



Be Fearless And Speak Your Mind. In Business, That Manifests As Being Bold And Thinking Big.

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Balkrishan "BK" Kalra, CEO of Genpact, the consulting firm, shares his key leadership playbook, current leadership challenges, and why he believes being direct is being kind.

This interview is part of our Art of Leading interview series with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.

Q. What's your leadership playbook? What values are particularly important to you?

A. Each one of us has many leadership values but I will specifically call out the top three from my lens. One is being direct and authentic, even in difficult and uncomfortable situations. I've always believed that being direct is being kind. The second is speed and high-fidelity responses, which require intellectual rigor. This also speaks to the importance of actively listening with the goal of learning. Third is being fearless and speaking your mind. In the business world, that manifests as being bold and thinking big. These are integral to who I am.

Q. Are there any stories you can share about that fearlessness in action?

A. In early 2012, shortly after moving back to the United States, I drove my wife to the DMV in Newark, NJ, to get her license. After dropping her off, I realized she had left her water bottle behind.

When I got out of the car to take it inside to her, a guy came up to me and put a gun to my head.

Instinct took over, and I lunged to hit him with that water bottle. Then another guy joined the fight, and he hit me on the head, and I was lying on the street bleeding. They searched my pockets and took both the Blackberrys I was carrying. Somebody then called 911 for an ambulance to take me to the hospital.

I figured out later that they probably wanted the car I was driving—they were searching my pockets for the keys and decided to take my cell phones instead. The doctor who treated me asked, “What were you thinking? Why didn’t you just give them the car?” I was speechless and I knew that instinct and my reflexes had taken over. If you try to take me down with something that’s not right, I will rise up stronger.

Q. That’s quite the story. How did that reflex to fight become part of your DNA?

A. Well, it is tough to point out one specific thing. However, when I was growing up in Punjab, India, we lived amidst ongoing terrorism. It was a part of our daily lives. For example, using public transport carried the risk of being attacked if you belonged to a particular community.

One day, my dad sat my older brother and me down and said, “You’re quite young, but if you ever find yourself in such a situation, you don’t just stand there and get gunned down. You fight the fight.” Possibly, that mindset seeped into me over time. Not that I am looking for confrontational situations, but I believe that handling conflict doesn’t raise my blood pressure. And so I encourage everyone at Genpact to speak their mind. We want diversity of thought here, expressed in a respectful manner.

Q. What do you consider the hardest part of leadership?

A. The world is changing very fast; therefore, the level of unknowns is increasing rapidly. As just one example, it’s hard to pinpoint with any new technology, such as AI or quantum computing, where things will land. As a leader, you want to create clarity on issues. Then, you add the unknowns in terms of geopolitics and the economy. Uncertainty has grown exponentially. You need to recognize that, work through it, and be open about the uncertainties so that other people can contribute to help better understand them.

Q. How do you hire? What questions do you ask job candidates?

A. I want to hear their life story. I want to understand who they are rather than just hearing about their career. My belief is that if we are hiring them at Genpact, we should be able to make them more successful. If not, then we do not have any right to onboard them. So, I approach the interview in that manner, ensuring the person will be able to accelerate their career within our culture.

I also like to ask them about their superpowers and what they fail miserably at. Many people are comfortable talking about their superpower but not many people want to talk about what they’re miserable at. How they approach that question tells you a lot. If somebody just gives you a safe answer, that’s a bad answer. I want people to be authentic because everyone experiences both success and failure in their personal and professional lives.

Q. What do you struggle with?

A. I consider myself an average to below-average communicator, especially when addressing large

audiences. I suffer from stage fright. I have to be on so many stages now, and while my stage fright is gradually waning, I need to prepare, and I am not natural. As a CEO, you have a natural loudspeaker in your hand. Communication is not my natural strength—I excel at other things—but I am working on it.

Q. When you coach senior executives, what topics come up most often?

A. At the most senior level, people want to lead through impact. I share a very simple framework I have used for decades—a multiplier effect of three things whenever you want to lead for impact. The first one is the quality of the ideas. How are you thinking about a problem statement? You need intellectual rigor and external insights to refine your ideas.

The second multiplier effect is, how are you going to organize teams at a larger scale around that idea? How do you build trust in those teams and generate team effectiveness? The third one is the quality of execution. What is the discipline? What are the metrics and leading indicators?

If you get those three right, you will create the alpha. But the quality of the team, and the level of trust on the team, is where people struggle most. So the challenge becomes, how do you create psychological safety for the teams so that they can authentically say what's on their minds? It's easy to say that, but it's tough to create.