

Embedding leadership throughout your organization

An interview with Harshvendra Soin, VP Leadership Acquisition and Development, Tech Mahindra

Interview by Gareth Bell



Harshvendra Soin

Indian technology services provider, Tech Mahindra, have embarked on a new employee development initiative, with the intention of nurturing the next generation of leaders and embedding them throughout the organization. The Young CEO program aims to develop 30 hand-picked employees by 2015 who will take end-to-end responsibility of areas such as Mergers and Acquisitions, platforms and new business initiatives.

This innovative program, launched prior to the recent merger between Mahindra Satyam and Tech Mahindra, is part of a distributed leadership model espoused by company MD, C.P. Gurnani. By empowering cohorts to have full responsibility within the areas of sales, domain and delivery, Gurnani hopes to create a start-up mentality that belies the organization's considerable size.

In the following interview, Harshvendra Soin, vice president of Leadership Development and Acquisition, discusses the intended outcomes of the program in more detail.

DLO: What is the inspiration behind the Young CEO Program?

Harshvendra Soin: The initiative is in line with our company philosophy to grow leaders from within. We recognise that, as we scale up our organization for our 2015 mission, which is to become a \$5bn organization, we clearly need young, bright minds to take on critical P&L roles. The Young CEO Program is designed to nurture young leaders to drive end-to-end responsibility. By "end-to-end", we mean the following five areas: mergers and acquisitions; new business initiatives; platforms; joint ventures; and developing a new geography. In these five areas, the young CEOs are fully empowered to run the sales, delivery and the domain, and we believe that, through their focus, energy, and out-of-box thinking, we will have a clear sustainable advantage going forwards.

In summation, the idea of the program is to unearth young talent from within the organization, to give them the tools and empowerment to run these five areas end-to-end, with the objective of being the best possible employer for these young people.

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How will you mitigate the risk of giving participants such autonomy and responsibility?

HS: There is always a risk involved in such things, as well as some investment. As an organization, we are willing to invest in talent, and I think that is the biggest thing to take away from this program. We will mitigate risk first through our selection process – a rigorous process consisting of leader interviews, assessment tests, data analysis of past records and performance, and recommendations from senior leaders. Secondly, the participants are mentored by senior leaders, including the CEO himself. Thirdly, they are given regular development inputs. And, fourthly, there is a monthly review process to ensure whatever support and help that is needed is given to them as they go through the program. By implementing these four things we are ensuring that these youngsters have everything they need to take on such senior responsibilities.

Is there any expectation on the cohorts to stay within the business for a certain length of time after the program?

HS: We don't have any written agreement to make the cohorts stay with us. We are confident that, through our investment in their development, and through the fact that they have hugely challenging assignments, we will in fact retain all of them. I don't think these opportunities are available outside of our organization.

Aside from the opportunities you have outlined, what other benefits in terms of training can the participants expect?

HS: There are two or three kinds of input they will get. First, the sheer on-the-job experience these young CEOs will get from running a platform, an M&A, a joint venture, a new business initiative, or a new geography, independently. Secondly, there are development inputs which will be given to them, including structured courses, based on the individual development plans they each have, which are updated quarterly; there is coaching; there is shadowing; and, of course, there are other developmental inputs they will get over the course of the next year. Thirdly, there is a complete review mechanism in place, on a monthly basis, wherein we ensure that any required support is given to the young CEOs so they may perform well in their tasks.

Why did you feel it was important to distribute leadership throughout your organization in such a way?

HS: If you look at our organization, we have almost 100,000 people, across more than 50 countries, so really the distributed leadership model is how we need to go about doing things. We believe in mobilizing leadership traits and abilities across all levels, rather than just relying on a few leaders at the top. It's also about engaging people across levels, about more people driving the leadership agenda of an organization, rather than just a few.

Our CEO is committed to a distributed leadership model, which is one of the fundamental reasons why Tech Mahindra is different. We believe in true empowerment, true leadership, alongside our values and competencies of alternate thinking, excepting no limits, and driving positive change. As a group, we believe in these facets and foundations, and I think this is truly reflected in our distributed leadership model.

With your operational responsibility in talent acquisition and development, what is your vision for the next two years?

HS: Not a very complicated vision, I must confess! I hope for Tech Mahindra to be recognized as the best employer, providing tremendous opportunities for employees at all levels, across all geographies and verticals. My vision is also to be benchmarked for our leadership development programs, and most importantly, for our ability to sustain and nurture best-in-class leaders from within.



Would you have any recommendations for other organizations with regards to leadership development?

HS: I believe that whatever initiatives an organization follows must be thought through and sustained, in order to enhance the transparency and credibility of the program. That is important. Secondly, it is important to link the leadership development agenda to the business needs, and really focus on what the strategic business needs of the organization are. For us, as we grow and double our revenues, it is clear that one of our strategic needs is to have a leadership funnel, and this Young CEO program is in line with that need.

Opinion of a participant on the Young CEO Program

As a participant on the Young CEO Program, what has your experience been so far?

Raghav Kumaria: I have worked with almost the entire leadership team over the last four and half months of the program. There is a very true sense of direction and purpose. To ensure we grow fast enough we need to anchor ourselves to strategic initiatives that will push our next growth strategy. For that, you need diligent focus, and people running things end-to-end, so the program fits directly with the business needs. The experience so far has been wonderful, getting full support in every area I need. I think as an organization we will learn from this experience, and move forward. I'm absolutely happy with the support and plans that have been put in place.

What do you hope to achieve with the foundation of knowledge the program will provide?

RK: For me, beyond the KRAs and growth targets, there is one very clear take-away: I understand in a large organization there is an element of ignorance towards things that are not in your purview, which you only experience with an outside-in view. For me, this provides an inside-out view for the end-to-end life cycle of a company, right from contract closers, to financing, to sales, to delivery, to operations, to customer satisfaction – this is a huge learning. The biggest take-away from my perspective is that, while we learn a lot of management principles in our B-schools, seeing things implemented end-to-end gives a different, far more practical perspective. Secondly, every day you need to push yourself, and there is something there on the table for you to achieve. That is a clear motivation when I wake up every morning, and as long as that is there life will always be a learning experience.

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