THE AVEPRR LEADERSHIP MODEL

StoRR ies

Ordinary People. Extraordinary Leadership.

Authenticity • Values • Emotional Intelligence • Purpose • Resilience • Responsiveness

RAKESH RAYIRAMKANDATH

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Stories Matter
NewDelhi • London

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Foreword

I have always been a visual learner. For me, movies and videos have often spoken louder than the written word because they allow us to witness a story unfolding in real-time. When I began reading this book, I didn't just see text on a page; I felt as though I was settling in to watch a compelling limited series. Each story serves as an episode, which is captivating, realistic, and building toward a climax that leaves you reflecting long after the chapter ends.

The flow is seamless, but the true brilliance lies in how these narratives breathe life into the **AVEPRR framework:** Authenticity, Values, Emotional Intelligence, Resilience, and Responsiveness. Having read the author's previous work on these attributes, I found that this book provides the essential bridge - transforming those core leadership concepts into living, breathing, real-world applications.

As a psychologist and behavioural enthusiast, I have always advocated that storytelling is our most potent form of communication. From a neuroscientific perspective, stories trigger **"neural coupling,"** allowing the reader's brain to sync with the narrative. We don't just process information; we recreate the scenes in our minds, which significantly aids retention and clarity. This psychological engagement is why the stories my parents told me in childhood still influence my decisions and actions today. Real-life incidents bypass theory and go straight to the **"identity level"** of human behaviour.

What makes this book a vital self-help tool, and not just a collection of anecdotes, is the deliberate, scientific structure following each story:

- **The Connection:** It bridges the narrative directly to AVEPR attributes.
- **The Growth Path:** It illustrates how leaders evolve as they embody these traits.
- **The Warning Signs:** It identifies the "drifts" and triggers that can lead to a leadership collapse.

Perhaps most importantly, each chapter concludes with a **Reflection Space.** The targeted questions provided are designed to move the reader from passive

observation to active **neuroplasticity.** By reflecting and answering these questions, we aren't just reading; we are literally rewiring our brains, challenging old patterns, and cementing new leadership pathways.

The language is simple and accessible, yet the impact is profound. This book acts as a mirror. It invites you to witness your current behavioral style and provides the practical **"mental gym"** needed to refine your attributes.

If you are ready to bring forth a better version of your professional self, I invite you to step into these stories. You won't just read this book - you will experience it, reflect upon it, and ultimately, evolve through it.

Sreeni S Warrier
Founder & Chief Architect - Mind Architects
Fractional CHRO and Former Talent Leader - PNB MetLife & Muthoot Fincorp.

Advance Praise Received for StoRRies

What distinguishes this collection is its honesty. These are not idealized accounts of leadership, but real, relatable situations where individuals are tested, often without warning. Each story captures a moment where something deeper than skill determines the outcome.

In *The Modern-Day Chakravyuha*, Rakesh brings out the complexity of modern organisational life, where individuals navigate systems that they do not fully understand. The story underscores a critical leadership discipline, pausing to ask "why." It reminds us that clarity of purpose is not optional; it is essential.

The Call in the Rain is a compelling illustration of authenticity, emotional intelligence and responsiveness. It shows that leadership is not defined by authority, but by ownership. In moments where delay is easier than action, the choice to step forward becomes the true test of character.

In *When Ambition Turns Dangerous*, the narrative takes a necessary turn into uncomfortable territory. Ambition, when detached from values, can distort judgment and erode trust. The story serves as a timely reminder that growth without grounding carries consequences.

The NCC backstory, *Where Leadership Truly Began*, resonates deeply. It is more than a tribute - it is a reaffirmation of how leadership is shaped early in life. The NCC does not just train individuals; it instils a way of thinking, of discipline, service, and leading by example. Seeing those values reflected across these stories brings the journey full circle. I have had the privilege of knowing Rakesh since our early days in the National Cadet Corps (NCC), a phase of life that quietly but firmly shapes one's character. As a Senior Under Officer myself, I have seen how discipline, responsibility, and leadership are not taught; they are lived. Reading *StoRRies*, I found myself revisiting those formative years, not merely with nostalgia, but with a renewed appreciation of how those early lessons have evolved into a grounded and practical philosophy of leadership.

What makes *StoRRies* particularly powerful is how it engages the reader. Rakesh does not prescribe answers. Instead, he poses questions; subtle, direct, and often uncomfortable. At the end of each story, the reader is compelled to reflect: *What would I have done? What do I stand for? This is the call to action.*

In a time where leadership is often reduced to metrics and outcomes, this book brings the focus back to fundamentals - Character, Values, and Self-awareness. It reminds us that leadership is not about visibility, but about integrity in moments that go unnoticed.

StoRRies is not just a collection of narratives. It is a mirror and, in that reflection, lies its enduring strength.

Dr P Sivakumar

Head, Centre for Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Analysis (CMEIA) & Faculty & HOD, Department of Development Studies, Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development (RGNIYD), ***Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Govt. of India***

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StoRRies by Rakesh brings alive inspiring real-life corporate accounts of Resilience and Responsiveness (RR) blended with AVEP pillars.

Through his vast work experience, Rakesh has woven a tapestry of stories that make us reflect and, more importantly, inspire us to take action.

Some of my biggest takeaways included one on the "The Modern Day Chakravyuha," a story on the importance of asking why we are doing what we are doing to return to a sense of purpose in our lives. Another one of my favourite stories is around the importance of an organization's culture and core values as the anchor that can bind people together to weather the good and the bad, even during unprecedented black swan events like the Covid lockdown.

What is unique about these stories is that it grabs us by the shoulders and makes us confront our own lives with the same reflective questions that are asked to the reader at the end of each chapter, questions that nudge us to be better professionals and human beings.

The impact that I have personally felt from the book is the clear call to action that I am left with long after I have completed a story - What am I going to do to make a difference? The stories serve as a quiet nudge, inspiring me to not just think but also act.

Pick up this book to find several of your own life's stories reflected in these pages and through that, a deeper understanding on how we can show up more intentionally for ourselves and the people around us.

Tojo Jose
Executive Coach, Adjunct Professor, Ex-CHRO - Muthoot FinCorp, Blue Star, Al-Suwaidi Group

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StoRRies by Rakesh Rayiramkandath is not merely a collection of stories; it is a collection of reflections on character, choices, and displaying true leadership under pressure. What makes this book impactful is the familiarity of its people and situations. As I read through the narratives, I realized these are not distant fictional characters. They are individuals we have all encountered in workplaces, institutions, and in life itself. In many ways, they are reflections of what we ourselves can become.

One story speaks powerfully about ambition, how essential it is for growth, yet how dangerous it can become when emotional intelligence and values fail to keep pace with success. Another one reminds us of the quiet strength of mothers who are the silent pillars who often shape resilience, character, and stability without ever seeking recognition. Those moments stay with the readers long after the story ends.

The tribute to NCC was deeply personal for me, gone back to our NCC days, and Camps we have done together, especially the attachment training we have done at the Indian Military Academy, which I believe was a great influence in shaping both our future, in whichever field we are today. It took me back to my own cadet days, the camps, the discipline, the camaraderie, and the invisible lessons that shaped our character during our formative years. NCC does not

merely train cadets; it builds perspective, responsibility, and the instinct to lead with integrity. Reading those sections brought back memories of a phase that continues to influence leadership journeys even decades later.

I was equally struck by the story of the sales manager who chose empathy and purpose over convenience. He went beyond policy, yet remained within the spirit of ethics and responsibility. In today's world, where systems often become excuses for inaction, that story quietly demonstrates what authenticity and human-centered leadership truly look like.

What Rakesh has done effectively through StoRRies is create narratives that do not preach but provoke reflection. Each story nudges the reader to pause and ask difficult but necessary questions:

What would I have done?

What do I stand for?

What am I becoming as a leader and as a human being?

This is a book that leaders should read, and perhaps even more importantly, a book that aspiring leaders must read. Because leadership here is not presented through titles or authority, but through choices, conduct, and courage in ordinary moments.

StoRRies leaves behind more than lessons. It leaves behind introspection.

Thank you Rakesh.

Jai Hind.

Lt Col SS Nair, Indian Army

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What Rakesh Rayiramkandath has done through this work is not to create another leadership playbook, but to surface something far more difficult to articulate and far more essential to practice, the moment of choice. The moment when policy is clear, but the path is not. The moment when numbers make sense, but the relationship is at risk, the moment when what is easy quietly competes with what is right.

The story of *"The Call in the Rain"* captures this with rare precision. It is not a story about credit terms or distribution strategy. It is about a question every professional relationship eventually asks: *Are we partners, or are we just participants in a transaction?*

What stands out is not the outcome, but the conduct. Honest conversations when convenient ambiguity was available. Data used not to defend a position, but to protect a relationship. And a leadership instinct that recognized something many organisations still struggle to accept, that trust is not separate from commercial success; it is the architecture beneath it.

The AVEPRR framework presented in this book does not read like a theory because it is not derived from abstraction. It emerges from lived realities - situations where authenticity, values, emotional intelligence, purpose, resilience, and responsiveness are not concepts, but decisions made under constraint.

What makes this book particularly relevant today is its refusal to simplify. There are no perfect characters here. No idealized outcomes. Only people navigating ambiguity, trade-offs, and consequences. And in doing so, the book achieves something rare: it does not instruct the reader; it involves them. You do not finish these stories with answers. You finish them with questions that stay longer than the reading itself.

For anyone building teams, markets, or institutions, especially in environments where relationships define outcomes more than contracts, this book offers a quiet but uncompromising reminder:

"A searingly honest look at the 'maze' of corporate ambition. This book provides the language to name our struggles and the courage to finally ask, 'Towards what?'"

"This book exposes a side of corporate life most professionals recognize but few articulate, the moment when ambition stops building and starts eroding. Sharp, unsettling, and deeply relevant."

"What makes this work exceptional is not just the conspiracy, but the restraint. The real heroes here are not loud; they are precise. Nalini and Aiswarya represent the kind of leadership most organizations claim to value and rarely demonstrate."

There is something quietly powerful about this book. You don't just read the stories, you recognise them. In a manager's dilemma, a cadet's discipline, or a moment of hesitation, you begin to see your own life reflected back at you. And that is where the book does its real work.

StoRRies doesn't try to change you. It helps you notice who you already are, and who you might become.

In markets, in organisations, and in life, we often overestimate the power of structure and underestimate the weight of trust. We build policies, frameworks, and systems, believing they will hold everything together. But when pressure comes, and it always does, what actually holds is far more human.

StoRRies understands this deeply.

Trust is not built in statements. It is built in moments. And those moments are always watching.

Vinay Balakrishnan

Chairman & MD, Founder, Thooshan

Former CEO, Island Life Insurance, Mauritius.

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Stories have **always** held a special place in my life because the right story does more than entertain; it quietly makes us reflect on our own choices, relationships, and journeys. So, when Rakesh mentioned that he was working on *StoRRies*, I was naturally curious. After reading a few of them, I realized this was not just another collection of narratives. These stories stay with you because they feel deeply personal, almost as though they quietly uncover parts of your own journey, choices, and experiences that you may never have paused to reflect upon. I am grateful that Rakesh allowed me to experience a few of these *StoRRies* before the book reaches its readers.

Reading the story - THE MODERN-DAY CHAKRAVYUHA, made me ponder, Is this what I would wish for my dear son? We have always put a sequential step to be navigated by every child. In the later part of the story, I realized I could have handled a situation differently.

The power of the right question is the core of every story. Every paragraph I read, I paused as it carried sense and value. Rakesh has explained the AVEPRR Leadership Framework for each story and mapped the situations.

The stories are weaved so beautifully, I sat through each of it thinking for a while in between. The questions make you stop for a longer pause than I had expected. The narrative is very engaging.

After long I am reading something that is so raw and real. A book that is speaking directly to YOU. I loved every bit I read.

Awesome book, a must-read recommendation!

Best Wishes,
Deeja, IT Program Manager, Bengaluru

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StoRRies is a deeply relevant and reflective work for the times we live in. What makes this book stand apart is that it does not attempt to glorify leadership through titles or positions. Instead, it reveals leadership through conduct, choices, courage, and accountability in everyday moments. Each character in these stories carries a lesson, and more importantly, each one becomes a trigger for personal reflection.

As I moved through the narratives, I found myself pausing often, not merely to observe the characters, but to reflect on the larger questions they leave behind. The stories compel the reader to examine leadership not as authority, but as responsibility. Some characters inspire. Some caution. Some quietly disturb. Yet all of them leave an impression because they feel real, familiar, and deeply human.

The tribute to NCC was particularly meaningful to me. Institutions like the National Cadet Corps have, for decades, shaped generations of leaders through discipline, service, resilience, and character-building. Long before leadership became a management subject, NCC was building it through experience, hardship, teamwork, and accountability. Reading those sections brought back

memories of the values and camaraderie that continue to influence us long after the uniform is folded away.

What impressed me most is that *StoRRies* does not confine itself to corporate boardrooms or organisational life alone. These stories travel across professions, families, institutions, and personal struggles. They remind us that leadership is not limited to a workplace; it is reflected in how we respond to people, pressure, setbacks, ambition, and responsibility.

Rakesh has written these narratives with emotional depth and practical realism. There is no preaching here. Instead, the reader is invited into situations that demand introspection. The reflection spaces after each story make the experience even more powerful because they force us to ask difficult but necessary questions about our own decisions, values, and direction.

This is a book that leaders, professionals, students, and aspiring individuals across walks of life will relate to. In an era where speed often overtakes wisdom and ambition sometimes outruns values, *StoRRies* serves as a timely reminder that character remains the foundation of enduring leadership.

A must-read for anyone seeking not just professional growth, but personal clarity.

Lt. Col. Vishnu Nair
Commanding Officer, 12 Telangana Bn NCC

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When I first **began** reading StoRRies, what struck me immediately was its honesty. These are not stories written to impress; they are stories that reflect life as it truly is, uncertain, demanding, emotional, and human. As I moved through the narratives, I found myself pausing often because the situations felt familiar. The conversations, silent pressures, ethical dilemmas, and choices between convenience and conviction are experiences many of us encounter in our professional and personal journeys.

What makes this book meaningful is its reminder that leadership is not built only through titles, authority, or achievements. It is built quietly, in how we respond

when trust is tested, pressure rises, or values become inconvenient. The AVEPRR framework - Authenticity, Values, Emotional Intelligence, Purpose, Resilience, and Responsiveness- comes alive naturally through these stories. It never feels theoretical. Instead, it emerges through relatable people, decisions, relationships, and consequences.

"The Call in the Rain" stayed with me because it beautifully captures the truth that trust is built through sincerity and human connection, not policy alone. "The Modern-Day Chakravyuha" resonated deeply because it reflects the internal battles many professionals silently fight while outwardly appearing successful.

What I appreciate most is that the book does not try to provide perfect answers. Instead, it encourages reflection. It asks readers to pause and examine their own choices, ambitions, relationships, and sense of purpose.

Rakesh has written with clarity, sensitivity, and emotional depth, drawing leadership lessons from lived experiences rather than abstract theory. That is the real strength of this work.

Some books inform. Some inspire. A few quietly stay with you. StoRRies belongs to the last category.

Best wishes and happy reading
Vinay Paramasivan
Director and CEO – Elatech Intralogistics Solutions
Former Vice President – Strand Life Sciences

The Philosophy Behind *StoRRies and* A Note from the Author

Human beings have never learned life from instructions. We have learned it from stories.

Long before frameworks, dashboards, and leadership models, people understood how to live, lead, fail, and rise again through the lived experiences of others. Stories travelled without slides or structure across dinner tables, railway journeys, shared tea breaks, and quiet conversations after difficult days. They carried something far more enduring than information.

They carried **wisdom shaped by reality**. They answered questions no manual could:

- Whom do you trust when pressure builds?
- What do you stand for when compromise feels easier?
- How do you continue when life does not go your way?

StoRRies is built on a simple but uncompromising belief that Values are not what we claim. They are what we choose, especially when it is difficult to choose them. They do not live in mission statements. They do not reveal themselves in comfort. They emerge in moments of tension, when no one is watching, when outcomes are uncertain, and when the easier path quietly competes with the right one.

The pages that follow are drawn from lived realities by a few people across India - from workplaces, families, institutions, and communities. These are not extraordinary people placed in extraordinary situations. These are ordinary individuals, sales managers, young professionals, teachers, cadets, entrepreneurs, and business heads who found themselves in moments that demanded clarity of character.

Some acted with conviction. Some hesitated. Some failed before they understood.

But in each story, there was a moment - a decision point - where something deeper than skill determined the outcome. These are not abstract ideals. They are first

principles of human behaviour, visible in moments of conflict, tested in adversity, and proven over time. You will not find perfection in these pages. You will find hesitation, pressure, ambiguity, and imperfect choices. Because life does not unfold in clean frameworks. It unfolds in uncertainty.

This book is not written to instruct. It is written to hold a mirror.

As you read, you may recognise your own situations - a difficult manager, a moment of ethical doubt, a silent struggle, a decision you postponed, or one you wish you had taken differently.

That recognition is not accidental. It is the purpose. Pause when something feels familiar. Stay with the discomfort. Ask yourself:

What would I have done in that moment? and more importantly - why?

Because ultimately, every story in this book points to a deeper question: **When your moment comes, who do you become?**

If these ***StoRRies*** help you:

- see your experiences with greater clarity
- act with stronger integrity
- understand people with deeper empathy
- and align your choices with your purpose

Then this book has done its work.

These are not stories of heroes. They are *StoRRies* of ordinary people navigating extraordinary moments, and somewhere within them, you may find your own. These are reflections drawn from real human lives and organisations I have closely observed, sometimes narrated to me by those who lived them, sometimes witnessed firsthand, and occasionally, lived myself. From the parade grounds of the NCC to crowded sales territories, from hospital corridors to corporate boardrooms, this country, Bharat, has been my greatest teacher. It has taught me that strength is not always visible. It does not always come with titles, recognition, or applause.

Often, it exists quietly

- in a young cadet choosing discipline over comfort,
- in a sales manager holding integrity under pressure,
- in a leader choosing fairness over convenience,
- in individuals who continue forward without certainty, but with conviction.

This land, my Bharat, with all its diversity, contradiction, ambition, and humanity, is not just the backdrop of these *StoRRies*. It is their source. Some names may feel familiar. Some situations may feel uncomfortably real. They are inspired representations. Any resemblance to specific individuals, organisations, or events is coincidental, and yet, if something in these pages feels like it is about you, perhaps that is precisely the point.

This is not a memoir. It is not a management manual. There are no ten-step frameworks here, no silver bullets dressed up as strategy. This book is not offered as an authority. It is offered as a reflection. Not as answers, but as experiences**.**

May these *StoRRies* resonate with the ordinary situations you face, and help you recognise the extraordinary strength you already carry.

Rakesh Rayiramkandath

INTRODUCTION

There is a quiet strength that sustains this country.

It does not seek recognition. It does not wait for applause. It does not announce itself in boardrooms or trend on social media. It simply continues, consistently, courageously, and almost always invisibly. In the factory worker who shows up before dawn. In the manager who takes the harder, honest road when no one is watching. In the leader who holds the team together not with authority, but with character.

This book is about that strength.

The AVEPRR Leadership Model

At the heart of this book lies a framework that is both simple and demanding, the **AVEPRR** leadership framework. It proposes that sustainable influence, whether personal, organisational, or societal, is not the product of strategy or status. It is not built into quarterly reviews or leadership off-sites. It is built in moments of pressure, in choices made when the path is unclear, and the cost is real.

It is the product of six integrated human capacities:

Authenticity · Values · Emotional Intelligence · Purpose · Resilience · Responsiveness

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A Foundational Proposition

In dynamic and uncertain environments, and every environment today qualifies, long-term credibility and impact are directly proportional to the alignment and strength of these six pillars within individuals and institutions.

When the pillars reinforce one another, growth is stable and trust compounds. When even one weakens, fractures appear - in culture, in decision-making, in

character, and in the trust of the people who depend on that character. The fractures rarely announce themselves. They accumulate quietly, until they don't. ***Short-term success can occur without these foundations. Sustainable success rarely does.***

In a world shaped by economic volatility, technological disruption, rapid scaling, acquisitions, layoffs, and shifting workforce expectations, technical expertise is the entry ticket. Human depth is the differentiator. It always has been. What has changed is how quickly the absence of that depth is now visible to teams, to markets, to the people who choose whether or not to follow.

AVEPRR is not theoretical idealism. It is practical realism, the kind that shows up in the choices people make when no policy covers the moment and no one is watching. The kind that either builds something lasting or quietly erodes it.

The Pillars and What They Actually Mean

Each pillar is described briefly below. But their true meaning lives not in this table; it lives in the stories that follow it.

Pillar	What It Means
Authenticity	The courage to keep word and action aligned, not just when it is easy, but when it costs something. It builds credibility in people, trust in equity in organisations, and social cohesion in communities.
Values	The internal compass that holds when policies are silent, and pressure is loudest. For individuals, it prevents ethical drift. For organisations and communities, it determines behaviour at the moments that matter most.
Emotional Intelligence	The capacity to regulate oneself and read others without losing clarity. It is the quality that converts authority into leadership, and conflict into resolution.
Purpose	The enduring *why* that sustains effort beyond immediate reward. When purpose is present, work becomes contribution. When it is absent, even successful careers feel hollow.
Resilience	Not the avoidance of adversity, but rather, the intelligent absorption of it. Resilience transforms setbacks into evolution and pressure into a proof of character.
Responsiveness	The discipline of thoughtful action. Not reaction but response. The difference between those two words is the difference between instinct and judgment, between impulse and leadership.

Together, these six capacities form a leadership model that applies as readily to a cadet on a parade ground as to a CEO navigating a crisis and to everyone in between. The context changes. The character required does not.

How To Read This Book

Each of the twenty stories in this collection illuminates one or more AVEPRR pillars through situations faced by people who did not set out to be leaders and became ones anyway. Or failed to. Or found their way back after the failure. Those last stories, perhaps, are the most instructive of all.

After every story, you will find:

Key Takeaways - what to emulate, what to avoid, and why the distinction matters.

Reflection Space - a dedicated section for your own observations, parallel experiences, and the honest questions that good stories tend to surface.

This is not a book to rush through. These stories will give back exactly as much as you bring to them. Read one. Sit with it. Let it settle. Then ask yourself honestly whether it has anything to say to the decisions you are currently making or avoiding.

The quiet strength in these pages has always been around you.

The question this book asks is simple: **Have you been paying attention? And what are you becoming?**

NOTE OF GRATITUDE

My earliest lessons in character were never taught in words; they were lived. In my mother, Geetha, I saw dignity in adversity, steadiness in uncertainty, and a moral clarity that did not bend with circumstance. She did not speak of values; she embodied them - quietly, consistently, and without expectation. Long before I understood frameworks, she was already living them: authentic in who she was, rooted in unshakable values, emotionally wise, purposeful in every sacrifice, resilient through hardship, and responsive with grace. If there is any truth in these pages, it traces back to her. This work does not begin with me; it begins with her.

To those who became family, my sister, brother-in-law, and niece, you are my grounding. To my mentors, who shaped my thinking through conversations, challenges, and example; and to my small, steadfast circle of friends, who stood present when it mattered most, your influence runs quietly through this work. Some relationships are given; some are chosen; the rarest become indistinguishable. You are that. This book carries your imprint, even where your names do not appear.

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THE MODERN–DAY CHAKRAVYUHA

Abhimanyu Deshmukh and the Maze of Expectations

A Story of Identity, Alignment, and the Courage to Ask: Toward What?
Mumbai | 2018 – 2023

> *"In the Mahabharata, Abhimanyu knew how to enter the Chakravyuha, the impossible spiral battle formation, but not how to exit it. In Mumbai's glass towers, this Abhimanyu knew how to enter the corporate race. But not how to step back from it."*

Chapter 1: The Flawless Trajectory

Mumbai — 2018 — The Beginning

On paper, Abhimanyu Deshmukh was a success story with no visible cracks. Good school. Top engineering college. MBA from a reputed institute. Campus placement into a global consulting firm in Mumbai, which placed him, at twenty-six, inside the particular ecosystem of achievement that the Indian professional class reserves its highest regard for. On LinkedIn he was thriving. In the family WhatsApp group he was the pride, the one whose career was shared as evidence that the family's investment in education had produced its intended return. In social circles he was 'sorted', that specific and revealing word that means not just successful but reliably, indefinitely, unproblematically successful.

Inside, he was exhausted. Not the clean exhaustion of hard work well spent, that particular tiredness has a quality of satisfaction in it, a proportionality between the effort and its meaning. This was a different kind of exhausted: the exhaustion of a person who has been working very hard at something that has gradually stopped feeling like theirs.

He was analytical. Structured. Reliable. Good at what he did genuinely, not just by the metrics of the performance review. But somewhere along the way, without a single dramatic moment to mark the transition, he had stopped asking himself

why he was doing it. The purpose had been replaced by pressure. The alignment had been replaced by acceleration. He was climbing efficiently. He had stopped asking toward what.

The maze he was inside had not announced itself as a maze. It had arrived as opportunity, as ambition, as the natural next step of a promising career. It had arrived as a Monday morning, and then another, and then a year of Monday mornings, each one indistinguishable from the last except that the pressure was slightly higher and the question of why was slightly more distant.

He was inside the Chakravyuha. He did not yet know he had entered it.

Chapter 2: The Lie He Typed to His Mother

A Balcony in Mumbai - A Sunday Evening - After a 16-Hour Workday

The breaking point, when it arrived, was not dramatic. It did not announce itself through a single event or a visible collapse. It arrived in the space between a question and an answer - specifically, in the space of a lie he typed without thinking, and then sat with in the dark.

He had worked sixteen hours that day on a high-stakes project with an aggressive client and an internal leader known in the firm for extracting output without emotional bandwidth, the kind of professional environment that is designed, whether intentionally or not, to optimize for delivery at the cost of the person delivering. His sleep had reduced over weeks. His irritability had increased. His health was declining in the quiet, incremental way that declining health operates when it is too busy being manageable to be noticed.

He sat on his apartment balcony that evening, the city lights performing their routine indifference to the internal landscapes of the people looking at them. His phone buzzed. His mother. A three-word message.

"Have you eaten?"

He typed: "Yes."

He hadn't.

The lie was small. The kind of lie that passes through a person's fingers without thought, because the habit of presenting fine has been practised long enough that it no longer requires deliberate decision. But that evening, sitting with the city lights and the cigarette and the accumulated weight of months of misalignment, the smallness of the lie disturbed him more than any missed deadline had.

When did success begin requiring dishonesty, even in the smallest forms? When had 'fine' become the automatic answer rather than the honest one, even to the person whose concern was the purest available? What had been lost in the interval between who he had been when he first arrived in Mumbai and who he was now, sitting on this balcony, too tired to eat, too conditioned to admit it?

The lie did not produce an answer. But it produced something more valuable: a question he could no longer postpone.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Recognizing the lie not as a small convenience but as a symptom, the specific signal that his internal state had diverged from his external performance so completely that even the most private conversation had become another arena for the performance of fine.*
>
> **Authenticity:** *The moment he sat with the question that the lie had exposed: 'When did success begin requiring dishonesty?' That question was the beginning of the return.*

Chapter 3: The Father's Question

A Weekend Home — The Question That Anchored Everything

He went home the following weekend. The particular specific gravity of a family home when you are carrying something you haven't named, the way it makes the unnamed thing slightly more present, slightly harder to maintain at arm's length, had its effect.

His father spoke little. He was a retired public-sector officer, the kind of person whose authority had never come from volume rather from the particular quality of measured presence that some people develop across decades of doing work that matters without requiring applause for it. On Sunday morning, reading the

newspaper without looking up, he asked a question so specific and so quiet that it arrived with the force of a precise instrument rather than a blunt one.

"You are doing well, I see."

A pause.

"But are you becoming the person you wanted to become?"

It was not accusatory. It was not disappointed. It was what the question itself described: anchoring. The specific, calm act of reminding someone what the actual question is, the one beneath all the questions about performance and promotion and visibility and billing hours and waiting to see what they do with it.

Abhimanyu had no answer. That absence of an answer was its own kind of answer. He had built a career in architecture of considerable quality. He had not checked its foundation. He was climbing efficiently toward a destination he had not chosen or had never chosen, because the architecture of the climb had been so well designed that the question of the destination had never seemed urgent enough to interrupt the climbing for.

Authenticity had taken a back seat to approval. Purpose had been replaced by pressure. Emotional intelligence had been outsourced to the survival mechanisms of a high-stakes professional environment that rewarded the performance of composure while the person behind the performance quietly frayed.

He was not failing. He was succeeding at the wrong things. The distinction was everything.

Chapter 4: The Quiet Choices — and What They Cost and Built

2019 – 2023 — The Recalibration

He did not resign dramatically. He did not post a bold announcement on LinkedIn, the social media move that, in his professional community, would have been the most visible possible signal of a pivot and would have collapsed the

distinction between the internal decision and its external performance. He did not hold a press conference for his own identity reclamation.

He began quietly. He reduced the social validation - the checking of comparison metrics, the performance of achievement for audiences whose approval he had come to need without having consciously chosen to need it. He spoke to a mentor who helped him name the maze before he could begin navigating it differently - the specific and undervalued act of honest counsel, which gives a person not the answer but the language to find it themselves. He enrolled in a weekend course in organisational psychology, something he had been curious about for years and had filed under 'when I have time', a category of genuine interest that professional ambition has a reliable tendency to starve.

He started therapy. This decision, in the milieu he inhabited, was high-performing, achievement-oriented, and carrying the specific cultural weight of a professional community that treats self-reliance as virtue and was itself an act of courage. Not the dramatic kind. The quiet kind, which is almost always more demanding than the visible sort.

When the next performance cycle came, a role was offered that promised faster promotion. It required a compromise he had decided he was no longer willing to make. He declined it. His peers were confused. His manager was disturbed. The institutional momentum of the firm's reward system which had been designed, successfully to make such decisions feel irrational, pressed against him.

He held the position.

That holding, quiet, unglamorous, not announced to anyone outside the conversation in which it happened, was the most significant professional act of his career to that point. Not because of what it produced externally. Because of what it confirmed internally: that the value he had decided to place on alignment was real enough to cost him something, and that he had chosen to pay the cost rather than compromise the value.

> **Values:** *Declining the faster promotion in front of a confused peer group and a disturbed manager. Values are not real until they cost something. This was the moment they became real.*

> **Resilience:** *The recalibration was not a single event. It was two years of quiet, deliberate, unglamorous work – therapy, mentoring, the course, the internal transition – sustained without applause, without the social validation that had previously been the fuel of his effort.*

> *Some battles are not fought with weapons. They are fought with identity. And the most dangerous battlefield is not the one where you might lose everything you have built – it is the one where you might lose sight of why you built it.*

Chapter 5: The Exit from the Maze and the Entry into Something Real

The Turn — 2021 Onwards

Over two years, he transitioned internally from pure consulting delivery into a strategy and people advisory function closer to organisational development. The salary progression was slower on this path. The visibility was different, less the kind that comes from client-facing project delivery and more the kind that comes from being the person other people think of when they need to think clearly. The fulfilment was real. Not performed. Real, the specific quality of an investment returning in the currency it was made in.

He began mentoring junior associates who were where he had been inside the maze, running efficiently, not yet asking the question that his father had asked him on a Sunday morning. He spoke openly about burnout, about ambition and its relationship to alignment, about the specific danger of climbing toward destinations you did not choose. He was not preaching. He was reporting from experience, which is the only form of counsel that actually changes anything.

The Chakravyuha had not disappeared. The corporate world does not dissolve its structures because an individual has learned to navigate them differently. The performance ratings still matter. The billing hours still matter. The quarterly cycles still have their rhythm. What had changed was his relationship to all of it, the understanding that the maze is real and that the maze is navigable, and that the navigation requires knowing who you are clearly enough that the maze cannot substitute itself for that knowledge without your noticing.

He had not escaped. He had learned to move through it without losing himself. The distinction, which sounds simple and is not, was the difference between the person sitting on the balcony typing a lie to his mother and the person who now asked his mentees, in the manner of his father: 'You are doing well, I see. But are you becoming the person you wanted to become?'

You don't escape the maze by running faster. You escape it by remembering who you are.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar was lost and reclaimed in this story

Authenticity	Choosing alignment over approval - the slow, costly work of returning to the person he had intended to become rather than continuing to maintain the person the system had rewarded him for performing
Values	Declining a promotion that required values compromise in front of peers who were confused and a manager who was disturbed; holding the line when the institutional momentum of the performance cycle argued loudly for crossing it
Emotional Intelligence	Recognizing burnout signals before collapse, reading the lie typed to his mother not as a small convenience but as a symptom of something more significant that demanded honest examination
Purpose	Redefining growth beyond designation the slow, unfashionable work of asking 'toward what?' rather than simply continuing upward because upward was available
Resilience	Rebuilding identity after internal fracture not with a dramatic public pivot but through two years of quiet, deliberate, unglamorous recalibration
Responsiveness	Acting early before the burnout became breakdown, before the misalignment became irreversible; choosing the inconvenient conversation with himself rather than waiting for the system to force it

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

Lessons from The Modern-Day Chakravyuha

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THE MAZE TIGHTENS:

✔	Pause before chasing the next milestone, ask 'toward what?' before answering 'how fast?'
✔	Check alignment, not just acceleration. The question is not whether the career is moving, but whether it is moving in a direction you chose
✔	Honour small truths, especially at home, especially in private; the lie told to a mother is the symptom of a larger dishonesty that accumulates until it cannot be managed
✔	Seek honest counsel early, which could be from a mentor, a therapist, or a person whose interest in your well-being is not conditional on your performance
✔	Decline what requires a values compromise, even when the institutional momentum argues loudly for accepting it
✔	Redefine success consciously and explicitly, not as rejection of ambition but as the responsible exercise of it
✔	Choose long-term identity over short-term applause. The applause adjusts itself to whatever you produce; the identity is the only thing that does not

WHAT KEEPS YOU TRAPPED IN THE MAZE:

✗	Measuring your worth only through performance ratings and external validation is the system's assessment of you, and your assessment of yourself is not required to be the same thing
✗	Climbing ladders you did not choose, acceleration in the wrong direction compounds the distance from where you actually want to be
✗	Confusing exhaustion with achievement, the two can coexist, but the one that is carrying the other is not always the one that looks most prominent
✗	Outsourcing purpose to corporate systems, the system will never tell you what your life is for; that question belongs to you and cannot be delegated
✗	Ignoring physical and emotional signals - sleep decline, irritability, the lie typed without thinking; these are not personality details, they are data about a system under unsustainable load
✗	Waiting for breakdown before recalibrating - responsiveness means acting on the early signal, before the momentum of the system makes early action feel impossible

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are uncomfortable by design. They are not about your career. They are about you.

Q1. Are you entering battles you don't know how to exit? Are you inside a Chakravyuha of your own - a professional structure, a set of expectations, a rhythm of acceleration, that you entered without fully choosing and don't know how to step back from?

Your reflection:

Q2. Where in your life are you performing at a high level but feeling misaligned? Where does the external trajectory and the internal experience diverge and how long have you been managing that divergence rather than examining it?

Your reflection:

Q3. What small dishonesty in your life signals a deeper imbalance? Not a major ethical failure, the smaller kind: the 'fine' that means not fine, the enthusiasm performed for an audience, the answer given before the question has been honestly considered.

Your reflection:

Q4. If you removed your salary and your title tomorrow, if the external validation structure of your professional life was taken away, what work would still matter to you? And how much of what you are currently doing is oriented toward that work?

Your reflection:

Q5. What would your younger self, the person you were before the trajectory took shape, say about the person you are becoming? And is what they would say something you can live with?

Your reflection:

Are you becoming the person you wanted to become?

That question is the North Star. Keep looking at it.

A

AUTHENTICITY

Definition

Authenticity is the disciplined practice of being truthful in identity, intent, and action, especially when pressure, incentives, or fear tempt you to present a different version of yourself.

What it Means for an Individual

For an individual, authenticity is the quiet courage to be the same person in private and in public. It is the ability to acknowledge mistakes without defensiveness, to succeed without exaggeration, and to stand by your values even when convenience suggests otherwise. Authentic people do not perform character; they live it. Over time, this consistency builds credibility. People trust them not because they are flawless, but because they are real.

What it Means for an Organisation

For an organisation, authenticity is the alignment between what it claims and what it practices. It is the difference between the values printed on posters and the values used to make difficult decisions. Authentic organisations admit mistakes, correct course publicly, and honour commitments even when it costs them. In the long run, authenticity becomes institutional credibility, the most powerful form of brand equity.

THE NORTH STAR

No One Could See

Deepak Singh, Denoy D'Cruz, and the CRM That Remembered Its Why
Bengaluru & Kolkata | 2013 – 2017

THE STORY

> *"Revenue did not decline because the market shrank. It declined because the unit forgot who it was. Identity erosion produces financial erosion. Always. The numbers are simply the last thing to show it."*

Chapter 1: The Question That Changed the Room

2013 — Bengaluru & Kolkata — The First Week

The CRM vertical had been built with a clear original vision: empower small and medium manufacturers across India, especially in underserved eastern regions, with technology simple enough to actually be used by businesses that could not afford dedicated IT teams or complex implementation timelines. It was ambitious. It was differentiated. It was, in 2013, being completely ignored by the people inside it.

Three consecutive quarters of negative revenue growth. Sales teams are chasing enterprise clients far outside the Ideal Customer Profile that the SBU had been designed around. A product roadmap bloated with features requested by a handful of large accounts whose requirements had nothing in common with the small manufacturer in Odisha trying to manage his distributor relationships on a mobile device. Rising customer acquisition costs. Internal blame cycles where each function held a different explanation for the same decline and none of the explanations pointed toward the root cause.

Deepak Singh arrived as the new P&L lead. He did not begin with cost rationalization. He did not pull the revenue data first. He began with a question,- asked individually to each of the twenty-two people in his team across both cities:

"What are we really here to solve?"

> *A business can survive without profit for a while. It cannot survive without a purpose for long. And the most dangerous kind of drift is the kind that looks, quarter after quarter, like strategic evolution, until the day someone asks the simple question that exposes it: what are we actually here to solve?*

The answers were honest in their way. We manage mid-market accounts. We build custom integrations. We close deals. We hit numbers. Every answer was a process answer. Not one of them was a purposeful answer. The SBU had been running, for some time, as though its function was the reason for its existence rather than the instrument of it.

Then Denoy D'Cruz leaned forward. He was quiet, one of the earliest employees, the kind of person who speaks rarely and precisely. He said: "We were created to serve MSMEs, small manufacturers who couldn't afford complex enterprise systems. We were meant to digitize the eastern belt comprising Odisha, Bengal, Assam and help them connect to modern buyers. But now we're competing for enterprise accounts with five other internal teams. We stopped being different."

Deepak did not interrupt. He had learned something specific about institutional memory: when long-tenured employees speak softly but precisely, they are usually giving you the most accurate map of the territory available. He had just found the North Star. It had been there all along. Nobody had been looking at it.

> **Purpose:** *The question 'what are we really here to solve?' is the most important question a leader can ask of a drifting organisation — and the most avoided one, because honest answers produce uncomfortable obligations.*
>
> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Hearing Denoy's answer for what it was: not a complaint or a historical footnote, but the institutional truth that the organisation needed to*

> *return to. The discipline of listening past the process answers to find the purpose answer underneath them.*

Chapter 2: The Drift — and the Courage to Name It

2013 — The Diagnosis and the Pushback

Deepak reviewed the archival materials from the SBU's founding years. Denoy was right. The CRM had been designed for simplicity over complexity, adoption over feature density, education over aggressive selling, retention over fast closures. These were not just product principles. They were market positioning decisions, the deliberate choice to serve a segment that larger enterprise software companies could not serve profitably because the segment required patience, vernacular support, and a different definition of success than enterprise deals provided.

Somewhere under quarterly pressure, imitation had replaced innovation. Enterprise deals looked glamorous. Ticket sizes looked impressive. Head office applauded large logos. And the original market, MSMEs, was labelled slow growth and quietly deprioritized by a team that had forgotten that their competitive advantage lived precisely in the segment they were abandoning.

Rajeev, Deepak's reporting leader, put the institutional position clearly: "Deepak, I respect your philosophy. But philosophy doesn't fund payroll. We need big accounts. MSMEs don't scale fast enough." The room was watching. Rajeev was not wrong about the urgency. He was wrong about the diagnosis. And Deepak understood the distinction between those two things with the clarity of a leader who has done the analytical work to earn his conviction.

