

# Thoughts on Academic Excellence<sup>1</sup>

V. L. Mote

---

The topic on Academic Leadership for discussion is timely and opportune. It is timely, because none of Institutions for higher learning, including the IITs and IIMs find a place among the top ten institutions of higher learning around the globe. Why do not we in India have a M. I. T., the Sloan School of Management, Harvard Business School of Business Administration and the California Institute of Technology? This question is of concern not only to academicians like us but also to the Ministry of Education, Government of India. If we do not address this question in right earnest, we would be perpetuating mediocrity. It is opportune because India is now grudgingly getting global appreciation as a country that matters. However, we are lagging far behind China in economic development, in giving to Indian citizens, good education, nutrition and an excellent health system that is comparable to the best in the world. In addition, India is nowhere near China when we compare the Indian military might with the military might of China. The Indian army has undoubtedly come a long way since the day when it suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the PLA. However, we cannot correct all the problems that I have listed above, unless we provide an excellent academic leadership to our Institutes of higher learning. In a "Knowledge-Economy", can India survive without excellent education and particularly, higher education? Providing academic leadership in achieving excellence in teaching must be the top priority of the Institutes and their distinguished alumni.

I make no apologies for beginning my presentation with the questions that I have posed in the second paragraph of this article. Asking the right questions is as important as finding the answers to the questions. It is so for the simple reason that we cannot answer a question that has not been posed. According to the legend, wrote his three great works, and impelled by the first question of his wife, The three words happen to be the first three words of the three works respectively. Why does

the sky look blue? This question led to the answer "Blue colour of the sky is due to Raleigh scattering."

Now that we are discussing "Academic Leadership" in IIM Indore, it is obvious we must address "academic leadership" in management education. I strongly believe that the Institutes of Management and the alumni of the Institutes' top management programmes have a crucial role to play in addressing the major managerial problems that the Indian Industry and the Indian Government face. I hope that I do not appear to be chauvinistic when I make the above assertion. The late Dr Vikram Sarabhai told me when he recruited me a young assistant professor "Mote the purpose of the Institute of Management Ahmedabad is to help the Indian Government and the Indian Industry in resolving many problems which we can classify as managerial. You must do so through your empirical and theoretical research and teaching" These words of Dr Sarabhai are etched on my mind and these words ring in my ears even now after fifty-one years.

With this background let me now address the question, what should be the action plans of the Institutes of Management and the alumni of its top management programmes for providing academic leadership? The triads of any educational programme are who to teach? what to teach? And the third element of the triad is how to teach? In the present context the question, who to teach is redundant. Clearly, our target audience is the participants of the Institute's top management programme. I will therefore concentrate on the two elements what to teach and how to teach.

Clearly, an organisation exists in an environment, comprising the economic and the social environment. The recent debate between two well-known economists, Professor Sen and Professor Bhagawati, whether social development comes first or economic development comes first shows the importance of understanding the environment that we live in. When President Obama won a second term, he said, "The US is standing on a fiscal cliff." In India, we are in a much worse situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecture delivered at IIM Indore on October 3, 2013 on the occasion of Foundation Day celebration of IIM Indore.

Our fiscal deficit among other factors, is leading to inflation, which in turn is leading to high current account deficit. As an economist observed "Inflation is the cruellest tax on the poor." Can you imagine the hardships that poorer sections of the society must be facing when onion, which is a poor man's food costs about eighty per kilogram? The rising prices of milk and vegetables are driving the inflation. Why cannot the persons who are in charge of managing the Indian economy tame inflation? Obviously, helping the understanding of the economic environment must be an important part of the Institutes' programme for providing academic leadership. I am sure that during this excellent "Conference on Creating and Sustaining Institutions" you must have discussed these important aspects of the Indian economic environment. My experience shows that the courses that teach Macro Economics rarely discuss these questions, which should be the central foci of such courses. Who but the Institutes and its alumni like you can provide this academic leadership?

