

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION TO BEAT THE ODDS

by Captain C. P. Krishnan Nair

When I turned ninety years old last year, a leading national daily in India asked me a simple question: What is the secret of your leadership success?

Success, in my opinion, always has its own secret codes. Innovation, ambition, hard work, audacity, determination, stellar skills, destiny—the list is endless. A lifelong inspiration for me has been the rallying call that Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, made to the nation as a freedom fighter: *Success comes to those who dare and act.*

When I look back on my own journey, which began in 1922, in a poor family in Kan-
nur, Kerala, I consider myself blessed. I have visited nearly every country in the world, seen people with diverse traditions, customs, and practices. I have experienced the culinary preferences of different cultures. Over the course of my career, I have had the privilege to meet with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, trailblazers from around the world—presidents and prime ministers—as well as nearly every Indian business and political leader since India gained independence.

What I have learned through my own experiences as a textile innovator, a hotelier, an environmentalist, and the chief gardener of The Leela Group is that a successful leader dares to dream, endures setbacks while executing his or her dream, and, most important of all, shares the story of his or her strategy again and again in every encounter. Too many strategies never get executed because they remain closely guarded secrets of the leadership team. The leader’s communication is what inspires a company and its culture to stand out and above from the rest.

Undoubtedly, powerful communication is the key to the leadership success of the Leela, which today is one of the fastest-growing and distinctly Indian hospitality groups. I have found that there are broadly three types of communication that inspire an organization. I share stories and perspectives on each of these.

Power of Communication

Even before I founded The Leela Group of luxury hospitality, I was fortunate to gain early insights into the power of communication. In the early 1950s, I had resigned from the Indian Army to join my wife's textile business. The state of the handloom industry at the time was terrible; the workers were very poor and the whole industry was disorganized. I wanted the handloom industry to prosper and add to the growth of the country's economy. I succeeded in persuading Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to support our efforts to modernize handlooms by converting pit looms to frame looms and setting up dye houses for the industry. This brought about a major revolution in just three years, and the government appointed me the director of the All-India Handloom Board. Then an incident happened that changed my life.

In 1958, a leading American textile importer, William Jacobson, while in Bombay, called the textile commissioner and asked where he could find exotic fabric from India. The textile commissioner sent him to me. I showed him many samples, all of which he rejected except one that he really liked. Jacobson asked what was unique about this fabric. I explained it was Madras Plaid (checked pattern), subtly fragrant, hand-woven cotton with vegetable dyes including indigo blue, turmeric, and gingelly oil. Primarily exported to West Africa, the Gold Coast, and Ghana, the fabric had captivated young African brides who were buying it for their wedding gowns. The one thing I explained to him about the fabric was that it had to be washed separately and carefully in cold water only, because vegetable dyes "bleed" and a new colored design would emerge after every wash. This seemed to excite Jacobson, who immediately placed an order for 5,000 yards.

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The fabric was converted into sports jackets and trousers, displayed in Brooks Brothers, and quickly moved off the shelves. But a couple of weeks later, customers put it in their washing machines and the color ran completely.irate customers flocked to Brooks Brothers demanding their money back from the store, which meant that Jacobson had to repay Brooks Brothers and was absolutely furious.

I remember asking myself, "Could lack of communication have caused this situation?" I flew to the United States, where I vividly narrated my side of the story of this unique fabric—how it was hand-woven on looms with vegetable dyes, tied and hand-washed along the banks of the river, and finally taken back to an idyllic Madras village for folding. The fabric, I said, was "guaranteed to bleed" from the very start, and this is why it was called the "Miracle Hand-Woven Fabric from India." The focus swiftly shifted from me to Jacobson, who was asked to explain why he had sold garments without special washing instructions. I was urged to communicate my story to an editor at *Seventeen* magazine. The editor ran a seven-page spread with beautiful pictures of the fabric under the sobriquet "Bleeding Madras." It was a huge hit. Within weeks, Brooks Brothers had received thousands of inquiries for the item. The "Bleeding Madras" fabric became the rage, and a new fashion concept swept America.

From then on there was no looking back. We began receiving orders from across America for Bleeding Madras, and soon our clientele ranged from Hollywood stars to leading fashion designers. Because we were market leaders, new doors began to open and I decided to move forward through them.

Entering the luxury hospitality business in India was not easy. The established leaders of luxury hospitality, namely the Taj and Oberoi, have zealously guarded their turf. So how would a newcomer like the Leela enter the club, become a full member, and then go on to a leadership position? And all this, within a decade! The answer, to a significant extent, lies in a deep understanding of the **three** principles of leadership communication: direction, dignity, and defining moments.

