



Looking Back & Moving Forward...


Can you share with us details of your early years and some of the most important incidents that have shaped your thinking?

Raised in a typical middle class home, my parents constantly reminded me that they had no family business to pass on, and hence all they could give me was values and education. It was up to me to build my life on those values and education. In jest, my mother once told me “you must study and do well, else you will have to be a roadside vendor when you grow up”. These early interactions instilled in me the importance of hard work and that I am *solely* responsible for what I make of my life. Both parents were working, hence I was forced to be independent. Once, my mother asked me to go out and bring some bread for the house. I went looking for bread but the shop was closed, so I came back empty handed. My mother was very disappointed and she said “How can you come back empty handed? You were sent to get bread, not to come back after visiting a closed shop. There are other shops in a different direction that you could have tried!” That incident taught me the importance of ‘owning the job’ and till date I believe that once you have been given a task or volunteered to do something, the option of leaving it incomplete is not an option at all. Incidents like these taught me the value of hard work and perseverance. As a natural outcome, I completed my Engineering with very good grades. My parents were not aware of the IIMs but my own determination helped me find out more about post graduation in Business Administration.

Mr. Ajoy Chawla is the Vice president, Watches and Accessories division, Titan Industries limited. A BE (Mechanical engineering) from VJTI Mumbai and PGDM from IIMC, he joined the Tata Administrative Services (TAS) in 1990. He was posted by TAS to Titan Industries in 1991. Since then, he has handled multiple portfolios in Titan including marketing, sales, retail, supply chain management, international and new business incubation etc. In 2010, he attended the Advanced Management Program (AMP) from Harvard Business School.




On completion of PGDM from IIM Calcutta, I was selected for the Tata Administrative Services (TAS) through campus recruitment. Working with India's most respected and professional group was truly a dream come true. The TAS internship gave me a lot of exposure into different TATA group companies across varied industries and functional areas. After my initial period of training with various companies, I chose to be with Titan.

 Tell us more about your journey in Titan? How has it moulded your leadership capability?

I joined Titan, when it was just a 4-year old organization. It was a young company characterized by youthful energy, fresh perspectives and innumerable possibilities waiting to be explored. Looking back, I feel Titan has been a great and adventurous journey, having had an opportunity to work on different products and across multiple functions—finance, sales, supply chain, retail, brand management, channel management, etc. In the last 20 years, I have had a new assignment every 2 years and this variety has kept me going. Titan has also done many new things which have been instrumental in providing a lot of exposure. For example, Titan implemented SAP—an ERP system, at a time when only 5 to 6 Indian companies had implemented it. We entered the European market and made efforts to establish our brand, when no other Indian company had ventured that audacious path. Though many companies had been in the export business, establishing a brand is a totally different challenge. Titan went from Watches to Jewelry and then to Eyewear & now accessories, in which

I was able to contribute. Currently, I am privileged to be mentoring a cross functional team working on a totally radical change management project—reconfiguring the end-to-end Value chain with the help of globally renowned Goldratt Consultants. These multiple opportunities to explore different areas and work in a variety of roles have been a huge motivator and source of energy for me. Titan has also given me the freedom to experiment. Entrepreneurship is a much hyped word in the corporate world, but at Titan you can actually implement ideas and convert them into successful businesses over a period of time (Am sure other companies also offer this opportunity). Every business and role gives you enough scope to experiment, bring about change and put your ideas into practice. No one stops you from doing what you want to do. It is a good environment for energetic, self-driven people with vision and direction. This has significantly molded my own personality.

 Could you share with us some of the lessons that you have learnt from other leaders or your mentors?

Every person who I've worked with, be it my superiors or my colleagues, has played a role in shaping me. My first boss, the then Regional Manager, Western Region, taught me the importance of documentation in a manager's life. After every market visit, he would meticulously document any conversation he had with any retailer, team member, franchisee, or distributor, and would send out a memo summarizing the discussion, action points and timelines. This would be sent to all




concerned process owners besides his area sales manager. This gave clarity on the expectations from the business associate, corporate team and the local team. Once things are on paper, there is no going back on what was agreed upon. This was the first lesson I learnt on execution excellence.

My second boss taught me the importance of having a sense of urgency and rapid decision making. An extremely energetic professional, he was always thinking of new initiatives. He had amazing business acumen, seen in his ability to sniff out opportunities where none exists, backed with an attitude that ‘anything is possible’. I still remember one incident which was a clear illustration of all these qualities. When working as a Commercial Head in London, there was a strong possibility that the office for watches might have to move to France as we did not have a warehousing option in London. My boss was concerned about moving to France, as the local language could be a big problem. He mentioned that we needed to resolve the warehouse challenge. I personally did not know much about the warehousing options in UK, though I had been there for about six months. While driving down to the airport, he jotted down numbers of a few logistics service providers from the billboards. He gave me the numbers saying “maybe this is a good starting point”. He called me the next day to check if I had been able to contact any of them. I had made a couple of calls and within the next 3 days we had around 10 warehousing options ready for us to evaluate. By the 15th day, we had signed up a central warehousing facility for the whole of Europe. This was a live demonstration of the belief that ‘everything is possible’. He believed that everything can be done in a few hours, days or weeks. He had a great sense of urgency in getting things done and it was contagious.

My current boss has so many aspects of leadership to teach. His ability to drive “Execution” across multiple teams and functions with predictable monthly reviews is worth emulating. His razor sharp clarity of thought very visible in his simple & powerful presentations, his ability to hold people accountable while showing respect and giving them space for decision making, his moral compass of never indulging in any form of politicking while trying his best to influence the right decision, and above all his humility are a few examples of the many things I have learnt from him.

