

## Saving the grand old party

Perhaps it is time for Rahul Gandhi to become non-executive chairman of the Congress and bring in a working president from outside the family

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When veteran congress leader Sheila Dikshit said Rahul Gandhi was yet to mature, most political analysts failed to understand that she didn't mean age but was referring to politics and leadership. Despite his Bangkok and Aspen leadership sojourns, Mr Gandhi has yet to understand the leadership styles needed to manage the disruptive era of Indian politics, especially when pitted against a PM who is more youthful in thought and in inspiring the youth.

When I first met Mr Gandhi, he was a first-time MP with much of his father's innocence. He was eager, inquisitive and brimming with positivity to what I had proposed as systemic changes in the party. It was apparent later that he could not sell the idea internally, and a decade later, I see all those predictions coming true. Perhaps the party culture is to shoot those who speak the truth, and predict disasters in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and possibly, Karnataka next.

Speaking to Congress leaders across the country, I realised the party had become like a company where employees have no faith or confidence in their CEO. What follows is a no-brainer. After every election fiasco, you hear the same hollow loyalty comments (such as, "we will come back stronger under Rahul") from various state leaders, but has anyone heard the "how"? Are they expecting the anti-incumbency factor and waiting it out? Remember, in Gujarat they have been waiting since 1995!

The Family's loyalists will argue that it is the binding force, and that Mr Gandhi can learn better political skills from his mother. Drawing a parallel with family-run businesses, this is less true when the business grows larger, at which point more general management skills are needed. When the country is going through a tectonic shift under a charismatic PM, the argument that a family can build trust among stakeholders holds no water, as in business. Count the number of family-run businesses that have disappeared in India alone. Congress should internalise the "Carnegie effect", where the inheritance has to be earned, and discard primogeniture in order to motivate non-family folk to rise to the top, if it does not want to disintegrate after Sonia Gandhi's heyday.

How can the Congress rise from the quagmire it is in? Since a democracy cannot survive without a good opposition, a "managerial turnaround" plan is not an option anymore.

Over the last few years the party seems to have lost sight of its mission, vision and values. It appears that its vision is all about winning elections, which is akin to a company whose vision is making profits. Companies with such myopic vision will fail miserably, just like Xerox, at one point the biggest of them all. With only the bottom line in mind, Xerox made full use of its monopoly in photocopy machines during the growth phase and when a customer complained of productivity losses due to frequent breakdowns of machines, it sold a new one while servicing an existing machine. It wasn't until competitors such as Canon launched better and cheaper machines, and bankruptcy loomed, that Xerox realised that customer service, quality and so on are more critical to making profits!

Just as profit is a measure of the success of a strategy, winning elections is a metric of what the party does. Because of this obsessiveness with winning elections, the Congress got into all types of



Rahul Gandhi (pictured) has yet to understand the leadership style needed in a disruptive political era

alliances everywhere without value-alignment, leading to further erosion of its identity. Examples galore: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, UP, etc. Congress cannot win alone in any of these states in the foreseeable future.

Ideally, the Congress should undertake a *chintan* session to reboot its mission, vision and values.

**The Congress must undertake a *chintan* session to reboot its mission, vision and values in tune with the demands of a resurgent India**

grassroots-level research to position itself in the minds of its stakeholders.

The leadership will then need to identify and overhaul its current processes in driving the changes. The change agenda associated with the renewed vision and value proposition will require excelling in many different processes, such as getting more foot soldiers on the ground, acquiring social media leadership and so on. The entire agenda will be mapped into a series of cause-and-effect linkages with clear responsibility, authority, and metrics.

Further, the core group will have to decide on the skills, values and capabilities of workers at all

levels, starting with the top leadership itself, and look for the right information systems to enable execution. The vision will also dictate the right organisation structure, leadership, teamwork and culture. The command-and-control mode and loyalty to the Family will no longer be relevant for today's world. They will need to shed their British-era divide-and-rule policy of factions in every state that has been keeping the high command relevant. The party will have to focus on alignment, and there will be no room for factions once it has decided on a path.

Mr Gandhi had sent the wrong signals during the Kerala elections by "requesting" party factions not to fight till the end of elections! A professional CEO will be ruthless in keeping dissidents in line. Perhaps it is time for Mr Gandhi to become non-executive chairman of the Congress and bring in a working president from outside the family, which can symbolise the change agenda. At this point they should decide on ways and means to raise funds for the new era of transformation, especially when they are not in power in many states.

Finally, a good governance system must be in place where rewards are on the basis of merit and not loyalty to the Family. Inner-party democracy can prevail at this point. And what better place to pilot the change agenda than Karnataka, where the writing on the walls screams "BJP"!

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