"Rajeev, we are bleeding not because MSMEs don't scale. We are bleeding because we abandoned differentiation. We are competing where we have no advantage. The underserved segment is not emotional charity. It's strategic opportunity."

Rajeev was not convinced. But he allowed Deepak space and space, in a senior leadership context where the numbers are arguing the other direction, is the most valuable form of support available. Deepak took the space and did not waste it.

> **Authenticity:** *Returning to foundational identity under pressure from above — not as defiance but as strategic clarity. The leader who allows external urgency to override internal conviction does not become pragmatic. They become a manager.*
>
> **Resilience:** *Holding the position with Rajeev when the easier and more comfortable response was to hedge, to split the difference, to pursue both enterprise and MSME without committing to either.*

Chapter 3: The Reset — and the Dip Before the Rise

2014 – 2015 — The Pivot Under Fire

The reset had three dimensions, and each one produced a form of resistance that Deepak absorbed without reversing course.

Product realignment: simplified workflows, removal of the enterprise-heavy features that had been built at great cost and were confusing the customers the product was originally designed for, modular pricing that matched MSME budget cycles, vernacular onboarding materials, reduced implementation complexity. The engineering team asked the question that all engineering teams ask when asked to remove rather than add: 'Why are we removing value we worked so hard to build?' Deepak's answer was the sentence that carried the entire pivot's logic: 'We are not removing value. We are restoring clarity.'

Sales reorientation: dedicated MSME acquisition teams, geographic focus on Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities where enterprise competitors had no presence, channel partner enablement that multiplied reach without multiplying headcount, education-led selling rather than aggressive closure tactics. Short-term pipeline shrank. Sales anxiety increased. Internal whispers began — 'Deepak is idealistic,' 'this will hurt quarterly bonuses' — the specific resistance of people whose short-term interests are genuinely threatened by a direction they can not yet see the outcome of.

Cultural regrounding: monthly town halls built around one slide that said 'Why We Exist' — not as a slogan but as a real story of a small manufacturer in Assam who had expanded into new markets using the CRM, or a textile supplier in

Odisha who had reduced missed follow-ups and increased repeat business and hired two more staff because sales had finally stabilised. The team began seeing faces where they had previously seen invoices. Purpose re-entered the conversation.

The first two quarters after the pivot were brutal. Revenue dipped further. Rajeev escalated concerns twice to corporate leadership. Deepak responded not with emotion but with structured data: MSME churn reduced by 18%. Referral acquisition increased by 22%. Customer lifetime value improving steadily. Support resolution time decreasing. Purpose was now measurable. That measurability was the only thing standing between Deepak's conviction and the organisation's instinct to reverse course.

He did not react. He responded. Every time.

> **Responsiveness:** *Structured reporting during the dip — not defensive narrative but precise data on the leading indicators that a purpose-led pivot produces before the lagging revenue indicators catch up. Rajeev needed numbers. Deepak gave him the right numbers.*
>
> **Values:** *Holding the original promise to an underserved market when the pressure to abandon it was real, institutional, and coming from above. This is what values look like when they are operational rather than decorative.*

Chapter 4: The Inflection — and What Conviction Builds

Mid-2015 to 2017 — The Proof

By mid-2015, the market began returning what the pivot had invested. Trade associations in eastern India started recommending the CRM. Local business chambers invited Deepak to speak — not because the product had won a feature comparison, but because it had been built for the people in the room rather than reluctantly adapted for them after building it for someone else. That distinction, felt clearly by MSME owners who had spent years being sold products designed for organisations ten times their size, produced the most powerful commercial outcome available: trust.

Denoy D'Cruz, whose quiet answer in the first week had provided the map the turnaround followed, was promoted to Strategy Lead. The institutional memory that had been marginalized under the enterprise drift became the foundation of the rebuilt identity.

By 2017: the SBU was the fastest-growing unit in the company. Profit margins had stabilised. Employee engagement scores had risen significantly. Two industry publications featured the CRM model as a case study in differentiated growth, which meant that the strategy that Rajeev had questioned as idealistic had become visible enough to be studied by peers.

The same twenty-two people who had answered the first question with 'we close deals' and 'we hit numbers' were now answering it differently. 'We help small businesses grow sustainably.' Conviction had replaced confusion. The North Star was visible again — not because it had moved, but because the team had turned back toward it.

Profit is a result. Purpose is a direction. Only one of them tells you where to go next.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar was lost and restored in this story

Authenticity	Returning to foundational identity instead of imitating competitors the courage to say 'this is who we are' when the easier answer was to become who the market rewarded
Values	Serving an underserved market with conviction rather than convenience holding the original promise when quarterly pressure argued for abandoning it
Emotional Intelligence	Listening to Denoy's quiet precision when louder voices were offering process answers; reading team anxiety and addressing it through culture rather than command
Purpose	Rebuilding the SBU around its original reason for existence not as a motivational exercise but as a strategic one, because without purpose, strategy becomes imitation

Resilience	Absorbing two brutal quarters of declining revenue after the pivot, without flinching, without reversing, without substituting Rajeev's urgency for his own conviction
Responsiveness	Adapting product, sales, and culture to real customer needs and measuring the adaptation not in vanity metrics but in churn rates, referral velocity, and lifetime value

HOW TO BE — AND HOW NOT TO BE

Lessons from The North Star No One Could See

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN PURPOSE HAS DRIFTED:

✔	Ask 'why' before 'how much' — the revenue question is important; the purpose question tells you whether the revenue strategy makes sense
✔	Listen to the quiet voices — Denoy held the map; the loudest voices in a drifting organisation are almost never the ones who know where the map is
✔	Protect differentiation even when imitation looks more immediately rewarding — you cannot win where you have no advantage, regardless of how impressive the opponent's ticket size appears
✔	Measure what matters long-term — churn rate, referral velocity, customer lifetime value — before the lagging revenue indicators have had time to reflect the leading purpose indicators
✔	Tie performance metrics to purpose explicitly — 'Why We Exist' is not a slogan for the town hall; it is the frame within which every metric should be presented and understood
✔	Give the team faces, not just invoices — the manufacturer in Assam who hired two staff because sales stabilised is the reason the product exists; make sure the team knows her story

WHAT ACCELERATES DRIFT AND DEEPENS IDENTITY EROSION:

✗	Chasing growth without identity — enterprise logos are impressive until you dziscover that winning them required becoming indistinguishable from the competitors you were supposed to outflank
✗	Abandoning underserved markets prematurely — the segment labelled 'slow growth' is often the one where your differentiation is highest and your competitive moat is widest
✗	Equating enterprise size with strategic fit — a large account outside your ICP is a liability dressed as a logo; the acquisition cost, the retention complexity, and the product distortion it produces almost always exceed its revenue
✗	Silencing internal conviction — Denoy had the answer in the first week; the organisation had been not listening to him for years; the cost of that silence was three consecutive quarters of decline
✗	Allowing short-term optics to override long-term clarity — the two quarters of further decline after the pivot were the price of restoration; paying that price without reversing was the entire test

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about your own role, team, or organisation and the North Star you may have stopped looking at.

Q1. What was the original purpose of your role, team, or organisation; the reason it was created, the problem it was built to solve? How close is the daily reality of what you do to that original purpose? And when did the gap begin?

Your reflection:

Q2. Who in your team is the Denoy D'Cruz, the long-tenured, quiet, precise person who holds the institutional memory that the organisation has been not

listening to? When did you last create the conditions for that person to speak honestly?

Your reflection:

Q3. Have you ever drifted under performance pressure, adopted strategies, pursued clients, or built features that felt like imitation rather than innovation, because the original differentiation felt too slow or too small? What did that drift cost?

Your reflection:

Q4. If your revenue disappeared tomorrow, if the external validation of your performance was removed, would the purpose of what you are building still stand? Would the team still know why they come to work? And if the answer is uncertain, what does that uncertainty tell you?

Your reflection:

Q5. What is the North Star of your current role the reason it exists, the people it serves, the problem it was built to solve? When did you last point the whole team toward it?

Your reflection:

"Running a P&L is not just about margin. It is about meaning. Without purpose, strategy becomes imitation. Without authenticity, numbers become cosmetic. Without resilience, conviction collapses. The North Star was always there. They just stopped looking at it."

THE RISE OF STUBBORN HIMMAT SINGH

A Story of Rejection, Dignity, and the Decade It Takes to Build a Man

Udaipur, Rajasthan | 1994 – 2005

PART ONE

THE CITY THAT MADE HIM

> *"Udaipur is not just a city. It is memory carved in stone. Every fort whisper of sacrifice. Every lake reflects history. And in its air grows the particular kind of person who does not know how to surrender."*

Chapter 1: What the Water Remembers

Udaipur, Rajasthan — The Early Years

Some cities shape people passively through opportunity, through infrastructure, through the ambient possibility of upward mobility. Udaipur is not one of those cities. Udaipur shapes through story. Through the accumulated weight of folklore that sits in its air like a monsoon before it breaks, the stories of Maharana Pratap, who chose the forest over capitulation, of Rana Sanga, who fought until he could not stand and then stood again, of men and women across centuries who decided that dignity was not something circumstance could remove.

Himmat Singh Rathore grew up breathing that air, not as mythology, but as a living expectation, the quiet, unspoken understanding that the city held about the people it produced. You did not give up in Udaipur. Not because giving up was impossible, but because the city had a memory longer than your difficulty, and in that memory, your difficulty would be diminished unless you met it with something worth remembering.

His father was a man of the state attached to secret service assignments whose nature was never discussed and whose presence was measured in absences. He

came home infrequently. He left without announcement. The work of the nation had consumed the work of the father, and what remained in the house was a household shaped by one person's quiet, extraordinary determination: Gayatri Bai.

She had been married at sixteen. In rural India in the early 1970s, this was not unusual. What was unusual was what she did with the life that followed. Brilliant in academics, the kind of mind that notices patterns and retains structures, and would have gone very far with different circumstances. She channeled her intelligence not into resentment at what circumstance had prevented but into the creation of something the circumstance had not anticipated. Two children. A household maintained on the edge of enough. A dignity that the joint family's politics, the financial strain, and her husband's perpetual absence could not touch.

Joint family life in those years was its own pressure system. There were hierarchies, competing interests, the particular cruelty of a household where resources are shared but not equally, where opinions are numerous but quiet authority belongs to a specific set of people, and where a young woman managing two children mostly alone was visible mostly as a problem to be discussed rather than a person to be respected.

Gayatri Bai never allowed any of it to become her identity. This was Himmat's first and most formative lesson in Authenticity - not heard as a principle, but absorbed as a lived example, every day, in the way his mother moved through a world that gave her very little.

She never allowed struggle to become identity. He learned this before he had words for it.

Chapter 2: The Table Where Two Battles Were Fought

Early 1990s — The Same Wooden Table

In the early 1990s, an unusual scene unfolded in the Rathore household that Himmat would carry with him for the rest of his life not as a memory to be displayed, but as a private image of what determination actually looks like when it has no audience.

Mother and son, sitting at the same wooden table, both preparing for examinations. She was completing her Bachelor of Education, the qualification that would allow her to teach and bring income into a household that desperately needed it. He was preparing for his board examinations, the gateway to whatever came next. Two parallel battles. One shared lamp. One shared objective so fundamental it did not need to be spoken: rise above circumstance.

They did not study together in the way that the phrase implies companionship. They studied alongside each other in the way that people study when the stakes are genuinely high, in a silence dense with concentration, punctuated occasionally by the scratch of a pen or the turn of a page, each one aware of the other's effort and drawing something from its proximity that would have been very difficult to name.

Both succeeded. She earned her B.Ed. and began teaching on contractual assignments. He passed his board examinations and entered university, where he found, in the National Cadet Corps, the institution that would become his primary identity for the next decade and the preparation ground for everything he was going to attempt.

The NCC was not extracurricular for Himmat Singh Rathore. This distinction matters. For most students, the NCC is an activity alongside the main work of a degree. For Himmat, it was a rehearsal. Rehearsal for a life in uniform, yes - but more precisely, rehearsal for the habits that a life in uniform requires: the discipline that becomes instinct, the physical rigor that disciplines the mind, the parade ground as a daily practice of precision and presence.

Republic Day Camp. Youth Exchange Programme. Sports. Academics. He excelled across every dimension not because he was the most naturally gifted person in the room but because he was the most consistently prepared one, which is, in the long run, a more durable advantage than gift.

His aspiration was singular. Not corporate. Not business. Not the comfortable ambiguity of 'something in management.' The Indian Army. His bloodline carried military service on both the paternal and maternal sides. Service was not an ambition for Himmat Singh Rathore. It was an inheritance, the thing that had already been decided before he was born and that the NCC had simply confirmed and formalized.

He prepared with the totality of someone who has no backup plan not because backup plans are unavailable but because the existence of one would be a betrayal of the commitment. He was preparing to be an officer. He was not preparing for anything else.

PART TWO

THE LETTER IN THE TIN BOX

> *"Not Recommended. Two words that carry the full weight of a closed door. He did not cry. He did not argue. He folded the letter carefully. Placed it inside a rusted tin box under the cot. And walked to the kitchen."*

Chapter 3: The First Rejection

The SSB Conference — First Attempt

He cleared the UPSC written examination. That in itself was a statement the written examination that filters tens of thousands of aspirants is not cleared by people who are unprepared, and Himmat Singh Rathore was not unprepared. He had earned his place at the Services Selection Board.

The SSB is not an examination in the conventional sense. It is an observation, a multi-day process designed to assess not what a candidate knows but who a candidate is. Psychological assessments. Group tasks. Individual obstacles. Interviews with officers who have spent their careers learning to distinguish between the performed version of leadership qualities and the genuine article.

Himmat went through it with the focused attention of someone who had been preparing for this specific experience for years. He did not perform. He showed up as himself, which was precisely what the process was designed to elicit and precisely what its assessors were trained to evaluate.

Then came the conference. The final stage. The room where the assessment board convenes and delivers its finding on each candidate.

Not recommended.

Not recommended.

He folded the letter carefully. He did not tear it. He did not throw it across the room. He folded it with the particular deliberateness of a person who is choosing, in this moment, how they will carry this thing and choosing to carry it with dignity

rather than despair. He placed it inside a rusted tin box that sat beneath his cot, a container that would become, over the years, the archive of his most private battles.

He walked to the kitchen. His mother was there, already reading the expression he had not yet put into words.

"Chai pila do, Amma. Adrak wali roti ke churma ke saath."

Make me ginger tea.

Four words. No elaboration. No dramatization. No request for consolation. Just the simple human need for warmth, physical warmth, the warmth of the kitchen, the warmth of a mother's presence, when the interior has gone cold.

Gayatri Bai made the tea. She did not ask what had happened. She knew. And she understood, in the way that mothers understand things without being told, that what her son needed in this moment was not words. He needed the tea. And he needed her to hand it to him as though the morning was still ordinary, as though his worth was not contingent on what a board in a distant city had decided about him.

She handed him the tea. He drank it. And something inside the rusted tin box filed away not just a rejection letter, but the memory of what it felt like to be held steady by someone who loved him without conditions.

Chapter 4: The Second Crack

Second Attempt — The SSB

He tried again.

That sentence is three words. It contains an entire landscape of what those words required. The months of preparation recommenced not with the energy of a first attempt but with its momentum of hope and novelty and the particular excitement of approaching something for the first time but with the harder, quieter energy of a second attempt, which knows exactly what it is walking back into and chooses to do so anyway.

He cleared the written examination again. He returned to the SSB. He went through the multi-day process again, the psychological assessments, the group tasks, the obstacles, the interview, carrying the specific knowledge of what the first attempt had produced and the specific uncertainty of whether this one would produce something different.

The conference convened again.

Not recommended.

The second rejection did something to him that the first had not. The first rejection had been a door closed unexpectedly. The second was a door closed again after he had spent months preparing to open it and the distance between those two experiences is the distance between disappointment and genuine doubt.

For weeks after the second conference, Himmat Singh Rathore spoke very little. The city moved around him. Friends continued their routines. The world produced its ordinary daily texture. But inside, he was negotiating with something darker and more complex than disappointment -the question that every person who faces repeated rejection eventually confronts: what if this is not a circumstance? What if this is me?

That question is not self-pity. It is the honest interrogation of someone who is taking failure seriously, who refuses to dismiss it as external bad luck, who is genuinely trying to understand whether the problem is fixable and whether they are the one who needs to fix it. Himmat sat with that question for weeks. He did not resolve it cleanly. He did not arrive at a satisfying answer.

He simply decided, in the particular quiet that follows genuine reckoning, to persist.

Not because he was certain. Because he refused to be finished.

PART THREE

SELLING IN THE MEANTIME

> *"₹1,200 per month. It barely covered the bus fare and the food. But it covered something more important: his refusal to take the easy shortcut that every person around him was willing to offer."*

Chapter 5: The Computer Shop and the Ethics of Small Things

Mid-1990s — Udaipur

Reality, unlike aspiration, does not wait. The household had needs that preparation for the SSB could not address. Gayatri Bai's contractual teaching income stretched only so far. Pooja was still in school. The joint family context made financial dependency its own kind of vulnerability, every rupee that came from outside the household rather than within it was a statement of independence that was worth protecting.

Himmat found work at a small computer peripherals shop. Assembled PCs. Hardware components. A market that was just beginning to open in the mid-1990s as personal computing arrived in Indian towns with the combination of excitement and confusion that new technology always brings.

The salary was ₹1,200 per month.

This is not a number that requires context to understand its smallness. It barely covered his bus fare and his food. There was almost nothing left after the basics of his own survival were addressed. And yet he went every day. He arrived on time. He wore a pressed shirt. And when customers arrived, bargaining aggressively, as people bargain when they feel they have the advantage over a young man in a small shop who they assume will bend, he did not bend in the ways that were available to him.

The shop traded in assembled components. Some of the components in the supply chain were, to varying degrees, counterfeit, lower-grade parts represented as premium ones, replacements sold as originals, the small persistent dishonesty that characterizes many corners of retail markets where verification is difficult

and the buyer cannot easily distinguish between what they are told and what they are given.

Colleagues suggested it. Not once. Regularly. The difference in margin between an honest sale and a slightly misrepresented one was visible and significant. Nobody was going to catch him. The customers rarely came back with complaints, they didn't know enough to identify what had gone wrong. This was simply how the market worked.

Himmat did not.

Not because he was naive about the market. He understood exactly what his colleagues were doing and why it was financially rational. He declined because he had a precise understanding, developed in the culture of the NCC and the aspiration toward a life in uniform, of what his character was for. It was not for sale at ₹1,200 per month. It was not for sale at any salary that had yet been offered to him. This was Authenticity not as a personality trait but as a daily operational decision chosen repeatedly, in small moments, when the incentive to choose differently was present and nobody was watching.

Some customers mocked his rural accent. This is worth naming because it was not incidental, it was a specific form of the dismissal that a young man from a place that was not urban, speaking in a register that signaled where he came from, encountered regularly in the commercial world. He absorbed it. He did not perform humiliation. He did not perform aggression. He simply continued.

Authenticity does not fluctuate with the mockery. It holds.

Chapter 6: The Medical Disposables and the Arithmetic of Pressure

Late 1990s — The Territory

He moved from the computer shop into medical disposables sales. Hospitals. Surgeons. Purchase officers. The kind of institutional buyer who has seen every version of the salesman's performance and is interested only in reliability, competitive pricing, and the assurance that what was ordered will arrive when promised.

The pay was slightly better. The pressure was significantly higher. And the UPSC preparation continued alongside the sales targets not as a theory of parallel activity, but as a daily lived reality in which eight hours of customer calls and hospital visits were followed by evenings of study materials and practice papers, and mornings that began before the household was awake with the particular quietness of a person who has allocated every hour carefully because they cannot afford to waste any of them.

The pressure ecosystem in medical sales is specific. A purchase officer who has been cultivated by a competitor will not come easily. A surgeon who has developed a preference for a particular brand's specification will not change it without a sustained and technically credible argument. Targets that have been set by people who understand the market less than the people working in it will still be enforced by people who understand them even less. Escalations arrive without warning. Collections stall. Relationships that took six months to build dissolve in a single contractual dispute.

Himmat navigated all of it. Not effortlessly - the daily arithmetic of sales pressure against UPSC preparation against family responsibility against the emotional weight of repeated SSB rejection does not add up to effortless. It adds up to exhausted. But in the way that genuine persistence always manifests, exhausted and continuing.

Friends from his NCC days formed the support system that made this possible. They met for tea. They shared notes. They sat in silence together in the way that people who have known each other through sustained difficulty know how to sit without the need to perform resilience for each other, without the need to explain what they were each carrying, because the shared understanding required no explanation.

What those friendships provided was not motivation in the inspirational sense. They provided the more essential thing: the evidence, available on a regular basis, that someone who knew him saw him and stayed. That he was not invisible. That his effort had witnesses, even if those witnesses were not the board in a distant city that kept returning the same verdict.

PART FOUR

NINE

> *"Nine attempts. Each one was not just an examination. It was a choice made again, fully, with full knowledge of what the previous choice had cost, to try once more."*

Chapter 7: The Weight of a Number

1994 – 2004 — The Decade

Nine.

Count it slowly. Nine UPSC preparation cycles each one lasting months, each one requiring the kind of sustained concentration that is almost impossible to describe to someone who has not done it, each one culminating in the SSB and its multi-day observation and its conference and its finding.

Nine times Himmat Singh Rathore cleared the written examination. Nine times he presented himself to the Services Selection Board the totality of who he was, distilled into days of psychological assessment and group tasks and interviews and the final conference, where officers he had never met determined whether he was the kind of person the Indian Army wanted.

Nine times the answer was the same.

Not recommended.

There is no adequate way to describe what nine rejections from the same aspiration do to a person. A single rejection is survivable through the logic of chance but perhaps this time, different circumstances, better luck. Two rejections shake that logic but leave it standing. Three begin to demand a different response. Four introduce the genuine possibility that the answer is not circumstance but fit that the person and the institution may not be matched in the way the person has always assumed.

By attempt five, six, seven, the psychological landscape has changed entirely. The question is no longer 'will I succeed this time' but something much darker and more personal: 'who am I if this is not meant for me?' Because the aspiration has

been so central, so defining, so deeply woven into the identity that the failure to achieve it does not feel like a career setback. It feels like a verdict on the self.

> *A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits. And quitting, for Himmat Singh Rathore, was the one option that was never truly available, not because life did not offer it, but because he understood, in his bones, what accepting it would cost.*

Around him, the pressures were not abstract. Family politics within the joint family structure the three of them, Gayatri Bai, Himmat, and Pooja, navigating a household context that had its own hierarchies and its own assessments of his worth and direction. Financial stress that had never genuinely resolved. Sales targets that arrived independent of how the UPSC preparation was going. Customer escalations that could not be deferred because the SSB was approaching. Social comparison, the particular torture of watching people from the same starting point arrive at stable, conventional destinations while he remained in the decade-long liminal space of a dream that had not yet been answered.

And silent expectations. This may be the heaviest category of pressure, because it is the least speakable. His mother had not said it. His sister had not said it. The NCC friends had not said it. But he knew with the precision of someone who knows the people who love him, that his choices had consequences beyond himself, that every year of preparation and selling and not arriving at a destination was a year that the people who depended on him also spent in uncertainty.

He wore his shirt ironed every morning. Shoes polished. Shoulders straight. Not for the world. For himself.

This is the detail that contains the entire character. When there is no audience, when the sales day has not yet begun, when the UPSC notes are not yet open, when the house is still quiet and the only person watching is the mirror, the person you are in that moment is who you actually are. Himmat's ironed shirt was not a performance. It was a discipline. The discipline of showing up for yourself before anyone else could see you, because the moment you stop showing up for yourself is the moment the erosion begins.

He did not pretend he was not struggling. This distinction is critical and easily missed. He was not performing resilience not constructing a cheerful exterior to protect others from the weight he was carrying. He was genuinely struggling, visibly in the ways that the people closest to him could see, present in his exhaustion and his quietness and the particular quality of his silences after each conference result.

But he did not allow the struggle to alter who he was. The ethics did not bend at the computer shop. The ironed shirt did not disappear. The tea with NCC friends did not become a bitter session. The commitment to Pooja's stability and Gayatri Bai's dignity did not weaken.

In nine attempts, covering a decade of repeated exposure to rejection, he remained recognizably, stubbornly, irreducibly himself.

That is Authenticity not as a concept but as a physical fact the fact of a person who was tested nine times and came back nine times as the same person.

Chapter 8: The Tenth Year and the Different Door

2004 – 2005 — The Threshold

The tenth year brought with it a clarity that none of the preceding nine had. Not the clarity of resolution, there was no dramatic moment of understanding, no conversation with a mentor that unlocked everything, no experience that suddenly made sense of the decade. The clarity was quieter and more earned than that. It was the clarity of exhaustion that has become honesty: the understanding that the door he had been standing in front of for ten years was not going to open, and that somewhere behind him, in the decade of sales experience, of discipline, of people management, of the particular kind of emotional intelligence that is developed specifically through repeated failure and recovery, another door had been standing open.

A major multinational corporation in the NCR region had been watching a certain profile in the market. They were looking for someone who understood people and operations and the sustained discipline of delivery under pressure. Someone whose character had been tested by conditions that most candidates

had not encountered. Someone who had been, in a very real sense, prepared for exactly this kind of responsibility by a decade of preparation for something else.

They offered Himmat Singh Rathore a global role in people management and service delivery.

Not the Army. Not the olive-green uniform. Not the parade ground or the barracks or the particular kind of belonging that military service provides to those who have given their life toward it.

But leadership. Responsibility. Service, the spirit of it, the actual daily practice of it, delivered through a different platform than the one he had always imagined.

He took the role. He took it not as a consolation prize, this is important, but as a recognition of something the decade had been building toward even when he could not see the direction. The qualities that the SSB had assessed and found not recommended or found present in a configuration that did not match what that institution at that time was seeking were the exact qualities that the corporation was looking to build its people function around. Discipline. Integrity. The emotional intelligence of someone who has been tested and has not broken. The authenticity of someone whose ethics did not fluctuate with salary.

Consistency, it turned out, had compound interest.

The stubborn cadet became a global service professional. The mission did not change. Only the uniform.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Never altering ethics for income or comfort; refusing to manufacture narratives that soothe the ego at the cost of truth
Values	Family responsibility honoured without resentment; every commitment to Gayatri Bai and Pooja treated as non-negotiable regardless of personal cost
Emotional Intelligence	Processing nine rejections without externalizing blame the discipline of sitting with disappointment until it becomes direction
Purpose	Service as the core not the Army specifically, but the spirit of service that the Army represented; holding that spirit even when the platform changed

Resilience	Ten years. Nine attempts. An ironed shirt every morning. Shoes were polished when there was no audience for the polish.
Responsiveness	When life redirected him — a decade of effort arriving at a corporate door rather than a barracks gate — he walked through it without losing who he was

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN OUTCOMES REFUSE TO ARRIVE:

✔	Hold your identity steady when outcomes fluctuate. The ironed shirt is the practice, not the promotion
✔	Accept disappointment without manufacturing blame; the board was not the enemy and the rejection was not a conspiracy
✔	Support those who depend on you, Pooja, Gayatri Bai, with dignity and without the resentment that says your burden is their fault
✔	Build credentials and character consistently, even and especially when recognition delays and the applause is entirely absent
✔	Refuse the ethical shortcut that every difficult financial period makes available; authenticity at ₹1,200 per month is the only kind that counts
✔	Let failure be an honest question about fit and preparation, not a permanent verdict on worth
✔	Adapt direction without abandoning purpose; the platform changes, the spirit of service does not
✔	Maintain the people who saw you through the difficult years they are not peripheral; they are the evidence of who you were when it was hardest

WHAT ERODES CHARACTER UNDER SUSTAINED PRESSURE:

✗	Allowing rejection to define self-worth rather than inform direction a closed door is information, not a sentence
✗	Compromising ethics for temporary financial relief; the character sold cheaply at ₹1,200 is no more available at ₹12,000

✗	Comparing your timeline to others, no two journeys are the same and comparison is the specific corrosion of the one quality you most need
✗	Weaponizing failure into victimhood, the SSB did not destroy him; it tested him, and the test was the preparation
✗	Allowing ego to resist the redirection that life eventually provides; the olive green was the plan, not the purpose
✗	Hiding the struggle behind performance — he did not pretend he was fine; he held himself without performing himself
✗	Abandoning the small disciplines when the large aspiration delays — the ironed shirt on the hard morning is the practice that makes the good morning possible

REFLECTION SPACE

Do not answer these quickly. Sit with each one until you find the honest answer rather than the composed one.

Q1. What is your equivalent of Himmat's rusted tin box the place where you store your rejections and disappointments? Are you filing them carefully, or are you leaving them open on the desk where they contaminate everything around them?

Your reflection:

Q2. Where in your professional or personal life are you currently tempted to compromise your authenticity for immediate relief, a more comfortable version of the truth, an ethical shortcut that nobody would notice, a performance that costs you less than the reality would?

Your reflection:

Q3. Is your effort consistent when there is no applause, when the interview is months away, the promotion is not in sight, and the recognition has not arrived? What is your equivalent of the ironed shirt and the polished shoes?

Your reflection:

Q4. When your original plan is not working, when the door you have been standing in front of for years shows no sign of opening in spite of having competency, consistent efforts and, at what point does persistence become wisdom, and at what point does it become avoidance of a necessary reckoning? How will you know which one you are practicing?

Your reflection:

Q5. If your original dream changes form, if the uniform becomes a boardroom, if the specific aspiration becomes something adjacent and different, will the

purpose that drove it survive the change? What is your purpose beneath the specific aspiration?

Your reflection:

> *"Authenticity is not about outcomes. It is about character under pressure. And the measure of character under pressure is not how you perform on the day everything works. It is who you are on the ninth morning after the eighth closed door."*

THE RESUME THAT TOLD THE TRUTH

Swapna Naik and the Interview That Changed Everything

Bengaluru | 2012

> *"In 2012, Bengaluru was expanding at a restless pace. Startups rising. Funding flowing. Talent moving quickly. Résumés travelling faster than reputations. And in a modest apartment in Yelahanka, Swapna Naik sat before her laptop, staring at a blank section that eight months of her life had left behind."*

Chapter 1: The Eight Months Nobody Wanted to See

Bengaluru - 2012 - A Modest Apartment in Yelahanka

Her previous employer a mid-sized logistics firm, had collapsed abruptly. No warning. No structured shutdown. Salaries had gone unpaid. Vendors were angry. Employees wandered the corridors in various stages of confusion and distress. And the HR team, whose function is, in normal operating conditions, the organisation's human anchor, found itself in the specific and demoralizing position of representing stability within a structure that was actively falling apart.

Swapna had been part of that team. When the company failed, she carried something out the door that she had not gone in wearing: the invisible stain of institutional collapse. There was no clean documentation. No formal closure letters. No corporate dignity in the exit. Just silence, and then the blank section on a résumé that eight months of searching had not yet filled.

Friends advised her. Remove the company. Adjust the dates. Nobody checks. Gaps look bad. The advice was not cynical - it was practical, delivered with genuine concern, reflecting the actual conventions of a hiring market that had learned to treat résumé management as a presentational skill rather than a test of character.

A well-meaning former colleague went further. She helped Swapna draft a revised version. The dates flowed seamlessly. The gap vanished. The narrative looked polished, exactly the way polished narratives look when someone with skill has spent time making them so. It was a good piece of work. It was a lie. Not a dramatic lie - the small, structural kind that professional environments have normalized into acceptability: the rounding of an edge, the softening of an inconvenient truth, the presentation of a version of events that the recipient would find easier to process and that would therefore serve the presenter better.

Swapna saved the document. She read it. For two days, she sat with the lie she had written about herself.

On the third day, she deleted it.

Authenticity often feels irrational in the short term. It almost always proves essential in the long run.

> **Authenticity:** *Deleting the polished alternative was not a dramatic act. It was a quiet one — made alone, unobserved, with no audience to confirm it was the right choice. That is precisely what makes it Authenticity rather than performance.*
>
> **Values:** *The former colleague's advice was well-intentioned. 'Nobody checks' is possibly even statistically accurate. Swapna's refusal was not based on the probability of discovery. It was based on the understanding that a professional relationship begun on a lie produces a specific kind of fragility that no subsequent performance can fully repair.*

Chapter 2: The Room With the Right Question

The Interview — A Healthcare Startup — Bengaluru

The opportunity was an HR Business Partner role at a fast-growing healthcare startup. The interviewer was Jawahar Naresh Uday - known widely as JNU, a leader in his late fifties who had spent thirty-five years building organisations and had, in that time, developed the specific and rare quality of quiet discernment. He did not rush questions. He did not perform authority. He observed. He had interviewed enough people to know the difference between the answer that had

been prepared and the answer that was being constructed in real time, from actual experience.

Swapna entered the room composed, but not untouched by the specific anxiety of someone who is about to tell the truth without knowing how it will be received.

He skimmed her résumé slowly. Then he paused at the section she had refused to fabricate.

"Tell me about the gap."

No accusation. No raised eyebrow. Just directness - the specific, unhurried directness of someone who has asked this question many times and is genuinely interested in what the answer reveals rather than in confirming a conclusion he has already reached.

This was the moment. She could adjust the narrative. Blame market conditions. Invent consulting work. Offer a safer, more presentable version of eight months that the alternative document had already demonstrated she could construct convincingly.

She chose discomfort.

She spoke about the collapse, the way it had unfolded, without warning, the employees in the corridors, the unpaid salaries, the particular humiliation of being the person responsible for people operations inside an organisation that had stopped operating. She admitted the professional embarrassment. The uncertainty. The emotional toll of a situation that was nobody's individual fault and that had cost everyone involved something they had not agreed to pay.

Then she said something that was not in any prepared answer she might have offered.

"For part of these eight months, I volunteered at a skilling centre in Yelahanka. Young women from low-income families, preparing for interviews. Many of them were first-generation graduates. I realized something there."

JNU leaned back slightly. Waiting.

"That organisations don't fail because people lack talent. They fail because leadership lacks values."

Silence held the room for a moment.

He asked, evenly: "Most candidates adjust gaps. You didn't. Why?"

Her answer came without hesitation. "Because you would have found out eventually. And then our working relationship would begin with doubt. I would rather lose an opportunity than begin it on a lie."

JNU had interviewed hundreds. He had heard rehearsed answers, defensive answers, brilliant answers. He was not evaluating capability. He was evaluating foundation, the specific quality of character that capability either rests on or doesn't, and that determines, in the long run, whether the capability produces something durable or something that eventually requires managing.

"You're hired," he said. "The role is yours, if you want it."

He had not hired perfection. He had hired credibility. The distinction, in every organisation that has ever tried to build something worth building, is everything.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Speaking about a collapse without bitterness. Naming the difficulty accurately while holding the composure that allowed JNU to hear the person rather than only the problem. This is the specific emotional intelligence that makes honest communication possible in high-stakes professional settings.*
>
> **Purpose:** *The skilling centre insight 'organisations don't fail because people lack talent, they fail because leadership lacks values' was not a prepared line. It was something she had discovered in the eight months that the alternative résumé would have hidden. The gap was where the purpose had been found.*

Chapter 3: What the Gap Had Built

The Career That Followed

Swapna entered the organisation not as someone desperate for recovery but as someone clear about her identity. The difference between those two versions of

the same person walking through the same door on the same first day is the difference between a career built on the anxiety of maintenance and a career built on the stability of integrity.

Over the years, she became one of the most respected HR leaders in the company. And she introduced a policy that initially made her managers uncomfortable: transparent interview feedback. Every candidate not selected received honest, constructive reasoning not the vague corporate phrases that protect the organisation from difficult conversations, not the polite dismissals that protect the reviewer from the discomfort of honesty, but real feedback. Specific. Usable. Respectful.

It was difficult to implement. It demanded maturity from the interviewers. It required the emotional intelligence to deliver difficult information without cruelty. But it built something that no other policy in the organisation produced as directly or as durably: trust. People began to speak truth upward. Concerns arrived at leadership level before they became crises. Feedback moved in both directions across a hierarchy that had been, before, a one-way system.

Swapna's eight-month gap became irrelevant. Her credibility filled the space not by covering over what had happened but by demonstrating, through years of consistent behaviour, that the person who had deleted the polished lie was still the person making decisions in the HR function. The résumé told the truth once, in a room with a leader who was paying attention. The career told it every day after that.

> **Resilience:** *The eight months were not a gap. They were a space – used for the skilling centre work that gave her the insight that made her the HR leader she became. Resilience is not the speed of recovery. It is the quality of what is built in the interval.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *The transparent feedback policy was the direct institutional expression of what the interview had demonstrated: that honesty, properly constructed and properly received, builds more than any polished alternative. She took what had worked in one conversation and made it the culture of a function.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar appeared in one room, in one honest conversation

Authenticity	Deleting the polished lie and telling the uncomfortable truth, choosing the version of herself that would still be intact at the end of the working relationship, however long or short it proved to be
Values	Refusing to manufacture experience to protect image, even when the system invited it, even when the well-meaning colleague had already done the drafting
Emotional Intelligence	Speaking about a collapse without bitterness or self-pity, naming the difficulty accurately while holding the composure that allowed JNU to hear the person rather than only the problem
Purpose	Recognizing, in the skilling centre in Yelahanka, that HR is not a process function, it is a trust function; that organisations fail not because people lack talent but because leadership lacks values
Resilience	Using eight months of unemployment not as a gap to hide but as a space to contribute; turning personal constraint into community investment
Responsiveness	Creating, once hired, the culture that the interview had demonstrated was possible transparent feedback, honesty flowing safely upward, trust built as an organisational asset

Your greatest professional asset is not your skill set. It is your credibility. And credibility, once built on a foundation that could not withstand scrutiny, produces the most expensive kind of professional liability available: the one that arrives without warning, at the worst possible moment.

HOW TO BE — AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THE SYSTEM REWARDS APPEARANCE:

✔	Tell the truth when the system rewards appearance, not because discovery is certain, but because a working relationship begun on a lie has a specific fragility that no subsequent performance can fully correct

✔	Use adversity as depth rather than defensiveness; the eight months were not a gap, they were a space that produced the insight that made her effective; the polished résumé would have erased both
✔	Begin professional relationships with clarity. 'I would rather lose an opportunity than begin it on a lie' is the most precise statement of long-term credibility available in the language
✔	Turn gaps into contribution, the skilling centre was not career management; it was the honest use of time; it built something that corporate employment would not have
✔	Build cultures where honesty is safe, transparent feedback is the institutional expression of the value that the interview had demonstrated; the individual choice became the organisational practice
✔	Prepare before promising, credibility is built not in the claim but in the consistent delivery against it, over time, under observation

WHAT BUILDS FRAGILE FOUNDATIONS:

✗	Manufacturing experience to protect image, the gap discovered later does more damage than the gap disclosed honestly; the foundation matters more than the surface
✗	Assuming 'everyone does it' justifies compromise, the prevalence of a practice is not its ethical endorsement; everyone doing it does not mean no one notices the exception
✗	Allowing embarrassment to shape dishonesty, - the collapse of the logistics firm was not Swapna's failure; it became one only if she responded to it by building her recovery on a distortion of it
✗	Treating recruitment as a transaction rather than trust-building the interview was not a performance evaluation; it was the first data point in a relationship that would determine the quality of everything that followed
✗	Building professional credibility on a foundation that scrutiny would not survive,- skills open doors; character determines how long you remain inside

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about the version of your professional story that would withstand honest examination.

Q1. Where are you currently tempted to adjust the truth for advantage, in a résumé, in a presentation, in a conversation with a manager or a client and what would it cost you if the adjustment were discovered? What would it cost you in your own estimation if it were not?

Your reflection:

Q2. If your professional story were fully verified every date, every role, every claim on every document, would it stand intact? And if not, what is the cost of the discrepancy growing larger rather than being corrected now?

Your reflection:

Q3. Have you turned your professional setbacks into contributions as Swapna did in Yelahanka, or only into explanations? What would it look like to use the difficult experience as material rather than as something to account for?

Your reflection:

Q4. Do you create environments in your team, your organisation, your household, where others can speak truth safely? And what does your own behaviour in those environments communicate about the safety of honesty?

Your reflection:

Q5. What is your credibility built on and is that foundation strong enough to carry the professional weight you are placing on it? If someone removed the performance metrics and examined only your character under pressure, what would they find?

Your reflection:

> *"When truth costs you something and you choose it anyway, that is not idealism. That is the only foundation on which anything durable has ever been built."*

That is what Authenticity builds, when it is chosen at cost. Not just credibility. Character.

V

VALUES

Definition

Values are the internal compass that guides decisions when rules are unclear and pressure is high.