Undoubtedly, we have followed a development pattern that has benefited only a few urban citizens who speak English<sup>2</sup>. Publishing data about the proportion of Muslim students in the Two-Year Post-Graduate Programmes that the Institutes offer would show how lopsided the distribution of educational opportunities for higher education are. Similarly, making public the data about the proportion of students whose parents are industrial workers, in the IIM's Two-Year Post-Graduate Programmes, would again highlight how lopsided the distribution of educational opportunities for higher education are.

What is true of the nation's educational programmes is also true of the nation's industrial development. The nation has developed large industries that are capital intensive resulting in large scale unemployment. What the nation needs is an array of labour intensive industries such as tourism and the garment industry, which are well paying. However, the impediment to the development of these industries is the attitude of the workforce. Remaining absent at the smallest pretext is

a common norm. In a garment industry, the production is organised in a line where each operative performs a limited operation and passes on the garment to the next operative. In such a production set up, absenteeism can be detrimental. Further, the poor quality of education affects the industry. In an interview for the selection of sewing machine operative, I asked the candidate whether an inch is longer or a centimetre is longer? I was surprised when the candidate who had passed the standard 10 in high school did not know the correct answer.

Similarly, for tourism we need guides who can speak many languages fluently. I speak subject to correction, but I am afraid that we do not have facilities to train tourist guides. Clearly, the only solution to all these problems is to ensure that all **young Indians** get good quality basic education. By basic education I mean that the education that will give them proficiency in reading, writing, and basic arithmetic. It is unfortunate that the poorest sections of the society do not get good quality education.

The Government of Gujarat has given this important task to Ahmedabad's municipal schools. Unfortunately, the less we speak about the quality of education in these schools the better off we would be. Now the Government has made it mandatory for corporations to set aside 2% of their profit for achieving the corporations' objective of Social Responsibility. I do hope that IIM Indore and its distinguished alumni will help the corporations to use these funds effectively and efficiently for imparting education to the poorest of the poor children in the city.

It is not possible to discuss thoroughly in the ambit of one short presentation all these issues. It would suffice it to say that the IIMs and the IITs should equip many NGOs<sup>3</sup> who can carry out these tasks.

I have not discussed two important issues regarding the IITs and IIMs' role in providing academic leadership. The first issue is, how to teach? And the second issue is the need to prepare teachers for meeting the burgeoning need for educating people at different levels.

<sup>2</sup> Once a research assistant told me, "Professor, do you realize the advantage that you have because your parents spoke English?" He stopped me dead in my tracks.

<sup>3</sup> SHARDA Trust, Arvind Mills' arm for helping the urban poor is carrying out many of these tasks effectively.

For want of space I will only answer the question, how to teach rather perfunctorily. I suggest that for answering the question how to teach, all teachers should follow Gandhiji's advice to teachers. He said, "**teach for life, through life, and throughout life.**" (Emphasis added).

Undoubtedly, the need to prepare **good teachers** is a pressing need. However, I am afraid that the IITs and IIMs can do very little about it except for training the teachers they need for their own requirements. For any person who wants to teach in primary school or high school must have a B. Ed. degree. Unfortunately, the IITs and the IIMs can play no role in improving the quality of education in the B. Ed. Programme. I recall that the IIM Ahmedabad had started a programme for university teachers but they had to wind up that programme soon.

Let me now turn to the question of social environment, which also has close connection with the economic environment. Parliament has passed the Food Security Bill. Undoubtedly, no Indian citizen would like to see a child going to sleep on an empty stomach. An old English adage says we must not only give fish to a hungry person but also teach him to fish. Do we have an effective educational programme to teach a vast majority of the unlettered persons among the poorest section of the society? I have already highlighted this issue and I need not repeat it here.

We get a glimpse of the Indian social environment when we read about the brutal rape and murder of Nirbhaya in Delhi. Similarly, the rape of a photographer journalist in Mumbai leads us to question how this could happen in India where we proudly say, "Angels dwell where women are respected?"

