



**DR SHARLENE
THIAGARAJAH**

TM Research &
Development CEO

STARTING out is always hard to do. I have often shared stories with colleagues about our experiences in the early days - revising presentations into the wee hours, dealing with tough managers, and terrified rides in the lift with the boss going up 21 floors!

Bosses, or rather leaders, are vital. A good leader, nay a great one, is the result of many different and layered life experiences and challenges. Some companies are identified by their leaders. We all have our favourites for different and personal reasons.

Regardless, these revolutionary individuals take hold of the reins and steer those who work under them to build positive, happy work cultures; and take an organisation from good to great.

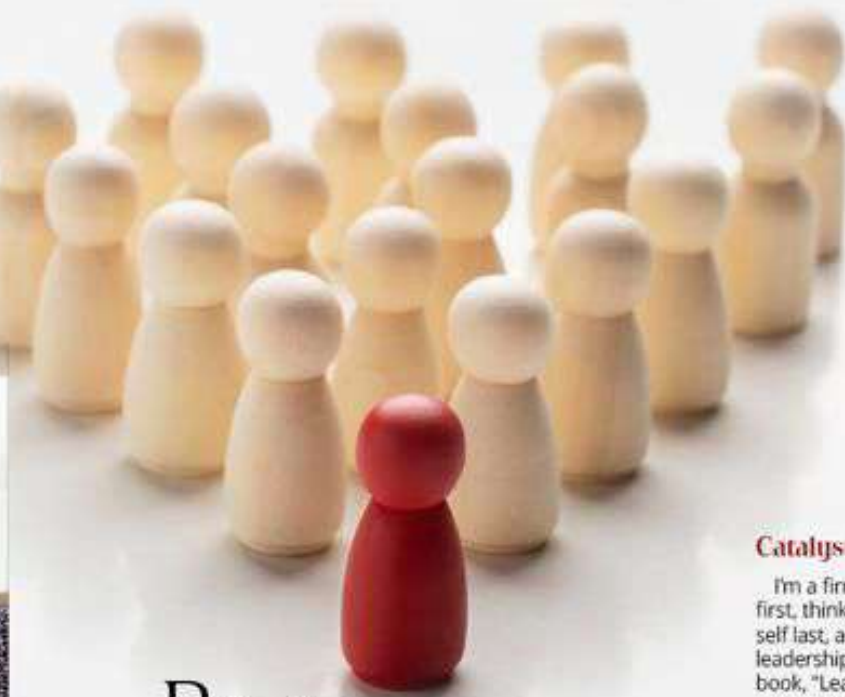
The true meaning of a leader has evolved over time. Different types of leadership styles may be required at different times of an organisation's growth cycle.

However, one thing is clear. Leadership style is a choice, especially so in an era of hyper-competition and non-stop disruption where collaboration is expected at every level.

The point of learning

I have fond memories of some leaders I encountered in my journey. Once, a boss took out a 2B pencil and proceeded to heavily edit the document I had meticulously prepared, and taught me how to use the correct terms and ensure the flow and information went hand-in-hand. He also pointed out why 10-point Times Roman was too small.

It was the compassionate demeanour with the genuine purpose of teaching that stuck with me.



Be a leader, not a boss

■ Leadership style is a choice, especially so in an era of hyper-competition and non-stop disruption

■ Get into the middle of it, find out what's working and what's not

I was fortunate to have had great professors at my alma mater who took time to point out errors in my work and showed me what a great engineer means. So, here is a shout-out to Prof Safa Haddad, my Wireless Communications professor whose lecture notes I still keep to this day.

Shaping a student's mind in their formative years with the right guidance can build confidence and prepare students for the real world.

The same care and clarity must be shown to them so standards are continually raised and the idea of "commitment to excellence" demonstrated at every turn. Our young can go very far if they have genuine teachers who care about raising a generation ready to face future challenges.

I am glad I was not handed everything on a platter, because what

would have been the point of learning then?

This is why I emphasise the need for leaders to be genuine in their desire to help others be better. Get into the middle of it, find out what's working and what's not. The team is failing?

Find time even in the midst of chaos to brainstorm on what went wrong and how to fix it. You won't be doing it only for them, you will find out just how much it benefits you as a leader!

The patience and wisdom shown by my bosses has stayed with me, and continues to be the hallmark of my own idea of what it takes to create a sense of well-being, trust and safety where people take risks and feel they belong.

As the world moves rapidly in the digital era, the role of a leader is no longer about getting employees to follow. Rather, it is about inviting them to work alongside and co-create a future that is envisioned together.

Leaders today know their product of innovation was not the result of an "aha" moment they had, but a combination of experiences, expertise and the sheer force of creativity that came from a group of people in a safe and encouraging space.

While I do encourage self-learning, it's vital to know that everyone needs guidance.

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" is a quote from Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. It underscores the crucial need to encourage a culture of learning and curiosity.

Catalyst for change

I'm a firm believer that leadership is first, thinking about others and yourself last, a case of practising servant leadership covered in Simon Sinek's book, "Leaders Eat Last".

Sinek discusses how leaders can help form a "circle of safety" to encourage employees to collaborate, take risks and be adventurous. People generally enjoy and benefit from a culture that is positive, engaging, committed and supportive.

I also like the idea of Sinek's Golden Circle - the "how", "what" and "why", and where this impacts an organisation. Having clarity on these will help us lead better. With a clear vision and a sense of purpose, leaders can inspire greater dedication from their teams.

Leaders obviously have followers. The question is whether your team is there because they have to or because they want to? My top three qualities that define a good leader are:

> Don't judge - Being a good leader means knowing when to step in and foster collaboration to resolve issues. It means not taking sides, but managing and pivoting towards resolutions where needed.

> Listen more, speak less - This trait is most underrated and the hardest to excel in. While leaders should be excellent communicators, nothing beats an excellent listener. When you really listen, you will realise what needs to be done, who needs to do it, why and how.

> Always be kind - Being kind means treating your team with respect even when you have to tick them off for poor performance! Spend time with them, groom and grow them.

It is important to recognise talent, hone and reward it. Effective leaders encourage creativity. They foster an environment where team members feel safe to suggest new ideas.

Human beings are not machines with a single set of push buttons. They have complex responses to love, achievement, pride, independence and sense of belonging.

When these softer social expectations and accomplishments go unrecognised, the joy of docking in every morning will diminish, affecting productivity, creativity and innovation at work.

And that is not good for business.