What it Means for an Individual

For an individual, values define what you will and will not do, regardless of reward or consequence. They shape behaviour when no one is watching. In everyday life, values show up in small acts - keeping promises, paying dues honestly, treating others with fairness, and choosing integrity over convenience. Over time, values shape reputation and identity.

What it Means for an Organisation

For an organisation, values define the behavioural boundaries of success. They guide hiring, promotions, partnerships, and strategic decisions. Organisations with strong values make difficult choices more easily because their moral framework is clear. When values are consistently practiced, they create trust internally and credibility externally.

THE CALL IN THE RAIN

When Trust Became the Real Contract

A Corporate Story of Partnership, Policy, and What Holds Markets Together
Chennai | 2010 – 2016

> *Contracts build transactions. Trust builds territories. And the difference between the two is the distance between a sales career and a leadership one.*

PART ONE

THE NETWORK THAT TRUST BUILT

> *"The brand had existed for decades. But a brand without a channel is a product sitting in a warehouse."*

Chapter 1: Building It the Old-Fashioned Way

Chennai — 2010

The southern distribution market for industrial and electrical equipment is not won through advertising or algorithms. It is won through presence of the accumulated trust of a hundred conversations with dealers, retailers, electricians, and contractors who have learned, over time, that a particular person's word is worth building a business on.

Amit Sharma arrived in the south zone with something more valuable than a product catalogue: he arrived with the discipline of an armed forces background, the patience to build relationships that compound over time, and the analytical instinct to know which relationships were worth compounding. He was not the kind of sales leader who led with incentives. He led with credibility. Data supported his position. Honesty maintained it.

Arulchamy Pandiyan had been in the electrical hardware distribution business long enough to know the difference between a company that was a partner and a company that managed its distributors. He had seen both kinds. He knew, within the first year of working with Amit Sharma, which kind this was beginning to feel like and it was the better kind.

Together, they built the southern network the way networks that actually hold are always built: dealer by dealer, retailer by retailer, electrician by electrician. They mapped the territory. They understood the local market dynamics and the procurement rhythms, the seasonal pressures, the relationships between contractors and suppliers that had existed for years before either of them arrived. They did not try to disrupt those relationships. They earned a place inside them.

Within three years, the southern region had grown from a fragmented patchwork of inconsistent relationships to the company's most promising channel story. Arulchamy Pandiyan was at the centre of it covering Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and parts of Karnataka with the operational discipline of someone who understood that distribution is a logistics business with a trust architecture beneath it.

Chapter 2: The Circular That Changed Everything

Chennai — The Policy Announcement

Then came the circular. It landed in inboxes across the country on an ordinary weekday with the kind of subject line that never fully prepares the reader for what follows.

Effective immediately.

Credit periods reduced. Distributor margins revised. Payment cycles tightened. The language was clean and professionally structured, the kind of language that sounds reasonable in a boardroom where the concern is working capital and the view is a spreadsheet. The decision made financial sense at the corporate level. It would improve liquidity. It would demonstrate discipline to auditors and investors. It was, on paper, a responsible governance decision.

On the ground, it was something else entirely. Distributors had structured commitments to their retailers, to their contractors, to their own working capital cycles, based on the agreements that had been in place. Retailers had planned procurement on the assumption of existing pricing. Contractors had quoted projects using margin structures that the circular had now, without warning or consultation, removed. The financial logic of the policy was real. But the policy had been designed in a room that did not contain the people it would most directly affect.

The channel had not been consulted. That omission was not a detail. It was the point because in relationship-driven distribution markets, the way a decision is made matters almost as much as what the decision is. A policy change that arrives without conversation is not a policy change. It is a signal about whose interests the company actually protects when those interests come into conflict.

Arulchamy Pandiyan read the circular twice. Then he picked up his phone and called Amit Sharma. Not through formal channels. Not with a grievance email. He called the way people call when they are trying to understand something before they decide whether to be angry about it.

"Amit bhai… I need to talk. Not email. Not on record. Just talk."

PART TWO

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERED

> *"The question had nothing to do with credit policy. It had everything to do with whether the relationship was real."*

Chapter 3: Filter Coffee and Unfiltered Truth

Madras Coffee House, T. Nagar — That Evening

They met the same evening at Madras Coffee House in T. Nagar. Rain streaked the glass windows. The usual sounds of a Chennai evening filtered through autorickshaws, distant traffic, the comfortable noise of a city that does not pause for individual dilemmas. Filter coffee arrived in steel tumblers. Neither of them reached for it immediately.

Arulchamy spoke calmly. He was not an emotional man by nature, he had built his business on the same combination of patience and operational precision that Amit respected in him. He was not there to negotiate. He was not there to threaten. He was there because, after three years of working alongside someone who had consistently behaved like a partner, he believed the conversation was owed. That belief was itself a form of trust.

"I'm not against change," he said. "Business evolves. Markets change." He paused. "But I built commitments based on stability."

Then he said what the circular had actually threatened: "Your competitor called last month. Higher margins. Longer credit. I ignored them."

He let that sit for a moment. Then:

"But tell me honestly, Amit - is this company a partner... or does it just manage distributors?"

It was a precise question. Not rhetorical, not accusatory, just precise. It contained the entire geography of the problem: the difference between a relationship and a transaction, between a partner who is consulted and a channel that is administered. Arulchamy was not asking about credit terms. He was asking

whether the three years they had built together had actually meant what he had believed they meant.

Amit Sharma did not answer immediately. He had learned from years in environments where the wrong answer said with confidence is more dangerous than the honest answer said with uncertainty, that this kind of question deserves a moment. He took it.

Chapter 4: The Honest Answer

Madras Coffee House — The Same Conversation

Amit did not defend the policy. He also did not criticize his organisation, not because he was protecting himself, but because emotional criticism of the company to a distributor would have served no one and resolved nothing. He understood the distinction between loyalty and compliance: he was loyal to the relationship, not obligated to perform enthusiasm for a decision he had not been consulted on.

"I can't promise what they'll decide," he said. "But I will present your full performance data. If they reject it, I'll tell you directly. Then you take your call."

Four sentences. No jargon. No hedging. No corporate language designed to create the impression of a commitment without the substance of one. What Amit offered Arulchamy was something rarer and more valuable than a better credit term: he offered him the truth about what was possible, the commitment to pursue it, and the respect of allowing him to make his own decision once the outcome was known.

Arulchamy picked up his coffee. He drank it. He did not say anything else about the competitor.

PART THREE

THE ROOM WHERE DATA SPOKE

> *"He did not position Arulchamy as an exception. He positioned him as an asset worth protecting. That reframing was the entire argument."*

Chapter 5: Arguing With Numbers, Not Sentiment

The Regional Review Meeting

The regional review meeting was the kind of room where policy is defended, not questioned. Finance had a mandate. Strategy had a position. The circular had already been issued. The expectation, in such rooms, is that field leaders come to report implementation, not to reopen decisions.

Amit came prepared for a different kind of conversation.

He did not argue with sentiment. He did not speak about loyalty or relationships or the years he and Arulchamy had spent building the southern network. Sentiment, in that room, would have been dismissed as field romanticism, the well-meaning but ultimately irrelevant appeal of someone too close to the ground to see the financial picture clearly.

Instead, he spoke numbers. Three-year growth trajectory of the southern region. Inventory rotation data that demonstrated Arulchamy's operational efficiency. Payment discipline records that are clean, consistent, without defaults. Retail network expansion metrics that showed the downstream reach the distribution model had created. And a competitive insulation analysis: the degree to which Arulchamy's established channel relationships were protecting the company's market share from competitors who were actively and aggressively trying to break in.

Then he offered a single, clear strategic equation: uniform policy strengthens finance. Flexible execution protects market share. These are not opposites. They are different instruments serving the same goal and treating them as mutually exclusive was itself a strategic error.

He did not ask for an exception. He asked for recognition: that Arulchamy Pandiyan was not a problem to be managed but an asset to be protected, and that the data made that case better than any argument from principle could.

The debate inside the room was real. Finance resisted the integrity of the policy was the point; carve-outs created precedent, precedent created complexity, complexity eroded discipline. Strategy pushed back - the southern region was growing; disrupting a high-performing distribution relationship carried its own financial risk, and that risk deserved to be modelled alongside the working capital benefit.

Eventually, leadership approved partial flexibility. Ninety-day credit instead of sixty. Not what Arulchamy had before. Not ideal. But workable - enough room for the commitments he had already made to be honoured without forcing a decision between the company and the businesses he supplied.

Chapter 6: The Call That Was Not an Email

After the Meeting

Amit did not send a corporate email with the outcome. He called Arulchamy personally.

"Here's what we secured," he said. "Ninety days. It's not everything. But it gives you breathing space."

Arulchamy was silent for a moment. The silence was not hesitation. It was the particular quality of quiet that settles over a person when they have received, not everything they hoped for, but something they can work with and when the way it was delivered confirms something they already believed about the person on the other end of the line.

"That's enough," he said. "I'm staying."

He declined the competitor's offer. Not because ninety days was better than what the competitor had proposed. It almost certainly wasn't. He stayed because the conversation at Madras Coffee House had answered the question he had actually been asking and the answer had been yes. This company, or at least this person inside it, was a partner. The credit term was a working arrangement. The partnership was something else.

PART FOUR

WHAT THE MARKET BUILT AFTER

> *"Arulchamy Pandiyan did not trust the company. He trusted Amit Sharma. The difference mattered more than anyone in the head office fully appreciated."*

Chapter 7: The Lesson PasuRaja Took Years to Understand

2010–2016 - The Outcome

PasuRaja had been watching. He was a young area manager at the time close enough to observe the dynamic between Amit and Arulchamy, too early in his own career to fully understand what he was seeing.

He had wondered, at the time, why Amit invested such disproportionate effort for one distributor. The company had other distributors. There were other territories to manage, other relationships to build, other fires to attend to. Why did this one matter so much?

Years later, when PasuRaja was leading his own team and had encountered enough versions of the same situation to recognise the pattern, he understood. The investment in Arulchamy Pandiyan was not an investment in one distributor. It was an investment in a principle, that in relationship-driven markets, trust is not a soft concept that sits alongside the commercial strategy. It is the commercial strategy. Without it, every margin structure, every credit term, every product advantage is temporary, because the competitor who wants your distributor does not need a better product. They only need a better conversation.

The numbers, between 2010 and 2016, made the principle visible. Southern distribution became the company's fastest-growing region. Distributor churn, which had been a persistent operational drag, reduced significantly. Retail penetration doubled across multiple districts. Competitors who had been actively trying to break into the established channel network found the doors closed not by contractual exclusivity, but by the far more durable exclusivity of trust.

Amit Sharma was eventually promoted as National Sales Manager. The promotion acknowledged the numbers. What the numbers represented the system of trust he had built, and the decision he had made in a coffee house on a rainy evening in T. Nagar, was harder to put in a promotion citation. But it was the real reason.

Chapter 8: Data with Integrity, Integrity With Influence

The Leadership Quality That Made It Possible

Amit Sharma had an unusual combination of qualities that this story turns on: he could move people not through pressure or incentives but through numbers explained with honesty. Most sales leaders can do one or the other. They can present data, or they can build relationships. The ones who can do both, who use data not as a weapon but as a form of honest communication, and who build relationships not through warmth alone but through the credibility that comes from always saying exactly what they mean are the ones who build the kind of loyalty that competitors cannot buy.

Data supported his integrity. Integrity strengthened his influence. The loop was self-reinforcing: because Arulchamy trusted that Amit's numbers were accurate and his promises were real, the data Amit presented in the regional review meeting carried weight that no fabricated optimism could have. And because the outcome of the review meeting was reported to Arulchamy exactly as it was not dressed up, not softened, not framed as a win when it was a partial one, the trust held.

This is what the AVEPRR framework calls Authenticity. Not the performance of honesty. The practice of it, consistently, in every conversation, regardless of whether the news is good.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Leading with honest, grounded communication, no overpromising, no performance threat
Values	Protecting relationships and commitments beyond what is immediately convenient
Emotional Intelligence	Reading the fear or frustration beneath a partner's words and responding to what is actually at stake
Purpose	Building a sustainable ecosystem, not just closing a transaction
Resilience	Holding the line between corporate mandate and ground reality without breaking either
Responsiveness	Acting before the competitor does because in trust-based markets, timing is everything

Contracts build transactions. Trust builds territories. And the difference between the two is the distance between a sales career and a leadership one.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO IN RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN MARKETS:

✔	Advocate for channel partners using performance data, not sentiment, because data moves rooms that emotion cannot
✔	Communicate honestly when outcomes are uncertain; an honest answer builds more trust than a comfortable one
✔	Balance corporate policy with ground-level reality by framing them as complementary, not competing, objectives
✔	Protect long-term distribution relationships with the same rigour applied to financial targets
✔	Call personally with difficult news rather than delegating the communication to an email or a junior

✔	Build credibility through consistent behaviour over time, because trust in distribution markets is a compounding asset
✔	Consult the channel before implementing structural changes that affect their operational commitments
✔	Recognise that the competitor's call is always coming and that the only defence is a relationship the competitor cannot replicate

WHAT UNDERMINES TRUST AND ERODES CHANNEL LOYALTY:

✗	Hiding behind 'policy' when a partner needs a human conversation about what the policy actually means for them
✗	Overpromising to retain loyalty because the credibility lost when a promise break is worth more than any short-term relationship saved
✗	Treating distributors as replaceable channel entities rather than as co-architects of market presence
✗	Implementing structural changes without stakeholder consultation the omission signals whose interests are actually protected
✗	Managing difficult conversations through email when the relationship requires a voice and a room
✗	Assuming that a better product or a better margin can substitute for a damaged relationship
✗	Failing to model the relationship cost of a policy change alongside its financial benefit

REFLECTION SPACE

Write what is actually true. Not the professional answer - the honest one.

Q1. When an organisational decision affects your partners or stakeholders, do you manage the communication or do you have the conversation? What is the difference, and which do you more often choose?

Your reflection:

Q2. Do the people who depend on you - partners, clients, team members - trust your word, or your position? If your position changed tomorrow, how many of those relationships would hold?

Your reflection:

Q3. Think of a time you presented data to move a difficult internal decision. Did the data speak for the relationship, or only for the numbers? What would it have looked like to present both?

Your reflection:

Q4. What professional relationships are you actively protecting today that may determine your options tomorrow? Are you investing in those relationships proportionally to what they are worth?

Your reflection:

Q5. If trust were a measurable KPI in your role tracked, reviewed, and reported with the same rigour as revenue what would your score be? What would need to change to improve it?

Your reflection:

> *"Policies may shape organisations. But trust builds markets. And the leaders who understand the difference between the two are the ones markets remember."*

WHEN AMBITION TURNS DANGEROUS

The JAME Conspiracy and the Leaders Who Protected the Truth

A Corporate Thriller of Power, Manipulation, and the Quiet Courage That Stopped Both
Kochi | 2001 – 2010

PART ONE

THE FESTIVAL MORNING

> *"It was Kerala Piravi Day. The city wore celebration like a festival shawl. Inside the glass tower, laughter echoed through corridors. In one corner, a young woman walked in with a weight she had not yet learned to carry."*

Chapter 1: The Email That Changed Everything

Kochi — November — Kerala Piravi Day

The city was in its best clothes. Kerala Piravi Day, the birth anniversary of the state, had turned Kochi into a celebration of itself. Women in elegant kasavu sarees, the gold border catching the morning light. Men in crisp kasavu mundus. The streets outside the glass towers of the multinational financial services organisation were vibrant with colour and the particular pride that collective identity produces on its anniversaries.

Inside the building, the festive mood was real. Cameras flashed in corridors. The smell of a traditional Kerala feast was already arriving from the office cafeteria. Laughter moved through the open-plan floors. This was a good organisation, known for its progressive people practices, for the quality of the culture it had built over years in a city where good organisations are noticed and remembered.

And in one corner of that building, a young woman dressed for the celebration walked in with a face that did not match the day.

Her name was Navya. She was a Management Trainee, five months into her first corporate role, still in the probation period, still learning the geography of a large organisation: which corridors led where, which names carried which weight, which informal rules governed the formal ones. She had joined with the particular combination of excitement and anxiety that every campus recruit brings to their first real job. She had not expected to need to navigate something like this. Not yet. Not five months in.

By mid-morning, an email reached the Internal Complaints Committee. The subject line was brief. Unambiguous. Heavy with the specific weight that those three words always carry in a professional environment.

Complaint of sexual harassment.

The allegation named a colleague. Sundar. A technology support professional with six years in the organisation - dependable, technically sound, somewhat reserved. By the standards of the mid-career professional ecosystem in that organisation, an unremarkable profile. Not known for anything that would have made him an obvious subject of a complaint.

The complaint was filed. The machinery activated. And nobody, yet, knew what was actually inside it.

Chapter 2: The Woman Who Listened to the Pauses

The First Hearing

Mrs. Nalini Krishnan chaired the Internal Complaints Committee with the authority of someone who has spent thirty years learning to distinguish between the things that are said and the things that are meant. She had handled sensitive employee matters before, in public sector institutions, in multinational corporations, in the full range of organisational contexts that three decades of experience provides. She understood that harassment complaints arrive with their own emotional architecture: specific, painful, and not always easy to narrate.

She listened to Navya.

Not just to the words. To the pauses. The hesitation that arrived at specific points in the narrative. The way certain parts of the account had a practised quality, not dishonest, exactly, but too smooth. Like a path that had been walked several times before the walk that was happening now.

The story had structure. Chronology. Internal consistency. All the elements that a genuine account contains. But something was absent. Nalini had spent enough hours in rooms like this one, across enough years, to know that absence is sometimes the most important thing in the room. The thing that is not said. The detail that the account skips over. The pause that arrives not because the memory is painful but because the script did not cover this moment.

She could not yet define the gap. She could not point to a specific sentence and name it as the fault line. But experience had taught her one principle that she had never seen fail:

When something feels incomplete, it usually is.

She did not draw a conclusion. She did not accelerate the process toward a finding. She wrote a discreet note to Aiswarya Nair, the Regional HR Leader for India. Brief. Measured. Carrying, in its restraint, the specific weight of a professional who knows that the note's understatement is its credibility.

"Something in this case requires deeper examination."

Seven words. And those words, delivered by someone whose judgment Aiswarya had learned to trust across years of working together, changed the direction of everything that followed.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Nalini heard what Navya's story was not saying. That capacity, to listen to the absence rather than only the presence, is what prevented an innocent person from being destroyed by a manufactured complaint.*

PART TWO

THE SUCCESSION THAT STARTED IT ALL

> *"The email from headquarters was discreet. Short. Decisive. For Jagadish and Mercy, it landed like a quiet explosion. Years of ambition dissolved in a sentence."*

Chapter 3: Mathews, and the Gap He Would Leave

The Months Before Succession Planning

To understand what was unfolding in Kochi, Aiswarya needed to go backwards. Not far, just few months, not years. But far enough to find the origin of a conspiracy that had been assembled with patience by people who believed they had both the motive and the means to execute it.

Mathews had led the India business for two years. He was a rare kind of executive, the kind who had spent twenty-five years building credibility in the company's global operations and then, as retirement approached, had asked to be transferred to India. Not as a reward. Not as a demotion. As a homecoming. He wanted to spend his final professional years close to the hometown he had come from, working in the market that was now, for any global financial services company, impossible to ignore.

As his retirement approached, succession planning began. These conversations happen quietly in organisations that manage transitions well, not announced, not debated publicly, but considered carefully at the level where decisions of this weight are made. The India business was growing. The successor would need a specific combination: the credibility to lead a high-performance sales organisation, the relationships to maintain the global headquarters' confidence, and the specific cultural intelligence to navigate India's market complexity.

Two names emerged naturally from the existing leadership. Jagadish and Mercy,- both General Managers in Sales, both delivering strong numbers, both carrying Mathews' professional respect. Both capable. Both, it must be said, genuinely high-performing in the conventional assessment of what high performance means

in a financial services sales organisation. The numbers were real. The client relationships were real. The leadership of their respective teams was real.

Beneath the professional cooperation, however, was a rivalry that was equally real and considerably less visible. Across leadership corridors, people who understood the organisation's dynamics whispered the same question. Not loudly. Not publicly. But consistently.

Who will become the next Business Head?

The rivalry had one genuinely positive effect: revenue grew. Both leaders pushed their teams. Competition, when it is contained within professional boundaries, accelerates performance. The India business was benefiting from the energy that two ambitious leaders generate when they are both running toward the same destination.

Then the message from headquarters arrived. Discreet. Short. Decisive. Jaydev Rajaram, currently based in Malaysia, would join Kochi, to lead India business. A decade of building corporate relationships across Southeast Asia. Consistent performance. Long-standing client trust. Strong relationships at the global level. He would come as the third General Manager reporting to Mathews, which was the formal announcement. The reality, understood immediately by the small group with full context, was that Jaydev was the successor.

For Jagadish and Mercy, the email arrived as the specific kind of shock that is most difficult to process: the shock of a future you had believed was yours being reassigned to someone you had never considered a competitor, because you had not known they existed in this context.

Years of ambition. Months of performing at the highest level, under the pressure of succession scrutiny. The belief, reasonable, based on everything they knew, that one of them would lead India.

Gone. In a sentence. From a building in another country.

The question they should have asked next was: What do we do now? The question they actually asked was darker.

Chapter 4: The Dinner and the Plan

The Evening After - The Origin of JAME

They met that evening. Just the two of them, Jagadish and Mercy (JAME) professional rivals becoming, in the specific crucible of shared disappointment, something different. Not friends. Something more dangerous than friends: collaborators in resentment. People who have found, in their common loss, a common purpose.

The conversation began with frustration. That is where these conversations always begin, with the legitimate emotion of people who have worked hard and been passed over and do not understand why. Frustration is human. It is the direction that frustration takes that determines character.

Their frustration took a direction.

If Jaydev could not be defeated through performance and he was already established, already arriving with the weight of headquarters' trust behind him, perhaps he could be weakened before he took charge. If the ground beneath his authority could be destabilised before he stood on it, if the relationships he was arriving to build could be seeded with doubt before he arrived to seed them with credibility, the equation might shift.

They began studying his background, his network, his key relationships at headquarters, the specific alliances that had made him the choice. To understand those relationships well enough to disrupt them, they needed information. Confidential information. The kind that does not arrive through conventional channels.

They needed someone who could get it.

And they knew exactly who had the technical access to try.

> **Values Lost:** *This is the moment. Not the dinner, not the conversation, not the frustration, but the specific instant when two people who had spent their careers performing integrity decided, together, that their ambition was worth more than*

> *anyone else's. That decision did not announce itself. It arrived quietly, as the most dangerous decisions always do.*

Chapter 5: The Approach - And the Man Who Said No

The Proposition to Sundar

Sundar was not a senior figure. He was a mid-career technology support professional, the kind of person in large organisations who is known for solving problems that others cannot solve and who is largely invisible when the problems are not present. He had six years of tenure, a clean record for most of his time, and access to certain technical systems that came with his role.

He also had one item in his history that JAME had found.

Years earlier (2002), Sundar had faced an internal complaint for making an inappropriate late-night call to a female colleague. The complaint had been investigated, a finding had been made, and the consequence had been a withheld promotion, a ceiling installed above him that he had been unable to reach past ever since. It was not a dramatic incident. It was an administrative fact. But administrative facts, in the hands of people who are willing to use them, become leverage.

JAME approached him. The request was framed carefully, these requests always are, but its substance was unambiguous. If Sundar could access Jaydev's systems and extract information about his communications, his plans, his relationships at headquarters, they would reward him. A promotion. A salary increase. A performance bonus. And the one thing that Sundar had been carrying for years as an invisible weight: they would erase the old complaint. Correct the record. Remove the ceiling.

The offer was real. The incentives were real. The people making the offer had the organisational authority to deliver on every one of them.

Sundar listened.

Then he said no.

Calmly. Without drama. Without the performance of indignation that would have been available to him, the opportunity to position himself as the whistleblower, to make a scene, to create an audience for his refusal. He simply declined. And then he added something that the JAME leadership had not anticipated:

"If I am pressured further, I will report this."

In that sentence, a conspiracy built across days of careful planning acquired a new and uncontrollable variable. Someone else knew. Someone who could not be managed through the incentive structure that had produced the plan, because he had already been offered everything and had declined everything.

The conspiracy had a problem it had not planned for. The problem was a man with a conscience.

> **Values:** *Sundar's refusal is the story's moral centre, not because it was heroic in a visible way, but because it was quietly, absolutely firm. The old complaint meant he had already been penalized for one failure of character. He was being offered redemption in exchange for another. He chose the harder version of redemption: the kind you earn rather than negotiate.*

PART THREE

THE TRAP WITHIN THE TRAP

> *"Samson was not the architect. He was the instrument. And instruments do not question the purpose they are built for, they simply perform it, until the performance produces a consequence that the architects had not fully imagined."*

Chapter 6: What Samson Noticed — And What He Did with It

The Manufactured Complaint

Samson was a manager who reported to Jagadish. He was present in this story as the kind of person that conspiracies require: capable enough to execute, ambitious enough to want the reward, and not senior enough to understand the full scope of what he was being used for. He had been watching the JAME operation with the attention of someone who senses that proximity to powerful people's plans might benefit him, if the plans succeeded.

He had noticed something. Sundar and Navya had been seen together at the tech park cafeteria, sharing coffee, in the early 2000s, in the way that colleagues at similar career levels sometimes share coffee when they are both new to a professional environment and finding their way around it. In the social context of that time, in that city, in that organisation's culture, this was ordinary. Unremarkable. The kind of interaction that happens dozens of times a day in any large office.

Samson saw something else in it.

He approached Navya. Not as a conspirator, he was too careful for that. He approached her as a concerned senior colleague. Protective. Alert to her interests in a way that she, five months into her career and still learning how professional relationships worked, had no framework to interrogate. He told her there were rumors circulating. About her and Sundar. The kind of rumors that could damage a young woman's reputation in an environment where professional credibility was still being established.

He offered a solution.

If she filed a complaint against Sundar, given that Sundar already had a historical complaint on record, the organisation would act quickly and decisively and the rumors would be quieted. She would be protected. Her professional reputation would be secured. And there was something more: if she cooperated, he would recommend her for a business role after probation. Higher salary. Performance incentives. A career trajectory significantly better than the one available to her in her current administrative function.

Navya was twenty-two. She was five months into her first job. She was anxious about the gossip Samson had described and Samson, who had spent years reading people, had understood precisely what combination of fear and incentive would produce the response the conspiracy required.

She believed him.

The complaint was filed.

A young woman's anxiety had been measured, weaponized, and deployed. And she would not understand what had been done to her and what had been done in her name, until twelve days later.

> **Purpose Lost:** *The organisation's complaint mechanism was created to protect. JAME and Samson had turned it into a weapon against Sundar, whose silence they needed to guarantee, and against Navya, whose inexperience, innocence and anxiety they had used as the instrument of that guarantee.*

Chapter 7: Twelve Days

The Investigation - Aiswarya Nair

Aiswarya Nair began her investigation the morning after Nalini's note arrived. She began the way she always began: not with the accusation, but with the periphery. The people whose names had appeared indirectly. The colleagues whose paths had crossed the main characters' paths in ways that were not yet significant but might become so. The information that existed in the spaces between the formal record.

She was known in the organisation for two qualities that rarely coexist in the same professional: discretion and courage. Discretion because the investigations she conducted could destroy careers if conducted carelessly, the leak that reaches the wrong person before the evidence is complete, the premature finding that corrupts the process before it has produced a result. Courage because the same investigations, conducted carefully and fully, sometimes produced findings that pointed upward. Toward people with authority. Toward people who believed their seniority protected them from scrutiny.

Within a few days, the scope of the investigation had widened beyond the original complaint. Witness accounts were not aligning. Timelines in different testimonies were shifting in ways that were not explained by ordinary variations in memory. And certain names were appearing with a frequency that made their peripheral status in the official narrative increasingly implausible.

Jagadish.

Mercy.

Two senior leaders. Two General Managers whose names belonged in succession planning conversations, not in harassment complaint investigations. Their presence in the emerging evidence was not direct, this had been constructed carefully. But it was traceable, through the specific patience of an investigator who understood that conspiracy leaves fingerprints even when it has wiped the surfaces.

Aiswarya documented everything. Quietly. Without the investigation becoming visible to the people it was investigating. For twelve days, she moved through the organisation like someone who was doing ordinary HR work and underneath that ordinary surface, she was assembling the complete architecture of what JAME had built.

On the twelfth day, the picture was complete.

The hacking proposition to Sundar, documented through Sundar's own account, cross-referenced with technical access logs that corroborated his presence in the conversations he described. Samson's approach to Navya, reconstructed through

Navya's own testimony, which shifted significantly once she understood that the investigator was not asking her to defend a complaint but to tell the truth about how the complaint had been constructed. The succession context. The dinner. The specific incentives that had been offered and refused.

All of it.

> **Resilience:** *Twelve days of investigation conducted under the institutional weight of two senior leaders who believed the complaint would be processed and closed before any real scrutiny arrived. Aiswarya's persistence - quiet, methodical, without drama was itself an act of organisational courage.*
>
> **Authenticity:** *When Navya was given the conditions to tell the full truth, when the investigator's approach made clear that she was not going to be punished for what she had been manipulated into, she told it. And Sundar had been telling it from the beginning; in the note he had declined to file until now.*

PART FOUR

WHAT CONSEQUENCE LOOKED LIKE

> *"The organisation acted decisively. Not dramatically — there were no press announcements, no performative displays of justice. Just the specific, proportionate consequence that falls when an institution has both the evidence and the integrity to act on it."*

Chapter 8: The Endings That Were Not Endings

The Aftermath

Jagadish and Mercy were transferred to remote locations. The announcement, made in the language of routine operational decisions, communicated something unambiguous to everyone in the organisation who understood what had preceded it: this was not a deployment. This was a consequence. The distance between the Kochi glass tower and a remote North India assignment was not geographical. It was the distance between being a potential India Head and being removed from the consideration set permanently, without a formal announcement of the removal.

Mercy resigned shortly after the transfer. The combination of the geographic displacement, the loss of her Kochi-based network, and the private knowledge of what had been discovered and why the transfer had been made, produced a professional situation she chose not to inhabit. She left. Not publicly. Not with the kind of farewell that senior departures usually attract. Quietly, which was how the organisation preferred it, and which was appropriate to the nature of the exit.

Jagadish accepted the remote assignment. He resigned six months later.

Samson's role in the conspiracy had been documented. His career within the organisation did not recover from that documentation.

Sundar was transferred to Delhi NCR. The investigation had established clearly that his refusal to cooperate with JAME's request had been an act of integrity that the conspiracy had not anticipated. His transfer was not a consequence, it was, in

the organisation's reading of his situation, a form of protection: removing him from the environment in which the people he had refused had operated and where the aftermath of their exposure created its own pressures. He resigned within a few months. The reasons he carried with him were his own.

Navya remained with the organisation for approximately a year before leaving for higher studies in the United Kingdom. The investigation had cleared her name as a person who had been manipulated rather than a person who had manipulated. But the clearing of a name does not erase the experience of having been placed in a position you had no framework to navigate. She left. Whether she carried the experience as damage or as a kind of terrible education about how professional environments actually work, only she would know.

Jaydev Rajaram assumed the India leadership. The conspiracy that had been constructed to prevent or delay his credibility in the role had instead, through the thorough documentation of who had opposed him and why given him an organisational environment that understood the specific cost of the kind of leadership that had tried to undermine him. He led India. The story of the conspiracy that had been built around his appointment was not announced publicly, but it was not forgotten privately.

The organisation remembered who had protected its integrity. It remembered who had tried to compromise it. That memory is the institution's most durable form of consequence.

Chapter 9: What Nalini and Aiswarya Actually Did

The Real Story Behind the Story

The two leaders who protected the truth in this story are worth understanding separately from the drama that surrounded them, because their leadership was not dramatic. It was methodical, patient, and practised with a quietness that makes it easy to understate.

Nalini Krishnan did not know, when she wrote her seven-word note, that the note would initiate an investigation that would expose a conspiracy involving two

General Managers and a plan to use a young management trainee's anxiety as a weapon. She knew one thing: the story she had heard felt incomplete. And in thirty years of handling sensitive employee matters, she had learned to trust that feeling more than she trusted the surface comfort of a clean, complete-seeming narrative.

She did not rush to a finding. She did not process the complaint efficiently toward the most obvious conclusion. She listened to the pauses. She wrote the note. She trusted the person she was passing the note to.

Aiswarya Nair took twelve days when a less careful investigator might have taken two and reached a conclusion that would have destroyed Sundar's career and left the conspiracy intact and operational. She began at the edges. She followed the inconsistencies. She created the conditions in which Navya could tell the full truth without fear of the consequence that Samson had implied would follow any deviation from the script she had been given.

Neither of them was performing heroism. They were performing their function,- the function that their roles, in an organisation with genuine governance commitments, required of them. But function, performed with this quality of attention and this willingness to pursue uncomfortable findings, is what distinguishes institutions that protect people from institutions that merely process complaints.

> **Purpose:** *They protected the organisation's integrity not as an abstract governance commitment but as the specific, daily practice of ensuring that the systems created to protect people actually protected them — and were not available to be weaponized by the people with enough seniority to try.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *When the investigation was complete, the organisation acted. Not weeks later, not after consultations designed to soften the consequence, not with the delay that communicates that seniority provides protection from accountability. It acted. That responsiveness was itself a statement about the kind of institution this was.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar held or failed in this story

Authenticity	Standing for truth even when the truth is buried under a carefully constructed lie and when finding it requires risking the comfort of the obvious answer
Values	The line that Sundar held when every incentive available, promotion, salary, erasure of a damaging record, was placed on the other side of it
Emotional Intelligence	Nalini listening to the pauses. To the hesitation. To what Navya's story was not saying. The capacity to hear what is absent is rarer and more valuable than the capacity to hear what is present
Purpose	Protecting the organisation's integrity not as a governance exercise but as the reason the investigation mattered, because institutions that do not protect the innocent are institutions that eventually protect no one
Resilience	Twelve days of investigation, conducted quietly, without leaks, without drama, against the institutional weight of two senior leaders who believed they were untouchable
Responsiveness	Acting the moment the investigation was complete, decisively, proportionately, without the hesitation that would have communicated that power could delay consequence

> *Ambition builds careers. Values build legacies. And the difference between those two statements is the difference between Jagadish and Mercy on one side of this story, and Nalini Krishnan and Aiswarya Nair on the other.*

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN POWER AND INTEGRITY COLLIDE:

✔	Listen to what a story is not saying, the pauses, the hesitations, the rehearsed quality of an account that should be raw before drawing the conclusion the surface is offering

✔	Investigate before judging; the most damaging findings come not from rushing toward a conclusion but from following the evidence slowly enough for the full picture to emerge
✔	Stand firm when offered incentives to compromise, Sundar's refusal was costly in the short term and defining in the long term
✔	Protect the people with the least power most carefully, Navya's vulnerability was exploited precisely because the organisations that should have protected her had failed to make that protection visible
✔	Hold seniority accountable with the same standard applied to everyone else justice that stops at a certain level communicates that above that level; the rules are different
✔	Act decisively when the investigation is complete the timing of the consequence communicates whether the organisation is serious about the principle
✔	Create the conditions in which the truth can be told Navya told the full truth only when the investigation made it safe to do so; that safety was built deliberately

WHAT ENABLES CONSPIRACY AND ERODES INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY:

✗	Weaponizing organisational processes, the complaint mechanism was built to protect; JAME turned it into an instrument of suppression
✗	Manipulating inexperienced employees, Navya's anxiety was a legitimate vulnerability that Samson used with precision; that use was the conspiracy's most cynical element
✗	Allowing ambition to override the line that was always clear — Jagadish and Mercy knew what they were doing was wrong; they chose to do it anyway
✗	Rewarding useful output without scrutinizing the methods, Samson had learned that proximity to powerful people's plans was its own kind of advancement
✗	Rushing investigations toward comfortable conclusions, the false complaint would have been processed and closed in days if Nalini had not heard the pauses
✗	Protecting seniority from the consequences that should follow clearly documented misconduct delay is the message that power protects itself
✗	Failing to make the organisation's commitment to junior employees visible before they need to rely on it Navya had no framework to identify what Samson was doing because no one had given her one

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are not about the characters. They are about you, your organisation, and the moments where your answers to them are being tested right now.

Q1. Have you ever sat in a room where a plan was being constructed that you knew crossed a line, and stayed silent? What made the silence easier than the word that would have ended the plan?

Your reflection:

Q2. Nalini heard the pauses. She heard what Navya's story was not saying. In your professional life, when did you last listen with that quality of attention to a colleague, a direct report, a team member who was telling you something that did not quite match how they were telling it?

Your reflection:

Q3. Sundar was offered a promotion, a salary increase, and the erasure of a record that had been limiting his career for years. He refused. What would you have done? And what does your honest answer to that question tell you about the current state of your own values under pressure?

Your reflection:

Q4. What responsibility does your organisation carry toward the newest, most inexperienced people in it - the Navya's who are five months into their first corporate role and have no framework for identifying when they are being manipulated by someone they have been taught to respect?

Q5. Which AVEPRR pillar do you believe is currently most at risk in your own professional environment, and what is the one action you could take this week to strengthen it before the event that tests it arrives?

Your reflection:

> *"Leadership is not defined by power. It is defined by the courage to protect truth, especially when the truth is buried under the ambitions of people with more power than the truth. Because in the end, organisations do not remember who competed for power. They remember who protected integrity."*

Ambition builds careers. Values build legacies.

The career is over. The legacy is permanent.

COMPASSION IS A STRATEGY

Binod Sahu, Sheetal Gupta, and the Pause That Changed Everything

Delhi NCR | 2017

> *"He could have deleted it immediately. Instead, he paused. And in that pause, unhurried, unobserved, without an audience, his leadership was tested more precisely than any KPI had ever tested it."*

Chapter 1: A Year of Doing Everything Right

Delhi NCR — 2017

By 2017, Binod Sahu had built an internal reputation that most managers spend careers trying to construct: methodical, fair, and reliably procedural. He documented what he said he would document. He followed the processes his organisation had designed. He escalated when escalation was required and held back when it was not. His professional identity was built on a particular kind of trustworthiness, the kind that comes not from warmth but from predictability. People knew what Binod would do because Binod always did what the situation, properly assessed, called for.

Which made the vendor relationship all the more frustrating. For nearly a year, the account had been a source of the specific professional friction that structured, process-oriented people find most difficult to absorb: not dramatic failure, but inconsistency. Sheetal, the account lead on the vendor side, was not incompetent. She knew the work. But deadlines slipped in ways that were hard to attribute to any single cause. Timelines shifted. Optimistic commitments became vague in the execution. The reliability that Binod brought to every other professional relationship was absent here, and its absence had a cumulative cost.

He had done everything the process recommended. Two formal escalations, documented in writing. Corrective action calls with clear expectation resets. The paper trail that organisations require before a vendor relationship can be formally

penalized or terminated was complete. The next step, and it was not a complicated one, was to execute it.

Then the email arrived. Addressed to someone else. From Sheetal's work account. Not meant for him.

Chapter 2: The Three Options and the One That Required More

The Pause

The email was personal. Written to a friend, with the particular unguarded honesty of private correspondence the kind of writing that does not perform composure because it has no audience to perform for. A parent's hospitalization. A serious medical condition. Sleepless nights navigating something that was not resolvable through effort or professionalism or the reliable delivery of project milestones.

Binod read it. He should not have. There was no malice in the reading the email had arrived in his inbox, forwarded by accident from Sheetal's work account, and by the time the content was visible the reading had already happened. He was now in possession of something he had not sought and had no right to.

He sat with three options. They were not abstract; each one had a clear professional logic behind it.

Option one was to ignore the email entirely and continue the escalation path. Professionalism, reasonably defined, requires maintaining boundaries between personal and professional spheres. He had a process to complete. He had documented justification. The information in the email, received accidentally, had no place in a professional vendor assessment, it should be treated as though it did not exist.

Option two was more calculating. He now understood why the deliverables had slipped. This context could be used, not cruelly, but strategically, to negotiate from a stronger position. To apply firmer pressure precisely calibrated to the knowledge that Sheetal had limited capacity to push back.

Option three was different in kind from the other two. It required something that the first two options did not: the willingness to see the person before the performance record. To respond to the full human situation rather than the professional surface of it. To give space without lowering the standards that the space was temporarily suspending.

Binod chose the third. He did not announce this choice. He did not explain it to anyone. He simply acted on it.

