



### **Diversity as opportunity - Review by R.Gopalakrishnan ( Executive Director, Tata Sons)**

The book ORGANIZATION 21C is unusual for three reasons. First, it is not an end-to-end sort of read; you can open any chapter and read it independently of the others. It is an anthology of essays written by 28 leading thinkers in the field of organisations. Second, it has been inspired by Richard (Dick) Beckhard, who has influenced all the authors in one way or another. Third, all the essays are forward-looking and focused on the leadership and organisational challenges facing [business](#).

In the opening chapter, Subir Chowdhury, who has put it all together, argues that: "To lead in the present and the future, organisations must emphasise two things: talent and environment. An organisation must employ and retain the best, brightest, and most diversified [people](#) in order to innovate." These words (the italics are mine) would not have appeared in a more classical book. Organisations pay lip service to diversity, but put in place steps to create clones out of young recruits. Having run Unilever Arabia, which employed [people](#) of 16 different nationalities, I realise the challenges of diversity and, equally, the rewards that come if one can leverage that diversity. For the future global organisation, diversity is not an academic issue - it is a reality.

The two chapters on 'Global Leadership' and 'Developing Global Leaders' are insightful and written with a lot of sensitivity. The authors are all European and one wonders whether there is a freshness on this score, compared to the usual American literature on such subjects. For example, seven qualities are listed as essential for global leaders over and above those found in excellent domestic and multinational leaders. These qualities are focused on geocentricity and multi-cultural sensitivity, both of which are more associated with Europeans rather than Americans. "A firm with a global mindset accepts diversity and heterogeneity as a source of opportunity," they argue correctly.

The 'Boardroom of the Future' points out that with the average size of boards decreasing and the demands and rewards for serving on boards increasing, companies need greater contributions from their own directors. This is best achieved by voluntary self-appraisal and continuous improvement programmes administered by the boards to their own directors. Otherwise, I fear, obligatory and [legal](#) initiatives will be forced on the boards. The cost of additional corporate governance reporting has been estimated by some US companies and appears to be quite large; in India, I reckon it could be Rs 300 crore per year! The authors propose seven characteristics that create truly independent boards. They also point out the five outcomes that good boards should aim for in order to deliver what stakeholders truly expect of them - real leadership!

Michael Beer's piece on 'Building Organisational Fitness' is apposite, particularly in the Indian social structure. He focuses on the silent killer, that is, the inability of organisations to confront real issues, and of leaders engaging teams in a constructive discussion that could resolve differences. You are bound to recognise your company in every line, and as you finish reading the essay, you'll be left with the question: can I do something about it? At least think about it, and, if possible, act on your thoughts.

There are also some hugely interesting quotations about experience and talent. For example, Sumner Redstone of Viacom is quoted as saying: "The question is not whether you are subjected to adversity and conflict during your life. The question is how you deal with it. If you really want to succeed, you have to be passionate and have a commitment to excellence." W. Edward Deming, ignored in the US and deified in [Japan](#), identified incredible persistence as a key characteristic of talent, an attribute not focused upon very often.

So what is the one huge positive and one huge negative of this book? The positive is an outstanding collection of well-knit and well-edited essays on a subject of great relevance in the future. The negative is that not all managers would find this an easy read; the subject is soft and woolly, [free](#) flowing, although not sticky. It is interesting if you first read it in doses, and rewarding if you refer to it occasionally thereafter. This is a must for your bookshelf.

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