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Opinion

Lessons for the Opposition parties from the business world

M Muneer | Updated on November 26, 2020 | Published on November 26, 2020



The Congress Party and its leader Rahul Gandhi are at a crossroads - PTI



Like businesses, political parties too must learn to ‘disrupt’ their ways of working to stay relevant and capture power

India’s Opposition leaders are not seizing the opportunities presented to

them and are instead waiting for others to fail to achieve their goals.

Every business has a shelf life and leaders who don’t adhere to this principle lose their relevance. Isn’t it the same in politics except that the supreme leaders refuse to step down?

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Get out of denial mode

The main opposition party, Indian National Congress, in particular, needs to get out of the self-denial mode that is typical of many business leaders. Recall the reactions of the CEOs of Blackberry, Nokia and Microsoft when the first iPhone hit the market – “Yet another mobile phone”, “who can beat a 1-billion-customer company” and a sarcastic “who will buy a \$500 phone!” were their comments. Remember the sense of denial of Indian telcos prior to Jio’s launch?

When the competitive advantages are short-lived, or less sustainable, leaders need a different mindset than when things are more predictable. This is all the more prevalent at a time when a pandemic is still raging accelerating the changes we have seen over the last couple of years.

The malaise in the Congress party

Take for instance the case of Congress party. It was started off like a public limited company but turned into a family-owned enterprise with poorly qualified dynasts in leadership positions. Its vote share shrunk from an average 45 per cent to below 20 per cent in just two decades.

It has lost far too many States and is staring at an exodus of good talent. The morale is so low that its talent pool is shrinking rapidly. Its equity or market cap is decaying fast and it has a board (working committee) that consists of nominated family loyalists who have no mass base. The tradition of Indira Gandhi is still being followed. The Bihar imbroglio shows how the Congress has totally lost its strategic acumen.

The party seems lacking a mission, vision and most critically values – even family businesses have pithy statements, whether followed or not. The party is playing reactive moves as in a game of chess when it should have

been looking at playing the Japanese game of Go, as my esteemed colleague Rita McGrath describes on what is needed for the transient-advantage era.

Instead of capturing opportunities and more territories, the leadership wasted resources betting on the wrong horse and refused to accept what people wanted. And opportunities have been plenty in the last six years: DeMo, the cow issue, mob lynching, GST, economic doom, data manipulation, Pulwama, CAA, the hasty lockdown, migrant crisis, China, PMCARES fund enigma and the never-flattening pandemic curves.

Lessons from the world of business

Here are six lessons for the Congress leaders, gleaned from a turbulent business world:

(1) Question the status quo: Instead of having discussions that reinforce existing perspectives, leaders should encourage conversations that question the status quo. Firing people who point out to the changes needed in the party shows inadequacy in leadership. Leaders must encourage better communication from the frontline/grassroot workers, especially for bad news to travel faster up.

(2) Involve a diverse team for policy decisions: Instead of a set of homogeneous yes-men (yes, mostly men) in the core working committee, have a diversified set, well-represented by gender, region and mass appeal, and not just loyalists.

(3) Be roughly right and fast: Leaders at all levels should be empowered to take decisions within certain policy limits and they can course-correct as things evolve in these times of uncertainty. No one can wait for precise data because by the time that comes the opportunity will be lost. The way to speed things up is also by encouraging State leaders to seek decisions more frequently and faster from the “High Command”.

(4) Avoid confirmation bias: How many times have the leaders encountered dissent within the working committee? Are they all saying aye and finding data to support the leader's suggestion? Is there anyone entrusted with finding data that does not confirm the leadership's thinking?

(5) Start seizing opportunities: Leaders need to have the talent to spot and seize opportunities before these become obvious to others. The BJP seems adept at this for now but then it is probably because it doesn't encounter any competition.

(6) Picking oneself up fast: If an election is lost, how quickly can the situation be reversed with the least damage to the worker morale? What Sachin Pilot did in building up the party within four years in Rajasthan is the best example. In all the other States where Congress lost elections, they won some of them back because of the anti-incumbency or opportunistic regional partnerships, and not by strengthening the organisation. Enterprises get obliterated when they don't disrupt their own businesses. If the main opposition party doesn't realise this new truism fast, the BJP will win another term in 2024!

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Published on November 26, 2020

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