He sent a message. It contained twelve words of substance and a lifetime of the kind of leadership that is forged not in strategy sessions but in the unobserved moments of a professional day.

"Sheetal, I hope you and your family are doing okay.
I know the project has been challenging recently.
Whenever you're ready, let's get on a call and reset the plan together.
No urgency from my side this week."

No mention of the email. No reference to the hospitalization. No change in formal policy. No signal that anything had been seen that was not meant to be seen. Just space, offered without explanation, received without condition.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *He did not respond to Sheetal's performance record. He responded to Sheetal. That shift from the visible data to the human context behind it is the precise definition of Emotional Intelligence in practice.*
>
> **Values:** *He chose the dignity of a person who had not consented to share her crisis over the procedural leverage the accidental email had made available. Nobody would have known if he had used it differently. That nobody was watching is exactly what makes it a values decision.*

Chapter 3: What Happened After

The Recovery and the Long View

Within the hour, Sheetal replied. She thanked him without explaining. The thank-you carried everything that could not be said professionally: the recognition

that she had been seen, not just assessed; that her absence of explanation had been accepted rather than demanded; that the space offered had been real and not conditional on a disclosure she had not been ready to make.

She confirmed that she would personally drive the pending deliverables beginning the following week.

She did. Every milestone was met. Every correction was made. Not one further escalation was required.

But the most significant outcome was not the recovery of the deliverables. It was what the recovery had been built on. The vendor relationship that had been on the verge of formal termination became, over time, one of the most dependable partnerships in Binod's professional portfolio. Sheetal's reliability in the months and years that followed was not the reliability of someone performing under scrutiny. It was the reliability of someone who had been treated with dignity at a moment when they had deserved it and had not been in a position to ask for it.

That foundation traced back to one decision. A response instead of a reaction. A pause instead of a process. A message instead of an escalation.

Speed impresses. Sensitivity transforms.

> **Purpose:** *He protected the partnership's long-term value at the cost of the short-term satisfaction of enforcing a consequence. Purpose, in this story, is the understanding that the relationship was worth more than the penalty.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *He responded to what was actually happening rather than what the documentation indicated was happening. Responsiveness here was not speed, it was accuracy. The accurate response to the full situation was slower, quieter, and more powerful than any escalation could have been.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Responding to an accidentally revealed truth without weaponizing it, treating what was not meant to be seen with the same integrity as what was

Values	Choosing the dignity of another person over the procedural leverage the situation made available because values are revealed most precisely in the choices that only the person making them will ever fully know about
Emotional Intelligence	Reading what Sheetal's performance data could not tell him: that behaviour has context, and context changes the appropriate response
Purpose	Protecting a long-term partnership over a short-term penalty understanding that the relationship's value was greater than the satisfaction of enforcing a consequence
Resilience	Giving space for recovery rather than enforcing collapse allowing Sheetal the room to restore herself without making her pay twice: once for the personal crisis and once for the professional gap it created
Responsiveness	Acting on the full picture rather than the visible one — responding to what was actually happening rather than reacting to what the process recommended

Leadership is not always about reacting fast. Sometimes it is about responding humanely. And the difference between a reaction and a response is not speed; it is the question asked in the pause between the trigger and the action.

REFLECTION SPACE

Answer these about yourself and your own professional choices not about Binod or Sheetal.

Q1. When someone in your team or vendor network underperforms, is your first instinct assumption of incompetence or curiosity about unseen pressure? What has that first instinct cost you in relationships, in outcomes, in the kind of leader people experience you as?

Your reflection:

Q2. Have you ever been in possession of information received accidentally, or shared in confidence, that you could have used as leverage? What did you do? And if you used it, what did it cost the relationship it was used in?

Your reflection:

Q3. Do people feel safe making mistakes around you ? safe enough to correct themselves before you need to correct them? What does the answer to that question tell you about the environment your leadership creates?

Your reflection:

Q4. When did you last choose empathy over escalation in a professional context and what happened after? If you cannot recall a recent example, what does the absence tell you?

Your reflection:

Q5. Which of the three options would you have chosen? And if your honest answer is not Option Three, what would need to change in your professional instincts, in your understanding of what leadership is for, to make it the default?

Your reflection:

"Work performance and personal reality are not separate compartments. They are the same human being. And the leader who understands this, who can read the full picture rather than only the visible data, is the leader whose relationships are built to last."

THE UNIFORM YOU WEAR INSIDE

Santosh Thakur, Farook Omar, and the Night That Revealed Character

Kerala | National Cadet Corps | National Trekking Expedition | August 1996

PART ONE

THREE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SIX

> *"In that uniform, surnames disappeared. Background became irrelevant. The city you came from ceased to matter. Only bearing mattered. Only character."*

Chapter 1: The Uniform That Equalized

Kerala — August 1996 — The National Trekking Expedition

Three hundred and thirty-six cadets. Count that number slowly. It is not a crowd; it is an ecosystem. Three hundred and thirty-six young people drawn from colleges across Kerala and from states scattered across the length of India, arriving at a camp with the particular combination of excitement and controlled anxiety that every NCC expedition produces in the people who attend it.

They spoke different languages. They prayed differently, ate differently, held different political opinions, came from cities and small towns and villages whose cultures had nothing in common with the cultures that had produced the person standing next to them in the formation. They had never met each other. They had no shared history. They had nothing, arriving at this camp, except the one thing that the olive-green uniform immediately conferred: equality.

In that uniform, the camouflage dangri that cadets in those years wore with a combination of pride and affection, surnames disappeared. The weight of family background, of caste and community and class, which organises so much of Indian social life outside the camp gates, had no operating space inside them. What you brought to this camp was not your father's name or your college's rank

or your hometown's reputation. What you brought was your bearing: the way you stood, the quality of your attention, the discipline of your habits, the character that emerged when circumstances applied pressure to who you actually were.

The NCC understood something about human development that most educational institutions do not: that character is not built in comfort. It is built in contrast. The way a university education builds expertise by placing a student alongside other students who have studied similar things, the NCC built character by placing people who had almost nothing in common alongside each other and creating the conditions, physical discomfort, competitive pressure, the removal of supervision, the addition of genuine stakes, in which the differences between them would either fracture the collaboration or forge something more durable.

Among the three hundred and thirty-six, two young men had been assigned to work together who could not have been more deliberately contrasted.

Chapter 2: Two Men, One Pair

The Pairing

Farook Omar came from Kerala. He was the kind of person whose discipline announces itself before he speaks in the quality of his boots (always polished), in the sharpness of his creases (always precise), in the alignment of his belt buckle (always perfect), in the particular way he inspected himself before inspection began, because he was not performing the standard for the instructor's benefit; he was maintaining it because it was his standard.

Discipline was not an effort for Farook Omar. This distinction matters enormously. Effort implies a cost the implication that something is being overcome, that the natural inclination is different from what is being produced. For Farook, discipline was a habit the natural inclination itself, so thoroughly internalised that its absence would have felt wrong, would have been the effort. He was precise because imprecision was uncomfortable to him. He was methodical because his mind did not find peace in disorder. The boots were polished because unpolished boots were not something he could move past.

Santosh Thakur came from Himachal Pradesh. He was the other kind of person, the one who fills a room with energy before he has said a word, who makes groups coalesce around him without intending to, whose mind moves quickly and whose opinions arrive fully formed and delivered with the particular certainty of someone who has never been wrong in a way that stayed with him. Intense. Expressive. Competitive.

But Santosh also had a quality that distinguished him from the simpler version of the confident young man: he was self-aware. Not always, and not perfectly self-awareness is never perfect, and the moments when it failed him are the moments this story is most interested in. But he possessed the capacity, when the pressure was right, to see his own impulse clearly enough to choose differently. That capacity would be tested tonight in the forest in ways he had not anticipated.

He thrived on momentum. Give Santosh Thakur a moving situation and he accelerated it. Give him a stalled one and he became impatient. He led naturally in discussions. He competed fiercely. And he was, on occasion, casual when he decided something was manageable which is the specific vulnerability of the confident person: the tendency to underestimate small things because small things have always worked out.

Farook thrived on precision. Give Farook Omar a complex situation and he slowed it down until it was legible. Give him an ambiguous one and he gathered more data before committing to a direction. He did not lead with momentum. He led with accuracy.

The NCC's pairing system was not accidental. The armed forces training model does not group similar personalities together to confirm each other's instincts. It places contrast in collaboration because the organisation that people will eventually lead is not composed of people who think the way they think and react the way they react. It is composed of exactly the kind of people who challenge them, frustrate them, and ultimately make them better if they let the challenge do its work.

They had never met before this camp. They would never forget what the camp taught them about each other — and about themselves.

PART TWO

THE FOREST THAT DID NOT LIE

> *"The forest at night does not forgive assumptions. It does not adjust itself to your confidence. It holds its terrain with complete indifference to whether you are ready for it."*

Chapter 3: What the Night Navigation Exercise Actually Was

August 1996 — The Exercise Begins

The night navigation exercise was announced with the particular matter-of-factness that the NCC employs when it is about to do something that will test people more than they expect to be tested. The briefing was logistical. A map. A compass. A torch. A series of checkpoints to be located and cleared in sequence. Work in pairs. Report progress at each checkpoint. Complete the course.

What the briefing did not say because it did not need to, because every exercise of this kind communicates its real purpose through the conditions rather than the instructions was that the exercise was not a navigation test. It was a character test. Navigation was the medium. Character was the content.

No instructors would walk beside them in the forest. No audience would observe their choices in the dark. No applause awaited them at any checkpoint. The forest at night is one of the most equalizing environments available to human beings, it does not care about your rank, your college's reputation, the competitive standing you have built in the daytime exercises, the image you have worked to project since arriving at camp. It presents terrain. You navigate it or you don't. And the decisions you make in its darkness are yours alone, observed only by whoever is beside you.

Farook and Santosh entered the forest together. The torchlight cut a narrow cone into the darkness ahead. The sound of other pairs departing faded quickly the forest absorbed them, separated them from the wider camp, placed them in the specific isolation of two people with a task and no one watching them complete it.

The first checkpoint. They found it. The confidence that comes from an early success — not arrogance, just the particular ease of a situation that is going as expected.

The second checkpoint. Cleared again. The ease deepened into something more comfortable, more assured. They were doing well. They knew the map. They had the compass. They had each other.

Then the forest changed its mind.

Chapter 4: When the Map Stopped Matching the Ground

The Third Checkpoint — Darkness

The terrain around the third checkpoint did not match what the map said it should be. This is the moment in every night navigation exercise, in every genuine test of judgment, when the gap between preparation and reality becomes visible. You have a map. The map is correct. But the map is a representation of the terrain, not the terrain itself, and representations have edges, have scales, have the inherent limitation of any simplification: they cannot contain every detail of the thing they simplify.

Santosh believed they had crossed the third checkpoint without recognizing it. This is a reasonable inference from the evidence available to them, they had been moving in what felt like the right direction, the checkpoint's coordinates should have been behind them, the terrain features they had expected to serve as landmarks had appeared and passed. It made sense. It felt right. And the feeling of being right particularly for a person of Santosh's confident temperament, has a momentum of its own.

"We must have passed it," he said. His voice in the forest had a different quality than it did in the daytime exercises lower, more certain in its uncertainty, the voice of someone reasoning aloud in the dark. "Let's move forward."

Farook did not move forward.

He crouched. Under the dim cone of the torchlight, he unfolded the map with the deliberateness of someone who does not make the next decision until the

current information is complete. He held the compass steady — not in the casual way of a person checking a rough direction, but in the precise way of a person who knows that the difference between slightly wrong and exactly right matters enormously when you are in a forest at night. He checked their bearing again. He examined the terrain features around them against the map's representation of those features.

The silence lasted long enough to be uncomfortable.

"We haven't passed it," Farook said. "We missed it. We went off course here." He indicated the point on the map with the torchlight.

The clarity of that statement in the darkness the absence of hedging, the absence of the softening language that people use when they are about to deliver unwelcome information was itself a form of character. Farook did not say 'I think we might have' or 'possibly we could have.' He said what the compass and the map were telling him, because the compass and the map were not interested in feelings.

They were undeniably off course. Not catastrophically lost the forest had not swallowed them, the camp was not unreachable, they were not in danger in any serious physical sense. But they had missed the checkpoint. They were not where they were supposed to be. And the path forward had a decision embedded in it that neither of them had expected to face.

That was when the real test arrived. Not from the forest. From a person.

Chapter 5: The Whisper in the Dark

The Third Checkpoint — The Temptation

Thomas was passing close enough to overhear. He was from another pair, navigating his own route, close enough in the darkness to catch the shape of their situation if not its precise details. He moved toward them briefly, the instinctive human movement toward other humans in darkness and in the proximity of that movement, he heard enough.

He whispered. The forest carried it with uncomfortable clarity.

"Just say you cleared it. No one can track every movement at night."

Six words. And in those six words, every piece of rationalization that a person in this situation might construct was contained. No one can track it. The verification is impossible. The consequence of the lie is invisible. Everyone is tired. The rankings matter. Your college will ask about your performance. Pride is a real thing. You did almost all of it right only one checkpoint, only this one moment of disorientation in an entire exercise that was otherwise navigated correctly. Why should one missed checkpoint define the whole night?

Santosh felt it. This is the most important thing to say about him in this moment: he felt the pull. He did not pretend it was not there. The competitive part of him the part that had thrived on momentum, that had led discussions and competed fiercely and built a camp identity around being someone who performed well felt the appeal of Thomas's suggestion with a specificity that he would describe, years later, as almost physical.

It was not temptation in the simple sense of wanting to do the wrong thing. It was more complicated than that, and more honest. It was the temptation of a person who is tired and competitive and aware of exactly how much the ranking means and who has a very reasonable argument available we did most of it right, only one checkpoint, the terrain was ambiguous and who knows, with the deeper part of their awareness, that the argument is not actually a reason. It is a rationalization. And the difference between a reason and a rationalization is the difference between integrity and its absence.

The internal monologue ran fast:

It's just one checkpoint.

We did most of it right.

Why lose marks for one mistake in the dark?

He knew the right answer. He had known it from the moment Farook confirmed they had missed the checkpoint. The difficulty was not knowledge. The difficulty was choosing the answer he already knew, against the pull of everything that argued for the alternative.

Chapter 6: Four Words That Changed Everything

The Moment of Decision

Farook stood quietly. He had not moved toward Thomas. He had not engaged with the whisper. He was not dramatic about it there was no performance of indignation, no speech about integrity, no visible display of the principle he was about to enact. He simply stood in the darkness, with the particular stillness of a person who has already decided and is waiting for the situation to catch up with the decision.

"We missed it," Farook said. "We report it."

No lecture. No moral architecture. No explanation of why integrity matters or what character means or what the consequences of dishonesty might be at some point in their future careers. Just the fact and its consequence: they had missed the checkpoint, and the appropriate response to having missed it was to report that they had missed it.

The simplicity of it was itself the most powerful thing about it. Farook did not need to construct an ethical argument. He did not need to weigh the options. He had already weighed them at some point in his life, in the process of becoming who he was and the weighing had produced a settled position that did not require recalculation in the specific pressure of this specific forest on this specific night.

That is what values actually are, in practice: not the principles you articulate when asked, but the positions that do not need recalculation when the pressure arrives. If you have to think hard about whether to be honest in the dark when no one is watching, the value is not yet fully formed. Farook did not have to think hard. The answer was already there.

Now Santosh had to decide. Not whether Farook was right — he knew Farook was right. The question was whether he would choose the thing he knew was right when every other force in the situation was arguing against it.

He looked at the map. He looked at the darkness. He thought about the ranking and the college and the tired teenage pride that wanted to protect itself.

And then he felt something else — something quieter than the competitive impulse, something that came from a deeper place than the desire to rank well. The understanding that the person he was choosing to be in this moment was not the person he would see in the inspection tomorrow morning. The person he was choosing to be in this moment was the person he would see in the mirror for the rest of his life.

"We report it," Santosh said.

Two words. The most important he had spoken all night. Possibly the most important of his young life.

They turned back. Through the forest. Toward the base camp. Toward the instructor who would record the missed checkpoint. Toward the deduction on paper that would cost them in the ranking.

Toward themselves.

PART THREE

THE NOD THAT SAID EVERYTHING

> *"A slight nod. Nothing more. But that nod carried more weight than any trophy in any cabinet, in any college, in any city either of them had come from."*

Chapter 7: Subedar Thej Bahadur's Morning

The Morning After — Inspection

Subedar Thej Bahadur moved along the inspection line with the economy of movement that comes from decades of reading people quickly and accurately. He did not stop at every cadet. He did not need to. An experienced military professional conducting morning inspection is not looking at the surface, at the crease and the buckle and the boot polish, which are merely the visible evidence of what they are actually assessing but at the person behind the surface. The quality of the bearing. The nature of the attention. The specific quality of how someone stands when they believe they are simply being inspected rather than being read.

He stopped in front of Farook Omar and Santosh Thakur.

His eyes moved across their uniforms. Crease. Buckle. Boots. The surface passed without comment, which in military inspection language is itself a form of approval. But he stayed a second longer than the inspection would have required and his eyes moved from the uniform to the person inside it.

Then the nod.

Slight. Almost imperceptible. Not accompanied by words, not followed by explanation, not elaborated into the kind of acknowledgement that would have made it a performance of recognition rather than the genuine article.

Just the nod.

And both of them understood, in the immediate, complete way that young people understand things when they are seen accurately by someone whose judgment

they respect, exactly what it meant. He knew. Not how he knew, and not what precise intelligence the camp's system had provided him about the events of the previous night. But he knew. The uniform inside had remained intact, and Subedar Thej Bahadur could see it.

No trophy. No announcement. No adjustment to the ranking that would acknowledge what they had done in the forest when the ranking was what was at stake. Just a slight nod from a man who had spent his career learning to read the difference between the people who perform their values and the people who hold them.

They had understood the lesson. And the lesson was this: the uniform inside is the only one that matters.

Chapter 8: What the Camp Was Actually For

The Deeper Learning

NCC camps are not trekking programs. This is the most important thing to understand about what happened in that forest in Kerala in August 1996. The trekking is the medium. The character development is the content. The compass and the map and the checkpoints and the night navigation exercise are all instruments in a training model that has one purpose: to place a young person in conditions where who they actually are becomes visible to themselves and to the institution before the stakes are high enough for the revelation to be catastrophic.

The armed forces have understood for a very long time what most organisations learn too late: that character under pressure cannot be reliably assessed in comfort. A classroom reveals intelligence and knowledge. An interview reveals composure and communication. Neither reveals what a person will do in the forest at night when they are tired and competitive and someone whispers the easier path and no one is watching.

The NCC camp revealed it. Farook's character was already formed the forest confirmed what was already there. Santosh's character was in formation the forest provided the specific test that moved him from the person who felt the pull of

the shortcut to the person who chose against it. Both outcomes are important. Both are what the exercise was designed to produce.

The pairing itself was the deeper lesson. A methodical young man from Kerala and an intense young man from Himachal Pradesh had nothing in common when they arrived at camp except the olive-green uniform. They left camp with something that no curriculum could have produced: the specific, tested knowledge of who the other person was in the dark. And that knowledge the knowledge of having been alongside someone when it was genuinely difficult and watching them choose well is the foundation of the kind of trust that lasts decades.

Chapter 9: The Lives That the Camp Built

Years Later — The Long Arc

The reunion happened years after the camp. The cadets who gathered were no longer teenagers in olive green they were professionals, parents, people whose lives had taken them in directions that the Kerala forest had not known about and could not have predicted.

Farook Omar had built a business. Not a large corporate enterprise something more rooted and more deliberate. A successful operation in Kerala that had expanded into the Gulf region. Hundreds of people employed from his village and its surrounding areas. The character that had been visible in the inspection before inspection began the boots polished, the bearing precise, the standard maintained for its own sake rather than for any audience was the same character he had brought to every business decision across the intervening years. Punctual. Ethical. Steady. The precision that had been habit in the NCC had remained habit in everything that followed it, because habit is not something you choose to apply selectively. It is who you are.

Santosh Thakur had chosen teaching. He was a university faculty member, the intense, expressive, fiercely engaged presence in a lecture hall that his NCC campmates would have recognised instantly as the same person who had competed in the discussion groups of August 1996. But he had added something

to the intensity in the intervening years: the particular depth that comes from having been tested and having chosen correctly at the moment that mattered most.

He had become an NCC officer. Voluntarily. Not because the obligation required it but because he understood, with the clarity that only comes from lived experience, that the thing the camp had done for him on that night in the forest was worth doing for other young people. He was shaping young minds now with the very values he had once struggled to choose under torchlight. The struggle was the credential. He had earned the right to speak about integrity under pressure by having exercised it under pressure himself, in the dark, when it cost him something.

At the reunion, Santosh said something that the people who heard it remember to this day:

"That night wasn't about marks. It was the first time I chose integrity over image."

Not the last time. The first time. The first deliberate, costly, chosen act of integrity made in darkness, against the pull of every competitive instinct he had, was the foundation on which everything that came after was built.

The forest had not been a test of navigation. It had been a test of the uniform worn inside.

Both of them, in different ways and through different lives, had passed it.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Being honest when verification was impossible, and dishonesty carried no visible consequence, - the choice made in darkness when no one was watching
Values	Choosing truth over competitive advantage at the moment when the ranking, the pride, and the college's reputation all argued for the lie

Emotional Intelligence	Managing the ego's pull, the peer's whisper, and the internal tug of teenage justification without flinching, without drama
Purpose	Understanding that the training was shaping the person, not just the performance and that one checkpoint lost now was worth infinitely more than one integrity lost forever
Resilience	Accepting the penalty without resentment, without excuse, without the bitterness that diminishes small people when they do the right thing and are penalized for it
Responsiveness	Choosing thoughtful, principled action in the seconds between the temptation and the decision not impulsive self-protection, but deliberate integrity

> *Anyone can stand straight when others are watching. Character is revealed when no one is. And the night that revealed the character of Farook Omar and Santosh Thakur was darker than either of them had prepared for, not in terrain, but in the territory of who they actually were.*

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THE FOREST GETS DARK:

✔	Choose integrity when shortcuts appear harmless and verification is impossible precisely because the absence of consequence is the most accurate test of your values
✔	Surround yourself with people who raise your standards simply by holding theirs Farook's settled character was the environment that made Santosh's choice possible
✔	Polish the boots before inspection, not for it the discipline maintained when no audience is present is the only kind that is real
✔	Pause before reacting under pressure; the seconds between the whisper and the answer are the most important seconds in the exercise
✔	Accept small losses to protect lifelong credibility the deduction on paper cost them in the ranking; the report made to the instructor invested in something that rankings cannot measure

✔	Collaborate across differences; the contrast between Farook and Santosh was the design, not the problem, growth lives in the friction between different temperaments
✔	Understand that training shapes the person first and the performance second; the checkpoint was the test's surface, character was its content

WHAT ERODES THE UNIFORM YOU WEAR INSIDE:

✗	Justifying dishonesty because 'no one will know', the assumption that value is determined by visibility is the precise inversion of what integrity means
✗	Confusing competitiveness with character, Santosh's drive to perform well was not the problem; the temptation to let it override his integrity was
✗	Letting ego override principle in the moment of pressure ego argues for the image; principle argues for the self; these are not the same
✗	Equating external discipline with internal integrity boots can be polished by someone whose character is not; the surface and the substance must match
✗	Compromising values for temporary recognition, the ranking adjusts every term; the character you build in the forest stays for the rest of your life
✗	Treating the whispered temptation as an offer to be considered rather than a test to be passed Thomas was not wrong that no one could track it; he was wrong about what tracking is for

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REFLECTION SPACE

Answer these questions about yourself, not about the characters. The forest is wherever you are reading this.

Q1. When was the last time you faced a small, apparently consequence-free ethical choice — and chose the harder right thing over the easier wrong one? What made you choose it? What would have happened if you had chosen differently?

Your reflection:

Q2. Is there an area of your professional or personal life where your behaviour changes when supervision is absent where the standard you hold yourself to in public is different from the standard you hold yourself to in private? What is the gap between those two standards worth to you?

Your reflection:

Q3. Who in your life is your Farook Omar, the person whose settled integrity raises your own standard simply by being present? Have you told them what their character has meant to yours?

Your reflection:

Q4. Think about the last time someone offered you Thomas's whisper the practical, low-risk shortcut that 'no one would ever know about.' What did you do? What does that choice say about the uniform you wear inside?

Your reflection:

Q5. If your character were evaluated in darkness in the specific conditions of your most unsupervised, most pressured, most tempted professional moments what would the assessment find? Would Subedar Thej Bahadur nod?

Your reflection:

> *"The world sees the uniform you wear. Your future is shaped by the one you carry within. And the night that revealed Farook Omar and Santosh Thakur was not a trekking exercise. It was the first chapter of the rest of their lives."*

Choose the uniform you wear inside. Choose it when it costs something. Choose it when no one is watching.

That choice made in the dark, with only a compass and a conscience, is where character begins

E

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Definition

Emotional Intelligence is the ability to understand, regulate, and respond to emotions, both your own and those of others, with awareness and maturity.

What it Means for an Individual

For an individual, emotional intelligence is the ability to pause before reacting. It allows you to recognise anger, fear, or frustration without letting those emotions dictate behaviour. It strengthens empathy, improves relationships, and enables thoughtful decisions under pressure. People with emotional intelligence create psychological safety around them.

What it Means for an Organisation

For organisations, emotional intelligence appears in leadership culture. It is reflected in how leaders listen, how conflict is handled, and how failure is discussed. Emotionally intelligent organisations encourage dialogue, recognise human realities behind performance metrics, and foster environments where people can contribute without fear.

THE ALTITUDE TRAP

When the View from the Top Blinds the Man Who Climbed There

A Corporate Story of Ambition, Drift, and the Long Road Back
Bengaluru | 2005 – 2024

PART ONE

THE MAKING OF A MAN

> *"He understood early that life would not hand him opportunities. He would have to build it."*

Chapter 1: A Village That Did Not Speak Startup

Rural Karnataka — Early Years

There are two kinds of ambition. The first is born from abundance, from a family that has already succeeded and expects the next generation to extend the inheritance. The second is quieter, more determined, and far more instructive: it is born from a home where nothing is guaranteed and everything must be earned.

Naanu Kumar grew up in the second kind of home, in a modest town in rural Karnataka, where his parents did not speak the language of venture capital or global markets. What they spoke was simpler and in the long run, more durable:

Study well. Work honestly. Respect people.

These were not motivational phrases. They were a survival code. And Naanu absorbed them not as lessons to be recited but as instincts to be lived. He excelled in school. He was disciplined in academics and restless on the sports field. Those who knew him in those years remember a young man who carried his determination quietly, the kind of person who does not announce what they are going to do but simply does it.

He understood early that he was not starting from the same position as many of his peers. He did not resent this. He used it. The gap between where he started and where he wanted to be was not an obstacle. It was the engine.

After completing his B.Tech, he packed his ambitions into a bag and moved to Bengaluru in 2005, joining a technology company as a management trainee software developer. The city was already building its identity as the Silicon Valley of India. For Naanu, it was not just a city. It was a possibility.

Chapter 2: Preparation Dressed as a Job

Bengaluru — 2005 to Early 2010s

Many people treat their first job as the end of a journey. Naanu treated it as the beginning of an apprenticeship, one that nobody had formally enrolled him in and that he was designing for himself in real time.

While colleagues clocked out when the day ended, Naanu stayed. He studied code frameworks long after the office emptied. He read about architecture patterns that were still evolving in the industry. He spent hours understanding not just what the technology did, but why it was built the way it was, the kind of thinking that separates engineers who execute from engineers who eventually lead.

His managers noticed. And when managers notice the right things, careers begin to move.

Developer. Senior Developer. Module Lead. Project Lead. The progression was neither lucky nor linear, it was earned through a consistent pattern of reliability that became his professional signature. By the early 2010s, Naanu was managing global software projects across time zones, building relationships with clients in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, and earning a reputation that preceded him into every new room.

He was known as someone who delivered under pressure, built teams people trusted, and stayed technically grounded even as his responsibilities grew. For a young engineer from a rural background who had arrived in the city with determination and modest savings, the journey felt extraordinary.

And yet, in the way of all people who are genuinely curious about what they are capable of, a question had begun forming quietly in the back of his mind. It was not arrogance. It was not restlessness. It was something closer to a calling.

Could he build something of his own?

Chapter 3: Six Engineers and a Whiteboard Full of Ideas

Bengaluru — The Early Startup Years

Entrepreneurship arrived for Naanu not as a plan but as a conviction, the slowly accumulating belief that the skills he had built, the markets he had come to understand, and the instinct for technology that he had cultivated over nearly a decade, could be the foundation of something real.

He watched Bengaluru's startup ecosystem with the attention of someone who was not merely observing but learning. Young founders were building technology products for global markets with energy that was infectious and ambition that was unapologetic. Naanu believed he too could create something meaningful. The question was not whether to try. The question was when.

With modest savings, the support of a few close friends and batchmates who believed in him before the market did, he founded a technology product company. The beginning was so humble it might have discouraged a man with less resolve:

A small rented office. Six engineers. Two borrowed desks.

A whiteboard covered in ideas that had not yet met reality.

But what those early days lacked in resources they made up for in intensity. The team coded during the day, debated product ideas late into the night, and spent weekends meeting the early adopters who were willing to test an unfinished product from an unknown company because something about the team made them believe in the possibility.

The market responded. Slowly, as markets always do with new entrants but unmistakably. Within two years, the team had grown to nearly fifty people, clients had expanded across India, and the product had evolved significantly from its

earliest iteration. What had started as a whiteboard full of ideas had become a real company with real clients and real stakes.

It was the beginning. And like all beginnings, it carried within it both the seeds of everything that would flourish and everything that would eventually go wrong.

PART TWO

THE BUILDING OF AN ORGANISATION

> *"They were not just building a product. They were building the kind of place where people could believe in something larger than a salary."*

Chapter 4: The Four Who Built What Naanu Dreamed

The Scaling Years

Naanu had the self-awareness that many founders lack: the recognition that enthusiasm cannot scale a company. That a vision without structure is a beautiful idea that eventually collapses under its own weight. That building something that lasts requires people who bring different kinds of intelligence to the same table.

He hired four leaders who would become the architects of the organisation's foundational character.

The Head of Technology arrived with the engineering depth to build systems that could carry the company's product ambitions beyond proof-of-concept. He brought rigour to an environment that had been running on instinct and pace, and he began building the kind of technical architecture that could support genuine scale.

The Head of Sales brought market intelligence and commercial discipline to a founding team that had built something remarkable but was still learning how to sell it consistently. He began constructing the pipeline infrastructure that would take the company from opportunistic wins to predictable revenue.

The Finance Leader introduced something that startups almost universally resist until they cannot: financial discipline. The quiet, unglamorous work of ensuring that the money coming in was tracked against the money going out, that decisions had financial logic behind them, that growth was sustainable rather than spectacular in the short term and ruinous in the long one.

And then there was the People and Culture Leader, perhaps the most quietly consequential hire of them all. Because what this person built was not a process or a system. What they built was the organisation's soul.

Together, these five people, Naanu and his four leaders, spent months in the kind of deep, unhurried conversation that organisations almost never make time for once they begin to grow. They co-created the company's purpose: the reason it existed beyond profit. They defined its core values: not as words on a wall but as commitments that would govern decisions when the easy choice and the right choice diverged. They built people practices that made employees feel seen, heard, and valued. And they drew a long-term roadmap that gave everyone in the organisation a sense of where the journey was going.

Town halls became a regular practice. Employees began speaking about ESOP participation not as a rumor but as a tangible possibility, shared ownership of a shared journey. The company became a buzzword across professional circles. Industry awards followed. Technology forums invited Naanu to speak. The product expanded to global markets. Employee strength crossed three hundred people.

What had started with six engineers and two borrowed desks had become a recognized technology company. And even in the difficult moments, the delayed incentives, the salary payouts that came late, employees trusted the leadership, because the vision was clear and the communication was honest. That trust was not accidental. It had been built, deliberately and patiently, by five people who understood that an organisation's resilience in hard times is always proportional to the depth of the relationship it has built with its people in good ones.

Chapter 5: The Invisible Architecture

The Peak Years

There is a quality that all genuinely healthy organisations share, and it is almost impossible to see from the outside. It is the quality of people who know why they are there, not just what they are doing, but what it means, and why it matters, and who else is alongside them in the effort.

This was what Naanu's company had built in those formative years. The leadership team had not just hired people. They had created the conditions in which people could invest their professional identity in something beyond a job title. The engineers were not just building software. The sales team was not just chasing numbers. The finance team was not just managing spreadsheets. Everyone, at every level, understood the story they were part of.

This invisible architecture, purpose, trust, shared ownership, is what makes organisations resilient. It is what allows them to absorb setbacks without fracturing. It is what keeps people in the building during the hard months when the easy thing would be to leave. And it is, as Naanu would eventually discover, precisely the thing that is hardest to rebuild once it has been broken.

For now, though, the architecture held. The company was growing. The founder was celebrated. And the distance between who Naanu Kumar had been in that rented office with six engineers and a whiteboard, and who he was becoming as the company expanded and the invitations multiplied, was beginning, quietly, invisibly and to widen.

PART THREE

THE ALTITUDE TRAP

> *"Success rarely changes people suddenly. It changes them quietly, one small rationalization at a time, until the person looking back from the summit barely recognizes the person who began the climb."*

Chapter 6: The Fog That Comes With the View

The Turning Years

Nobody warned Naanu about the altitude trap. Nobody warns anyone, because the people who could warn you are usually the ones you have already stopped listening to by the time the trap closes.

The shifts were so gradual that each one, in isolation, seemed reasonable. Leadership meetings became shorter, efficiency, Naanu told himself. Late-night decisions replaced collaborative discussions, speed, he said. New hires were approved without the financial discipline the Finance Leader had built, opportunity, he reasoned. Expensive international conferences were pursued with an enthusiasm that had less to do with strategy and more to do with being seen in rooms that reflected back the version of himself he had begun to prefer.

Meanwhile, his personal lifestyle expanded. The man from a rural Karnataka home who had once lived within his means while building something larger was now living in a way that expressed, visibly and publicly, how far he had come. This is not inherently wrong. It becomes wrong only when the expression of success begins to replace the practice of the values that enabled it.

His leadership team noticed. They were not timid people, these were the same leaders who had helped build the organisation from the ground up, who had sat in those long purposeful conversations about values and roadmaps and culture. They raised the signals. They reminded Naanu of the systems they had created together. They spoke about the drift, carefully at first, then with increasing directness.

Naanu heard them. But he had stopped listening.

'Trust me,' he would say, with a certainty that had once been grounded in evidence and was now grounded only in itself. 'I know what I'm doing.'

This is the sentence that precedes almost every preventable institutional failure. Not because it is always wrong in the moment, sometimes the speaker does know what they are doing. But because it signals something more dangerous than ignorance. It signals the closure of the feedback loop. And an organisation whose leader has closed the feedback loop has begun, quietly, to deteriorate.

Chapter 7: The Money That Made Things Worse

The Investment Years

Around this time, a large Chinese investment group showed interest in the company. The conversations that followed were the kind that founders dream about in the early years, serious money, serious intent, a validation that the company was real enough and significant enough to attract institutional capital.

After negotiations, the first phase of funding was secured. Several million dollars. The number was transformative, at least in theory.

But capital is not neutral. It takes on the character of the leadership that receives it. In the hands of a grounded, disciplined founder who treats investment as a responsibility rather than a reward, funding accelerates progress. In the hands of a founder who has already begun to drift from the values that built the organisation, funding accelerates the drift.

What should have arrived as an obligation, to the investors, to the employees, to the purpose the company had been built around, arrived instead as confirmation. Confirmation that Naanu had been right. That the instincts were correct. That the speed and the unilateralism and the personal expansion were all justified, because look: the money had come.

Strategic discussions disappeared. Leadership participation in key decisions declined to the point of irrelevance. The collaborative culture that the People and Culture Leader had spent years building began eroding, not dramatically, not all

at once, but in the way that erosion always works: incrementally, invisibly, until one day you look at the riverbank and realize it is no longer where it was.

> *Success tests character far more than failure ever does. Not because success is harder than failure, but because failure shows you the bottom, while success hides the ceiling. And when you cannot see the ceiling, you do not know you are rising too fast to stay grounded.*

Chapter 8: The Exit of the Architects

The Departure Years

They did not leave in anger. That is the thing that makes this chapter of the story so painful to read. They left in disappointment, which is something far more final.

The Head of Sales resigned first. He had built the company's commercial engine from a standing start. He had believed in the product, in the founder, and in the journey. When he walked out, he took with him not just his title but the institutional knowledge of every client relationship he had nurtured, every market insight he had accumulated, every early adoption conversation he had turned into revenue.

The Technology Head followed. The engineering architecture he had built continued to function, but without its architect it would eventually drift toward technical debt and short-term decisions that would compound into long-term fragility. He had seen what was coming. He chose not to watch it arrive.

The Finance Leader stepped down. The financial discipline he had installed, the quiet, unglamorous work of ensuring decisions had economic logic, had already been eroding. His departure formalized what had already become true in practice: the company was making decisions without a rigorous financial conscience.

And then, last and most significantly, the People and Culture Leader moved on. This was the departure that mattered most, because what left with her was not a skill set or a process. What left was the living memory of why the organisation had been built the way it had been built. The values conversations. The purpose

work. The people practice. The invisible architecture had made the company a place where three hundred people invested their professional identity in something beyond a salary. All of it had been held in place, in part, by this person's daily presence. When she left, what remained was the structure without the spirit.

Naanu told himself that experience could be replaced with fresh talent from the market. This is one of the most expensive mistakes a founder can make, not because it is factually wrong, but because it misunderstands what the departing people actually represented. They were not employees. They were co-founders of the organisation's character. They had given the prime years of their professional lives to build something they believed was shared. And they had done so, for nearly five years, without seeing meaningful increases in their compensation or benefits, while watching new hires brought in at three to four times their salaries to fill the roles they had created.

The irony was devastating in its precision. The very people who had built the organisation's capacity for growth were replaced, at premium cost, with people who had not been there for the building, and who therefore lacked the only thing money cannot buy: the understanding of what the organisation was actually trying to be.

What appeared to be strategic talent upgrading was something else entirely. It was a founder demonstrating, perhaps unconsciously, that he alone was the centre of the organisation. That the collective journey was, in the end, his journey. That the shared ownership they had all spoken about in those early town halls had always been, finally, his ownership.

Companies rarely collapse because talent leaves.
They weaken when trust leaves with it.
And people who build an organisation also carry its soul.

Chapter 9: The Warning Signs That Were Always There

Founder Drift — The Pattern

In many growing startups, founder drift does not arrive as a crisis. It arrives as a series of small normalized deviations, each one explainable in isolation, each one unremarkable, each one adding to a pattern that becomes visible only in retrospect:

Decisions taken without consultation, framed as speed. Systems dismissed as unnecessary bureaucracy, framed as agility. Rapid hiring or spending without financial discipline is framed as ambition. Early team members gradually sidelined, framed as evolution. Leadership conversations replaced by unilateral announcements, framed as vision.

A founder rarely notices these shifts early. But the organisation always does. It notices in the quality of the conversations that no longer happen. In the questions that are no longer asked in meetings. In the particular silence that settles over a leadership team that has learned, through experience, that raising a concern costs more than absorbing one.

The organisation had been sending signals for months. The leadership team had been reading them clearly. Naanu had stopped speaking the language in which those signals were written.

PART FOUR

THE FALL

> *"The collapse did not come from outside. It came from the inside of a man who had confused the applause for the achievement."*

Chapter 10: When the Cracks Became Chasms

The Crisis Years

Without the four leaders who had built the organisation's operational and cultural foundation, without financial discipline or collaborative decision-making, without the invisible architecture of purpose and shared ownership, the company began to fracture in every direction simultaneously.

Processes weakened because the people who had designed them were gone and the people who had replaced them were still learning the organisation's logic. Client escalations increased because the institutional knowledge that had managed those relationships, the understanding of client personalities, the history of commitments, the context of every delivery, had walked out with the people who held it. Service delivery began slipping in the way that all service delivery slips when the people delivering it have stopped believing in the leadership above them.

The Chinese investors had deployed oversight teams to monitor fund utilization. What those teams found when they arrived was not the organisation they had funded. Financial discipline had weakened to the point where the numbers told a different story from the narrative that had been presented in the investment pitch. Leadership instability was growing the turnover at the senior level, the replacement hires, the unilateral decisions, all of it was visible and all of it was concerning.

The second phase of funding was cancelled.

