
A breezy collection of stories, fables, caselets and first-person accounts of the amazing experiences of individuals and organizations aspiring to create a diverse and inclusive workplace!



DIVERSITY CHALLENGE™

Creating an Inclusive Workplace

SAUNDARYA RAJESH



ADVANCE PRAISE

Our embracing of D&I principles truly determines how we live and work meaningfully—in this delightful collection of stories, anecdotes and life situations. Dr Rajesh drives this message home emphatically.

Anil Chaudhry

Zone President and Managing Director
International Operations, Schneider Electric

Diversity is a business imperative; inclusion, a behaviour, an attitude. This distinction is brought through beautifully in *The 99 Day Diversity Challenge* by Dr Saundarya. A must-read for all D&I enthusiasts!

Chaitanya N. Sreenivas

VP HR and HR Head India South Asia, IBM

Organizations which practise the concept of diversity and inclusion are more creative and adaptable. They usually live longer and beat others in terms of growth and profitability. I also feel that companies having diversity and inclusion provide the right platform to foster happy, involved and closely knit teams. Having pioneered the concept of diversity and inclusion along with spearheading the work for providing second careers for women, Saundarya is the best person to write *The 99 Day Diversity Challenge*. Having walked the talk, there is no better person to elucidate and throw more light on diversity and inclusion.

C.K. Ranganathan

Chairman and Managing Director, CavinKare Private Limited



DAY
52/99



INTERLUDE: THE TALLEST LIGHTHOUSES CAST THE LONGEST SHADOWS

The sound of the water sprinkler keeping the lawn of his beach house fresh and green was meditative. Bharat leaned back in the rattan chair on the large first-floor verandah that overlooked his garden. The backwaters flowed within visible distance of his house and in the light of the setting sun, he could see the golden brown silhouettes of the fishermen standing on the slim row boats, gently rowing towards the centre where the catfish swam. The Saturday breeze wafted in with the voices of Moti, his old gardener, in conversation with the cook. Moti was plucking tender coconuts from the trees that lined the garden.

His mind drifting to other days and times, Bharat found himself reflecting about a summer vacation he had had with his dad several decades ago. How time has changed! He realized that while he was a celebrated CEO whose interviews were featured as cover stories of every popular business magazine, he would always be his father's boy. Dad's guidance and many pieces of advice had always kept him in good stead. Having lost his mother at an early age, Bharat had been raised by his father single-handedly. 'I was never a rebel teenager,' thought Bharat to himself with a smile. He remembered that he was scheduled to have a video-chat with his father that night. He was delighted that his dad had taken to smartphones easily and had now mastered WhatsApp and Facebook.

It had been a few weeks since he began the 99 Day Diversity Challenge and Bharat realized that each topic impacted him in a different way. It had been an experience like no other. He had gone through the manuscript hurriedly at first and then began reading and absorbing parts of it with more relish. The comments and notations on the sides of the pages provided interesting insights and Bharat wondered who had written them. A thorough search on the internet on the '99 Day



Diversity Challenge' had yielded nothing. Not wanting to engage Advaita in another conversation about the antecedents of the book, Bharat quelled his curiosity and continued reading the tome. Much to Evita's surprise, he had even brought it with him to the beach house.

They were expecting guests, and Evita and the kids had gone to the village to buy fresh vegetables for the night's dinner. The beach house was Bharat's retreat, his haven, the place where he travelled to for peace, quiet and reflection. He sometimes invited friends or partners over for discussions, and today, he was looking forward to the conversation. His mentor, Paramita Acharya, was driving down.

Paramita was Bharat's predecessor at AcceLever. It had been a short stint, but in the brief time that Bharat had known her, Paramita, a small-made pleasant lady who reminded you of your favourite aunt, seemed more like a coach than a CEO. While Bharat had been a career AcceLeverite, having joined as an MT and working his way over 25 years to a senior management position, Paramita had been a rank outsider. She came from a completely different industry background and was even considered a maverick. Her three previous stints had been hugely successful but each had ended with a buy-out or a public issue. Paramita was a makeover artist and seemed to have been brought in by the board as part of a compromise to infuse fresh blood into AcceLever.

