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## Q&A | SUBROTO BAGCHI

### *How to scale up*

**A new book says start-ups must turn to expertise in every area of their functioning to build scale**

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Subroto Bagchi, co-founder and chairman of Bangalore-headquartered information technology company Mindtree, says scaling a business is a completely different ball game from launching one. "The initial days of heady enthusiasm will not cut it anymore," he says.

In his new book, *The Elephant Catchers: Key Lessons for Breakthrough Growth*, Bagchi draws on his own experiences and the example of Mindtree to break the process down into steps, including building comfort with the idea of scale and enhancing the intellect and reputation of your company.

In an email interview, Bagchi talked to us about the major hiring challenges growing organizations face and why he speaks candidly about the mistakes he has made in business. Edited excerpts:

#### What was your inspiration for writing the book?

My first book, *The High Performance Entrepreneur*, was written for would-be entrepreneurs. It was about how to start your own enterprise and the right way to do it. *The Elephant Catchers* takes the conversation to the next level. It is about scaling the enterprise you'd started. It draws on my own experiences of raising Mindtree and lessons learnt from many other organizations I have admired.

**The book talks about developing a sense of comfort with the idea of scale.**

Scale is not just about building volume growth. It has many other facets to it. People who actually scale are not fearful of scale. They see scale as beneficial; they see scale as an ally for creating larger good. That is the story of the house of the Tatas. That is how Aravind Eye Hospital has built its legacy. Once you are comfortable with the idea of scale, you need to explore how to go about achieving it.

**What does the title of the book refer to?**

The name came to my mind based on my childhood experiences of growing up in the tribal belts of India. I learnt early in my life that catching small game and catching an elephant involve fundamentally different techniques. The first requires enthusiasm; the second requires expertise. You catch a rabbit to eat it, but an elephant is caught and tamed to become a long-term resource. I also learnt that people who catch rabbits seldom have the knowledge and expertise to catch an elephant. It is the same with an organization that has reached a turning point and is on the verge of scaling. The initial days of heady enthusiasm will not cut it anymore. To achieve the larger dream, an expanded mode of functioning—to achieve scale—they must turn to expertise in every area of their functioning.

**What is the role of the founder in a growing organization?**

In *The Elephant Catchers*, I have used the metaphor of Bramha, Vishnu and Maheshwara. It is not without reason that our forefathers saw the act of creation, sustenance and reengineering as separate competencies. If Bramha were to sustain, he would have a hell of a problem, if Vishnu were to take a call on dropping a line of business or firing the bottom 5%, it would never happen and God help if Shiva were to get on to creation. The gods know when to let go; they underscore their personal competency gaps. Most founders have a lot of Bramha and some also have a certain amount of Vishnu, most lack the Shiva ability. Metaphors apart, founders in a growing organization must know the difference between being the most competent person in the enterprise to owning the business.

**What hiring mistakes should a growing firm watch out for?**

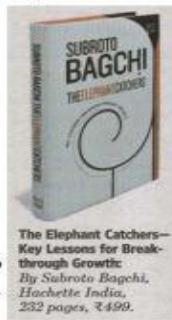
You look for people similar to (you) or those who can "work for you". You "hire down" whereas you need to "hire up". Start-ups that succeed are usually culture-led whereas at the next stage of growth, they need to be expertise-led. While so doing, many times, they pick up people from larger companies hoping pedigree is the sure sign of expertise. It takes less to survive in a large company, it takes a lot more to come to a smaller company and execute scale. In not making that distinction, companies bring in talent, go through mutual frustration and in the process lose time.

**In the book, you speak candidly about some of the things that did not work out for Mindtree.**

If Indian entrepreneurs do not build emotional security to admit their mistakes, how will we all grow up? How will we build bigger and better companies? When you read that Subroto Bagchi screwed up and he said so, you take it seriously and, more importantly, you would not want to feel awkward when it comes to discussing your mistakes.



The build-up: Subroto Bagchi.



*The Elephant Catchers—Key Lessons for Breakthrough Growth*  
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