That decision shook the organisation in the way that only the sudden withdrawal of expected oxygen can shake a room. Cash flow tightened immediately. Vendors, who had extended credit on the basis of a company that seemed to be on a

trajectory, demanded payment. Clients, sensing instability, paused contracts. Conversations that should have been about growth became conversations about survival.

Within months, the company executed mass layoffs. Five hundred employees were reduced to approximately one hundred and fifty. Each exit was not just a headcount reduction; it was a life disrupted, a professional trajectory altered, a family's financial security threatened by decisions made in a leadership vacuum. Legal disputes followed. Vendor claims surfaced. Employee groups approached labour authorities.

But the greatest loss, the one that would prove hardest to recover from, was not financial. It was reputational.

There was a time, not long before, when people spoke about Naanu Kumar and his company with the kind of pride that attaches itself to a story people feel fortunate to be adjacent to. A founder from a rural background who had built something significant in Bengaluru's competitive technology landscape. A company that had made it from six engineers to global markets. A team that had won awards and filled auditoriums and generated the kind of organic enthusiasm that no marketing budget can manufacture.

Now, people kept a careful distance. Investors hesitated. Industry peers avoided public association. Talented professionals declined offers. The story that had attracted people was no longer the story being told. And Naanu - the man who had once filled technology forums with his presence, found himself increasingly, uncomfortably, alone.

Chapter 11: The Quiet Office

The Moment of Reckoning

For the first time in years, Naanu sat alone in the office that had once buzzed with the particular energy of people building something together.

The whiteboard that had been covered in ideas when there were six of them was still there. Most of the people were not. The awards on the wall were still there.

The values statement that he and his four leaders had crafted in those long, purposeful conversations was still framed on the wall. The chairs in the conference room where they had once debated late into the night were still arranged around the table.

Everything was there. Except the thing that had made all of it matter.

In the silence of that office, stripped of the noise of growth and the affirmation of success and the constant motion that had made reflection unnecessary, Naanu Kumar arrived at a reckoning that no one else could have delivered to him. It had to come from this: from sitting in the room that had once been full of life he had helped create, and understanding with painful clarity what had happened to it.

The company had not collapsed because of technology. The market had not abandoned it. The product had not become irrelevant. The company had weakened because its leadership had lost its anchor. Because success had replaced humility. Because authority had replaced collaboration. Because speed had replaced reflection. Because the guiding pillars, the ones he had helped create with four people who believed in him when believing in him required imagination, had been quietly, incrementally, catastrophically abandoned.

He had climbed to an altitude where the view was magnificent. And the view had blinded him to the terrain.

PART FIVE

THE LONG ROAD BACK

> *"Rebuilding after collapse is harder than building from scratch. When you build from scratch, hope is your only raw material. When you rebuild, you must work with the weight of what you know."*

Chapter 12: The Pandemic and the Paradox

2020 — COVID Disruption

Then came COVID-19. The disruption that arrived without invitation and without regard for what any company was in the middle of navigating. For Naanu's already fragile organisation, it was another blow in a sequence of blows that had already reduced employee strength to below sixty people. Revenue declined sharply. Operations returned, almost completely, to startup mode.

But here is the paradox that serious adversity sometimes delivers: it forced a stillness that Naanu had been avoiding for years. The constant motion of running a growing company, the back-to-back meetings, the international travel, the speaking invitations, the investor calls, the daily theatre of leadership performance, all of it stopped. And in the stillness, the things that had always been true but had been too easy to avoid became impossible to ignore.

This time, Naanu responded differently.

He sought executive coaching, a decision that, for a founder who had spent years telling his leadership team to trust him, represented a significant act of humility. To sit across from another person and say: I do not have all the answers. I need help. I need to understand what I could not see from inside myself. It is the kind of conversation that requires the very qualities the AVEPRR framework describes and that Naanu had gradually, disastrously, abandoned.

He revisited the leadership principles he had once believed in, not as an academic exercise but as a reckoning. He sat with the values document he and his four leaders had created together. He read it as a stranger might read it, without the comfort of having written it, and he asked himself, honestly, whether the

organisation he had been running in the years before the collapse had any genuine relationship with the words on that page.

The answer was painful. And pain, when it comes from clarity rather than self-pity, is useful.

Chapter 13: The People Who Never Fully Left

The Rebuilding Years

He reached out to former colleagues. Many had moved on, to other companies, to other cities, to professional lives that had rebuilt themselves around the absence of the company they had once helped create. He did not expect them to return. He reached out because the act of reaching out was itself part of the reckoning: an acknowledgement that the journey had been shared, that the contribution had been real, that the dismissal, whether explicit or implicit, had been wrong.

Some did not respond. That too was a kind of answer, and he received it.

But a few well-wishers, former batchmates, people who had known him before the company and had watched from a careful distance during the years of drift, began guiding him informally. Not with the authority of a formal role but with the patience of people who still believed, cautiously, that the man they had known before the altitude trap had not been entirely replaced by the man who had fallen into it.

The executive coach helped him understand something that no one in his immediate circle had been positioned to say: that the founder drift had not been a character flaw. It had been a failure of self-awareness compounded by a leadership environment that had stopped providing honest feedback. That the warning signs had been there, from his departing leaders, from his employees, from his investors' oversight teams, and that the most important leadership skill he had failed to exercise was the willingness to hear what he did not want to hear.

Slowly, more cautiously, more thoughtfully, more humbly than anything he had built before, the company began to move again. Not with the momentum of the

early years, which had been fueled by the intoxicating combination of novelty and possibility. But with something more deliberate. More considered. More honest about what it would take, and what it had already cost.

Chapter 14: The Reckoning with the Architects

Towards a New Chapter — 2024

Naanu has begun reconnecting with a few members of the earlier leadership team, the four architects who had stood beside him in building the organisation's foundation. Not all of them are available. Not all of them are willing. The years between then and now have made some conversations easier and others perhaps impossible.

But where those reconnections have happened, something important has been rediscovered. These early leaders understood more than just the company's roadmap. They understood Naanu himself, his temperament, his ambition, his purpose, the vision that had originally gathered everyone together. And with that understanding, alignment had come naturally in those early days. Not because they agreed with everything, but because they trusted the framework within which they disagreed.

If the organisation is to rise again, it will require the same spirit of trust, collaboration, and shared purpose that once defined it. Not as a nostalgic recreation of the past, but as a conscious construction of a different future, one that carries the lessons of the collapse as part of its architecture rather than something to be forgotten in the enthusiasm of recovery.

There is hope. Not certainty, hope does not come with guarantees. But the foundation of genuine hope is not the absence of evidence to the contrary. It is the presence of a person who has been changed by experience in the right direction.

The lessons of the past have deepened Naanu Kumar's humility in ways that success never could. He is not the same person who sat in that rented office with six engineers and a whiteboard full of dreams. He is also not the person who sat alone in the office that had been emptied of everything except furniture and

framed values. He is someone in between, shaped by both, still in the process of becoming, looking at the pillars of the AVEPRR framework not as a tool for building a great company, but as a code for becoming the kind of leader that a great company deserves.

Authenticity. Values. Emotional Intelligence.
Purpose. Resilience. Responsiveness.

Not words on a wall. A daily decision about who to be.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar was built, broken, and rebuilt in this story

Authenticity	The alignment between who Naanu said he was, who he had been, and who he was becoming, a gap that widened silently until it became a chasm
Values	The principles co-created with the founding team that governed every decision in the early years and that were quietly discarded as success made them feel like constraints
Emotional Intelligence	The capacity to hear what his departing leaders were actually saying, not about strategy, but about trust and to respond before they became exits
Purpose	The reason the company existed beyond the founder's ambition; the 'why' that had made 300 people believe in something larger than a salary, and that was the first casualty of the drift
Resilience	Not the resilience of the early years, which was forged by scarcity but the far harder resilience of the recovery: rebuilding from collapse with the full weight of what caused it
Responsiveness	Acting on the signals, the shorter meetings, the departing leaders, the investor oversight teams, before they became irreversible consequences

Success tests character far more than failure ever does. Not because success is harder than failure, but because failure shows you the bottom, while success hides the ceiling. And when

you cannot see the ceiling, you do not know you are rising too fast to stay grounded.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO AS THEY GROW:

✔	Build governance structures and people systems before scaling; they are not constraints on growth, they are the architecture that makes growth survivable
✔	Listen to the people who built the organisation alongside you with the same quality of attention you gave them when you needed their help to build it
✔	Let success deepen humility rather than replace it. The best evidence of a great founder is that they become more curious as they grow, not less
✔	Protect the culture through every hiring decision, every promotion, every conversation. Culture is not a value statement; it is what happens in the meeting when no one is performing
✔	Honour the people who built the foundation, in compensation, in voice, in genuine inclusion, before market rates make the honouring feel forced
✔	Treat the departure of a founding leader as an emergency, not an evolution — ask what they are leaving behind before accepting that they are simply moving on
✔	Receive feedback as information, not as challenge — 'trust me' is a feedback loop closing; the loop must stay open

WHAT ACCELERATES THE DRIFT AND DEEPENS THE COLLAPSE:

✗	Centralising every decision as the organisation grows — authority replacing collaboration is the first visible symptom of founder drift
✗	Dismissing governance systems as bureaucracy — the systems feel like constraints only to founders who have forgotten why they were built
✗	Treating early team members as replaceable — the institutional memory that leaves with them cannot be hired back at any compensation level
✗	Confusing the conference invitation with leadership credibility — being seen in the room is not the same as doing the work the room requires

✗	Replacing collaborative mornings with unilateral late-night decisions — and calling the replacement 'speed'
✗	Using 'trust me' as a substitute for the evidence that trust is built on — trust is a delivery record, not a declaration
✗	Assuming the organisation's culture will maintain itself without the daily practice of the leaders responsible for it

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are not about Naanu Kumar. They are about you. Answer them in the space where the story intersects with your own professional life.

Q1. Have you ever watched success change a leader or felt it changing you? What was the first signal? What was your response to that signal at the time, and what would your response be now?

Your reflection:

Q2. Who are the people in your professional life who helped build what you have and are they being honoured proportionally to what they built? If you mapped their compensation and recognition against the value they contributed, what would the map reveal?

Your reflection:

Q3. When a trusted colleague raises a concern about your direction or your behaviour, what is your first internal response? Do you hear the concern as information or as a challenge? What does the honest answer to that question tell you about the current state of your feedback loop?

Your reflection:

Q4. What are the early warning signals of drift in your current role or organisation? The decisions being made without consultation, the systems dismissed as unnecessary, the team members whose concerns are being managed rather than heard? What would it cost you to name them now, before they become the collapse that names them for you?

Your reflection:

Q5. If the purpose that brought your organisation or team together. the original 'why', were held against the decisions being made today, what gap would you find? Is the gap growing or closing? And what is the one decision you could make this week that would close it by even one degree?

Your reflection:

> *"A company can rise on ambition, talent, and opportunity. But it survives only on character. And sometimes the most powerful leadership journey is not the rise. It is the realization that follows the fall, if the founder is willing to sit in that realization long enough to be changed by it."*

Build those systems now. Honour the people who help you build them. Let the purpose stay alive in the daily decisions, not just the annual strategy. And when the first signal of drift arrives, the meeting that gets shorter, the feedback that stops arriving, the colleague who phrases their concern more carefully than they used to, respond to it as the emergency it is.

That responsiveness, exercised early, is the difference between a story that ends with an empty office and one that doesn't need to go there to find its lesson.

THE ESCALATION

That Could Not Wait

How Gautam Shetty's 35-Minute Ride Protected Trust, Truth, and Patient Safety
Bengaluru | 1998 – 2005

> *"Trust is not built in presentations. It is built in moments when someone chooses truth before convenience, and rides a motorcycle 38 kilometers to stand in a room full of angry doctors and contaminated samples, with nothing but honesty to offer."*

Chapter 1: The ICU at an Ordinary Hour

Bengaluru - A Medical College Hospital - Late Afternoon

Hospitals carry a rhythm unlike any other place. The machines hum at frequencies that become invisible to the people who work inside them, part of the ambient air, as natural as breathing, noticed only when they stop. Nurses move through corridors with the particular efficiency of people who have learned to separate urgency from panic. Doctors carry decisions that most people never encounter, made in minutes, with consequences that will still be visible in the patient's chart long after the doctor has moved to the next room.

On this afternoon in Bengaluru, inside the ICU of a large medical college hospital, the rhythm had been interrupted. Several doctors stood around a steel table examining a set of urine collection bags, a common disposable medical product, the kind that moves through hospital supply chains in cartons of dozens without anyone giving it a second thought. Because it should not require a second thought. Because the people who make it have a responsibility to ensure that it does not.

What the doctors were seeing inside these bags required more than a second thought. Urine leakage. And inside the leakage, visible traces of blood and pus from ICU patients, fragile people fighting infections and organ failures and the

particular vulnerability of the critically ill, for whom an additional complication is not an inconvenience but a genuine threat. And nurses had reported something else, something that had alarmed them enough to document it separately: some patients had begun shivering shortly after the product was used.

For the doctors in that ICU, who had spent their professional lives learning to read the specific language that a patient's body uses to communicate distress, shivering in a critical care setting is not a minor observation. It is a signal. And signals, in an ICU, are responded to, not managed, not deferred, not placed in a queue.

They contacted the distributor. The distributor escalated to the supplying company. The call reached the regional sales office in Bengaluru within minutes.

Inside the company, the initial response was entirely predictable. And entirely insufficient.

Chapter 2: The Moment Before the Decision

The Regional Sales Office — The Same Afternoon

Production insisted their processes were correct. Quality assurance maintained that all batches had passed the required testing protocols. Someone suggested the issue might be related to handling within the hospital itself the particular explanation that organisations reach for when the evidence is uncomfortable and the internal records appear clean. The hospital was willing to meet a company representative the following morning. For most organisations, this would have been a reasonable timeline. Schedule the meeting. Prepare the talking points. Send someone with the appropriate seniority. Resolve it professionally.

Gautam Shetty, the regional sales manager responsible for this territory, looked at the situation differently. Not because he had been told to. Not because a protocol said so. Because he understood two things that the morning-meeting logic did not account for.

First: by the following morning, the defective bags, the actual physical evidence that the doctors had laid out on that steel table, could easily be disposed of as

medical waste. ICUs do not hold contaminated products overnight as a courtesy to suppliers. They dispose of them. And without the samples, the investigation would be left with nothing but records that already claimed everything was compliant.

Second: a delayed response in an ICU environment communicates something that no subsequent apology can fully correct. It communicates that the company's timeline is more important than the patient's safety. The process of scheduling a meeting matter more than the urgency of the people who called for one. In critical care environments, where trust is built through the evidence of how quickly and honestly someone responds when something goes wrong, delay is not neutral. It is a statement.

Gautam decided not to wait.

He picked up his helmet. He started his motorcycle.

He rode toward the hospital.

> **Responsiveness:** *The decision to go tonight rather than tomorrow morning was not a policy decision. It was a values decision — the recognition that the situation's urgency was defined by the patient's condition, not by the company's scheduling convenience.*
>
> **Purpose:** *His actual purpose was never the product. It was never the quarterly number or the account relationship. His purpose was to ensure that what the company made did not harm the people it was made for. That purpose, clearly understood, made the decision simple even when it was inconvenient.*

Chapter 3: Thirty-Five Minutes and One Room

The Ride — The ICU — That Evening

The hospital was 38 kilometers away. Bengaluru traffic does not negotiate with urgency. But Gautam rode with the specific focus of a person who has made a decision and is not reconsidering it in transit. Thirty-five minutes later, he entered the hospital campus and made his way to the ICU.

The doctors had not expected him that evening. Their expressions, when he arrived, carried the particular quality of frustration that has been sitting long enough to harden into a kind of resigned skepticism, the look of people who have learned, through enough interactions with supplier representatives, to expect defence rather than engagement.

One of them gestured toward the samples on the steel table. "Your company says there is no defect," he said. Another pointed at the bags directly: "Look at these. Urine leakage with blood and pus. And patients are shivering when this product is used."

Gautam looked at the bags. He understood what he was seeing. He understood what it meant. And he made a decision in that moment that surprised everyone in the room, perhaps including himself.

He did not defend the company.

He did not argue about internal processes.

He said, calmly and directly: "If our product has caused even the smallest risk to patient care, I sincerely apologise on behalf of the company."

The room went silent. It was not the response the doctors had expected. It was not the response that sales representatives typically deliver when standing in front of a table covered with evidence of a product failure. It was, instead, the only response that the situation deserved, the simple, direct acknowledgement that the people in front of him were right to be concerned, and that the person standing in their ICU took that concern seriously.

Then he asked for one thing. "Please allow me to take these samples back for investigation." He collected the defective bags, barehanded, still containing contaminated fluid, and returned to the manufacturing facility.

He had not defended the company. He had represented it at its best.

> **Authenticity:** *Standing in the ICU without a shield. No process defence. No internal records to cite. Just the honest acknowledgement that if the product had caused risk, the risk was real and the apology was owed. Authenticity, here, was not a communication style. It was a choice about what the situation required.*

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Reading the room — the exhausted doctors, the fragile patients behind the curtains, the specific weight of critical care — and responding to what the weight required rather than what the company's internal narrative had prepared him to say.*

Chapter 4: The Truth the Records Had Missed — and the Return

The Factory — The Following Day

At the manufacturing facility, the initial response was familiar: defensive. Production pointed to compliance records. Quality assurance referenced sterilization protocols. The documentation appeared clean.

Gautam placed the samples on the inspection table. "Let us check this again," he said quietly. The quietness was not meekness; it was the specific calm of a person who has already seen the evidence and knows that the evidence, examined honestly, will speak more clearly than any record.

The engineers opened the bags. They inspected the sealing. They reviewed the sterilization and packaging logs against the actual timeline of this specific batch. Two findings emerged.

First: a minor sealing defect during manufacturing, which explained the leakage. Second and more significant, the sterilization resting protocol. Medical disposables are required to rest for at least 24 hours after sterilization before packaging, to allow the material to stabilize. This batch had been packaged within 18 hours. The premature packaging had likely caused material instability, which explained why some patients had experienced shivering during use.

The truth was now clear. The doctors had been right. The patients had been telling the truth through their bodies' signals. And the records that had appeared clean had been clean only because nobody had looked at the right thing.

The following day, Gautam returned to the hospital carrying three things: a formal explanation, replacement samples, and a sincere apology, not as a salesman managing an account relationship, but as a professional acknowledging responsibility for patient care.

He met the ICU doctors. He explained both findings openly: the sealing defect and the premature packaging. He did not minimize either. He did not frame them as edge cases or statistical anomalies. He named them for what they were: failures that had reached patients who had no capacity to absorb them.

One doctor looked at him for a moment and said: "Most companies come here to argue." Another added: "You came here to understand."

The hospital continued doing business with the company for several years after that incident. And the company improved. Manufacturing protocols were revised. Sterilization compliance became stricter. Quality controls were strengthened. A crisis that could have ended a relationship had instead produced the most durable form of trust available: the trust that comes from watching someone choose truth when convenience was available and chose it anyway.

A crisis had become a turning point. One 35-minute ride had made the difference.

> **Values:** *Patient safety treated as the only metric that mattered – above the quarterly number, above the account relationship, above the company's immediate reputation. Values are not what an organisation states. They are what an individual protects when the protection is costly.*
>
> **Resilience:** *Carrying contaminated samples barehanded through a Bengaluru evening. Standing in front of the production team the next morning and placing evidence on the table that challenged their certainty. Returning to the ICU with an honest explanation rather than a managed one.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar showed up in a single decisive evening

Authenticity	Standing in the ICU without a shield not defending the company, not explaining the processes, but acknowledging that if the product had caused risk, the risk was real and the apology was owed
Values	Treating patient safety as the only metric that mattered in that room above sales numbers, above the quarterly relationship, above the company's immediate reputation

Emotional Intelligence	Reading the ICU environment the fragile patients, the exhausted doctors, the weight of critical care and responding to that weight with the humility it deserved
Purpose	Understanding that his actual purpose was never to sell a product. It was to ensure that the product served the people it was made for safely, reliably, without exception
Resilience	Riding 38 kilometers to face a room full of angry doctors and contaminated samples, with no support, no internal validation, and no certainty about what he would find
Responsiveness	Recognizing that waiting until morning was not a timeline decision it was a values decision. And choosing the harder version of the response because the easier one was not good enough for the situation

Leadership rarely announces itself. Sometimes it appears in the moment when someone decides that waiting is not an option – picks up a helmet, starts a motorcycle, and rides 38 kilometers into a situation that no protocol required them to face tonight.

HOW TO BE – AND HOW NOT TO BE

Leadership Lessons from The Escalation That Could Not Wait

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THE SITUATION IS URGENT AND REAL:

✔	Respond at the speed the situation requires, not the speed that is institutionally comfortable or administratively convenient
✔	Investigate firsthand, with your own eyes, before forming a position, the records said compliant; the samples on the table said otherwise
✔	Accept responsibility before defending the process; the apology before the investigation is not a weakness; it is the acknowledgement that the concern is real, regardless of the cause
✔	Preserve physical evidence before it disappears. The 35-minute ride was not about urgency for urgency's sake; it was about understanding that evidence has a window

✔	Return with the truth, however uncomfortable, Gautam came back the next day with both findings, not just the less damaging one
✔	Use crises as catalysts for systemic improvement; the protocols were not revised despite the crisis; they were revised because of it
✔	Read the human environment you are entering, doctors in an ICU are not difficult customers; they are professionals carrying fragile lives, and the response they deserve is proportional to that weight

WHAT ERODES TRUST IN HIGH-STAKES ENVIRONMENTS:

✗	Dismissing complaints without firsthand investigation, the production team's initial certainty was based on records, not reality; records and reality are not always the same thing
✗	Prioritizing institutional reputation over clinical truth, the alternative narrative about 'hospital handling' would have protected the company in the short term and destroyed the relationship permanently
✗	Delaying response when evidence may be irretrievably lost; morning was not a reasonable timeline; it was a comfortable one, and the difference between those two things mattered enormously
✗	Defending process to people whose patients are the evidence, the doctors were not asking about sterilization protocols; they were asking whether the company could be trusted with human life
✗	Treating patient safety as a subset of brand management, Gautam understood it was the other way around: brand management is a subset of patient safety, and only in that order does either survive

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about your own professional decisions, the moments when acting immediately mattered, and what you chose.

Q1. Have you ever faced a situation where acting immediately could have prevented a larger crisis, but institutional comfort argued for waiting? What did you choose? And what did the choice produce?

Your reflection:

Q2. When a complaint arrives about something your organisation made or did, what is your first instinct - to investigate or to defend? And what does that instinct say about where your primary loyalty lies?

Your reflection:

Q3. Think of a time when you stood in front of an angry customer, stakeholder, or partner with evidence of a failure. Did you defend, explain, or acknowledge? What happened after, and what would have happened if you had chosen differently?

Your reflection:

Q4. What is the 'patient' in your professional context the person or purpose at the end of everything you do, who cannot advocate for themselves in the room where the decisions are made? Are you making those decisions as if they were in the room?

Your reflection:

Q5. If the evidence in your current situation were about to disappear, if the equivalent of tomorrow's medical waste disposal were twelve hours away, what would you do tonight?

Your reflection:

> *"Sometimes leadership is simply the ability to act when waiting would be easier. To ride toward the difficult thing rather than schedule a meeting about it. To stand in the room without a shield. To carry the evidence back in your own hands. To return the next day with the full truth not the comfortable portion of it."*

That is what leadership looks like when it is not performing.

When it is simply doing what the situation requires, at the speed it requires, with the honesty it deserves.

WHEN DEBT KNOCKED

The Business That Refused to Collapse

A Story of Resilience, Family, and the Courage to Hold the Line
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu | 2013 – 2019

PART ONE

WHAT THREE DECADES BUILT

> *"For twenty-eight years, the Velusamy name meant something in Coimbatore's medical supply circles. Not luxury. Not dominance. Reliability."*

Chapter 1: The Weight of a Reputation

Coimbatore — 2013

In Coimbatore's medical supply trade, reputation is not a marketing asset. It is the business itself. Hospitals do not change suppliers lightly — the supply chain for medical equipment and consumables is too consequential for casual switching. When a hospital administrator knows that a particular supplier delivers on time, invoices accurately, and resolves problems without theatre, that knowledge becomes stickier than any contract.

The Velusamy family had built that kind of stickiness over twenty-eight years. Three decades of deliveries made on time, commitments honoured without reminder, and problems resolved before they required escalation. Muthu Velusamy had grown up inside this business, watching his father navigate the rhythms of a trade built entirely on relationship credibility, absorbing the lesson that the most durable competitive advantage in their world was simply being the business that people could count on.

When Muthu took over active management, he inherited both the business and its most valuable asset: a name that opened doors before he had said a word.

Hospitals trusted the Velusamy account. Suppliers extended credit because the payment history was clean. Competitors acknowledged the network that three decades of reliability had built.

Then 2014 arrived. And with it, the crisis that nobody saw coming because it did not arrive as a scandal or fraud or market disruption. It arrived as something far more insidious: delayed payments from the clients the business depended on most.

Chapter 2: The Fist Around the Throat

2014 — The Crisis Begins

The major private hospital chains of South India were in an aggressive expansion phase. New facilities. New cities. New debt. And when large organisations carry large debt, the first adjustment they make - quietly, without announcement, is to slow the payment of their vendors.

Ninety-day payment terms became a hundred and twenty. A hundred and twenty became indefinite follow-up conversations. Receivables that the Velusamy business had modelled as incoming cash by a specific date were instead sitting in an accounts receivable, column that kept growing while the payables column made no such accommodations. Suppliers still expected payment on schedule. Staff wages still fell due on the last of the month. Operating costs did not pause to wait for hospital chains to resolve their internal cash flow problems.

Working capital dried up. Not suddenly — that would almost have been easier, because a sudden crisis demands an immediate response. This crisis tightened slowly, like a fist closing incrementally around the throat of the business. Each month a little harder. Each quarter a little less room to breathe. Until, by late 2014, the Velusamy business was facing a liquidity crisis that could not be absorbed through ordinary operational adjustment.

The family had to decide what to do. And families, when they face financial crises together, discover very quickly that the decision is never only financial.

PART TWO

THE DISAGREEMENT THAT MATTERED

> *"In family businesses, financial decisions are emotional decisions. The balance sheet and the dining table are the same surface."*

Chapter 3: Two Brothers, Two Calculations

The Household — Late 2014

Muthu's elder brother co-managed the operations side of the business. He was practical in the way that people who have watched a business struggle are practical — oriented toward the immediate, suspicious of the speculative, and deeply uncomfortable with the idea of carrying a risk that had a visible exit.

His calculation was straightforward: sell the warehouse. Clear the debt. Reduce the liability. Survive the present. Then rebuild from a smaller, cleaner base without the weight of what had accumulated.

On paper, it made sense. The warehouse was the most significant asset on the balance sheet. Liquidating it would clear the debt, relieve the supplier pressure, and remove the bank from the immediate conversation. The family would still exist. The business could theoretically restart. The bleeding would stop.

Muthu listened to all of it. Then he said quietly: "If we sell the warehouse, we survive the debt. But we lose inventory capacity. Without inventory, we lose scale. Without scale, we lose competitiveness. We won't die today. We'll die slowly in two years."

It was not a dramatic statement. It was a strategic one. Muthu had traced the consequence not one step forward, as his brother had, but three and what he saw at the end of that chain was not survival but a slower version of the same collapse, arrived at after the one asset that could have prevented it had already been sold.

But the elder brother was not wrong to be frightened. He was responding to real pressure with a real solution. The disagreement between them was not about intelligence or competence. It was about time horizon — about whether the right question was how to survive the next six months or how to remain a competitive

business five years from now. Both questions were legitimate. They could not both be answered with the same decision.

Voices rose. Silence followed. Pride entered the room in the way that pride always enters family financial disagreements — not as arrogance but as fear that has hardened into a position. The family fracture was real. Resilience does not mean the absence of fracture. It means not letting the fracture become the final word.

Chapter 4: The Decision to Hold

The Turning Point

Muthu made a decision. Not to win the argument — that was not available to him without damaging something more important than the argument. He made a decision about what he would do next, regardless of whether the family agreement was unanimous.

He would not sell the warehouse. He would find another way. And the first step was to go to the bank — not as a supplicant, not with desperation, but with the one thing that gives a person standing in a room where they are otherwise vulnerable: a structured plan.

Resilience in business, at its most precise, is the refusal to let urgency override intelligence. Urgency says: take the first exit that relieves the pressure. Intelligence says: trace the consequence of that exit before you take it. Muthu had traced it. The exit led somewhere worse. So he went looking for a different door.

PART THREE

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT BUILT THE BRIDGE

> *"He did not ask for sympathy. He asked for structured support. The distinction is everything when you are sitting across from someone who needs to believe in your plan, not your predicament."*

Chapter 5: The Walk to the Bank

The Bank Meeting — 2015

Muthu went to the bank alone. He carried with him a twenty-four-month cash flow projection — not an optimistic narrative about recovery, but a granular model: receivable recovery timelines mapped against the hospital chains' own restructuring schedules, revised payables matched to the restructured credit terms he was going to request, margin adjustments that reflected the operational tightening already underway, and a repayment schedule with milestones that he was committing to, not proposing as aspirations.

The bank was not generous by instinct. Lenders in distress situations are paid to be sceptical — to distinguish between borrowers who have a plan and borrowers who have a story dressed up as a plan. What Muthu presented was not a story. It was a model. The assumptions were visible. The risks were named. The timeline was specific. It was the financial presentation of a person who understood the problem well enough to have quantified it, and who was asking for restructuring support not because the situation was hopeless but because the plan was real and the numbers backed it.

The bank approved a restructuring facility. With conditions: strict monitoring, disciplined repayment milestones, no deviation. Muthu accepted without negotiating the conditions. He had not come to negotiate conditions. He had come to establish that he was the kind of borrower who did not need them to be negotiated.

Chapter 6: The Conversation With Farook Omar

The Supplier Meeting

The bank was one conversation. The suppliers were three. And supplier conversations during a crisis are different from bank conversations, because banks are processing a financial risk, but suppliers are processing a relationship risk. They are asking not just whether the numbers work but whether the person across from them is someone they have been right to trust.

Farook Omar was the key. He represented the most significant of the three critical suppliers, and he was known, in the trade, as someone who thought in decades rather than quarters. He had seen businesses go through difficult periods. He had seen some of them emerge stronger and some of them use the language of temporary difficulty to mask a more permanent deterioration. He knew the difference between the two.

Muthu did not approach him with softened language. He said what was true: "Our receivables are stuck. We need sixty additional days. I am not defaulting. I am requesting time."

Three sentences. No performance, no padding, no request for sympathy. Just the situation, the specific ask, and the distinction that mattered most, that this was a request, not an evasion.

Farook Omar looked at him for a moment. Then: "You've been straight with us for years. We'll hold your account. Don't make us regret it."

That sentence was not generosity. It was a calculated extension of credit based on a credit history that had nothing to do with money, it was a history of honest conversations, of problems reported rather than concealed, of commitments that had been kept even when keeping them had not been easy. The trust that Muthu's father had started building twenty-eight years ago, and that Muthu had continued to build in every interaction since, had just become the most valuable working capital item on the balance sheet.

Trust built in good years becomes leverage in bad ones. This is not a metaphor. In the Velusamy business's survival, it was a literal financial mechanism.

PART FOUR

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE WAITING PERIOD

> *"The months that followed were not heroic. They were disciplined. And discipline, sustained without applause, is the hardest form of resilience."*

Chapter 7: What Survival Actually Looks Like

2015 – Mid-2016

Recovery stories are usually told at the point of recovery, the moment the receivables cleared, the moment the debt was repaid ahead of schedule, the moment the warehouse was still standing and the family name was still intact. What gets compressed in those tellings is the period between the decision and the outcome.

The months between mid-2015 and mid-2016 were not dramatic. They were disciplined. Costs were tightened across every discretionary line. Inventory movement was optimized every rupee of stock turned faster, every slow-moving item reviewed for whether it was worth the carrying cost. Collection follow-ups became relentless not aggressive in a way that damaged relationships, but consistent and structured in a way that made clear the Velusamy business was tracking every account and expected the same seriousness in return. Non-essential expansion plans were paused entirely.

The family tensions did not disappear overnight. The elder brother's concern had not been wrong, it had been a different reading of the same risk. Those readings coexisted uncomfortably for months, the disagreement present in the room even when it was not spoken, before the improving trajectory of the receivables gradually allowed both positions to relax. Resilience in a family business does not mean the family agrees. It means the family holds together long enough for the facts to clarify which position was right.

Between late 2015 and mid-2016, the hospital chains that had created the crisis began to stabilize, some through external financial intervention, some through restructuring of their own debt. As they stabilised, their vendor payments began

to clear. Slowly. In tranches. But in the direction that Muthu's twenty-four-month model had projected.

The debt was repaid ahead of the revised schedule. The warehouse stood intact. The family name stood intact. And something else had changed, something the balance sheet did not capture but the market noticed immediately.

Chapter 8: The Invisible Asset

2016 – 2019 — The Rebuild

Credibility under crisis is the rarest form of business asset because it cannot be acquired during normal operating conditions. It can only be demonstrated when the pressure is real and the options are genuinely constrained. The Velusamy business had spent two years inside that pressure — visibly, in the knowledge of its suppliers, its bank, and the hospital procurement teams who had been watching whether their delayed payments had broken one of their most reliable vendors.

It had not broken. And that fact changed the nature of every subsequent commercial relationship.

Vendors who had extended credit during the crisis offered better terms in the recovery — not as generosity but as a rational response to proven reliability. Banks evaluated the business differently, with the kind of institutional trust that comes from watching a borrower honour a restructuring commitment in full and ahead of schedule. Customers — the hospital procurement managers whose chains had created the crisis — saw in the Velusamy business a stability that their own expansion had threatened but not destroyed.

From 2016 to 2019, the business regained steady growth. Not aggressive expansion — Muthu had learned too much in the preceding years to mistake velocity for health. Measured strength. The crisis that nearly broke them had refined them: the operations were tighter, the financial discipline was deeper, the relationships were stronger for having been tested, and Muthu was no longer simply an inheritor of a reputation his father had built. He was now its builder.

The name meant something because of what he had chosen to do with it when it was most at risk.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Facing the crisis honestly - with suppliers, the bank, and the family, without concealment or performance
Values	Protecting the legacy and the supplier relationships that were built over decades, not just the balance sheet
Emotional Intelligence	Navigating the family fracture without letting it become permanent; managing tension without weaponizing it
Purpose	Holding the long view, preserving competitive capacity, when every short-term signal said to sell and survive
Resilience	Withstanding a sustained liquidity crisis without surrendering the asset that defined the business's future
Responsiveness	Acting with structured speed the bank presentation, the supplier conversations before the crisis made those conversations impossible

Businesses fail when numbers turn red. They collapse when courage turns weak. The difference between those two outcomes is a decision made at the right moment by the right person.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THE CRISIS ARRIVES:

✔	Analyze before reacting, trace the full consequence chain of every option before committing to one
✔	Protect long-term operational capacity over short-term financial relief, even when short-term relief feels like survival
✔	Present structured solutions to creditors and partners, not emotional appeals - a plan is more persuasive than a predicament
✔	Communicate transparently with suppliers and banks during a crisis; concealment accelerates deterioration, honesty slows it
✔	Build trust capital during good years by honouring commitments consistently, and it becomes the most liquid asset in a crisis
✔	Separate ego from strategy in family disagreements; the question is what is right for the business, not who is right in the room
✔	Manage recovery with discipline and patience; sustainable rebuilding is measured, not spectacular

WHAT UNDERMINES RESILIENCE AND ACCELERATES COLLAPSE:

✗	Liquidating strategic assets impulsively to relieve immediate pressure without tracing the downstream consequences
✗	Hiding financial stress from partners and creditors - the concealment, damages the relationship more than the crisis does
✗	Allowing panic to dictate irreversible decisions; urgency is a pressure, not a mandate
✗	Treating banks as adversaries rather than structured stakeholders who can be engaged with a credible plan
✗	Compromising the reputation built over decades to ease a discomfort that a different kind of courage could have absorbed
✗	Allowing a family disagreement to become a permanent fracture rather than a temporary tension that the facts eventually resolve

REFLECTION SPACE

Write what is actually true for your situation not the composed answer, but the honest one.

Q1. When you are under financial or professional pressure, do you react to relieve the immediate discomfort or do you pause to trace the full consequence of the relief you are reaching for?

Your reflection:

Q2. What is the asset in your professional life, a relationship, a skill, a piece of your reputation, that you are most tempted to sacrifice when things get difficult? What would it actually cost you over a three-year horizon if you did?

Your reflection:

Q3. Have you been building trust with the people who matter most to your work - suppliers, partners, colleagues, creditors, in the good years? If a crisis came tomorrow, which relationships would hold the way Farook Omar's did?

Your reflection:

Q4. Do you treat financial discipline as a constraint that limits what you can do, or as the structure that makes what you want to do sustainable? What would change in your decisions if you genuinely held the second view?

Your reflection:

Q5. If a crisis equivalent to the one Muthu faced arrived in your professional life tomorrow, what would be your first disciplined step, not your first emotional reaction, but your first deliberate, structured action?

Your reflection:

"Resilience is not avoiding debt. It is refusing to let debt define you. And the leaders who carry that refusal into action, with a plan, with transparency, with the patience to hold through the months that offer no applause, are the ones whose businesses survive to become the proof."

P

PURPOSE

Definition

Purpose is the deeper reason an individual or organisation exists beyond immediate gain or recognition.

What it Means for an Individual

For individuals, purpose answers the question: 'What is all this effort for?' It gives meaning to sacrifice, direction to ambition, and resilience during adversity. Purpose-driven individuals see work not merely as an activity but as a contribution. This clarity helps them endure setbacks while staying aligned with what matters most.

What it Means for an Organisation

For organisations, purpose defines the societal or human value they create. Profit may sustain the organisation, but purpose explains why it deserves to exist. Organisations guided by purpose attract committed employees, loyal customers, and long-term relevance because their work solves meaningful problems.

THE MOTHER'S LEDGER

Anju Nair, Rahul, Rekha, and the Wealth No Bank Records

Kerala | Mid-1990s to 2005

> *"In a modest home in Kerala, there was a ledger that no auditor ever saw. It had no columns for profit. No sections for loss. No signatures at the bottom. But it recorded everything. Anju Nair kept it invisibly - not in ink, but in choices."*

Chapter 1: The Arithmetic of a Disciplined Life

Kerala — Mid-1990s

The 1990s, in a middle-class Kerala household, were not dramatic years. They were disciplined years — the kind of years whose quality is measured not in their events but in their texture: the way money moved through the household, the way decisions were made at the kitchen table, the way constraint was absorbed rather than displayed.

Her husband's income was steady, but never abundant. Steady, in this context, meant reliable rather than generous — the kind of income that covers the necessities with enough margin to require careful management and not quite enough to allow carelessness. School fees for Rahul arrived just before salary credit. Rekha needed books, uniforms, extra classes. Festival shopping required budgeting that stretched across months. Electricity bills were monitored. Groceries were planned with the precision of someone who understood that the difference between enough and not enough was a sequence of small decisions made correctly every day.

But the children never felt scarcity. They felt structure. That difference — between the emotional experience of deprivation and the emotional experience of discipline — is the story's first and most fundamental demonstration of Emotional Intelligence. Anju understood something that many leaders spend careers trying

to learn: that the people who depend on you do not need to know every problem. They need to feel stability. And stability is not the absence of difficulty. It is the presence of someone who is managing it without making the difficulty their problem to carry.

Every rupee had a direction. Every child felt secure. Both things were simultaneously true — because she made them so.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Shielding children from anxiety while teaching them responsibility — the precise distinction between protecting them from the weight and denying the weight exists. They felt structure. Not scarcity. That difference was her daily work.*

Chapter 2: What Rahul Watched — and Carried Forward

The Quiet Education

Rahul watched more than he spoke. This was his nature, and it made him, in the household Anju managed, a student of her daily practice in ways that he could not have named at the time and would only understand fully in retrospect.

He watched her negotiate with vendors. Not aggressively, not submissively with the specific, dignified directness of someone who knows the value of what they are paying for and the importance of paying it on time. She never delayed a payment beyond what she had promised. The commitment was made, and the commitment was kept, regardless of what the week had produced in the space between the promise and the fulfilment.

He watched her refuse to speak ill of relatives, even when tensions existed, even when the occasion invited it, even when the living room conversation after a family gathering had all the conditions for complaint to arrive and be received warmly. She chose not to. Not through suppression through a genuine understanding that what you say about others in private is what you are in private, and that what you are in private is what you actually are.