Initially Bharat had resented Paramita as did most of the tenured team at AcceLever. Paramita was alien to the culture, the way things worked at AcceLever. Her soft-spoken manner was a complete antithesis to the sharp, aggressive style that was typical of AcceLever. The fact that she listened more than she spoke seemed in contrast to the AcceLever old boys club, where the guys in charge did all the talking. It appeared as though Paramita would always be the outsider, the unfamiliar X factor, and everyone waited to see if her methods would fail.

Nothing speaks louder than success and Paramita's was no different. Over time, Bharat learnt to trust her. He accepted that the older woman's methods may be different but they worked. Paramita's thinking seemed



more suited to a social enterprise, but the results they gave ensured that the board felt vindicated in their choice. Which was why it came as a complete surprise to Bharat when Paramita shared with him that just after 13 months, she would be leaving AcceLever.

‘I am recommending your candidature to the board, Bharat. I would like them to name you the CEO,’ she had said to Bharat’s great delight. As a fast-tracker and a career-primary professional, Bharat knew he would become CEO one day, if not of AcceLever but certainly of some company, but he didn’t expect it so soon. The opportunity to lead a business, define customer expectations, create new products and solutions, pick up CSR as a focus area—Bharat foresaw an exciting future but also realized that he would need Paramita’s guidance and mentoring. ‘I will accept the position, but only on one condition, Paramita,’ Bharat had said. ‘I want you to be my mentor.’

Paramita happily agreed. Once the board accepted Paramita’s decision and named Bharat the CEO-in-waiting, the duo swung into action. Paramita spent two hours each day for the next two months, guiding and counselling Bharat. In those 60 days, Bharat learnt more about managing people than he had in his entire career. He also realized that behind the soft façade of the Type B, Paramita was a sharp thinker and keen observer of human behaviour.

That was more than two years ago and the two had stayed connected, friends. ‘If there’s one person I would like to talk to about inclusion, it is Paramita,’ thought Bharat as her car pulled into the driveway.

Paramita and her husband Shekar stepped out of the car, their faces wreathed in smiles. Each time Bharat looked at the couple, he could not but reflect on the utter contrast between husband and wife. Shekar, his bearded bespectacled visage with a prominent nose, was reminiscent of a young Tagore. His lean 6-foot frame in a pair of jeans and a loose-fitting sweatshirt looked every inch the relaxed, retired man, while Paramita, 4 feet 11 inches tall, dressed in a crisp cotton saree was a small dynamo of energy and enthusiasm. One could never imagine her being retired.



‘Ah, the beard is even more luxurious than I remember!’ laughed Bharat as he shook hands warmly with Shekar and gave Paramita a tight hug.

‘Bharat, how have you been? How’s Evita? How are the kids?’ Paramita handed him a large cloth bag filled with fruit. ‘We harvested this morning. Mangoes from the farm.’

Bharat opened the bag and breathed in deeply the fragrance of ripe Alphonso. ‘Hmm, divine.’

‘Great to see that the farm is shaping up well. How are you and Shekar enjoying the farm life?’

‘It’s a labour of love. And as all good work, as you sow, so you reap,’ drawled Shekar, as enigmatic as ever.

‘Well, Shekar’s current obsession is with the betel vine at home. He is trying his best to get it to grow exactly the way he wants!’ laughed Paramita.

‘All I am doing is giving it a few gentle nudges to change direction. It is trying to latch on to the tree jasmine, I want it to be independent!’

‘That’s Shekar for you! If I do the same thing at the NGO, he asks me not to be fussy! I split time between the NGO and the farm—don’t know which is more demanding!’ said Paramita.