Direction: Carve the Path Toward a Larger Purpose

As a leader I believe that there is a larger purpose in the excellence with which every activity is carried out. For me that larger purpose is nation building. By that I mean benchmarking with the highest international standards with a view to show that India can do just as well if not better than the rest of the world in luxury hospitality. This is born out of a desire to showcase the ability of India. There are multiple examples of ways in which the Leela exemplifies the warmth and grace unique to Indian hospitality. After all, a great nation is judged by many things, including the hospitality it extends to the world.

But this purpose extends beyond our own brand to the hospitality industry itself. Our model of leadership includes never losing sight of the larger organizational purpose. Because India is playing a new role on the global stage, so are we. This is why we are on the forefront of a wide array of initiatives that will help double the international arrivals to the country in the next five years. From advocating for relaxing the norms on multiple entry for foreign tourists, to

*We practice the “Leela
Dharma.”*

extending visa-on-arrival facilities to more countries, to seeking reforms of our coastal regulations that will allow beach resorts to be set up for the first time, to promoting the reclassification of the industry from real estate to infrastructure to spur investment, we have been spearheading a persistent, purposeful communication at the highest levels. These efforts already have and will continue to result in positive policy moves.

Our larger goal has been to build a hospitality industry of a quality and scale this country deserves. This is what the Leela truly stands for. This is what makes our employees proud.

Dignity: Promote Relationships over Transactions

Leaders forge an organization’s personality, craft its identity, and infuse it with a unique culture. And they use communication to make these intangibles tangible in ways that all can relate to. For example, at the Leela our employee service manual is called “The Dharma . . . a guiding light.” *Dharma* means “duty,” and it is a concept based on the *Vedas*, our scriptures that date back to the fourth century BC. I first discovered the principles of duty when I read the *Jnana Vasishtam*, an elaborate classic of great importance but perhaps not as widely known as, for instance, the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Jnana Vasishtam* captures the teachings of the wise old sage Vasishtha to Rama, the hero of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Through beautiful and interesting stories, this spiritual treatise illustrates the principles of self-realization and self-knowledge that form the basis of positive Dharma.

Across the Leela properties in India, we practice the “Leela Dharma,” which is a doctrine of duties and simple virtues to be followed by each employee. These Dharmas stand for the principles that orient our employees and form the foundations of our code of conduct—within the organization, toward each other, and with our most cherished heritage, our guests. These Dharmas resonate with each individual who

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joins the Leela family and help them identify with the company ethos.

Our company's ethos is to be an Indian company with Indian values and global standards of service. We offer world-class quality, but we are clear about being Indian at heart. Communication like the Dharmas reinforce this stand effectively. My vision of Indian hospitality is inspired by my mother, who had a well in the house, and passing gurus stopped by for a drink. She always offered them a full meal too. My mother truly believed the scriptures that said God can visit us in any form. So treat every guest like God: "*Atithi Devo Bhava.*" This inspired my family and me deeply. It became the ethos of The Leela Group. And it will continue to inspire us to provide the highest level of personalized service at the Leela. It is not just what our brand stands for; it evokes the 5,000-year tradition of our culture.

This idea of Indian hospitality also inspired another aspect of the Leela—greenery and luxuriant planting. When we opened the Leela Mumbai, the building itself had been designed by internationally known architects and stylists, but the surrounding land—all 100 acres of it—was barren. We—my wife Leela and I—hand-picked plants and saplings of trees and flowers, from plumeria and Banyan trees to dainty lilies and orchids to King and Queen palms, and then decided where to plant each one of them systematically—one sapling at a time. As the saying goes, the hands that help are holier than the lips that pray. Our daily gardening slowly turned the whole deserted area into a green oasis that soon began spreading into the adjoining neighborhoods.

Over the years, Leela and I personally supervised the greening of each hotel. Our dream was to create havens in the heart of the urban cities as well as in our resorts. Ultimately, it inspired our sons—Vivek and Dinesh—to incorporate green building leadership and practices that contribute every day toward environmental protection and offer a healthier and safer environment for our guests and employees. In fact, the Leela Palace New Delhi is the first new hotel in India's capital to receive the highest level of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, the Platinum LEED certification, for its world-class sustainable design.

We undertook this journey by building a simple allegiance that has resonated with the entire Leela team. Today, each member shares our enduring commitment toward protecting our environment.

Defining Moments: Celebrate the Moments of Truth Across the Organization

Moments of truth are landmarks in leadership communication. In our case, these are literally landmarks—our properties. Other luxury chains buy old palaces. The Leela builds new ones. Some people say the Leela is over-the-top luxury. I say it is a deliberate communication strategy. It is high decibel because we are telling our story in a way that has never been told before. It is the story of the new India—unapologetic, optimistic, opulent. So everything is bigger, louder, brighter than the others, as befits a new palace ready to host a new generation of business leaders, renowned artists, and heads of state, from here and abroad.