He watched her sit late at night, after the children were in bed, recalculating expenses when unexpected medical bills arrived — the quiet, unseeable work of

managing constraint without making the constraint anyone else's problem. And he watched her wake up the next morning composed. Breakfast ready. Uniforms ironed. The night's difficulty absorbed without residue in the morning's presentation.

One evening he asked: "Amma, are we struggling?"

She smiled gently.

"We are learning."

That reframing — struggle as learning rather than as suffering — carried more leadership intelligence than most management courses convey in a semester. He grew up understanding financial discipline not as fear but as responsibility. Not as the shape that poverty takes but as the shape that integrity takes when resources are finite.

Rahul became a Chartered Accountant. His professional circle describes him as someone who honours commitments, who prepares before he promises, who never defaults casually. He did not learn these qualities from a professional ethics course. He learned them from watching his mother negotiate with a vegetable vendor and wake up composed after a difficult night.

> **Authenticity:** *Being the same in private and in public — the bills recalculated alone at midnight and the composed morning that followed were not separate performances. They were the same person, consistent. Rahul absorbed that consistency long before any organisation gave it a name.*
>
> **Values:** *Never delaying a payment beyond what was promised. Never speaking ill of the absent. Both were non-negotiable, enacted daily without announcement. Values are not declared. They are demonstrated in the small, repeated choices that children are always watching.*

Chapter 3: What Rekha Absorbed — and Chose to Become

The Empathy Learned in a Living Room

Rekha was the more expressive of the two. More sensitive to emotional weather — the kind of child who notices when a room has changed before anyone has said anything, who asks the direct question rather than circling around it. She would notice when her mother seemed tired.

She would ask: "Why don't you rest?"

Anju would answer honestly and calmly. "Because some seasons require effort. Rest will come." She did not dismiss the question. She did not redirect it with false cheerfulness. She gave the honest answer and trusted her daughter's capacity to receive it. She regulated her emotions — not by hiding them, but by processing them privately and then presenting what was useful.

The neighbours who came to the house taught Rekha something different. They came with property disputes, with family tensions, with the accumulated weight of situations that had been managed past the point of self-management. And Anju received them without judgment. She did not interrupt. She did not rush toward advice — that particular habit of the impatient helper who begins solving before the problem has been fully described. She did not escalate the emotion by adding her own. She listened first. Completely. In the particular stillness of someone who understands that listening is not waiting to speak.

Rekha watched all of this from the edge of the room, or from the kitchen, or from wherever she happened to be when the conversations arrived. She was receiving an education in conflict navigation and emotional intelligence that no formal curriculum was designed to provide.

She chose community development as her profession. Her colleagues and community describe her as empathetic, grounded, and fair. She learned every one of those qualities in her mother's living room, from a woman who never called what she was doing leadership — because she was too busy doing it to name it.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Listening before advising. Not interrupting the full account. Not escalating emotion by adding her own. These are not soft skills. They are the precise*

> *technical competencies of someone who understands that the quality of a response is inseparable from the quality of the listening that preceded it.*

Chapter 4: The Purpose That Simplified Hardship

The Question Asked Years Later

Years passed. The household moved through its seasons Rahul's education, Rekha's education, the accumulated small victories and adjustments of a family navigating the arithmetic of middle-class India with grace. The children became adults. They carried with them, without being entirely aware they were carrying it, the specific character that had been built in that house.

One day, Rekha asked her mother directly. Not as admiration as genuine curiosity, the question of an adult trying to understand the mechanism behind what she had observed:

"Amma, how did you manage everything without complaining?"

Anju looked at both her children. And said:

"I knew what it was for."

For your education. For your character. For your future stability. For your ability to stand upright in the world.

That clarity — that specific, concrete, named understanding of what every difficulty was building — is what the AVEPRR framework calls Purpose. Not an abstract mission statement. Not a philosophical position. A specific, daily operational answer to the question: why does this effort matter?

Purpose reorganises pain. That is not a metaphor. It is the literal mechanism by which people sustain effort through difficulty that would otherwise be unsustainable. Anju could recalculate expenses at midnight and wake up composed the next morning not because the difficulty was small but because the purpose was clear. The ledger she kept invisibly had a column that no financial ledger contains: the 'why' that made every other entry meaningful.

Today, Rahul and Rekha live the full AVEPRR framework without having been trained in it. They are the same in private and in public. They honour commitments. They understand before they react. They know what their effort is building. They continue through constraint. They adapt without losing their core. They learned all of it in a modest home in Kerala, from a mother who never called what she was doing leadership.

Purpose is not declared. It is demonstrated. And somewhere, in a modest home in Kerala, a mother demonstrated it every morning.

> **Purpose:** *Enduring because she knew specifically what she was enduring for — not abstractly, but in the faces of the children eating the breakfast she had made after the difficult night. That specificity is what made the endurance possible and the outcome inevitable.*
>
> **Resilience:** *Crying quietly after the children slept. Waking up and making breakfast. Not denial of difficulty — continuation with awareness. The resilience was not the absence of the feeling. It was the choice, made every morning, to act from purpose rather than from pain.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How a mother built every pillar long before the world called it leadership

Authenticity	Being the same in private and in public, the bills recalculated at midnight and the composed breakfast the following morning were the same person, undivided
Values	Never compromising dignity under financial or social pressure; honouring every commitment made; refusing to speak ill even when the occasion invited it
Emotional Intelligence	Giving children stability rather than anxiety; shielding them from the weight of constraint while teaching them its discipline; listening to neighbours without judgment before offering counsel
Purpose	Enduring because she knew precisely what the endurance was building, not abstractly, but specifically: your education, your character, your ability to stand upright in the world

Resilience	Crying quietly after the children slept. Waking up and making breakfast. Not because the difficulty had passed but because the purpose had not
Responsiveness	Adapting to every situation — property disputes, a neighbour's crisis, an elderly widow's need — without losing the composure that made her the person others reached for

The strongest foundations are built quietly. Long before anyone calls it leadership. In a modest home in Kerala, in the years when every rupee had a direction and every choice had a consequence, one woman quietly wrote a legacy that no bank could measure, but generations will live.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS MODEL IN EVERY ENVIRONMENT:

✔	Model the behaviour you want the people around you to inherit - children, colleagues, and juniors absorb what they observe far more durably than what they are told
✔	Protect the emotional climate - give stability, not anxiety; the people who depend on you need to feel that the ground is holding, even when you are the one holding it
✔	Reframe struggle as learning - 'we are learning' is not optimism; it is the accurate description of what difficulty, managed with purpose, actually produces
✔	Honour every commitment visibly, the vendor paid on time, the promise kept without reminder; these are the entries in the ledger that others are always reading
✔	Listen before advising, completely, without interrupting, without escalating the emotion; this is not a soft skill, it is the technical precondition for any response that actually helps
✔	Anchor hardship in purpose, know specifically what the effort is building; that specificity is what makes the difficult morning possible
✔	Process difficulty privately; present composure publicly, not as suppression but as the professional responsibility of someone others depend on

WHAT ERODES THE FOUNDATION BEING BUILT:

✗	Exposing those who depend on you to unmanaged anxiety, the children, the team, the community do not need the full weight of the difficulty; they need the evidence that someone is managing it
✗	Normalizing complaint as culture, constraint narrated as suffering teaches the people watching that difficulty is something to perform rather than navigate
✗	Compromising dignity under financial or social pressure, the vendor paid on time, regardless; the dignity held, regardless; these are non-negotiable precisely because the pressure to compromise them is always real
✗	Separating values from daily life, integrity is not reserved for the formal occasions; it lives in the negotiation with the vendor and the conversation at midnight
✗	Dismissing emotions, Anju regulated hers; she did not dismiss Rekha's question or redirect it falsely; the regulation was the skill, not the avoidance

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about the ledger you are keeping and what its entries will compound into.

Q1. What invisible ledger are you maintaining through your daily choices - at home, at work, in every small interaction? What are its entries compounding into? And who is watching them accumulate?

Your reflection:

Q2. What are the people around you, children, team members, colleagues, juniors, learning from watching your behaviour? Not from what you say to them. From what they observe when you do not know you are being observed.

Your reflection:

Q3. When you endure difficulty at work, in a relationship, in a sustained effort, do you know specifically what you are enduring for? Can you name it in the way Anju named it: 'your education, your character, your ability to stand upright in the world'?

Your reflection:

Q4. Do you regulate your emotions or transfer them to the people around you? What is the difference in the experience of the people closest to you between a difficult day you processed privately and a difficult day you expressed without processing?

Your reflection:

Q5. If someone wrote your legacy in one line, the compound effect of your daily choices on the people who have been watching you, what would that line say? And is it the line you would choose?

Your reflection:

"Purpose is not declared. It is demonstrated. And sometimes the most powerful leadership in the world happens in a modest home, at a kitchen table, in the years before anyone calls it leadership at all."

FROM SURVIVAL TO SIGNIFICANCE

The Rise, Fall, and Renewal of Ali Imran

A Story of Dignity, Ambition, and What Success Forgets to Teach
Calicut, North Kerala | 1995 – 2020

PART ONE

THE EDUCATION THAT SCHOOL DID NOT GIVE HIM

> *"Childhood for Ali Imran did not resemble the carefree memories most children hold. It was shaped by responsibility, uncertainty, and the specific kind of survival that teaches you things no curriculum contains."*

Chapter 1: What It Means to Grow Up Early

Calicut — 1995 — Childhood

Calicut sits on the historical Malabar Coast with the particular combination of beauty and bustle that port towns accumulate over centuries of trade. The sea is close. The markets are loud. The city has a commercial intelligence built into its culture, the understanding, absorbed by its people over generations, that opportunity is created by the meeting of effort and relationship, and that neither alone is sufficient.

Ali Imran grew up in this city without the one thing that most children take as the invisible infrastructure of their development: parents. He lost them early, young enough that the loss shaped the foundation rather than disrupting something already built. He was placed with distant relatives. These were not bad people; they ran small businesses, they provided food and shelter, and they expected the child they were housing to contribute to the household in proportion to what the household was providing. This was not cruelty. It was the economics of limited means applied to an arrangement that could not afford to be sentimental.

School hours were followed by work hours. As a teenager, Ali Imran moved between odd jobs with the adaptability of someone who has understood, before most people his age have considered the question, that the world does not hold still for the unprepared. He assisted in shops. Helped with deliveries. Supported the trade businesses of relatives. Learned, from proximity to small commerce, how goods moved between people, how credit worked, how trust was extended and why, and what happened when it was not honoured.

This education, conducted in warehouses and markets and on delivery routes rather than in classrooms, produced something that no school could have manufactured: the specific intelligence of a person who has learned about the world by operating inside it, rather than by being taught about it from a safe distance.

But Ali Imran did not accept the limitation that his circumstances seemed to prescribe. He watched the young men around him, boys from similar circumstances, without the same family structure or financial cushion, and he saw the directions those circumstances could pull a person. Social distractions. Unhealthy habits. The pull of easy money that is never easy in the way it promises to be. He chose something harder.

Work. Discipline. Survival with dignity.

These three words were not a philosophy. They were the operating system of a boy who had no other options and had decided to treat that as an advantage rather than a limitation.

> **Resilience:** *The resilience Ali Imran built in these years was not chosen. It was forged by necessity – by the specific condition of having no safety net and no one to catch him if he stopped moving. This is the resilience of survival. It is real and it is powerful. But it is, as he would eventually discover, a different kind of resilience from the one the future would require.*

Chapter 2: The License and the Degree

Early Working Years — Calicut

To continue his education, which he pursued with the determination of someone who understood, at a bone level, that credentials were the difference between being perpetually dependent on other people's businesses and one day running his own, Ali Imran did everything available to him. He learned driving early and obtained his license, adding a commercial capability that a teenager with more conventional support would not have needed to acquire. He worked as a pump assistant, a plumber's helper, an electrician's assistant, a mason's assistant, a delivery boy, and a driver.

Whatever work came his way, he accepted. This is not the romantic version of hard work, rather the kind that is described in retrospect as character-building and formative and meaningful. This was the practical version: the work that paid tuition fees, the work that kept the arrangement with the relatives viable, the work that was available on a given day to a person with a given set of skills and an absolute requirement to earn.

And through all of it, slowly, through persistence that had no alternative and determination that had no logical basis in the circumstances that surrounded it, he completed his graduation. With a high first class.

For someone who had built his education on the margins of other people's days, a first-class degree was not an achievement. It was a declaration.

The declaration was not addressed to anyone in particular. It was addressed to the circumstance that had seemed to decide his trajectory before he was old enough to decide it himself. It said: I am not what you made me. I am what I chose to become with what you gave me.

Chapter 3: The Market as Teacher

Late 1990s — Commission Sales — The Learning Years

After graduation, Ali Imran became a commission-based sales agent for a small retail distributor in Calicut. For two years he travelled across the region, carrying products, building relationships, and learning the market from the inside. Not as

a student of it, but as a participant in it. This distinction matters enormously. Academic knowledge of markets is available to anyone who reads. The knowledge that Ali Imran was building in those years was available only to someone who was present in the market every day, who learned how the retailer in a specific town made decisions, why a distributor in one district extended credit differently from a distributor in the next, and what the word of a sales agent was actually worth in a market where everyone's word was tested against delivery.

He learned three things during these years that would define his approach for the next two decades. Retailers trusted honesty. Distributors valued reliability. And relationships were often stronger than price. These were not principles he had been taught. They were observations he had made from the ground level of a market where the alternative dishonesty, unreliability, the manipulation of price at the cost of relationship, was visible in the careers of people around him who were doing it and experiencing the compound consequence.

In the year 2000, Ali Imran joined a local FMCG company as a full-time sales executive handling the northern districts of Kerala. The transition from commission agent to employed sales professional was not just a financial upgrade. It was the first formal recognition that his approach to market the honesty, the relationship-building, the supply chain discipline was valuable enough that someone was willing to pay for it with a salary rather than a percentage.

His approach was specific and it produced specific results. He never dumped stock onto distributors the practice of pushing inventory into the channel without regard for whether it would actually sell, which inflates short-term numbers and destroys long-term relationships. He ensured products moved from distributor to retailer. He protected the margins of everyone in the supply chain. The message that spread across the market was not about his products. It was about him.

Ali Imran was dependable.

> **Values:** *Protecting the supply chain never dumping stock, never sacrificing a partner's margin for a short-term number, was not a policy Ali Imran followed. It was an expression of who he was, shaped by years of watching what trust meant when you had nothing else to offer. His values were not inherited. They were earned through the specific experience of being someone whom other people's livelihoods depended on.*

PART TWO

THE MAN WHO BUILT HIS DREAM FROM SCRATCH

> *"I want to eat good food in good restaurants. I want to ride my own two-wheeler. I want to wear branded clothes. Behind that innocent answer was a truth that the auditorium only half understood: those were not luxuries. For him, they were dignity."*

Chapter 4: The Question That Got an Honest Answer

The Award Ceremony — The Moment of Truth

The annual award ceremony was the kind of event that organisations hold to confirm what they already know about their best performers, wrapped in the ritual of public recognition. Ali Imran had been invited because the numbers left no other option. He had been the company's standout performer in his region not by a small margin, but by the kind of margin that makes other sales professionals ask what the person is doing that they are not.

His boss asked him the question that bosses ask at these ceremonies. What drives you to perform like this? It was a question designed to produce a motivational answer the kind of response that organisations can frame and display, the language of purpose and impact and the desire to make a difference. The audience leaned forward slightly in the way that audiences lean when they expect to be inspired.

Ali Imran gave them something different.

"I want to earn, to eat good food in good restaurants. I want to earn, to ride my own two-wheeler. I want to earn, to wear branded clothes."

The auditorium erupted. Laughter, then applause. The combination of surprise and delight that an audience produces when someone tells the unadorned truth in a room that was prepared for a performance.

But what the auditorium heard as charming and unexpected was, when understood fully, the most precise articulation of Purpose in the room that evening. For someone who had grown up eating what was available, wearing what was affordable, and moving on foot or in borrowed vehicles, a good restaurant

was not a luxury. It was a statement. A two-wheeler of his own was not transport. It was independence. Branded clothes were not vanity. They were the visible evidence that he had arrived somewhere his childhood had not permitted him to imagine.

These were not small dreams. They were the concentrated expression of every year of every job he had done to survive and build. They were the dreams that had made the commission sales years bearable and the study years possible. They were, precisely and without embarrassment, his purpose, and his purpose was the most honest thing in that room.

Within three months, he was promoted as Sales Manager for Kerala.

> **Purpose:** *Ali Imran's purpose in those years was not abstract. It was specific – the restaurant, the two-wheeler, the branded clothes. That specificity was not a limitation; it was what made the purpose real enough to function as actual motivation rather than a statement to be displayed. Purpose that you can name is purpose that you can chase.*

Chapter 5: The Golden Years — 750 Square Feet Becoming 3,000

The Distribution Years — Building Something Real

The years that followed his promotion through to his decision to start his own distribution business were the years in which Ali Imran discovered that the principles that had made him dependable as a sales agent were equally powerful when they were the principles of his own enterprise. The same discipline. The same supply chain integrity. The same commitment to ensuring that the whole chain thrived rather than just his own margins.

He started with modest savings, a few loans from super stockists who trusted his word based on years of watching him operate, a 750 square foot warehouse, and one delivery vehicle. Within a year the business had stabilised. His team grew to four people. Within five years the business had transformed beyond what the 750 square feet had been capable of imagining: a 3,000 square foot office and distribution hub, twelve employees, three delivery vehicles running daily routes, a market that had expanded across Kerala and into neighbouring districts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

He moved from a rented house to his own home. He purchased small properties around Calicut. His children joined reputed schools. The young man who had once dreamed of owning a two-wheeler now drove a top-end small car. Within family, business circles, and community networks, Ali Imran had built a reputation that went beyond commercial respect. He had become a story that people in Calicut told each other — the boy who had started with nothing and had built something real through the specific combination of trust, discipline, and the refusal to take shortcuts.

The first purpose had been achieved. And in achieving it, he had discovered that significance was more interesting than survival — that building something that employed twelve people and served an entire regional supply chain was a different kind of ambition from eating in a good restaurant, and that the second kind of ambition was what the first kind had been preparing him for.

He had survived. Now he wanted to mean something.

> **Resilience:** *The resilience that had built this business was the same resilience that had survived the childhood – direct, practical, grounded in the understanding that the only way through a difficult situation is through it. But the business was now larger, more complex, and serving more lives than his own survival. The resilience it required was beginning to exceed the resilience his early years had taught him.*

PART THREE

THE LEAP THAT BECAME THE FALL

> *"Why only distribute? Why not manufacture? He knew the retailers, the distributors, the market. What he did not know – what success had never required him to learn – was everything that came after the knowing."*

Chapter 6: 2015 — The Decision That Changed Everything

2015 — The Manufacturing Leap

In 2015, a new thought entered Ali Imran's mind and quickly became a conviction. He had spent fifteen years understanding the market from the distribution side — he knew what retailers needed, what distributors valued, how the supply chain moved, where the margins sat and where they disappeared. He had watched colleagues who had once worked alongside him start small manufacturing units. Some of them were doing well. The logic, from where he stood, was straightforward: he had the channel, he had the relationships, he had the market intelligence. What he was missing was the product. Why continue distributing other people's products when he could produce his own?

The question was reasonable. The answer it produced was not wrong in principle. Vertical integration moving from distribution into manufacturing, is a legitimate strategic direction for businesses with the channel relationships Ali Imran had built. Many businesses had done it successfully. The logic was sound.

What the logic did not include because success does not volunteer its own limitations — was the full accounting of what manufacturing required that distribution had not. Quality assurance systems. Process management. Technical expertise in production. A different kind of operational discipline from the one that had built the distribution network. A willingness to hire qualified professionals for functions that were unfamiliar rather than managing every aspect personally. A structured strategic plan rather than the relationship intelligence and market feel that had always been sufficient before.

Ali Imran invested his savings. Pledged assets. Raised loans. A manufacturing facility was built. Over one hundred workers and staff joined the new venture. The distribution company became the primary channel for the new products.

At first, excitement filled the air. He had made the leap from distributor to manufacturer. The story had a new chapter.

What he had not realized was that the chapter had changed genre.

Chapter 7: The Cracks That Were Always There

The Invisible Deterioration

The problems did not arrive all at once. They never do. The collapse of a business — like the collapse of a person's character, or the collapse of an organisation's culture — is almost always a slow accumulation of individually manageable signals that were not managed, until the accumulation exceeds the system's capacity to absorb it.

Retailers started complaining about product quality. Not dramatically — not in the way that produces an immediate crisis and demands an immediate response. In the way that customer dissatisfaction always begins: one complaint, then another, then the particular silence that follows when the complaints stop arriving because the customers have stopped buying. The quality inconsistencies had a root cause. The manufacturing process lacked the systems — the quality assurance frameworks, the production controls, the qualified technical oversight — that distribution had never needed because distribution was moving other people's quality-controlled products.

Instead of addressing the root, Ali Imran addressed the surface. He reduced prices. He offered bundled deals. He incentivised distributors and retailers to absorb and move inventory that the market was beginning to reject. For a few months, the tactics worked — the channel was motivated, sales moved, the numbers looked manageable.

Then they stopped. Not slowed. Stopped.

The inventory that had been pushed into the channel and had not moved was now sitting in distributor warehouses — a physical, daily reminder to the supply chain partners who had trusted Ali Imran for fifteen years that the current situation was different from everything that had preceded it. That the person who had once protected their margins was now asking them to absorb a problem he had not yet named to himself.

The ten failures were not sudden discoveries. They were the accumulated consequence of decisions that had each seemed, in isolation, either reasonable or minor.

> **Authenticity Eroding:** *The gap between the man who had built his reputation on never dumping stock and the man who was now offering bundled deals to move product the market did not want was growing. He could feel it. He did not yet name it.*
>
> **Responsiveness Eroding:** *The retailer complaints were the signal. The production inconsistencies were the signal. The inventory accumulating in the channel was the signal. Each one arrived clearly enough to be acted on. None of them were.*
>
> **Purpose Eroding:** *The original purpose — to build something significant, something that meant more than his own survival — was being subordinated to the daily management of a crisis that had been produced by decisions that significance requires you to make differently.*

Chapter 8: The Ten Decisions That Accumulated Into a Collapse

The Anatomy of the Failure

It is worth naming the ten decisions not as a list of failures but as the specific mechanism of how a person who had demonstrated exceptional judgment across fifteen years made ten choices in sequence that undid the work of those years. Each one was, in isolation, the kind of decision that is available to every growing entrepreneur. The danger was their combination and their accumulation.

Quality assurance was never formalized. In distribution, quality belonged to the manufacturer. In manufacturing, quality had to be owned — in systems, in processes, in the daily rigour of production oversight. Ali Imran managed it the

way he had managed everything before: through personal presence and personal judgment. Personal judgment is not sufficient when the production volume exceeds what personal judgment can observe.

Qualified professionals were not hired for the functions that required them. The cost was visible. The alternative cost — of managing manufacturing without technical expertise — was not visible until the retailer complaints made it undeniable. Saving costs at the expertise level is almost always the most expensive economy available to a growing business.

There was no structured execution plan. The distribution business had been built on relationship intelligence and market feel, capabilities that Ali Imran possessed in abundance. Manufacturing required something different: the translation of those capabilities into a documented operational strategy that could be executed consistently by the hundred-plus people he was now employing. That translation was never made.

Decision-making became isolated. The same independence that had made him effective when the operation was small made him brittle when the operation required the distributed intelligence of qualified advisors, functional heads, and market signals that he was no longer close enough to the ground to receive personally.

Lifestyle visibility had become a priority. The visible expressions of success, the home, the properties, the car, the community standing, had shifted from outcomes of his work to inputs into his identity. The man who had once been defined by what he built was becoming defined by what he possessed. This shift is subtle and lethal: it redirects energy from the work to the image of the work.

He had stopped learning. This is perhaps the most consequential of the ten. The market had changed dramatically since the 1990s. Consumer behaviour, retail dynamics, supply chain technology, competitive intensity, all of it had evolved. Ali Imran had not invested in understanding that evolution because his existing knowledge had been sufficient for so long that the idea of its insufficiency had not presented itself as a real concern.

Pride had replaced learning. And when pride replaces learning, what you lose is not just knowledge. You lose the capacity to receive the feedback that would tell you what you do not know.

His struggle had taught him how to survive. Success had not taught him how to lead an organisation. And the organisation — one hundred people, pledged assets, raised loans — was waiting on a factory floor for someone who understood the difference.

PART FOUR

THE SILENCE OF MACHINES

> *"He walked alone through the factory floor. Machines stood silent. Workers waited for direction. And for the first time in decades, a man who had never not known what to do next confronted the most honest question available to him."*

Chapter 9: Fear as Information

The Reckoning — The Evening on the Factory Floor

Debt had increased. Inventory had piled up. The distribution relationships that had been the foundation of everything he had built were weakening — not broken, not yet, but strained in the specific way that trust strains when it is being asked to carry a weight it was not extended to support. The super stockists who had trusted him with credit, the retailers who had believed in his word for fifteen years, were watching the situation with the patient concern of people who are not yet ready to withdraw but who are no longer certain that they should not.

One evening, Ali Imran walked alone through the factory floor. He had done this hundreds of times before — the founder's walk, the daily inspection, the visible presence that communicates to the workforce that the person at the top is paying attention. But this evening was different. The machines were silent. Production had slowed to a point where the machinery's silence was no longer an anomaly but an atmosphere. Workers sat or stood at their stations — not working, not idle in the casual sense, but waiting. Waiting for direction that had not come. Waiting for the person who had built this to tell them what it was supposed to become.

Ali Imran walked the full length of the floor. He did not perform the inspection. He absorbed the room.

And in the absorbing, something arrived that he had not felt in decades. Not since the years when he was a boy doing odd jobs to pay tuition fees, when the uncertainty of tomorrow was a daily companion rather than an abstraction.

Fear.

Not the fear of a person who has always been afraid. The fear of a person who has been fearless for so long that the emotion arrives with the specific force of the unfamiliar. The fear that comes not from having nothing he had survived nothing, but from having built something and watching it tremble.

And in that fear, standing on the factory floor among silent machines and waiting workers, Ali Imran heard something that the noise of the preceding years had been drowning out.

His struggle had taught him how to survive. But survival and leadership of an organisation are not the same knowledge. He had been applying the first where the second was required. And the organisation, the one hundred people, the pledged assets, the relationships extended on the basis of fifteen years of trust had been absorbing the cost of that confusion until it could absorb no more.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Fear, when it is received rather than suppressed, is the most precise feedback a leader can be given. The factory floor's silence was not a crisis. It was a diagnosis. Ali Imran, in that walk, received the diagnosis he had been refusing for months.*
>
> **Purpose:** *The movement from survival to significance requires knowing the difference between the two. On that factory floor, for the first time, Ali Imran understood the difference not as a concept but as a lived reality: the significance he had been building toward was at risk, and the risk had come from inside him, not from outside.*

Chapter 10: The Courage That Is Harder Than Survival

The Rebuild — 2020 Onwards

What happened next is where the story's most important act of leadership occurs. It is not dramatic. It does not have the cinematic quality of the earlier chapters, the boy working multiple jobs, the commission sales years, the distribution business growing from 750 to 3,000 square feet. It is quieter and, in its own way, more demanding than any of those chapters.

Ali Imran did something that few entrepreneurs, once they have achieved the level of public success and community standing that he had built, find the courage

to do. He accepted his mistakes. Not in the managed, PR-appropriate way of leaders who acknowledge difficulty while protecting their narrative. In the genuine way — the way that requires sitting with what you got wrong without immediately constructing the explanation that would make it someone else's fault or the market's fault or the timing's fault.

He began seeking advice from industry experts. This, for a man who had spent twenty-five years being the person other people came to for counsel, required the specific humility that success makes most difficult: the willingness to be the student again, in a room where you are not the most experienced person present, about a subject that you believed your experience had prepared you to understand.

He started rebuilding systems, the quality assurance frameworks, the structured operational processes, the hiring of qualified professionals for the functions that required them. He began learning again: about the market as it currently was, not as he had learned it in the 1990s. About manufacturing as a discipline, not just as a capability he had assumed his distribution experience would transfer into.

The journey is still ongoing. The direction is clearer. And those who know Ali Imran who watched the boy survive and the man build and the entrepreneur stumble and the leader begin again,— believe something specific about this chapter of the story: a man who survived life's hardest beginning still has the strength to rebuild. Not because survival guarantees resilience. But because Ali Imran's resilience was never only the product of circumstance. It was a choice he had been making, every day, since the day he had decided that dignity was something he would earn rather than something life owed him.

> **Resilience:** *This is the hardest resilience of the three the story contains. Not the resilience of the orphaned boy – which was forged by necessity. Not the resilience of the sales executive building a distribution business – which was fuelled by purpose. This is the resilience of the man who had everything, lost much of it, and chose to learn rather than collapse. It is chosen, deliberate, and arrived at through the specific experience of a factory floor walk that told him the truth he had been avoiding.*

> **Authenticity:** *Accepting that the gap between who he had been — the man whose word was his brand, who never dumped stock, who protected every margin in his chain — and who he had become — the man using short-term tactics to manage a quality problem he had not built the systems to address — was real and was his responsibility. That acceptance is Authenticity at its most costly and its most essential.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar was built, tested, broken, and rebuilt across this story

Authenticity	The alignment between who Ali said he was — the man forged by hardship who never forgot the value of trust — and who he was becoming as success began to rewrite the story he told himself
Values	The protection of his supply chain partners never dumping stock, protecting margins, ensuring the whole chain thrived that built his first two decades and began to erode in the third
Emotional Intelligence	Recognizing that the fear walking the silent factory floor was not weakness but information; that the machines standing still were saying something he needed to hear
Purpose	The movement from 'I want to eat in good restaurants and wear branded clothes' which was dignity to 'I want to build something that outlasts me' which was significance
Resilience	Not the resilience of the boy who survived without parents that was forged by necessity. The harder resilience: the man who had everything, lost much of it, and chose to learn rather than collapse
Responsiveness	Acting on the signals the retailer complaints, the production inconsistencies, the isolation of his decision-making before the signals became the collapse that named them

Sometimes life does not test us when we have nothing. It tests us when we finally have something to lose. And the man who survived the first test without a manual had no manual for the second one either.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO AS THEY GROW AND SCALE:

✔	Build systems before scaling into new domains. The capability that built one kind of business does not automatically transfer to a different kind without the additional knowledge the difference requires
✔	Continue learning throughout life, specifically about the domains you are entering, not just the domains you have mastered
✔	Stay grounded during success; the restaurant and the two-wheeler were achievements of the first purpose they are not the foundation of the second one
✔	Protect the trust of your supply chain and market partners with the same discipline in the complex years as in the simple ones
✔	Hire qualified professionals for the functions that require them; saving costs at the expertise level is the most expensive economy available to a growing business
✔	Separate your identity from your possessions. The home and the car are outcomes of the work, not the work itself, and the confusion of those two things is where the drift begins
✔	Seek advice before the crisis demands it; the industry experts Ali Imran eventually consulted were available before the factory went silent
✔	Accept mistakes with the specific courage that success makes most difficult — the willingness to be wrong, to say so, and to be the student again in a room where you are not the most experienced person

WHAT TRANSFORMS AMBITION INTO ITS OWN UNDOING:

✗	Relying only on past success to navigate a present that requires a different knowledge track record is not expertise, and the difference matters most when the stakes are highest
✗	Ignoring changing market dynamics because existing knowledge has been sufficient for long enough to feel permanent
✗	Using short-term tactics, such as price reductions, bundled deals, and incentive pushes, to manage problems that have structural causes requiring structural solutions

✗	Isolating decision-making as the organisation grows; the independence that works at a small scale becomes brittleness at a large scale
✗	Allowing pride to replace learning, the moment you stop being able to receive feedback is the moment your past success becomes your ceiling
✗	Treating lifestyle visibility as the measure of the work rather than its outcome; what you possess is not who you are, and when those two things are confused, the work suffers
✗	Avoiding qualified expertise to save costs; the retailer's complaints were not a market problem they were a quality problem that qualified technical oversight would have addressed before they became the reason customers stopped buying

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are not about Ali Imran. They are about the version of his story that lives inside your own professional journey.

Q1. Ali Imran's early purpose was specific and honest: a restaurant, a two-wheeler, branded clothes. What is your current purpose and is it specific enough to function as actual motivation, or has it become abstract enough to be disconnected from the daily decisions that either serve it or betray it?

Your reflection:

Q2. When was the last time you learned something genuinely new about the domain you operate in — not a confirmation of what you already know, but a discovery that your existing model was incomplete or outdated? What did you do with that discovery?

Your reflection:

Q3. Is there a signal in your current professional environment — a customer complaint, a team member's concern, an operational inconsistency — that you have been managing with tactics rather than addressing with structural solutions? What is the cost of continuing to manage it rather than fix it?

Your reflection:

Q4. What is the one domain in your current role or business where you know you need qualified expertise that you do not currently have — and what is the story you are telling yourself about why you have not yet invested in it?

Your reflection:

Q5. If you were to walk the length of your organisation's equivalent of the factory floor — alone, without an agenda, without a presentation — what would you hear in the silence? What are the machines in your world that have gone quiet, and what are they trying to tell you?

Your reflection:

> *"Sometimes life teaches its most powerful lessons not through failure, but through the courage to begin again. And beginning again – with the full knowledge of what went wrong, without the protection of a new story that would let you avoid that knowledge is the hardest kind of beginning."*

The courage to rebuild with both eyes open. *That is where the story is.*

That is where the AVEPRR framework lives when it is not a framework but a daily practice.

READING THE ROOM

Vijay, James, and the Negotiation That Almost Broke

A Story About the Most Important Slide of the Day – the One That Was Never Shown
Delhi NCR | 2007

> *"He almost destroyed it in the first ten minutes. Not because he was unprepared. Because he was so thoroughly prepared for the wrong conversation that he could not hear the right one trying to begin."*

Chapter 1: The Six Weeks That Prepared the Wrong Answer

Gurgaon — 2007 — A Glass-and-Steel Conference Room

Vijay had been preparing for six weeks. This is worth understanding precisely: six weeks of methodical, thorough, professionally rigorous preparation. The benchmarks had been gathered from three independent sources. The market comparisons had been validated against current data. The slide deck had forty slides, each one earning its presence through a process of selection that had reduced an earlier draft of sixty. He had rehearsed with his junior team three times. He walked into the conference room in Gurgaon's corporate belt feeling as prepared as he had ever felt for anything professional.

He was prepared. He was prepared for the wrong conversation.

This is the specific and expensive failure mode of the excellent analyst: the capacity to solve a problem with thoroughness, rigour, and considerable craft, and to solve it before confirming that it is the problem that actually needs solving. Vijay's forty slides were an answer. They were an answer to a question James had not asked.

James sat across the table. He was a quiet man in his fifties, formally dressed, who had flown in from Mumbai specifically for this meeting. He was, Vijay had been told, the decision-maker. Vijay proceeded accordingly: he directed everything at

James. He talked fast. He moved through the slides with the energy of someone who has been building toward this moment for six weeks and is finally in the room where the moment can happen.

He did not notice that James had stopped making eye contact after slide seven.

By slide ten, James was looking at the window. Not dramatically, not with the visible impatience of someone who wants the presentation to end. With the quiet, politely maintained attention of someone whose mind has left the conversation while the body remains positioned to suggest that it has not. The vendor team were attentive in the same way, present in form, absent in substance.

The room had already made its decision. Vijay was still on slide twelve.

Chapter 2: The Note on the Torn Page

The Same Room — Twenty Minutes In

Nisha had been brought to take notes. This is the formal description of her role. The actual description of her value in that room was something different: she was the person who was not performing the presentation and was therefore free to observe what the presentation was doing to the person receiving it.

She had noticed the shift in James around slide seven. Not the content of the shift, the analytical mind requires data to process, and a man looking at a window provides limited data. What she noticed was subtler and more precise: the change in the quality of his attention as it became performed attention. The blinking pattern that she would later describe to Vijay on the drive home. The specific stillness of a person who has mentally left a meeting but is too professionally courteous to physically leave it.

She tore a corner from her notepad. She wrote five words. She passed the fragment across the table to Vijay without changing her own expression.

'He's switched off. Slow down.'

Five words. The single most valuable piece of intelligence delivered in the room that day. Not from the forty slides. From a torn corner of a notepad, passed across

a table by someone whose job description said 'note-taker' and whose actual function was reader of rooms.

Vijay looked up from his slide. He saw what Nisha had already described. James at the window. The team politely elsewhere. The particular quality of a meeting that has technically not yet failed and has already ceased to produce value.

He made a choice. A choice that six weeks of preparation had not prepared him for, and that was perhaps the most important professional decision he made in that entire negotiation.

He closed his laptop.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Nisha read what James was not saying, the window, the blinking pattern, the performed attention, and translated it into the five words that gave Vijay the chance to recover. This is the precise practical definition of Emotional Intelligence: reading the signal others are sending without words, and responding to what is actually present rather than what is officially being communicated.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *The pivot happened in real time, in the middle of the meeting, without a break or a plan or a protocol. Vijay received the five words, looked up, saw what they described, and acted. That is Responsiveness, not the speed of the action but the accuracy of the reading that preceded it.*

Chapter 3: The Question That Replaced the Slides

The Same Room — The Conversation That Built the Partnership

'James-ji,' Vijay said. The address was personal, respectful, a small but significant signal that the register of the exchange had changed. 'I have been talking at you for twenty minutes. I apologise. Can I ask, what are the two or three things that matter most to you in this partnership?'

The apology was not performative. It was precise and honest: he had been talking at James rather than with him, and the distinction between those two activities had been visible to everyone in the room except Vijay for the preceding twenty minutes. The acknowledgement was not self-flagellation. It was the authentic

recognition of what had been happening, and that recognition was what allowed the conversation to shift.

James looked at him. For the first time in twenty minutes, the quality of his attention was real rather than performed.

He said: 'Continuity. My previous vendor changed account managers four times in three years. I cannot run a business on that.'

The room changed. One sentence. The actual concern, the thing James had flown from Mumbai to address, the thing that was governing every other question he had about this potential partnership, was now present in the conversation for the first time. And it had nothing to do with slide thirty-seven.

Everything Vijay had prepared addressed price and feature benchmarking. None of it addressed continuity. The forty slides were a comprehensive answer to a question about commercial terms. James's actual question was about trust, specifically, about whether this partner would be present and consistent across the duration of a relationship, or whether it would deliver a vendor who changed faces every eighteen months and required him to rebuild the institutional trust from zero, again, each time.

In the next forty minutes, without a single slide, without the presentation that had been prepared across six weeks, Vijay and James had a conversation. A genuine one: the specific kind of professional exchange that only becomes possible when both parties are actually present, actually interested in each other's concerns, and actually oriented toward building something rather than winning something. A partnership structure emerged that addressed James's continuity concern with specific contractual protections, and that incorporated Vijay's commercial terms without the adversarial positioning that price-focused negotiations almost always produce.

The deal was signed. It ran for four years. Not one escalation.

The most important slide of the day was the one Vijay never showed.

> **Purpose:** *The deal was not the purpose. The partnership was. A deal achieved through the forty-slide presentation would have produced a contract. The conversation produced*

> *a four-year relationship without escalations. Vijay understood the difference the moment he closed the laptop — because closing it was itself the act of choosing the relationship over the performance.*
>
> **Authenticity:** *'I have been talking at you for twenty minutes. I apologise.' The acknowledgement was not strategic positioning. It was the honest naming of what had been happening. That honesty — small, specific, immediate — is what opened the space for James's actual concern to enter the room.*

Chapter 4: What Nisha Knew

The Drive Back— The Real Lesson

On the drive back through Gurgaon traffic, Vijay asked the question that the meeting had made obvious. 'How did you know he'd switched off?'

Nisha's answer was specific and unhurried. 'He stopped blinking normally. People do that when they're pretending to listen but have already left.'

Vijay laughed. 'I need to learn to read rooms better.'

'You already did,' Nisha said. 'You closed the laptop. That was the most important slide of the day.'

This exchange is the story's quiet centre. Vijay had been preparing for the presentation. What the day actually required was different. And the gap between those two things, between the preparation and the actual requirement, was bridged not by more preparation but by the specific quality of attentiveness that Nisha had brought to a room she was supposed to be observing passively.

The lesson is not that preparation is useless. Vijay's commercial knowledge, his market benchmarks, his understanding of the pricing landscape, all of that informed the partnership structure that emerged from the conversation. The preparation was necessary. It was not sufficient. What turned the preparation from a failed presentation into a successful deal was the willingness, at the right moment, to set it aside and ask the question that had not been prepared.

