

Turbulent-Time Lessons For The Opposition

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Enterprises are getting obliterated when they don't disrupt their own businesses. If the main opposition party doesn't realise this new truism fast, India is well on its way to a "Modiarchy" in 2024!



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26 November, 2020 by Dr M Muneer

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July 20 was a historic day for mankind. It was on this day 51 years ago that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon and said, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Just before he re-entered the Lander, he had made an enigmatic remark: "Good luck, Mr Gorsky."

Most people assumed he was directing this comment to a rival Soviet astronaut, as it was a war of one-upmanship then. Soviets were the first to send a man to space (Yuri Gagarin) and Armstrong fulfilled Kennedy's vision of first man on moon.

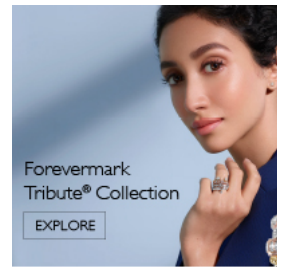
However, no Gorsky was discovered and journalists pursued Armstrong for years but until 1995 he refused to oblige with an answer. As the story goes, by then Mr Gorsky was no more and Armstrong felt it to fine to reveal. As a small kid, he and his friend were practicing baseball in his backyard one afternoon when the ball got hit and fell near the bedroom window of the neighbor, Gorskys. As Armstrong went to pick it up, he heard Mrs Gorsky shouting at Mr Gorsky: "Sex? You want sex NOW?!! When that kid next door walks on the moon!"

This may well be a humorous anecdote on the conservative Jewish women and their sexual preferences then, but is quite reflective of India's opposition leaders – they are waiting for someone else's fate (such as the failure of the ruling party) to realise their goals, and not seizing opportunities that present themselves all the time.

Every business has a shelf life and leaders who don't sell them by that date lose their relevance. Isn't it the same in politics except that the supreme leaders refuse to step down?

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 US\$500 phone!" were their respective comments. Remember also the denial mode of Indian telcos prior to Jio launch.

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



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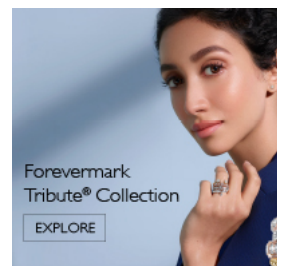
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Take for instance the case of Congress party. It was started off like a public limited company but turned into a family-owned enterprise with poorly qualified dynasts in leadership positions. Its vote share shrunk from an average 45% to below 20% in just two decades when the current "maa-beta" duo was in control. It has lost far too many States as of now and is staring at an exodus of good talent. The morale is so low that its talent pool is shrinking day by day. It is in a denial mode despite research showing otherwise. Its equity or market cap is decaying faster than India's famed middle class. It has a board (working committee) that consists of nominated family loyalists who have no mass base. The tradition of [Indira Gandhi](#) has been followed. The Bihar imbroglia shows how 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 they had aplenty in the last six years: DeMo, holy cow, mob killing, GST, economic doom, data manipulation, Pulwama, CAA, lockdownomics, migrant crisis, China, PMCARES fund enigma and the never-flattening pandemic curves.

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 status quo. The firing of an individual for pointing out the needed changes 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 homogenous 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 come the opportunity will be lost. Like how the opposition missed the opportunity to mobilise the "walking class" to march to the Race Course Road. 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 the leaders have 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 disconfirm the leadership's thinking?
5. Stop solving problems and start seizing opportunities: Leaders need to have the talent to spot and seize opportunities before these become obvious to others. BJP seems adept at this for now but then it is probably because they don'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 4 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 organization.

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