

'Bangalore failed to scale intellect'

Subroto Bagchi, chairman of IT company Mindtree, talks about the importance of scaling people and organizations in his recently published book, *The Elephant Catchers*

Anshul Dhamija & Sujit John | TNN

What made you focus on scale?

It occurred to me that India needs scale like never before. And this is not about scale in business but about building scale for not-for-profit, for professionals, for government institutions. There is a lot of pressure overall in the system because as people we are not scaling as much as we should.

What do you see as the essential elements of scaling?

I believe there are six essentials. First, you need to be comfortable with the idea of scale. Second, you must recognize that something needs to change at the point of inflection. It could be the culture of the organization, the service or product, or the mode of delivery. Third, you have to scale intellect, which may mean you have to get external consultants.

Fourth, you have to scale your reputation, ensure everything is above board. Otherwise you could get into the kind of situation Ranbaxy and Rajat Gupta did. Fifth, you have to scale your people, learn from unusual sources. Sixth, you have to scale adversity, be able to quickly come out of difficulties you get into.

Do you think Bangalore scaled?

No. Bangalore was not at all comfortable with the idea of scale. This city didn't know the size of good fortune coming its way, and didn't know how to use it. No politician, no bureaucrat, nobody had any idea. If this much success was available to any other developed country in the world they would kiss your feet, hug you and want to have this industry (information technology) in their backyard. Singapore wants a Bangalore, but hasn't been able to figure it out; you create a Bangalore in Dubai, and the rulers would make you the most wanted person in the world; Germany cannot have a Bangalore today and America is just unable to figure it out.

One big problem with Bangalore was that it failed to scale intellect. And intellect is not about NRN and Premji, intellect is about the corporator, bureaucracy and government. Besides, Bangalore failed to scale its people. Today, I worry about Bangalore's energy levels, its becoming too comfortable with itself. You go to Mumbai, Delhi, or even Hyderabad,

The Interview



these cities are far more energetic than Bangalore is today!

Why the reference to elephant catchers?

Oh it's a very cute story (from the tribal lands of Odisha). And those were days much before Facebook and Twitter, but when catching rabbits, immediately the word would go around as everybody is tweeting mentally.

From a 5-year-old to a 70-year-old everybody would congregate, with bows and arrows, brooms, utensils, and head in to the forest. There would always be two groups -- one to catch and kill, the other to create cacophony. So people enter the forest make loud noises, one rabbit comes out, then a partridge and so on. In the evening there is a lot of story telling, some brew will be drunk and the meat eaten. In this narration the people are led by enthusiasm; as long as you are enthusiastic you are invited to the party. But contrast this with people who catch elephants. You have to be expertise led to trap and catch elephants, because if your are enthusiasm led then you might have to pay with your life. While catching elephants, one group will go to the site and know the likely path the elephants will take and see how many males, females, and calves are in the herd; another group then would go to dig a ditch and cover the ditch; a third set of people would go along with specially made ropes and trained elephants, to bring the trapped elephant back.

The strategy and approach for the two are drastically different. Besides, when you catch a rabbit it's not difficult to figure out what to do with it. You eat it, it's a consumptive resource. When you bring an elephant you cannot say where will I keep it; you have to pre-think where you will tie the elephant. An elephant to me symbolizes scale and its a regenerative resource.