Do you remember the disaster in Uttarakhand where many pilgrims lost their lives? Let me recall the sequence of events leading to the disaster in Uttarakhand. On 12 June, the Metrological Department issued a warning of heavy rainfall near the Kedarnath temple and suggested that the *char dham yatra* should be postponed. The department sent copies to the CMO and to the District Collector's office. Unfortunately, none of the worthies took any notice of these warnings and the disaster followed. It was the Indian Air Force and the Indian

Army rescued the pilgrims. The Air Marshal said "our rotors will keep spinning until we have rescued the last pilgrim. In the massive rescue-operation that followed the Air Force lost one helicopter, the pilot, and the army personnel lost their lives. But the Air Force did not stop its rescue operations. After giving full military honours to the pilots and soldiers who lost their lives in the operation, the Air Force continued its rescue operations.

The Indian Armed forces could do such a rescue operation because it has a strong code of conduct. The code is:

1. The safety and the honour of your country come first.
2. The safety and the honour of the men you command comes second, and
3. Your own safety and honour come last.

That the Armed Forces live according to this code of conduct is apparent when we see the ratio of officers to men killed in all battles.

Contrast the behaviour of the Air Force Pilots and the soldiers of the Indian Army with the behaviour of the shopkeepers and the *dhaba* owners who fleeced the hungry and the thirsty pilgrims who could manage to come down safely.

Can the Institutes of Management and its distinguished alumni act as the conscience keepers of the society? I am sure that if the IITs and the IIMs followed this strategy, then over a couple of decades they would have transformed Indian society.

I could go on. We academicians do not keep time according to the watch. We keep time with the calendar. I would not tax your patience. Let me conclude my talk by sharing with you the important message that the last verse of the *Bhagavadgita* gives to important people like you shape the destiny of organisations. Perhaps a word on what the *Bhagavadgita* is may not be out of place. The *Bhagavadgita* is more a religious classic than a philosophical treatise. It is not an esoteric work designed for and understood by the specially initiated but a popular poem which helps even those "who wander in the region of many and variable." The last verse of the *Bhagavadgita* says "unite vision (yoga) and energy (dhanuh) and not allow the former to degenerate into

madness or the latter into savagery. High thought and just action must be, for ever, the aim of man."

**V. L. Mote** was a Professor at Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad from 1962 to 1993.



## Indian Institute of Management Indore

Management Development Programmes

**JANUARY - MARCH 2014**

S.N.	Programme Title	Coordinator	Dates
1.	Negotiation Skills	Kamal Kishore Jain	Jan 06 - 08
2.	Retail Management	Hasmukh Gajjar	Jan 07 - 10
3.	Workshop on Business Modeling	U. K. Bhattacharya	Jan 13 - 15
4.	Senior Management Programme	Prashant Salwan	Jan 16 - 25
5.	How to Build Innovative Organizations	D. L. Sunder	Jan 22 - 24
6.	Leadership Communication	Madhusri Shrivastava	Jan 27 - 29
7.	Customer Behaviour and Marketing Strategy	Sabita Mahapatra	Feb 03 - 05
8.	Competency Mapping & Management	Sumit Kumar Ghosh	Feb 03 - 05
9.	Strategic Reward Management	Kajari Mukherjee	Feb 10 - 12
10.	Workshop on Logic of Logistics	U. K. Bhattacharya	Feb 10 - 12
11.	Accelerating Leadership Impact through Communication Skills	Swatantra	Feb 17 - 19
12.	Corporate Performance Management	Keyur Thaker	Feb 18 - 20
13.	Cloud Computing and Other Modern Computing Architectures	Madhukar Dayal	Mar 03 - 05

For details please contact:  
 Management Development Programmes (MDP) Office  
**Indian Institute of Management Indore**  
 Rau-Pithampur Road, INDORE 453556 (India)  
 Tel: +91-731-2439750, 2439752-54 • Fax: +91-731-2439800, 2439751 (D)  
 E-mail: mdp@iimidr.ac.in