Indeed, the iconic properties of the Leela are moments of truth communication carved in stone. Each Leela has been an architectural marvel built against nearly insurmountable odds, and contrary to the conventional wisdom of the time.

For instance, in Bombay, where we first started in 1985, we were not anywhere near South Mumbai, which is the commercial pulse of the city. Nevertheless, we decided to build the city's first luxury hotel

near the airport in North Mumbai. We bet that North Mumbai would become more relevant over time. It has. Today, the area around the Leela has several luxury hotels following our leading example. In a similar vein, the Leela Palace Bangalore was the largest and the first ultra-luxury property built at a time when market pundits doubted whether the demand would exist. Once again, our self-belief in pushing the boundaries of luxury was rewarded. We opened the hotel at price point of \$500 a night at a time when no other hospitality player dared to demand such a rate. Since launch, the Leela Palace Bangalore has enjoyed the highest occupancy and highest average room rate in the country.

When we first bought the land on the banks of Lake Pichola in Rajasthan, many well-wishers warned us about the lack of a road route to our construction site. But we were unfazed. It took us thirteen years and herds of horses and donkeys carrying the construction materials to the site, transforming it brick by brick into what is now rated one of the world's best hotels by Condé Nast Traveler USA.

Similarly, the Leela Goa, spread over seventy-five acres, was built despite the absence of a road route; we used only river travel to complete the construction. And, most recently, the Leela Palace New Delhi is the only hotel in twenty years to be built in the heart of the diplomatic enclave. Bringing many offerings for the first time ever for discerning clientele posed its own challenges—the first Lutyens-inspired luxury palace, the first Asian outposts of legendary restaurants Le Cirque and MEGU, the first world-class ESPA spa in New Delhi. But, in less than a year, the Leela Palace New Delhi was ranked among the “Best of the Best” in the world by Robb Report USA, along with the Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong; Corinthia Hotel, London; and Mandarin Oriental, Paris.

The stories of the challenges we faced in building our properties are legendary among the Leela employees and reinforce the determination of the organization to redefine luxury in India. I always tell my team that tough times pass, and our hotels are testimony to our vision upheld despite formidable odds.

The leader's communication always upholds dignity.

As each property is successfully completed, the team confidence in facing down challenges has only grown. Each time I pat them on the back, I give them a card to carry every day in their pockets. It's a simple listing of the awards and accolades the Leela has received, but it's a continual reminder of individual contribution and collective success.

Managers, Guards, and Gardeners

The channels of a chief communicator are always open. Even a walk in the garden, or a chat with an employee, from the juniormost to the seniormost, gives me an insight into what is going on and what needs to be addressed. I have individual relationships not just with my managers but also with my gardeners and guards across our properties.

How I communicate as a leader sets the tone of the organization culture. And I hope these lessons shared give you an insight into the role of a CEO as chief communication officer.

Elevate business over “busyness.” First, the leader articulates the direction of the organization and gives to its employees their corporate identity. For employees caught in day-to-day operations, the leader's communication aligns them with the higher purpose of the business.

Emphasize relationships over transactions. Second, the leader's communication always upholds dignity

and key values and cultural aspects of the organization that the leader embodies and emphasizes to the team. This is done through organized ways, like special occasions, and also via everyday gestures that touch people.

Enable moments of truth over truisms. Last but not least, the leader enables, and continuously celebrates defining moments of truth. These are effective, the stuff of legend. They affirm the vision of the leader and are an inspiration to the team.

The Secret of a Leader's Success

If in ten years I am again asked what is the secret of my leadership success, I am confident I will have the same answer as I did when I was asked that identical question last year. The secret of any leader's success is powerful communication, expressed in terms of direction, dignity, and defining moments. I hope you will give these approaches a try in your own organizations. I am certain the impact will be both immediate and significant, and that your customers, your employees, your shareholders, your communities—and you—will see and feel the difference.



Padmabhushan Captain C. P. Krishnan Nair is chairman of The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, one of the finest hotel groups in India. Today, The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts has eight luxury properties in New Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Gurgaon-Delhi N.C.R., Udaipur, Goa, and Kovalam; with more hotels opening in Jaipur, Agra, and Lake Ashtamudi in Kerala. His mission is to delight and exceed his guests' expectations through gracious Indian hospitality as laid down in the ancient Indian scriptures as Atithi Devo Bhava or "Guest is god." Captain Nair is currently writing his autobiography, to be published in 2013.