'What are the two or three things that matter most to you in this partnership?' - that question, asked genuinely rather than rhetorically, is the most powerful instrument available in any negotiation. It costs nothing to ask. It requires, as a prerequisite, the specific willingness to hear an answer that might require abandoning everything else that has been prepared. That willingness is emotional intelligence in its most direct commercial application.

And the person in the room who read the signal that made the question possible was the one whose job description said note-taker.

The room speaks, always. The question is whether anyone in it is listening.

> **Values:** *The decision to close the laptop — to prioritise the relationship over the presentation, the person over the performance — was a values decision made in a moment of considerable sunk cost. Six weeks of preparation. Three rehearsals. Forty slides. Vijay set all of it aside the moment the person across the table mattered more than the slides.*
>
> **Resilience:** *Abandoning the presentation mid-room required the specific resilience of someone who could separate their professional identity from the material they had prepared. The laptop was not Vijay. Closing it was not failure. It was the act that made success possible.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar showed up in one conference room, in one decisive moment

Authenticity	Vijay's willingness to say, 'I have been talking at you for twenty minutes. I apologise.' The act of naming what had been happening rather than continuing it
Values	Choosing to serve the relationship over the presentation, closing the laptop when it was no longer serving the person on the other side of the table
Emotional Intelligence	Nisha was reading what James's body had been saying since slide seven; Vijay was acting on the signal in real time; the question that replaced the presentation

Purpose	The deal was not the purpose. The partnership was. The slide deck served one; the conversation built the other. Vijay understood the difference the moment he closed the laptop.
Resilience	Abandoning six weeks of preparation in the middle of the room, without panic, without defensiveness, without the ego investment that makes pivoting feel like failure
Responsiveness	The pivot itself: from information delivery to genuine enquiry, from 'here is what I have prepared' to 'what actually matters to you?', the most important shift available in any negotiation

Intelligence reads the words. Emotional intelligence reads the silence between them. And the most valuable skill in any negotiation, any meeting, any human exchange — is knowing which one to respond to.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO IN EVERY ROOM THEY ENTER:

✔	Read the silence as carefully as the words, the window James looked at, the blinking that changed, the performed attention; these were signals as clear as any spoken statement
✔	Ask before you tell, 'what are the two or three things that matter most to you?' is the most powerful question available in any professional exchange, and it costs nothing to ask
✔	Close the laptop when it is no longer serving the person on the other side of it, the willingness to abandon preparation in service of presence is the highest form of professional respect
✔	Acknowledge what is happening in the room, honestly and without defensiveness, 'I have been talking at you for twenty minutes' named reality; that naming is what allowed reality to change
✔	Bring people to meetings whose function is to observe, Nisha's value came precisely from not being inside the performance; the observer role is not lesser, it is complementary and often decisive
✔	Let the conversation replace the presentation when the presentation is answering the wrong question — preparation is necessary; it is not sacred

WHAT TURNS PREPARATION INTO A BARRIER:

✗	Performing the presentation for the preparation's sake, six weeks of work creates an investment that makes it hard to abandon; the investment should serve the meeting, not the reverse
✗	Mistaking thorough preparation for situational awareness, preparation addresses what you expect; situational awareness addresses what is actually present
✗	Directing everything at the decision-maker at the expense of reading the decision-maker, Vijay was so focused on reaching James that he stopped noticing whether James was still reachable
✗	Equating the deal with the purpose, a signed contract with an unaddressed concern becomes an escalation waiting for its moment; the partnership was the purpose, not the paperwork
✗	Treating the note-taker as peripheral, Nisha's observation saved the negotiation; the person whose role seems least important is often the one with the clearest view

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REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about the rooms you have been in, and the signals you may have missed while the presentation was running.

Q1. Think of a recent meeting, negotiation, or important conversation. Were you reading the words, or the silence between them? What were the non-verbal signals in the room, and what were they communicating about the quality of the engagement?

Your reflection:

Q2. When did you last stop mid-meeting, close the laptop, put down the agenda, abandon the prepared material, because the person across the table needed something the preparation was not providing? What did you do instead?

Your reflection:

Q3. What is the 'continuity' equivalent in the most important professional relationship you are currently navigating, the real concern, the one beneath the stated concern, that has not yet been asked about and that no amount of commercial preparation is designed to address?

Your reflection:

Q4. Who is the Nisha in your professional environment, the person whose observational precision you have been underusing because their role description suggests a different function? What are they seeing that you are missing?

Your reflection:

Q5. If someone assessed not your preparation for your last important meeting, but your presence in it, your actual attentiveness to what was happening rather than what you had planned to deliver, what would they find? And what would it reveal about the gap between your preparation and your purpose?

Your reflection:

"The most important slide of the day was the one that was never shown. And the most important skill in the room was the one that had no place on the agenda, rather, the ability to notice that someone had stopped blinking normally."

THE MAN EVERYONE KNEW

But No One Trusted

A Story of Charm, Collapse, and the Slow Work of Rebuilding Credibility
New Delhi | 2011 – 2025

PART ONE

THE MOST POPULAR MAN IN THE ROOM

> *"He was visible everywhere. He was present nowhere that mattered."*

Chapter 1: The Gift That Became the Trap

New Delhi — 2011

There is a particular kind of professional that every industry produces, the person who makes every room feel warmer the moment they enter it. Deepak Nayyar was that person. Twenty years in procurement and support services, a well-settled family background from Ambala, and the kind of social intelligence that cannot be taught in any MBA Programme. He moved between corporate boardrooms and roadside tea stalls with equal fluency. He remembered names. He connected people who needed connecting. He made everyone he spoke to feel, in the moment of the conversation, that they were the most important person in his professional orbit.

He had built five income streams alongside his corporate role: a life insurance agency, used automobile sales, real estate brokering, share trading, and the occasional consulting project in his core domain. He described this portfolio not as distraction but as strategy, multiple bets, diversified risk, the kind of enterprising energy that successful people admire.

The corporate role provided stability. The side ventures provided identity. The combination provided, above all else, the thing Deepak valued most: visibility. He was everywhere. His number was in more phones than he could count. His

name came up in conversations he was not part of. People wanted to be associated with him because association with Deepak Nayyar felt like momentum.

The problem was not that he was everywhere. It was what happened after he left the room.

Chapter 2: The Architecture of the Yes

2011 – 2017

Deepak Nayyar never said no. This was not generosity. It was the avoidance of discomfort dressed as generosity and the difference between those two things is the difference between a gift and a debt.

Every 'yes' that Deepak delivered created an expectation. An expectation created a commitment. A commitment, once made and not honoured, created a data point. And data points, accumulated over years across a professional network, create a reputation that operates entirely independently of the person's intentions.

The pattern was consistent across every domain he operated in. A business partner would bring him an opportunity, a vendor introduction, a joint proposal, a referral arrangement and Deepak would respond with warmth and enthusiasm. 'Yes, absolutely. Let me call them this week.' The call would not come. A follow-up would produce another enthusiastic affirmation. The follow-up's follow-up would produce a slightly cooler response. And then silence. Not hostile silence, Deepak was never hostile. Just the particular silence of a man who had moved on to the next room, the next conversation, the next yes, before the previous one had been honoured.

Projects stalled because of him. Collaborations were delayed until the opportunity window closed. Referral arrangements dissolved because the referred party was never actually contacted. Vendor payments were renegotiated after agreement, not dramatically, but through the slow erosion of 'I'll clear it by Friday' becoming 'give me till next week' becoming 'I'm sorting something out, don't worry.'

He never meant harm. This is the most important and the most irrelevant fact about Deepak Nayyar. Leadership is not measured by intention. It is measured by reliability. And between intention and reliability, there is only one thing: follow-through. Deepak Nayyar had everything except that.

Inside professional circles, a word had attached itself to his name. Betrayer.

Not because he cheated anyone. Not because he lied with intent. But because he had taught people, through repetition, that his word was the beginning of a story that would not reach its end.

PART TWO

THE COLLAPSE THAT STARTED AT HOME

> *"Credibility does not collapse loudly. It fades quietly — one unanswered call at a time, one missed deadline at a time, until the silence becomes the loudest thing about you."*

Chapter 3: The Layoff and What It Revealed

2017 — The Unravelling Begins

When the layoff came, Deepak told himself it was temporary. He had contacts. He had networks. He had five income streams. He had the social capital of twenty years in a city that runs on who you know.

What he discovered, in the weeks that followed, was that social capital and professional capital are not the same currency. People were happy to have a conversation with Deepak Nayyar. They were not offering him work. The distinction was precise and devastating: they liked him too much to use him for anything important.

The side ventures that were supposed to cushion the fall revealed their own fragility. The insurance agency had let renewals lapse because follow-up calls had not been made. The automobile business had a buyer who had been waiting three weeks for a callback that never came. The real estate deals that had been close to closing had been quietly taken by other brokers who showed up consistently. The share portfolio had been managed with the same scattered attention that characterized everything else, some wins, more drift, no discipline.

Vendor payments, which had always been slightly delayed, became very delayed. Commitments made to suppliers who had extended credit on the basis of relationship were renegotiated after the fact, not dishonestly, but in the way that communicates something worse than dishonesty: unreliability. 'I'll pay on the first,' becoming 'end of the month,' becoming 'wait for me to sort something out.'

School fees went unpaid until the school called. Electricity bills accumulated until the final notice arrived. The jugaadu style, the resourceful improvisation that had

always produced a last-minute solution just in time, was still producing solutions, but the cost of the last-minute was now being paid by people who had not agreed to absorb it.

And then the worst of it: the friends.

The friends who genuinely tried to help. Who called with job leads and received no callback. Who suggested business partnerships and heard 'absolutely, let me think about it' followed by three weeks of silence. Who offered collaboration ideas and watched them disappear into the same void that had consumed every previous commitment. These were not casual acquaintances. These were people who had chosen, with full knowledge of his pattern, to extend one more chance.

He burned through them one by one. Not dramatically. Quietly. In the way that people stop calling, not with anger, but with the quiet finality of people who have run out of the particular kind of hope that his charm had once been able to restore.

Chapter 4: What the Children Learned

The Household — 2017 to 2019

The most devastating section of this story is not about professional failure. It is about what happened inside the house.

Children learn what they live. Deepak's children, watching their father navigate the collapsed structure of his professional and financial life, began adopting, with the unconscious precision of children, the patterns they observed. Non-committal responses to questions about homework. Promises about chores that were not followed through. A certain evasiveness when accountability is approached.

They were not being taught this explicitly. They were absorbing it, the way children absorb everything, through observation of the person they spend the most time watching. The man who was teaching them, without intending to, was that commitment is something you say rather than something you do. That the conversation is enough. That follow-through is optional.

His wife had been managing the household's financial exposure with the quiet ferocity of a person who has been compensating for someone else's inconsistency for so long that the compensation has become invisible. Now, with the layoff and the collapsing side ventures and the vendors calling and the school fees overdue, the quiet ferocity became audible. Conversations that had been managed hardened into confrontations. The domestic space that had been a retreat from the consequences of his professional pattern became another arena where the consequences were present.

For the first time in years, there was nowhere to go. Every room had a version of the same question in it. And the question was not about money.

The question was: who are you, actually? Beneath the contacts and the networks and the warm yes and the charming follow-up that never came? When we strip away the social fluency and the entrepreneurial identity and the professional visibility, what is left?

For nearly six years, he did not have a good answer.

PART THREE

THE DIAGNOSIS NO ONE ELSE COULD DELIVER

> *"Transformation rarely begins with inspiration. It begins with discomfort so complete that there is no comfortable story left to tell yourself."*

Chapter 5: The Conversation He Had Been Avoiding

2019 — The Turning Point

After another failed collaboration, a joint venture that had been live for three weeks before his partner quietly withdrew, citing 'different working styles' in the careful language that people use when what they mean is 'I cannot rely on you', and another evening of strained domestic silence, Deepak sat alone and let himself be honest.

He was not a victim of the layoff. He was not a casualty of a difficult market or bad timing or the specific misfortune that had made each individual commitment difficult to honor. He was the common denominator. He had been the common denominator for the entirety of his professional life, and he had spent that life developing an explanation for every failure that located its origin outside himself.

The market. The client. The partner who wasn't flexible enough. The timing that wasn't right. The circumstances that made this particular commitment harder to honor than the last one. He had a story for everything except the one story that explained all of them.

He reached out not to network, not to find the next opportunity, not to charm his way into a new relationship that he would eventually fail to honour. He reached out to learn. He called senior leaders from his past who had watched his career with a combination of affection and quiet frustration. He engaged a professional coach. He spoke to experienced businessmen who had known him long enough to be honest without being cruel.

And for the first time perhaps the first time in his professional life, he did not manage the conversation. He did not deploy the charm. He did not redirect the

discomfort with an anecdote or a pivot to someone else's story. He sat in the feedback and let it reach him.

The diagnosis, from multiple sources in multiple conversations, was the same: he had a fear of commitment masquerading as enthusiasm. Every 'yes' was an escape from the discomfort of saying 'no' and from the accountability that a genuine commitment would have required him to honor. The scatter of five income streams was not strategy. It was avoidance the avoidance of going deep enough in any single direction that failure would be visible and attributable specifically to him.

He lacked discipline in follow-through. Not competence. Not intelligence. Not social skill. Discipline. The quiet, unglamorous, unrewarded work of doing the next thing on the list even when the next thing is difficult and nobody is watching and the easier option is to open a new conversation in a new room with a new person who does not yet know his pattern.

That was the diagnosis. Now came the harder part.

Chapter 6: Three Years of Small Kept Promises

2019 – 2022 — The Rebuild

He began with the smallest possible corrections. Not a new venture. Not a reinvention. The smallest possible unit of the change he needed: a single kept promise, followed by another.

He paid a vendor on the exact date he had agreed. Not a day later. He filed a tax document before the deadline not at 11:58 p.m. on the final day, but a week before, with the particular satisfaction of a man discovering that the anxiety of the approaching deadline is more expensive than the work of eliminating it. He attended every meeting he committed to and when he could not attend, he said so in advance, directly, instead of simply not appearing.

Most significantly and most painfully, he began saying no. This was the hardest correction of all, because every 'no' required him to sit in the discomfort that the 'yes' had always been designed to avoid. To say 'I cannot take this on right now'

to a person who was looking at him with expectation felt, in the moment, like a failure. It was, in fact, the first genuine act of professional integrity he had consistently practised.

He reduced his income streams from five to two the corporate consulting work he was genuinely skilled at, and one side venture that he committed to operating with the same rigour he was applying to everything else. He stopped attending every networking event he was invited to. He stopped collecting new contacts. He started servicing the relationships he already had following through on the things he had committed to with the people who were still, cautiously, giving him the benefit of whatever doubt remained.

The first year was not rewarding. People who had been burned by his pattern did not immediately recalibrate. Some tested him assigning small tasks with clear deadlines, watching whether the delivery materialized. Some ignored him not hostilely, but with the protective indifference of people who have learned not to depend on a particular source of disappointment. Some assumed relapse. When he delivered consistently for six months, one former partner reached out with a small project. He delivered it. Another followed.

Credibility rebuilds the way it erodes: quietly, through accumulated evidence, one small data point at a time. It cannot be announced. It cannot be charmed into existence. It can only be demonstrated, repeatedly, in the unglamorous space between the commitment and its delivery.

By the end of the third year, something had shifted in the language that his professional circle used about him. Not dramatically there was no ceremony, no public rehabilitation. But the word that had attached itself to his name had changed. Where once the circles that knew him would preface a reference with a quiet warning 'Deepak's great to talk to, but check if he follows through' there was now something different. Something closer to: 'He's changed. I've seen it myself.'

Committed collaborator. That was the new word. It had taken three years to earn two.

Chapter 7: What Home Looked Like After

2022 – 2025

The professional recovery was visible. The domestic recovery was quieter and, in every way that mattered, more significant.

His children, who had spent years absorbing the pattern of the uncommitted yes, began watching a different performance. Homework commitments that were made and kept. Financial obligations that were met on time and without drama. Promises about family time that were written into a calendar and honoured even when a professional opportunity presented itself at the same moment.

Children recalibrate more quickly than professional networks. They are less defended, more observant, and when what they see begins to change, more immediately responsive. The household conversations that had hardened during the worst years softened. Not because the past had been erased, but because the present was providing consistent evidence of something different.

Today, Deepak Nayyar is invited to speak about personal transformation not because he was always strong, but because he rebuilt from a documented and specific weakness. His talks are not inspirational in the easy sense. They are honest in the uncomfortable sense. He names the pattern. He names the years. He names what his inconsistency cost the people who trusted him professionally, financially, domestically before he understood that trust is not a social skill. It is a delivery record.

He is not famous for his recovery. He is trusted for it. The distinction, after everything, is the one that matters most.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar shows up in this story

Authenticity	Admitting to himself and others that he was the common denominator in every failure, not the market, not the economy, not bad luck
Values	Choosing to honor financial and professional commitments fully, even when the easier option was another deferral

Emotional Intelligence	Recognizing that charm had been a mask for insecurity, and that the insecurity needed naming before it could be corrected
Purpose	Shifting from scattered visibility to meaningful, focused contribution from being known to being depended on
Resilience	Sustaining three years of quiet, unglamorous, consistently delivered discipline when every old habit pulled against it
Responsiveness	Acting on feedback rather than defending against it; making each piece of honest counsel a decision point rather than a conversation to be managed

Charm can open doors. Character keeps them open. And the tragedy of Deepak Nayyar is that he had charm in abundance and spent twenty years mistaking it for character.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

Leadership Lessons from The Man Everyone Knew But No One Trusted

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN CREDIBILITY:

✔	Commit thoughtfully, say yes only when you have traced the full consequences of the commitment, including the delivery it requires
✔	Build depth over breadth; one well-served relationship is worth more than ten charmed introductions that lead nowhere
✔	Say no when you cannot deliver; the discomfort of the no is always smaller than the cost of the failed yes
✔	Honour financial and relational obligations on the agreed date, not the day that eventually becomes unavoidable
✔	Seek honest feedback when patterns repeat, and receive it without immediately relocating its origin to external circumstances
✔	Choose fewer things and do them with the consistency that builds the kind of trust that cannot be manufactured by charm
✔	Let your actions rebuild what your words damaged; credibility is a delivery record, not a social performance

WHAT ERODES CREDIBILITY AND ACCELERATES ISOLATION:

✗	Saying yes to avoid the discomfort of no the yes that cannot be honoured is more damaging than the no that was never given
✗	Confusing social visibility with professional credibility; being known and being trusted are entirely different currencies
✗	Renegotiating commitments after agreement even once, even gently because the pattern begins with the first renegotiation
✗	Hiding insecurity behind charm; the performance of confidence in the absence of follow-through is the most expensive persona to maintain

✗	Assuming trust resets automatically when circumstances change; trust resets only when behaviour changes and the changed behaviour is observed consistently over time
✗	Scattering across multiple ventures to avoid going deep enough in any one for failure to be clearly attributable to you
✗	Treating feedback as something to manage rather than something to act on; the defended conversation learns nothing

REFLECTION SPACE

Do not answer these questions for the person this story is about. Answer them for yourself.

Q1. When people think of you professionally, do they trust you to execute or do they enjoy your conversation and quietly manage their expectations about delivery? How would you know the difference?

Your reflection:

Q2. Where in your professional or personal life have you said yes when you meant maybe, and maybe when you meant no? What has the accumulated cost of those undisciplined affirmations been to the people who received them, and to your own reputation?

Your reflection:

Q3. If the people who have tried to work with you in the last two years were asked to describe your reliability in a single word, not your likeability, not your intelligence, not your network, but your reliability, what word would they use? Is that the word you would choose?

Your reflection:

Q4. What one pattern in your professional behaviour needs disciplined correction, not a reinvention, not a new venture, not a new identity, but one specific habit that, if changed consistently for three months, would make you measurably more reliable to the people who depend on you?

Your reflection:

Q5. What small commitment can you make and honor today, not next week, not after you have thought about it, but today that would begin, in the smallest possible way, the delivery record that trust requires?

Your reflection:

> *"Charm builds introductions. Commitment builds relationships. Consistency builds legacy. And the man who had all three in the right order was not the man at the beginning of this story. He was the man at the end of it."*

You are not judged by what you intend. You are remembered by what you deliver.

R

RESILIENCE

Definition

Resilience is the capacity to absorb difficulty, adapt to change, and continue forward with renewed strength – in short to bounce back.

What it Means for an Individual

For individuals, resilience is not the absence of hardship but the ability to recover from it. It involves learning from failure, adjusting strategies, and refusing to allow setbacks to define identity. Resilient people remain hopeful without being naive, realistic without becoming cynical.

What it Means for an Organisation

For organisations, resilience is the ability to survive disruptions such as economic downturns, technological shifts, and market crises while preserving core values. Resilient organisations learn quickly, adapt structures when needed, and maintain cultural stability even during uncertainty.

WHEN THE VAULTS STAYED OPEN

How Twenty Thousand People and One Leadership Team Refused to Let a Pandemic Close a Purpose

Charles Rodrigues · Ethan Mathews · Sreenivasan · Ranveer Singh · Abraham · Devankana · Biswajeet Banerjee · Sasikumar
Chennai | 2020 – 2022

> *"The NBFC had survived regulatory cycles, market contractions, competitive disruptions. It had never faced an event that simultaneously shut its branches, stranded its field workforce, froze its borrowers' cash flows, and made the paper-based operational model that thirty years had been built on suddenly, completely, inaccessible."*

Chapter 1: The Night the Rules Changed

Chennai — March 24, 2020 — 8 p.m.

It was a legacy institution in the truest sense, not old-fashioned, but deeply rooted. Twenty thousand employees. A branch network threaded across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and the coastal districts of Maharashtra and Odisha. Borrowers who were overwhelmingly people the formal banking system had not reached: small traders, agricultural households, self-employed women in semi-urban clusters, micro-entrepreneurs whose entire working capital depended on this NBFC's monthly disbursements.

This was not a technology company. It was a relationship company. The field officer who knew the borrower by name. The branch manager who understood local credit culture the way a doctor understands a long-term patient. The collections process was as much a social contract as a financial one. Paper was not a legacy limitation it was the medium through which trust had been built and delivered for three decades. The product was human presence, and the product had worked.

On the night of March 24, 2020, human presence was removed from the equation.

Charles Rodrigues read the Prime Minister's lockdown announcement from his home in Chennai. He sat for four minutes. Then he called Ethan Mathews.

"Twenty thousand people," he said. "By morning, every one of them needs to know two things: that their job is safe, and that we know they exist."

Ethan understood the first sentence immediately. The second — that we know they exist — was the sentence that would define the organisation's character for the next two years. Not that we are managing them. Not that we are monitoring them. That we know they exist, specifically, individually, as human beings with specific fears in a specific situation they did not choose.

Twenty thousand employees. Millions of borrowers who had no other option. One night to decide what kind of institution you intended to be.

> **Authenticity:** *Charles did not call his communications team. He called his CHRO. His first instinct was human: every one of them needs to know we know they exist. That instinct, before any strategy had been formed, before any plan had been drafted, was the institution's most important leadership act of the entire crisis.*
>
> **Values:** *The commitment was made before it was tested. Not a single layoff. Not a single borrower abandoned. These were not announced as policies. They were stated as non-negotiables — the commitments the strategy would have to honour rather than the outcomes the strategy might produce if convenient.*

Chapter 2: Seventy-Two Hours — Building the BCP From Scratch

March 25–27, 2020 — Emergency War Room

There was no business continuity plan sitting on a shelf. There had been plans — various iterations of risk documentation that addressed market disruption, liquidity events, regulatory interventions. None of them addressed the complete, simultaneous removal of every physical touchpoint the institution operated through.

Charles convened the leadership team - Ethan, Sreenivasan, Ranveer, Abraham, Devankana, Biswajeet, and Sasikumar, in twice-daily video calls beginning the morning after the announcement. The calls had a specific discipline: each session produced decisions, not deliberations. The luxury of extended deliberation had been removed by the situation.

Sasikumar owned the risk architecture. The moratorium announced by the RBI gave borrowers relief — but the institution needed a triage framework that could distinguish between the borrower whose income had been genuinely frozen by the lockdown and the borrower whose credit profile had been deteriorating before the pandemic arrived. He built three categories within forty-eight hours: borrowers in acute crisis, borrowers in temporary disruption, borrowers whose pre-pandemic profile required separate management. Three categories. Three response protocols. The framework was operational before the first post-lockdown field contact.

Ranveer built the hybrid operations model for field activity. The branch could not receive customers. The field officer could not visit borrowers. But essential operations — disbursements to borrowers in acute need, critical collections from those who could pay — had to continue at a minimum viable level. He designed a contactless model within seventy-two hours: defined safe operating protocols for field visits where genuinely necessary, digital-first alternatives for everything that could be converted, and a daily operations dashboard that gave Chennai visibility into field activity across every geography simultaneously.

Biswajeet translated every decision into field-implementable language. The policies being decided in Chennai needed to reach a branch officer in rural Andhra Pradesh with the same clarity they carried in the boardroom. He established a daily HRBP briefing, a structured voice message to each regional HRBP, summarizing the day's operational and HR decisions in plain language, followed by a live question window. The policies arrived in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, because a policy that could not be understood in the language of the person implementing it was not yet a policy.

Seventy-two hours. No manual. No precedent. Eight leaders building the structure while standing inside the storm.

Resilience: *The BCP was not adapted from an existing framework – it was constructed under conditions that were simultaneously the reason it was needed and the obstacle to building it. This is the most demanding form of institutional resilience: making the decision before the certainty arrives, and revising as the certainty improves.*

Responsiveness: *Sasikumar's triage framework was operational before the first field contact. Ranveer's hybrid model was in the hands of branch managers within three days. Biswajeet's daily briefings began before the ink on the first policy decision was dry. Responsiveness here was not speed alone – it was the combination of acting early and designing to be correctable.*

Chapter 3: The Twenty-Thousand-Call Initiative

April – June 2020 — The Most Human Thing the Institution Had Ever Done

Ethan Mathews and Sreenivasan had been discussing the idea from the first emergency session. The principle was both simple and operationally staggering: every one of the twenty thousand employees would receive a personal call from someone in the HR function or the HRBP network. Not an automated voice message, not a circular from the MD's office, not a WhatsApp broadcast. A call, a real voice, conducted in the employee's preferred language, asking two things: are you safe, and what do you need?

Sreenivasan built the tracking system. A shared document, updated in real time, recording each call, its date, the employee's situation as reported, and any follow-up action required. It was not sophisticated technology it was a Google Sheet maintained manually by twenty-five people simultaneously, because the situation did not permit the luxury of waiting for a better tool. The sophistication was in the commitment, not the software.

The calls were distributed across the HR function and the HRBP network, organized by geography, function, and language. Tamil-speaking employees received calls in Tamil. Hindi-speaking field officers in Maharashtra received calls in Hindi. Telugu-speaking branch managers in Andhra Pradesh received calls in Telugu. The language choice was not courtesy, it was the signal that the institution knew who each person was specifically, not as a category.

What the calls revealed was both expected and deeply instructive. Expected: anxiety about job security, about EMI payments on personal loans, about elderly parents in cities they could not reach, about children out of school. The standard human landscape of a lockdown. Instructive: the number of employees who said, when asked what they needed, that they needed to know whether the organisation still thought of them as people rather than as field headcount. The call itself, the fact of it, the specificity of it, the language of it was often the most complete answer to the question it was asking.

Sreenivasan spoke directly with a field collections officer from a branch in a district in southern Tamil Nadu. The officer had been with the institution for eleven years. He said, quietly and without elaboration: "*Phone vandhuchu. Konjam lesa feel aachu.*" A phone call came. I felt a little lighter.

Not a salary increase. Not a policy revision. Not a formal assurance from the communications team. A phone call from a person who knew his name and asked how he was. Eleven years of institutional relationship compressed into the weight of a single call, made possible by two HR leaders who had decided that twenty thousand individuals needed to be held one at a time.

Twenty thousand calls. Twenty thousand people who learned their institution knew they existed. That knowledge compounded for two years.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *The twenty-thousand-call initiative was the most operationally demanding act of institutional empathy in the organisation's history. Ethan and Sreenivasan understood something easy to state and hard to execute at scale: confidence is not built through announcements, it is built through the specific, individual experience of being personally seen. Each call was a unit of trust deposited into a relationship that the next two years would draw on heavily.*

Chapter 4: Extending the Circle — Abraham and the Customer Outreach

April 2020 — Beyond the Internal Boundary

Abraham watched the twenty-thousand-call initiative take shape from the first emergency session. He understood its logic. He also understood that the institution's human boundary did not end at its employee roster.

The NBFC's borrowers, the small trader in Coimbatore, the agricultural household in the Krishna delta, the self-employed garment worker in Tirupur, had been receiving the institution's financial products for years. They had not been receiving its presence. They had received loan officers, collections officers, and disbursal confirmations. They had not, in most cases, received a call from a relationship manager who asked how the family was.

Abraham issued a directive to all business heads in the second week of the lockdown: every relationship manager would personally reach every borrower in their portfolio. Not to assess repayment capacity. Not to discuss moratorium terms. To ask: is the family safe, and what does the business need right now?

The calls were logged. The patterns they revealed fed directly into Ranveer's operational planning and Sasikumar's risk recalibration, which sectors were most affected, which geographies were recovering earliest, which borrower categories needed restructuring and which needed only time. The human outreach became the institution's most accurate early-recovery intelligence, because the borrowers were telling relationship managers things they would not have disclosed to a formal credit assessment process.

What Abraham understood and what the data subsequently confirmed was that trust invested in a crisis moment is the most durable kind. Borrowers who had been called personally during the lockdown, whose situations had been heard rather than only processed, renewed their relationship with the NBFC at rates that no competing institution could match in the post-lockdown recovery. The call was an act of values. The portfolio retention was the return on that act, measured two years later.

> **Purpose:** *The NBFC existed to provide financial access to people who had no alternative. In the lockdown, those borrowers needed the institution more than they ever had in normal operations. Abraham's directive was the expression of that purpose in its most direct available form: when your borrowers are frightened, you call them. Not because it is commercially optimal. Because it is what you are for.*

Chapter 5: The Technology Leap — Paper to Platform

May 2020 – December 2021 — The Transformation That Could Not Be Deferred

The digital transformation roadmap had existed in draft form for three years. It had been reviewed twice, deprioritized once, and was sitting in a strategy document when the lockdown made it unavoidable. Not preferable — unavoidable. The paper-based model that had served the institution for thirty years could not function under conditions that removed physical presence from

the equation. The transformation that management had found difficult to prioritize in normal operations became, overnight, the only available path to operational continuity.

Abraham's strategic initiative's function owned the deployment architecture. He stated two non-negotiables at the first planning session: the technology had to serve the field officer before it served the management dashboard; and every deployment had to be accompanied by capability building at the same pace. A tool installed without the ability to use it was not an asset; it was a liability dressed as progress.

Devankana's learning function became the engine of the second non-negotiable. She designed the learning sprint before the deployment was complete not after, not alongside in a loosely coordinated way, but integrated into the rollout schedule so that a field officer received their device and their training in the same week. The training was built for the actual user: vernacular language materials, job-relevant scenarios drawn from real field situations, short repeated modules rather than long one-time onboarding sessions. Every branch had a designated peer trainer, a field officer identified by Biswajeet's HRBP network as technically confident and relationally trusted, who could provide immediate support rather than waiting for a helpdesk call.

Ranveer rebuilt the operations model around the technology rather than around the paper it replaced. Loan applications processed digitally. Disbursements confirmed by SMS receipt. Collections recorded on a field officer app, the paper receipt becoming the exception rather than the standard. The field officer's day still began with human relationships, that was the product, and the product had not changed — but it now ended with a digital record that gave the institution visibility it had never possessed before: real-time portfolio health, collections patterns, early delinquency signals three weeks before they would previously have been visible.

Sasikumar's risk function was the primary beneficiary of that visibility. For thirty years, risk management had operated on a lag, monthly reports compiled from branch registers, trends visible only after they had already materialised. The digital infrastructure gave him current data. He could see a collections shortfall forming, distinguish between temporary disruption and genuine deterioration, and

calibrate the institution's exposure with a precision that the paper-based model had never made possible. The risk function that had been reactive became, for the first time, genuinely proactive.

The adoption was faster than anyone had planned for, because the learning had been designed for the person rather than the system, and because Biswajeet's HRBP network was feeding real-time adoption intelligence back into the deployment planning. Where adoption was slow, the learning was redesigned. Where a branch manager was resistant, the HRBP understood whether the resistance was technical or cultural and responded accordingly. The transformation treated each branch as an individual rather than as a unit in a rollout plan.

The institution that had operated on paper for thirty years completed its digital transformation in eighteen months. Not because technology had become easier — because purpose had become urgent.

> **Resilience:** *Three years of deferred transformation delivered in eighteen months, alongside normal operations, during a pandemic. The resilience was not in the absence of difficulty – the technology deployments had failures, the adoption had resistance, the data migration had errors. The resilience was in the commitment to continue, correct, and complete.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *Devankana's learning sprint began before the deployment was finished. Abraham's deployment architecture began before the technology vendor had finalised the contract. The institution moved toward the solution before the solution was ready, because the people who needed it could not wait.*

Chapter 6: Two Years Later - The Character the Crisis Built

2022 — What Compounded

By the end of 2021, the institution that emerged looked different from the one that had entered the lockdown. The differences were visible in the technology, in the digital loan processing, the real-time risk dashboards, the field officer app that had replaced the register. But the more significant differences were not in the systems. They were in the people.

Employee confidence surveys showed a measurable shift. Employees who had been reached by the twenty-thousand-call initiative in April 2020 reported significantly higher institutional trust scores in the 2021 and 2022 cycles than those reached later. The calls had not been forgotten. They had become the foundation on which two years of operational pressure and transformation had been built the specific, durable kind of organisational trust that is produced by being personally seen at a moment of genuine vulnerability.

The industry ranking improved significantly a movement from a solid mid-tier position to a recognition that placed the institution among the sector's leading performers on portfolio quality, operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement. Each of those dimensions traced to a specific decision: Sasikumar's proactive risk management, Ranveer's hybrid model, Abraham's customer outreach, Ethan and Sreenivasan's human infrastructure. The ranking was not the result of a campaign to improve a ranking. It was the result of four decisions made under pressure, each in service of the institution's purpose rather than its metrics.

Revenue grew not despite the pandemic but in significant part because of how the institution had responded to it. Borrowers who had been contacted personally during the lockdown, whose repayment situations had been restructured with humanity rather than policy rigidity, returned to the NBFC for their next credit cycle at rates that no competing institution in the segment matched. The trust deposited in the crisis conversation had compounded into commercial loyalty that the paper-and-process model of the pre-pandemic institution could not have generated.

Charles addressed the institution's full leadership community at the 2022 annual gathering. He said something they had not heard before and that they would not forget.

"In March 2020, I thought we were managing a crisis. I understand now that we were being given an examination. Every decision we made across those two years was a statement about what this institution believed it was for. The numbers in front of you today are not

the output of a strategy. They are the output of a character held consistently, by eight people and twenty thousand people, in conditions that made the holding genuinely difficult."

The vaults stayed open. The people stayed. The borrowers stayed. The character held. The institution that emerged was not the same one that had entered it was a stronger version of what it had always intended to be.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How eight leaders held twenty thousand people and a mission together across two years of crisis

Authenticity	Charles is standing before twenty thousand employees virtually, unscripted and saying: I do not have all the answers, but I will not abandon anyone. The honesty that made an organisation believe the institution was worth staying for
Values	Not a single employee was laid off. Not one borrower was left without human contact. Both commitments were held when the easier path was available, and the harder one was chosen without announcement
Emotional Intelligence	Ethan and Sreenivasan, along with their team, personally called all twenty thousand+ employees, reading each individual not as headcount but as a human being with specific fears in a specific situation; the most operationally demanding act of institutional empathy in the organisation's history
Purpose	The NBFC existed to provide financial access to underserved borrowers who had no alternative. In the lockdown, those borrowers needed the institution more than ever. The crisis clarified the purpose rather than obscuring it
Resilience	A paper-and-people business deploying technology at scale in conditions that offered no manual and no precedent, converting three years of deferred transformation into eighteen months of embedded practice
Responsiveness	Business Continuity Plan built in 72 hours. Abraham's customer outreach directive was issued in week one. Devankana's learning sprint was running before the technology was fully deployed. Acting before certainty, in service of the people who needed action

A financial institution's true test is not the year markets perform well. It is the year the ground shifts beneath every assumption the business was built on and the people the institution was built to serve have nowhere else to go.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

Leadership Lessons from When the Vaults Stayed Open

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN EVERYTHING IS TESTED AT ONCE:

✔	State the non-negotiables before the strategy Charles's two commitments came before any plan existed; the plan had to serve them, not the reverse
✔	Reach every person personally, at whatever scale that requires twenty thousand calls is an irrational commitment only if you have misunderstood what confidence is built from
✔	Build the contingency framework before it is needed Sasikumar's seventy-two-hour triage was operational before the first field contact; preparation made the response possible
✔	Deploy technology in service of the person doing the work, not the leader monitoring it Devankana's learner-first principle produced the adoption rate the deployment plan had not dared to project
✔	Extend the human outreach to those you serve, not only to those who serve you, Abraham's customer directive produced portfolio retention that two years of conventional relationship management would not have generated
✔	Translate leadership decisions into the language of the person implementing them Biswajeet's daily multilingual briefings converted policy into practice; a policy understood in Chennai but not in a district branch is not yet a policy
✔	Recognise that the crisis is the character examination Charles's 2022 reflection named what the two years had actually been; the numbers were the output of the character, not the strategy

WHAT COLLAPSES INSTITUTIONS WHEN CRISIS ARRIVES:

✗	Waiting for certainty before communicating, twenty thousand employees cannot wait twenty-four hours to know whether their institution is present; the uncertainty itself is the injury
✗	Treating employees as headcount in a crisis the twenty-thousand-call initiative was operationally demanding precisely because it refused the easier, less human alternative of a broadcast message
✗	Deploying technology without deploying the capability to use it a tool installed without training is a liability; the adoption rate follows the learning design, not the deployment schedule
✗	Using a crisis as a reason to retreat from borrowers the lockdown was an argument for Abraham's outreach directive, not an argument against it; the borrowers who most needed the institution were least able to reach it
✗	Allowing departmental boundaries to survive a crisis that requires the full institution the seventy-two-hour BCP was possible because eight leaders stopped defending territory; the pandemic had removed the conditions that made territorial defensiveness viable

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REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about your institution, your team, and the non-negotiables that would hold or not hold, under the weight of a genuine crisis.

Q1. What are the two things every person in your organisation needs to know in a crisis before any plan has been written? Have you stated them? Would your people know them without being told at the moment they need them most?

Your reflection:

Q2. If you committed to personally reaching every person in your organisation during a crisis not through a circular but through a call, what would it reveal about what your people actually need from you that the normal operating environment has never surfaced?

Your reflection:

Q3. In your institution's last major crisis, was the technology deployed in service of the people doing the field work, or in service of the leadership's visibility into that work? What did that design choice produce in practice?

Your reflection:

Q4. Have you ever extended a human outreach to the people you serve not to transact but to care, during a moment of genuine difficulty for them? What did that conversation produce in the relationship that the transaction channel could not have produced?

Your reflection:

Q5. If your institution faced a Charles Rodrigues moment tonight a complete, simultaneous disruption of every operational assumption you have built on what would your equivalent of 'the vaults stayed open' be? And is the character already in place to make that possible?

Your reflection:

> *"In 2020, we thought we were managing a crisis. I understand now that we were being examined. Every decision we made across those two years was a statement about what this institution believed it was for. The numbers you see today are not the output of a strategy. They are the output of a character held consistently, in conditions that made the holding genuinely difficult."*

Because eight leaders decided, in the hours before any plan existed, what the institution was for and held that decision consistently for two years. That is what character looks like at an institutional scale

THE ANSWER

You Were Carrying All Along

JNU, a Protégé, and the Sound of Quiet Wisdom
Bengaluru | 2025

> *"Wisdom does not shout. It waits until you are quiet enough to hear it. And the mentor who understands this is not the one who fills the silence it is the one who creates the conditions for the silence to speak."*

Chapter 1: The Question Beneath the Question

Bengaluru — 2025 — A Waterfront Hotel Lobby

For over three decades, Jawahar Naresh Uday had sat across from versions of the same person. Different ages. Different industries. Different cities. Different specific pressures and particular crises and individual configurations of the professional difficulty that brings someone to a table with a mentor and says, in so many words: I am lost and I need someone to help me find the path.