The friends walked inside and the evening turned mellow. Between the laughter, the catching up and the hot dinner served by Evita, the talk turned to Bharat’s work.

‘Ah, I have to tell you this,’ said Bharat, once they were settled in the verandah with bowls of freshly churned home-made ice creams. ‘I am reading this book—I don’t even know if I can call it a book, it is more like a manuscript of reflections. It is called the 99 Day Diversity Challenge!’

As soon as he had shared this, Bharat noticed the couple promptly exchange glances. Shekar adjusted himself a little more comfortably in the rattan settee, while Paramita leaned forward a little and asked, ‘And how do you find it?’



Bharat looked at the couple incredulously. This was not the question he had expected from Paramita. He thought she would ask, 'What is the 99 Day Diversity Challenge??' Instead she was asking about how he found it! Did she know about the book? But how could she? Was it not strange to them? Had they too read it before? But it did not seem like a published book.

A million questions racing in his mind, Bharat asked the first that he could articulate. 'But, but ... how do you know about the book, Paramita?'

'Because I wrote it,' said Paramita simply.

While Bharat's expressions revealed that he was finding it difficult to digest that bit of startling information, Paramita began softly. 'Advaita is our niece. You have met her a couple of times at my house parties ...'

As Bharat looked even more astounded, Paramita continued. 'Bharat, I always felt that AcceLever was at a huge disadvantage when it came to D&I. In fact, one of the primary reasons that I left the organization was because even at the very top, the culture was very non-inclusive.'

'But, how did Advaita ...' before Bharat could complete, Shekar piped in with a broad smile. 'Advaita is my sister's daughter, Bharat. Didn't you recognize our prominent family heirloom?' laughed Shekar, pointing to his own nose. With a start, Bharat realized what he had found familiar about Advaita. She was a female version of Shekar!

As Bharat joined in the laughter, Shekar continued, 'She finished her MBA and got campus placed last year at AcceLever. Even we did not know that she was applying for an MT's position. It is only after she got through and mentioned that she had met you that the idea was born in Paramita's mind!'

'I had been wanting to speak to you about inculcating a culture of inclusion at AcceLever, Bharat,' said Paramita, this time her voice serious with intent.

'Inclusion is something that has to begin at the very top. It is not a culture change that you should attempt with a bottom-up strategy. To use an analogy closer to this beach house of yours—the tallest



lighthouses cast the longest shadows. Leaders create cultures. A culture of inclusion and diversity has to be driven top-down. You—the leader—have to internalize it; you have to make it cool, make it part of the organizational DNA. And you need to approach it in your usual intellectual manner, not emotionally. That is why I made sure that Advaita worked really hard on the report before sending it to you!

The revelation was astounding and Bharat shook his head in surprise and amazement. ‘The 99 Day Diversity Challenge is a compilation of my thoughts on the subject. I urged Advaita to give it to you and if you did not take it, to just leave it in your office!’ continued Paramita.

‘Oh and over the last one month, she has been dying to call you and ask you how you found the book!’ said Shekar, again with a huge laugh, while Paramita quickly added, ‘It was a surprise and delight that you called us for dinner today! I was wondering if you would at all bring up the topic of the 99 Day Diversity Challenge and even if you did, whether you liked it....’

Bharat stood up suddenly and took Paramita’s hands in his own—‘Thanks for never giving up on me, Paramita!’ he said wholeheartedly. ‘The 99 Day Diversity Challenge is the most thought-provoking thing I have ever read. It has made me reflect and revisit many of my decisions and behaviour. I have just completed about a third of it and already I find myself thinking differently. But why did you not just call me up and ask me to read it? Why the whole cloak-and-daggers thing with Advaita giving me the report and all??’