Our current MD, Mr. Bhaskar Bhat is an iconic leader, able to connect very well with people and bring out the best in them, be it under regular or adverse circumstances. I have learnt from him, the art of inspiring people to take on more. His jovial, positive and down to earth approach has made him a very approachable leader.

 How does one develop team spirit and guide people? Could you share some examples of your experiences through which you have learnt?

The current MD of my organization is an amazing example of generating energy and team spirit as well as converting ideas into concrete actionables. A few years back, Titan had an offsite meeting, to explore how we could achieve our aspiration of increasing our turnover five times in 5 years! The name was christened “Future Shock”. A group of managers across all functions/geographies from the organization were handpicked. The first phase of the activity involved a brainstorming session, where people came up with many new business ideas. We shortlisted 20 ideas, worked on 6 commonly agreed projects and



finally only 3 made it to implementation phase. These 3 ideas were not only powerful enough to energize all existing businesses, but also aided in transforming the organization culture from complacency to enterprising, while building a co-created vision!

Learning from him has been the art of converting negatives to positives. I remember the year when he was to take over as the new outgoing MD, our top line numbers were below business plan targets. He used this to share with all employees that this was not a good way to give a farewell to the MD, who was the founder of such a great company. He called key members of the senior management team and started off what was called 'Mission impossible'. We had 100 days to achieve the goals set internally. As a natural outcome of this mission, we formed further teams across the states, and these teams had to achieve stretch targets. The entire organization took on that 'Mission Impossible' as a challenge and the kind of energy it generated across the company was amazing. "People were our key strength" he said, "all I did was go to them for help. I only gave them a common goal, a rallying call!"

How does a leader help in aligning the focus of the team? How have you learnt it from some of the leaders you have worked with?

This is one great take away for me as I have observed my current boss in action, for the last 5 years. He is a role model when it comes to execution excellence and managing alignment. He ensures that each employee in the team is aligned to their role and the common goal. When it comes to execution, he excels in it through his unique and unfailing review mechanism. At Titan, informally, our

system of execution has been named after him. He has a strong belief that every process, system, or operation can be made predictable, and reasonably accurate. There is a weekly internal operations review. Monthly review meetings are held with all the dealers. Each quarter, he reviews all support functions. To ensure that the team is moving in the right direction, he would list out 5-10 things each team being reviewed needs to focus on. These then become our action points demanding rigorous attention right through the month.


How will you describe your leadership style? How do you decide which leadership style to adopt? What are the most important things for subordinate development?

I have never really categorized my leadership style. However, looking back, it would be safe to say that in the initial years of my career, I was much more focused on getting the task done and could be classified as 'task oriented'. At that stage ensuring you meet targets, perform well, and meet KPIs etc. was most important. As you progress in life, it strikes you that targets and outcomes cannot happen unless your team is aligned with you. It is not 'you' alone who is delivering results, it is 'you' in the context of the 'team' who is delivering or ensuring outcomes. The next step of team alignment will happen only when the team sees meaning in the various initiatives. In my current role, I largely decide my leadership style based on two parameters-the situation and the nature of the team member.

At any time, if there are 35 managers in the team, out of which there are 8-9 direct reports, I cannot adopt the same style with all of them. Some are well aligned to the goals and aware of what is to be achieved. All they need is a bit of problem solving support and




some clarity. With such team members, I am more hands-off and motivate them saying they are doing a wonderful job and give guidance only when they seek help. On the other hand, let's take the case of an operation intensive function like Retailing. Retail has multiple operational issues, and you may find that there is a lot more that needs to be done in terms of execution at the store level. In spite of the constant support being provided, if the person is unable to ramp up and deliver, I have to be more 'hands-on' and understand the problem. It may require much more follow up, frequent reviews and reminders. Both these illustrate that every individual is different and we need to adapt our style. 'Different strokes for different folks' is what works for me.

 What are a few resources/ books you would recommend to someone looking to gain insight into becoming a better leader?

One of the biggest challenges that managers in many organizations face is the know-how and skill of 'engaging the team'. I believe that the first step in engaging a team is to ensure that the team knows and is clear of 'what it is supposed to do' and 'what is expected from individual team members'. Two books which have helped me in this area are 'First break all the rules' and 'Now Discover your Strengths' by Marcus Buckingham. When I first read these books, I was heading the retailing department at Titan. I was so excited, that I used the questions in the book dealing with work and work environment, and circulated it to the other departments to get feedback on my department. The feedback that we got helped me reset expectations and refocus on the deliverables as a team collectively.

Moving from 'team' to the individual level, the book 'The Road Less Traveled', by M. Scott Peck has helped me get insights that help us evolve based on his experiences as a psychotherapist and deep enquiry. I have tried using these insights to gain a better understanding of my self and my team mates.

Another great book which has influenced me significantly is 'You can heal your life' by Louise Haye. Louise Haye illustrates through her own personal journey as well as those of others, how we can achieve dramatic effects at the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical levels by changing one's beliefs and ideas that are responsible for creating unhealthy patterns in our lives. She goes on to share simple exercises that help us observe our thought patterns and ways of releasing and replacing those patterns with new and healthy ones. I have personally experienced that it works!

 To summarize, what in your opinion should a leader do to be a role model?

In my opinion, the Job of a leader is to groom leaders within the team. Having said that, I feel the 5 biggest expectations from a leader are:

1. Leadership means to Influence people, policies, processes, culture all the time.
2. Communicating powerfully - Linking individuals' roles to the larger inspiring goal, making their work lives more meaningful.
3. Challenging people to achieve stretch goals, pushing them to think new and radical.
4. Living the values of the organization on a daily basis.
5. Developing future leaders and making oneself redundant.

