

It's your values that help build a strong enterprise

Ashok Soota

Responsible entrepreneurs are a special breed, seeking to transform industries... and think far beyond what is required of business leaders — Carol Sanford

It's a quote from Gandhi that's often repeated: "My life is my message". I don't want to claim I picked up things from Gandhi, that would not be right, but I do believe strongly in these words that sum up his philosophy. It applies to all of us. Our lives are to be led in congruence with our values.

I have always seen integrity as a black-and-white issue. I have taken it for granted for my people and for myself, unless proven otherwise. The principles that have steered me have guided how I react in a business situation.

In the more than 50 years of my career, I've been an intrapreneur as well as an entrepreneur. With a single-minded focus on evolving the company from the inside out, it has been

a fulfilling journey of collaboration and innovation. The opportunity to be led by one's innate principles and the sense of ownership one feels from being an intrapreneur are important to me.

First, governance in every respect is important to me. Second is fairness in everything one does. It is important to be fair not just in day-to-day business situations but more so, in negotiations. There are times when you approach other parties with the power you have over them as you are larger. The right approach in these situations is to be fair and not take advantage.

My third principle is building relationships. In situations such as joint ventures, what stands the test of time is a win-win approach.

It's not just for the individual, it is also critical for a company to be governed by values. When faced with ethical paradoxes or moral dilemmas in business, values are what really guide our behaviour every single day.

The impact of values-driven leaders on the company, its people, its customers and its shareholders is very powerful. When the founders are true to principles, it drills down to every single person on the team, building an ethically resilient and morally strong organization that can withstand the onslaught of a volatile and ambiguous environment, in an increasingly competitive market.

The principle of fairness also makes it imperative for a responsible entrepreneur to do good both by his team and

the end, also becomes relatively less important. What is important is the appreciation one gets in the share price through the results we deliver and the growth we experience.

It is important to have our happiest people contribute equally towards happiest customers and happiest shareholders. One must be fair and generous in as many ways as one can be with one's team. They are the ones who are helping to deliver the result with a business model that helps them achieve this.

HARD DECISIONS

Even when one has to make difficult decisions in business, it is important to be fair and empathetic. These are ideals that can be adapted to business. Other

than for integrity reasons, I never needed to make a decision on parting with people until Happiest Minds. Although none of the decisions were wrong, and were done with due diligence, they had me thinking. A philosophy of being mindful and being fair helps

make the right decisions.

To be fair to the people concerned, it was in their best interest to move on and be successful in another environment. We have been mindful enough to allow them a soft landing and let them retain stock. For example, we once had to part ways with a capable and competent leader who was overly harsh with his team. We cannot run a company called Happiest Minds with leaders who make it impossible to happen. One must be true to one's mission and one's own values in everything that one does.

As told to Sharon S. Rajkumar.

Ashok Soota is executive chairperson, Happiest Minds. Sharon S. Rajkumar is happiness evangelist at the company.

The principle of fairness makes it imperative for a responsible entrepreneur to do good by both his team and his shareholders

his shareholders. You cannot take care of one category and not the other.

A good example is the stock options we have created. We have the most extensive stock option programme in the industry, four times wider in coverage than any other Indian IT services company. We covered all 2,500 people in Happiest Minds as of January 2020. So, everyone benefited when we went public in September.

And now that we have gone public, we must continue to give people fair remuneration. We have to decide, after the contribution to the government towards taxes, how much we want to retain for growth in the company and how much we want to pass on to shareholders as dividend. That pathway, in