‘Because I did not want you to do it just because I said so,’ said Paramita staring into her ice cream bowl for a second before looking up and facing Bharat squarely. ‘I wanted you to see the importance of it, the necessity of it. I wanted you to buy the “business case”. Which is why I asked Advaita to prepare the document. I asked her to minute the meetings that she sat in, collect information that was publicly available on the sales results and the contributions made by individuals. I wanted her to build a strong and powerful argument. And then, I asked her to write to you. And knowing the kind of thorough guy that



you are, who is a logical and systematic thinker, I knew that you would take the bait!’

Bharat smiled at how well his mentor had predicted his own behaviour. ‘Have you shared the 99 Day Diversity Challenge with anyone else, Paramita?’

‘No, not yet. You were always my first option. I wanted you to not just read it, but also make sure that you live the values, Bharat. You were a soft target for me!’ laughed Paramita.

‘I know the incredible influence you have within AcceLever,’ she continued. ‘Not just with your team but also among your peers, your own age cohort. That’s why I backed you for the role of the CEO, because I know that you are a truly charismatic, influential leader. And that is the reason why I wanted you to be the first to read the 99 Day Diversity Challenge.’

‘Thanks again, Paramita. I am deeply grateful to you,’ said Bharat rather emotionally.

‘No thanks needed, Bharat, I said this before and I will say it again—the tallest lighthouses cast the longest shadows,’ said Paramita, getting up quickly from her chair and pacing around the room. ‘Having worked in the corridors of power, I know exactly how much influence you wield. When you decide to adopt inclusion as a behaviour, you impact scores, even hundreds of other influential leaders. Your behaviour is observed, it is discussed. You are the subject of much thought. Which is why I wanted to start with you. I want inclusion to be a leadership competency. I want it to be your signature trait. And knowing the kind of leader you are, you will ensure that your team follows your example. Because...’ and this time, Bharat joined in ‘the tallest lighthouses cast the longest shadows...’





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Saundarya Rajesh is one of India's most respected thought leaders on D&I. An award-winning social entrepreneur, she is best known as the pioneer of second-career opportunities for women in corporate India. She has been recognized as a '#100Women Achiever' by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, India, and also listed in the United Nation's 'Women Transforming India' by the NITI Aayog.

A relentless advocate of the potential of women in the workplace, Saundarya is the advisor of choice for an impressive list of organizations and leaders on the benefits of inclusion and diversity. One of the earliest voices in India to speak about the need for gender balance in the workplace, her diversity immersion sessions have benefited varied audiences, ranging from industry bodies to the police force, from entrepreneurs to college-goers, from organizations such as Accenture, Deloitte, IBM, Mahindra Group and Tata Group to small and medium businesses. Inspirational in her approach to tackling systemic issues faced by women, Saundarya has irrevocably changed the game for the Indian woman professional, by introducing the concept of 'career intentionality' and 'career re-entry' to corporate India.

Widely quoted on women's careers, entrepreneurship and inclusive leadership, Saundarya is a highly sought-after speaker at national and international conferences, and a firm believer in integrating work and life. In her pursuit to develop and inspire people to grow to their full potential, she makes her writing debut through this book. Given her passion for the subject, there is promise of more!

For more details, please visit the author's Twitter handle (SaundaryaR) and her profile on Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saundarya_Rajesh).

For access to additional tools, techniques and resources on the book, please log on to www.99daydiversitychallenge.com



What is The 99 Day Diversity Challenge?

- A never-before account of the nascent experiences of implementing the culture of D&I at the Indian workplace
- A precise explanation on the different strands of diversity, how to leverage each strand and the future of the D&I thoughts
- A customisable framework to set organizational inclusion goals, design a methodology to accomplish them and track your progress
- Ready-to-use tools put in the most interesting and gripping way, this book will unlock the diverse human potential at your workplace
- With a lexicon, word puzzles, crosswords, engaging D&I games, this book all set to enrich the reader with an all new experience for those set to begin their own D&I journey.

Learn more. Visit us at:

www.99daydiversitychallenge.com

Click and Share