The questions changed in their surface features. But beneath every variation was the same tremor the same fundamental anxiety of a person who has built a professional life with considerable skill and is beginning to suspect that the architecture and the interior are not aligned. Am I on the right path? What do I do when the system rewards what I don't believe in? How do I continue when I feel split between who I am and what the world currently demands?

What made JNU remarkable was not the brilliance of his responses. He had responses thirty years of observation and experience had produced a specific and durable understanding of how people find their way through professional and personal complexity. But he had learned, somewhere in those decades, that the most powerful thing a mentor can offer is rarely an answer. It is a question that makes the other person's own answer visible.

He did not rush to fix people. He did not decorate uncertainty with quick advice the particular professional habit of the accomplished person who equates speed of response with quality of wisdom. He stayed. Unhurried. Present. And that staying in a world of scheduled fifteen-minute conversations and five-point action plans was rare enough to be the most significant thing he brought to any table.

On a quiet evening near a waterfront hotel in Bengaluru, a young professional in their early thirties sat across from him. The city moved in the background startups pivoting, markets fluctuating, careers accelerating and collapsing in the particular rhythm of a technology hub that has learned to treat velocity as virtue.

The year had been heavy. A shifting job market. A family transition that had made the professional pressures feel simultaneously more urgent and less important. Ethical dilemmas at work the specific, grinding kind that do not arrive as dramatic moments but as slow accumulations: values colliding with incentives, integrity measured against advancement, the question of who you are being tested by daily decisions that nobody will ever formally evaluate.

"I feel like I'm constantly choosing between growth and integrity," the younger voice said finally. "How do I know which way to go?"

JNU did not answer immediately. He had learned that the space before a response carries more weight than the response itself.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Not filling the silence. Not rushing toward the fix. Staying – completely, without the performance of helpful urgency – until the real question was present in the room. This is what it means to listen before you speak.*

Chapter 2: Tell Me About Your Mother

The Unexpected Question

Then JNU asked a question that landed unexpectedly, sideways, into the professional conversation it interrupted.

"Tell me about your mother."

It was not strategic. It was not a therapeutic technique deployed from a mentor's playbook. It was a question asked by someone who had learned, through decades of watching people find their own answers, that the source of the guidance they were seeking was almost always present, in the values they had absorbed before any organisation had a chance to complicate them, in the lives they had watched closely enough for the watching to become formation.

The younger professional hesitated. The question did not fit the conversation's professional frame. They had come with a career dilemma and had received, in response, an invitation to speak about a parent. But something in JNU's stillness, the quality of his waiting, the absence of any impatience to arrive somewhere, made the hesitation brief.

They began.

About a woman who had faced financial strain without complaint, who had never described what she was doing as management or leadership or character-building but who had practised all three, daily, in the specific unglamorous decisions of a life navigated with more grace than the circumstances had required. Who had balanced dignity and hardship without choosing between them. Who had endured not because she had certainty about outcomes but because she had a clarity about purpose that made the uncertainty manageable. Who had never articulated a values framework, but had lived one, every day, in front of the person now sitting at this table, who had been watching.

As the story unfolded, something shifted in the room. The anxiety in the protégé's voice softened. The quality of their attention changed, from the anxious forward-leaning of someone trying to extract an answer to the more grounded attention of someone remembering something they had always known.

JNU nodded. He had seen this before. The answer revealing itself to the person who had been carrying it, through the specific mechanism of being asked to describe it in a different form.

You already know which way to go. You have been carrying the answer inside you and searching for it outside.

> **Purpose:** *The mother's life the endurance grounded in clarity about what the endurance was building, was the answer the protégé had been searching for in market dynamics and performance frameworks and career advice. It had been present all along, as lived experience rather than articulated principle.*
>
> **Values:** *They are not acquired in an MBA. They are not written into you by HR policies. They are inherited and chosen and practised or they are not present at all. JNU's question worked because the values were already there. All the question did was make them visible.*

Chapter 3: What Wisdom Sounds Like

The Harder Truth — and the Walk Back

JNU spoke after the story had finished. Not immediately, he allowed the space in which the story had landed to remain for a moment longer, because the space was doing work that words would interrupt if they arrived too quickly.

"Authenticity is not something you acquire in an MBA." A pause. "Values are not written into you by HR policies. Emotional intelligence is not a course you attend. Purpose is not a LinkedIn headline. Resilience is not motivational language. Responsiveness is not speed."

He looked directly at the person across the table.

"These are qualities you inherit, choose, and practice. You inherited them. You are choosing them. Now you must practice them."

Then he added the harder truth the one that most mentors soften, because it is uncomfortable and because the protégé has come seeking reassurance rather than reality.

"And you will fail." Another pause, allowing the words to settle without defensiveness. "At times, you will compromise. You will doubt. You will overreact. So, did I. So does everyone."

"The goal is not perfection. The goal is return."

"Return to what you know is right. Again, and again."

That is what wisdom sounds like. Not grand instruction. Not a comprehensive framework for ethical decision-making under professional pressure. Not a five-point strategy. Just: return. Again, and again. To what you already know. To what the story you just told reveals you have always carried.

The conversation ended without an action plan. There was no career blueprint. No structured path forward. Just direction which is different from a map and worth more, because a map tells you the route but direction tells you the orientation, and orientation is what survives the moments when the map turns out to be wrong.

Outside, a cool breeze moved across the waterfront toward the shore, away from it, returning again. Ancient rhythm. Consistent. Unhurried. The conversation had had the same quality.

The protégé did not leave with certainty. They left with clarity. And clarity is stronger.

> **Resilience:** *'The goal is not perfection. The goal is return.' This is the most honest and most useful definition of resilience available: not the absence of failure, not the prevention of misalignment, but the consistent capacity to return to what you know is right when you have moved away from it.*
>
> **Responsiveness:** *Acting from inner clarity rather than external pressure — the waterfront's ancient rhythm as the metaphor: toward, away, returning. Not reactivity. Not speed. The deep responsiveness of knowing your nature and aligning with it consistently, even when the world's pull is in a different direction.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How each pillar arrived not as instruction, but as recognition

Authenticity	Recognizing the internal conflict rather than masking it with ambition or performance being honest enough with yourself to name the split between who you are and what the world is currently rewarding
Values	Anchoring decisions in the moral framework already present, not acquired in an MBA Programme or written into policy, but inherited and practised across a lifetime before the career began

Emotional Intelligence	JNU's stillness: listening until the real question surfaced; asking about the mother rather than the market; creating the conditions in which the answer could become visible rather than providing one
Purpose	Understanding why you do what you do beyond the reward it produces, the enduring 'why' that remains when the incentives change
Resilience	'The goal is not perfection. The goal is return.' Returning to what you know is right, again and again, after each moment of compromise or doubt or misalignment
Responsiveness	Acting from inner clarity rather than external pressure, knowing your nature, aligning with it, and continuing toward what matters even when the world pulls elsewhere

True mentors do not give you answers. They help you hear your own. And what makes that rare - genuinely, uncomfortably rare, is that it requires the mentor to be more interested in the person finding their own clarity than in the pleasure of providing it.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN THEY MENTOR AND WHEN THEY SEEK GUIDANCE:

✔	Seek direction, not validation, the mentor who tells you what you want to hear is not serving you; the mentor who helps you find what you already know is
✔	Listen longer than you speak, JNU's stillness was not passivity; it was the active discipline of creating space for the real question to surface
✔	Reflect on the values you inherited before the career complicated them; they are still there; they are still the answer; the question is whether you are consulting them
✔	Accept that misalignment happens and return anyway, perfection is not the goal; the return is the practice
✔	Ask the unexpected question, 'tell me about your mother,' redirected the entire conversation to where the answer actually lived
✔	Choose internal clarity over external applause, clarity is stronger than certainty; it survives the moments when certainty dissolves
✔	Understand that the AVEPRR pillars are not acquired, they are inherited, chosen, and practised; the inheritance already happened; the choosing is now

WHAT PREVENTS YOU FROM HEARING THE ANSWER YOU ALREADY CARRY:

✗	Outsourcing moral decisions to the system or to the mentor, the system will not tell you who to be; the mentor cannot tell you who you are; only you can access that
✗	Chasing growth detached from values, growth in the wrong direction compounds the distance from what you are actually for
✗	Mistaking speed for direction, responsiveness is not velocity; it is the alignment between your nature and your action
✗	Suppressing internal conflict rather than examining it, the split between who you are and what the world rewards is not a problem to be managed; it is information to be engaged with
✗	Searching externally for answers that live internally, thirty years of formation have already given you the framework; the work is making it conscious, not finding something new

REFLECTION SPACE

Let these questions be slow. The answer you are looking for is already present; it may need a moment of stillness to become audible.

Q1. When you are conflicted between what the system rewards and what you know is right, whose example anchors you? Name them. What specifically do they demonstrate, and how long have you been carrying that demonstration without fully consulting it?

Your reflection:

Q2. Am I searching externally for answers I already carry internally? What is the evidence that the answer I am currently looking for is already present, in my formation, in my values, in the lives I have watched closely enough for the watching to become my own orientation?

Your reflection:

Q3. Where in your current season are you choosing reward over alignment? Not dramatically in the small, daily, individually explainable ways that accumulate into the particular discomfort of the person who is succeeding professionally and unsettled personally?

Your reflection:

Q4. What does 'returning to what is right' mean in your current season? Not in the abstract specifically. What is the one orientation, the one value, the one commitment that you have moved away from and that, returned to, would change the quality of the decision you are currently holding?

Your reflection:

Q5. If JNU asked you tonight, across a table, unhurried, with the quality of stillness that creates space rather than filling it, 'tell me about your mother,' what would surface? And what does the story that surfaces tell you about the answer you have been carrying?

Your reflection:

"Authenticity is not something you acquire in an MBA. Values are not written into you by HR policies. Emotional intelligence is not a course you attend. Purpose is not a LinkedIn headline. Resilience is not motivational language. Responsiveness is not speed. These are qualities you inherit, choose, and practice. You inherited them. You are choosing them. Now you must practice them."

You have been carrying it too.

The question is not where to find it. The question is whether you are still enough to hear it.

R

RESPONSIVENESS

Definition

Responsiveness is the discipline of observing change carefully and responding thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively.

What it Means for an Individual

For individuals, responsiveness means reading situations clearly and adjusting behaviour wisely. It involves listening before acting, gathering information before judging, and responding proportionately to circumstances. Responsive individuals create stability in uncertain environments.

What it Means for an Organisation

For organisations, responsiveness reflects agility with responsibility. Responsive organisations recognise shifts in markets, technology, and society early. They adjust strategies without abandoning values, communicate transparently during change, and make decisions that balance speed with wisdom.

THE ANTIDOTE

When Those Who Lead Betray

India | 2009 – 2015

Based on true events inside a multi-billion-dollar global organisation

PART ONE - THE CULL

> *"Leadership character shows itself most clearly when the walls are closing in."*

Chapter 1: The Room Where India Burned

November 2009 — First Week

The conference line crackled to life at precisely 8 a.m. on a Monday that the India leadership team would never forget. From across the Pacific, two senior emissaries of the Global Headquarters had joined the APAC review call, not as spectators, but as surgeons arriving to assess the damage. India, they announced without ceremony, was top-heavy, target-deficient, and demoralised. The global engagement survey had placed the India operation below the company's own average, a slow-burning embarrassment that had finally ignited into a boardroom crisis. Global client projects had been mishandled. Names from the India Senior Leadership Team were circulating in GHQ hallways for entirely the wrong reasons.

The India SLT received the verdict in silence. Some stared at their screens. A few took notes. None pushed back. This was the anatomy of a failed leadership - not one dramatic collapse, but a long sequence of small surrenders of integrity, each one normalizing the next, until the organisation had become, floor by floor and city by city, a place where fear had replaced purpose.

What nobody in that call fully grasped was that the next ninety days would serve as the most lethal stress test the leadership could be subjected to. Some would

bend. A few would break. And two men, in two different cities, would refuse to do either.

Chapter 2: The Forty Percent Decree

Late November 2009

Within few days of that review call, the India SLT emerged from its bunker with a plan. It was swift, blunt, and designed entirely for the benefit of the people who designed it.

The workforce would be trimmed by forty percent. Mid-level managers. Ground staff. People who had spent years building client relationships, delivering projects, and keeping the engine running while their leaders attended offsite retreats. A blanket freeze was slapped on all marketing and sales activity. Travel was prohibited, except for the SLT, for whom every privilege remained magnificently intact. Their cabins still hummed with air-conditioned comfort. Their expense accounts remained unqueried. Their Orkut profiles were updated daily, tagged photographs from parties appearing with a cheerfulness that bordered on the obscene.

At the top of this machinery of elimination sat two men: Sunil Cheriyan (SC), the COO, a communications-averse careerist whose primary skill appeared to be monitoring LinkedIn and ordering from Flipkart between video calls, and Vikrant Verma (VV), the CHRO, who had abandoned every instinct of a human-resources professional to become the operation's most enthusiastic executioner. VV had no say in the SLT. He earned his seat at the table not through courage, but through compliance.

The directive reached the offices without warning, without negotiation, and without legal clarity: reduce headcount by mid-December. People were asked to leave immediately, without notice period payments, without settlement clarity. Performers with three years of strong reviews were handed walking papers. Client deliveries buckled. Escalations multiplied. And when global clients complained, the SLT issued a unified, contemptible narrative: the ground-level workforce had

simply lost the will to perform. The market, they said. The attitude, they said. Not once did they look inward.

Chapter 3: The Soldier Who Would Not Fall

December 2009

Into this storm walked Rudra Pratap Singh (RPS). He had come from a world where orders were questioned when lives depended on it, where responsibility was shouldered rather than delegated, and where a man's word was the document that mattered more than any signed memo.

RPS headed a HRBP for a strategic business unit and had spent years designing people initiatives that actually worked. When the scrap orders came, he sat down, pulled three years of performance data, pipeline projections, and market-recovery indicators, and placed them in front of the SLT with the quiet precision of a man defusing a bomb. The performers being marked for exit were assets the company could not afford to lose, not with the market already showing signs of recovery. His analysis was methodical, his language direct, his stance immovable.

The SLT did not engage with the data. Instead, Sunil Cheriyan (SC) went personal. The trigger was a LinkedIn recommendation. RPS had written a professional endorsement for a mid-level manager the SLT had marked for removal. SC called it insubordination. VV joined the call with smooth menace, declaring RPS could be terminated for the act. The recommendation had to be withdrawn by the end of day and confirmed in writing with a deletion screenshot as proof.

RPS listened. Then he asked for everything they were saying, in writing. The line went silent. That silence was a verdict: they had no ground to stand on. He did not withdraw the recommendation. He did not apologise. The blow to SC and VV's authority was not loud, but it was permanent. This is Accountability in its most stripped-down form: the refusal to perform an action one knows to be wrong, regardless of personal cost.

Chapter 4: The Ally in Bangalore

December 2009

A thousand miles south, in Bangalore, the SLT had a different problem. Arjun Maurya (AM) was not a whistleblower by nature. He was a builder. Twenty years inside the same organisation, four business lines, three of them running profitably through the very recession the SLT was using to justify mass termination. When the cull directive reached him, AM pushed back, not with emotion, but with simple, unassailable business logic.

SC and VV, unused to being challenged by someone they could not easily dismiss, responded the only way they knew: they got personal. It did not work. AM had seen too many corporate winters to be frightened by a summer storm.

In the background, escalation mails had begun arriving at the GHQ in the United States, with specific names, specific deeds, some data. The GHQ forwarded them to the APAC President of Operations, who was himself a quiet supporter of Cheriyan's plan. APAC slow-walked the process. But the mails kept coming. Everyday. The GHQ, which had an instinct for protecting its reputation, began to act. This was no longer a regional HR problem. This was a governance crisis.

Chapter 5: The Ghost in the Settlement

Mid-December 2009

Then, just as the cull was reaching its bloodiest phase, the ghost arrived.

The Bangalore office received a legal notice. A family was seeking the full-and-final settlement of their deceased daughter, a former employee whose dues had gone unpaid for over eight months. When the family had approached the company, they were turned away: the office had no evidence of the family members' identity, they were told. The family returned with something worse. Their daughter had contracted a fatal infection from unhygienic toilet facilities on the company premises. The records existed. The communications existed. A case was filed in the Bangalore court.

RPS was transferred to Bangalore a punishment dressed as a posting. No formal communication. No stated reason. The intention was clear: put him far from Delhi, remove his influence, wait for him to resign. It was a mistake. They had placed their two most dangerous opponents in the same room.

RPS was welcomed by this legal letter. He dived into action and ensured justice to the deceased is done. The SLT, which had spent months evading accountability for every living employee, now found itself legally obligated to answer for a dead one. The dues were cleared, hastily and quietly. But the stain did not come out.

PART TWO - THE ALLIANCE

> *"You cannot intimidate two people simultaneously when each draws strength from the other."*

Chapter 6: When the Punishment Became the Platform

Early 2010

RPS arrived in Bangalore not as a defeated man but as a man handed unexpected proximity to the one ally capable of matching his own resolve. He and Arjun Maurya shared office space, a common enemy, and a shared refusal to define themselves by the titles on their doors.

They mapped the damage together, not just personnel losses, but the institutional memory that had been discarded, the client relationships frayed, the competency gaps torn into the workforce. Then, quietly, without announcing it upward, they began to build something. A new business line focused on skills and competency enhancement. They signed agreements with two campuses in South India. The model would allow the company to retain people, creating a pipeline of new talent for the next growth phase. The revenue potential was real. Within 3 months, the pipeline showed INR 50 lakhs in committed business with signed contracts.

When the senior leadership (SL) gang heard of it, SC wanted the model handed over to present to GHQ as his own initiative. VV demanded the operating model be disclosed. Both AM and RPS and every manager in their team maintained absolute silence about the details. The gang could not extract what they could not threaten out of existence.

VV finally escalated to a direct video call with RPS. The message was unambiguous: share the model and transfer credit to SC and VV, or be sidelined entirely. Then VV added the phrase meant to end the conversation: 'Your reporting line ends with me. I will ensure you are rated a 1 and terminated on non-performance grounds.'

RPS did not flinch. He had heard more frightening ultimatums from men with more institutional power. He conceded nothing. He went back to building the pipeline. In the AVEP-RR framework, this is called Resilience - the capacity to absorb pressure without surrendering purpose.

Chapter 7: The Fall of the Gang

2010 Mid June— The Reckoning

The escalation mails had by now become a daily torrent into the GHQ, specific, documented, named, dated, and in several cases directly witnessed by multiple parties. The GHQ began to act.

VV was asked to resign for the systematic destruction of organisational culture. Another SLT member was dismissed for abusive language and the deliberate pressure campaign that had coerced resignations. SC received a formal and severe warning. In place of Cheriyan, the GHQ deployed Sujay Keni (SK), a man of Indian origin who had spent twelve years at GHQ. SK arrived without fanfare. He conducted townhalls. He held one-on-ones. He spoke in the language of rebuilding. Engagement scores tentatively improved by November 2010.

Over thirty days of SK in the India office, SC departed, no farewell event, no warm send-off. One morning, his cabin was empty. Over the following ninety days the remaining members of the gang followed SC on way out. A new CHRO was appointed: Prakash Venky (PV), a senior professional carrying genuine cross-industry experience and the real intention to rebuild trust. RPS was part of his lean team. For a moment, brief, fragile, cautiously optimistic, - it seemed the worst was over.

PART THREE - THE PANDORA OFFICE

> *"Corruption is not always a roar. Sometimes it is the sound of a door that should be locked, left quietly ajar."*

Chapter 8: A Sunny Morning in Hyderabad

February 2011

RPS was habitual to connect with the last mile and went on branch visits for his southern region. The Hyderabad branch visit was routine, or it was supposed to be. RPS moved through the floors with the practised awareness of someone trained to read environments as much as conversations. Something was off. He could feel it in the quality of the silences, in the way eye contact was avoided, in the particular stillness that settles over a group of people who collectively know something they are not collectively saying.

He arranged to meet Ramasamy Rao (RR) at 4 p.m. A young lady, arrived before Ramasamy did. A young woman. A fresher, barely a few months into her first corporate role. She stood at the door of RPS's workspace and asked politely for a few minutes. RPS looked at her once and understood, not from anything she said, but from everything she didn't. Twenty years of reading people in high-pressure environments had made him fluent in that particular silence. He set aside everything else. What she told him in the next few hours would reconfigure the afternoon, the investigation, the month, and the fate of four people who believed themselves untouchable.

Chapter 9: What the Glass Walls Heard

January–February 2011

It began with Swati Sharma (SS), Business Unit Head, SLT member, Hyderabad. SS was under severe target pressure, the kind that narrows a person's ethical field of vision until only the immediate number matters.

When one of her managers went on maternity leave in January 2011, SS made a decision that crossed every line of corporate governance: she instructed the

departing manager to hand over her system password and official email credentials before leaving. The stated reason was client service continuity. The actual reason was something else entirely. She discreetly passed on the credentials to Praveen Misra (PM) a manager running a ten-member team of young women, all of them fresh from campus, isolated and vulnerable in the way that first jobs make people vulnerable.

Praveen Misra (PM) used those credentials to fabricate invoices and manipulate client communications. When two members of his team reported his behaviour to Swati Sharma, she told them this was how good managers developed people, and that such matters should be resolved at the manager level. Within the end of the month, both women were exited on performance grounds. The remaining eight understood the message: stay silent, stay employed. Praveen sometimes misbehaved and rewarded team members who complied to his “acts” with Monday morning cinema outings funded by him. The performance, such as it was, continued. The silence held. Most Monday’s he also joined them.

But silence in office buildings has a way of travelling through walls. One floor away, Naresh Reddy (NR), manager, client servicing, had locked horns with Praveen Misra over a conference room booking. Ramasamy Rao (RR) had attempted to mediate. Swati Sharma intervened and shut him down. She knew what Naresh Reddy was doing, and she knew what Praveen Misra was doing, and the last thing she needed was a facilities head connecting the two threads.

Naresh and Praveen summoned by Swati to a discussion room that sat directly adjacent to an open workspace, poorly soundproofed, voices carrying clearly through the partition. Dozens of people heard every word of the veiled threat. Naresh Reddy had his own history. His team of ten were trained to fund their manager's lifestyle: dinner with alcohol after every monthly salary payout, attendance mandatory. Travel reimbursements required a twenty percent kickback routed through the manager sign-off process he controlled. The cover story was 'client collaboration and career development.' The threat beneath it was existential.

The young fresher who stood at RPS's door that evening had decided she was not interested in being destroyed. She came from people who had taught her that courage is not the absence of fear but the decision to speak anyway. She spoke. Every word of it was true.

Chapter 10: The Confession of a Cornered Man

February 2011 — Evening

Ramasamy Rao arrived at 4 p.m. and confirmed everything - slowly, like a man setting down a burden he had carried too long alone. He had known. He had been intimidated into silence by Swati Sharma. He had escalated through Akash Dhavan's channel, and the matter had been reviewed by Sujay Keni, who had not supported Rao in the facts but warned him to execute what the business required.

Ramasamy Rao was in his late forties. His wife was expecting their first child. His parents were ageing and unwell. He had mortgaged his silence against his family's security, a calculation that thousands of people in corporate organisations make every year without anyone calling it by its true name: institutional cowardice born of institutional failure.

'I am bebas RP saab,' he said. Helpless. RPS stepped out and had a cigarette in the evening air, thinking about the fragility of human choices how an entire office of several hundred people could know precisely what was happening and still say nothing. How three people a young woman, a facilities manager, and himself were holding the truth while everyone else held their breath. He thought about what the armed forces had taught him: that silence in the face of injustice is not neutrality. It is a vote for the injustice. He went back inside and began to act.

Chapter 11: The Bell Is Rung

February 2011

The next morning, RPS convened a townhall. He spoke about new leadership, organisational values, and the changes being made. He announced that he would personally meet every employee one-on-one, and extended his stay in Hyderabad

by a full week. He made no accusations. He created the conditions under which truth could travel.

The previous night he had called Prakash Venky (PV) the new CHRO and laid out everything. PV, new to the system and genuinely committed to the values he had been hired to represent, encouraged RPS without reservation and pledged full support. The investigation began discreetly and methodically - victim statements, witness statements, documentation. The IT cell was instructed to seize the laptop of the employee on maternity leave under the cover of a routine system update, and reset her email credentials, cutting off Praveen Misra's fraudulent pipeline. For a few days, everything moved invisibly beneath the surface. Then it broke.

PART FOUR –

THE BETRAYAL AND THE TRAITOR

> *"The deepest wound is not the one the enemy inflicts. It is the one that comes from the hand you trusted."*

Chapter 12: The CHRO Who Talked

February 2011 — Night

The India leadership team was at an offsite in Jaipur, the kind of retreat organisations schedule to project confidence they do not yet feel. Prakash Venky (PV) was there, navigating the new ecosystem around Srikant Ramanan (SR), the lunatic new COO, trying to find his footing where the political geometry had not yet stabilised.

Late that night, around 12 midnight, with the investigation nearing its final stage, PV shared the entire Hyderabad investigation with Srikant Ramanan (SR). By 6 a.m. the next morning, SR had shared it with Akash Dhavan (AD). By 6:30 a.m. RPS had received multiple calls, from Naresh Reddy, from Swati Sharma, from Praveen Misra. Each of them knew. The investigation conducted with surgical care over weeks had been exposed in a single night by the very person whose job it was to protect it.

RPS was pulled back to Delhi HQ, framed as a business hindrance. But something the SLT had not anticipated happened in parallel: the people who had given statements, including the manager still on maternity leave, escalated the matter directly to the GHQ in the United States. The GHQ was now dealing with a governance crisis too large for any regional actor to contain. SR, PV, SK, and the APAC COO no longer controlled the situation.

Chapter 13: The Entitlement Economy

2011

Srikant Ramanan (SR) deserves his own chapter, not because he was the most dangerous person in this story, but because he was the most visible symptom of a

disease that runs through corporate organisations: the nepotism hire wrapped in the language of merit.

SR had been transferred from the Philippines not because India needed him, but because the APAC COO, a distant relative, could no longer absorb the escalations SR was generating in Manila. He arrived in Delhi and on his “Day One” immediately created a scene about the car sent to collect him from the airport. An ordinary sedan was beneath his position; an SUV was the minimum acceptable. The entire Delhi HQ watched in silence as a senior executive conducted what amounted to a tantrum over a vehicle. The APAC COO told Prakash Venky (PV), in a private aside, 'dil pe mat le yaara.' In that moment PV understood: SR was blood, and blood was thicker than governance.

In the weeks that followed, SR became the organisation's most reliable source of daily theatre - disturbances at the office complex, on roads, with traffic wardens, occasionally with clients. He had no visible instinct for business development. Every frustration found its outlet in Prakash Venky (PV), who absorbed daily humiliations: the temperature of his (SR) elachi chai, Delhi's congestion, and the suboptimal geography of the office location. The organisation was healing itself in spite of its leadership, not because of it.

Chapter 14: The Misfire of the Acquisition

Late 2011

Sujay Keni had proposed the acquisition of a smaller technology company, a measured strategic move designed to add capability. RPS had been involved from initial scoping through integration and transformation. It had been a year of disciplined work. Then came December 2011. Business results were poor, and SR proposed a 'reverse transition' - transferring a significant portion of the company's workforce into the acquired entity, moving clients, technology, and processes simultaneously. The logic was cost reduction. The APAC COO agreed.

The result was the destruction of a functional acquisition. The integration collapsed. Client relationships fractured. The GHQ flagged it as a direct failure of the APAC COO's judgment; not a market misfortune, not an execution error,

but a deliberate decision made without adequate diligence. The dominoes were accelerating now.

Chapter 15: The Double Agent

Early 2012

The APAC COO, under pressure from all directions, asked Arjun Maurya (AM) to lead the reinvestigation of the entire Hyderabad episode. AM accepted. Then AM called RPS back to Bangalore.

What they found, as they expanded the scope, was darker than either had expected. The Hyderabad situation; Praveen Misra's fraud, Naresh Reddy's extortion, Swati Sharma's complicity was not a set of independent failures. It was a pattern. A deliberately engineered one. As they traced the origin of client issues across multiple cities and years, a single thread emerged: Akash Dhavan was on the payroll of a direct competitor. His mandate - patient, methodical, professionally executed was to systematically migrate the company's major clients to the competition. Swati Sharma was his internal ally. The escalation he had 'forwarded' to SK had been a containment operation, not a genuine attempt to surface truth.

Every piece of manufactured chaos the company had attributed to market conditions and people failures bore the fingerprints of a corporate infiltration that had operated for 1.5 years without detection. AM drafted his report - meticulous, evidence-bound and submitted it directly to the GHQ, bypassing every layer of APAC authority that had enabled or failed to stop what had happened.

PART FIVE -THE RECKONING

> *"Justice in organisations rarely arrives with a trumpet. It comes quietly, with a termination letter and an empty parking spot."*

Chapter 16: Terminations Without Ceremony

February 2012

The GHQ acted swiftly once the report was in its hands. Akash Dhavan was terminated immediately not with a press release, not with a farewell dinner, but with the kind of swift irreversible finality reserved for the most unambiguous betrayals. Legal case filed in the court of Delhi. Swati Sharma followed. Naresh Reddy. Praveen Misra. Four people who had, each in their own way, decided that the institution existed to serve their interests rather than the reverse.

The APAC COO and his inner circle received formal written warnings for gross mismanagement, for misleading the company, for the human cost of their decisions, and for the losses traceable directly to their choices. Over the next three months that followed, they too were gone. The APAC COO's exit; the most significant - was a figure who had wielded enormous regional authority, departing without ceremony: a calendar cleared, a cabin emptied, a name removed from the directory. No fanfare. Just the silence of an era ending.

Chapter 17: The Architecture of What Came Next

2012–2015

The GHQ commissioned a major consulting firm to rebuild the India leadership from the ground up - structured search, behavioural assessment, values alignment. A major technology firm was engaged to modernize the operational infrastructure that had been neglected and exploited for years.

RPS and AM stayed. Not because they were asked to, but because they had unfinished work. They spent the next phase handholding new leadership, providing the institutional memory no onboarding document could replicate, helping new business heads understand not just the processes but the human terrain. When the knowledge transfer was complete and the new leadership had

found its footing, both men moved on. Separately. Toward other organisations, other challenges, other rooms where someone needed someone to bell the cat.

In 2015, the company was listed among India's most desired places to work. The citation mentioned values, leadership, and culture. It did not mention the names of the people who had protected those things when protecting them was the most professionally dangerous choice available. It never does.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT EFFECTIVE AVEP-RR LEADERS DO:

✔	Hold accountability personally; they do not delegate responsibility for decisions they authored.
✔	Use data and evidence when they push back, not emotion or hierarchy.
✔	Protect truth-tellers institutionally, even when it creates discomfort above them.
✔	Speak up early; they do not wait for crises to become governance failures.
✔	Build alliances based on shared values, not shared interests. Hire after informed decisions, maybe Psychometrics can help to some extent
✔	Separate personal vulnerability from professional judgement
✔	Create the conditions of psychological safety before expecting courage from others
✔	Treat the people function as the conscience of the organisation, not its compliance arm
✔	Escalate through the correct channels and directly to GHQ if those channels are compromised
✔	Accept that doing the right thing at cost is not heroism; it is the basic minimum of leadership

WHAT INEFFECTIVE AND DANGEROUS LEADERS DO:

✗	Use institutional authority to silence dissent rather than engage with it
✗	Protect their own careers at the cost of the people in their care
✗	Conflate loyalty to a person with loyalty to the organisation
✗	Mistake compliance for competence in the people below them

✗	Treat the HR function as an enforcement tool rather than a governance partner
✗	Allow nepotism and personal relationships to govern hiring and appointments
✗	Cover institutional wrongdoing with the language of business priority
✗	Delay settlements, investigations, and accountability until forced by external pressure
✗	Use performance ratings as weapons in personal vendettas
✗	Leak sensitive investigations to protect themselves at the cost of those who trusted them
✗	Allow a culture of silence to persist because it is convenient
✗	Believe that their own departure will erase the damage they caused

REFLECTION SPACE

The following questions are invitations - not examinations. There are no correct answers. There is only honest reflection. Write what occurs to you, without editing for comfort.

Q1. Think of a time when you knew something was wrong in your organisation and chose silence. What was the cost to others, and to yourself?

Reflection notes:

Q2. Ramasamy Rao knew the truth and could not act on it. Can you identify people in your current environment who may be in a similar position? What would it take to create the conditions that gave RPS what he gave Rao - a safe room?

Reflection notes:

Q3. VV, the CHRO, was the most institutionally positioned person to protect the workforce and the one who caused it the most damage. Have you ever seen a function that was meant to serve people become the instrument of their harm? What allowed that inversion to happen?

Reflection notes

Q4. Arjun Maurya and RPS chose to stay and handhold the new leadership after the reckoning despite having every reason to leave. Have you ever stayed when leaving would have been easier? What made it worth it?

Reflection notes:

Q5. The Young Fresher walked into a senior leader's office with no institutional protection and told the complete truth. What does your organisation do, formally and informally, to make that act possible? What does it do that makes it harder?

Reflection notes:

Q6. Prakash Venky had genuine values and good intentions. He still exposed an investigation that destroyed lives. Which of the AVEP-RR pillars do you find hardest to practice under pressure, and why?

Reflection notes:

Q7. Corporate Venom ends with a 'Great Place to Work' listing in 2015. Does that resolution feel complete to you? What does it say about how organisations measure success and what they leave uncounted?

Reflection notes:

> *"Leadership is not the story an organisation talks about itself. It is the gap between that story and what actually happened and who, quietly, in the space of that gap, chose to close it."*

The AVEP-RR framework - Authenticity, Values, Empathy, Purpose, Resilience, Responsibility is not a checklist. It is not a competency model to be rated in an annual review. It is not something you perform for your manager or showcase in a town hall.

It is the sum of all the choices you make when no one is watching. When the call is difficult. When the room is against you. When the cost is personal and the benefit is institutional and no one will ever formally acknowledge the difference between what you did and what you could have gotten away with.

Every character in Corporate Venom made choices. The choices accumulate. They become culture. Culture becomes the experience of every person who walks through the door - the fresher, the manager, the facilities head, the woman on maternity leave, the family of an employee who deserved better from the people who were paid to lead.

The organisations that endure are those that genuinely earn the right to call themselves great places to work, are not the ones that never faced a Sunil Cheriyan or an Akash Dhavan. They are the ones who produced a Rudra Pratap Singh and a Arjun Maurya. The ones that created, even accidentally, the conditions in which a young woman with three months of corporate experience could walk into a room and tell the truth.

Leadership is not a title. It is a daily decision about which side of the gap you stand on. Stand on the right side. Even when it costs you something. Especially then.

—

WHERE LEADERSHIP TRULY BEGAN

A Tribute to the National Cadet Corps and the Cadets It Shaped

India | Mid-1990s

PART ONE

THE INDIA THAT MADE THEM

> *"India in the mid-1990s was a nation in transition. Economic reforms were opening new possibilities. A new generation of young Indians was beginning to imagine larger futures. And far from the corporate corridors, a quiet institution was already building the people those futures would need."*

Chapter 1: Three Young Men and One Uniform

India — Mid-1990s — Across Three States

They came from different Indias. Not the statistical different - rather different in the lived, textured, irreducible way that a young man from the desert edge of Rajasthan is different from a young man from the busy, ambitious streets of Delhi, who is different again from a young man from the mountain towns of Himachal Pradesh where the hills hold their silence and the winters are long and the distance between places measures itself in hours of difficult road rather than kilometers.

Himmat Singh Rathore carried Rajasthan in his bearing, the particular uprightness of a person shaped by a land where endurance is not a virtue but a requirement, where the stories passed down across generations are stories of people who did not bend. Amit Sharma carried Delhi in his energy, the restless, forward-moving intelligence of a city that never quite settles, that is always building something, always becoming something, always looking for the next room to enter. Santosh Thakur carried the hills in his steadiness, the calm of a

person who has grown up where the view is long and patience is not taught but absorbed, season by season, from the landscape itself.

Three different languages at home. Three different sets of food, customs, celebrations, and silences. Three sets of parents who had given their sons values they could not fully articulate but demonstrated every day through the ordinary decisions of their lives.

They had never met. They would never have met, not through school, not through university, not through any ordinary mechanism of Indian social life that tends to cluster people within the geography and community of their origin. They met because they all made the same unusual choice at the same stage of their lives: they stepped forward.

They joined the National Cadet Corps.

And when they put on the uniform, the three different parts of India, they had come from became one.

Chapter 2: The Uniform That Equalized, and the Institution That Built

NCC Training Grounds — Across India

The NCC's genius thing that separates it from every other youth institution India has produced is structural. It does not group similar people together to confirm their similarities. It takes young people from the full geography and social spectrum of the country and places them in the same uniform, on the same parade ground, at the same pre-dawn hour, with the same standards applied to all of them without exception.

In that uniform, the surname that carries a village's history becomes irrelevant. The economic background that organizes so much of Indian social life finds no foothold. The language of the home, the mother tongue that is the deepest carrier of identity, becomes secondary to the shared language of the parade ground: the commands, the drills, the standards that apply to the cadet from the city and the cadet from the village in exactly equal measure.

The camps were not comfortable. They were not designed to be. Cadets woke before sunrise, not as a test of willpower, though it tested willpower, but because the discipline of the early morning, practised daily, becomes the discipline of the whole day. Parade drills lasted hours. Weapon training demanded a quality of focus that most eighteen-year-olds had never been required to produce. Trekking expeditions tested the specific kind of endurance that cannot be simulated, the endurance of continuing when the body has given its honest assessment and the mind must decide what to do with that assessment. Night navigation exercises demanded teamwork of the kind that develops only under genuine pressure, when the consequence of miscommunication is real.

Army attachment camps brought the cadets into direct contact with the armed forces' operational culture, not as observers but as participants, absorbing the discipline and precision of an institution that has been building leaders for a century and has learned, through that century, that character is not produced by lectures. It is produced by repeated exposure to demanding conditions with consequences attached.

Comfort rarely existed. Excuses never survived.

And somewhere inside that demanding, uncomfortable, consequence-rich environment, three young strangers became something more than fellow students. They became brothers in action.

> **Resilience:** *The long march still has three kilometers remaining. The training ground is wet. The team is tired. The leader cannot be. This is not a metaphor. It is Tuesday at the NCC camp. And the cadet who commands through it is learning something that no corporate training Programme can replicate.*

PART TWO

WHAT THEY LEARNED BEFORE THE WORLD ASKED FOR IT

> *"At an age when most young people are still discovering themselves, these three were already leading people. Not in theory. Under pressure. With consequences. With real teams that needed something from them that they could not fake."*

Chapter 3: The Age of Seventeen and the Weight of Responsibility

National Camps — Republic Day Camp — Youth Exchange Programme

By the time they were seventeen to twenty years old, each of them had already done something that most people in their generation had not yet been asked to do and would not be asked to do until their thirties: they had commanded and coordinated hundreds of people.

The achievement record was remarkable on its surface. National-level camps attended, the gatherings that brought the best cadets from across the country into the same space, exposing them to the scale and diversity of what the NCC had built. The NCC 'C' Certificate, earned through years of training and assessed through demanding examination. The Republic Day Camp, the most selective national gathering of cadets, the one where the country watches and the standard is the highest the organisation sets. The Youth Exchange Programme, which took them outside the country and showed them, at an age when the world still felt very large, that the values embedded in their training were not specific to one culture but recognizable across all of them.

Best Cadet recognition at their respective NCC Directorates. These are not participation awards. They are assessments of the total cadet, the discipline, the leadership, the character, the performance under pressure made by officers whose professional lives have been built on reading exactly these qualities in young people.

But the achievement record is not the story. The achievement record is the evidence of the story. The story is what happened to three young people in the

process of earning those achievements, what they became, what they learned, and what they carried out of the olive-green world and into everything that came after.

They organized drills for cadets younger than themselves. They resolved conflicts in the way that only the person who must both maintain discipline and preserve the team's morale can resolve them not by choosing one over the other but by finding the response that honors both. They motivated teams during the long marches when the easier option was to let the formation slow, when their own legs ached as much as anyone else's, when the difference between a leader and a follower was not physical capacity but the willingness to carry something extra: the responsibility for everyone else's direction.

They ensured discipline without arrogance. This is harder than it sounds. Discipline without arrogance requires the specific emotional intelligence of a person who has authority over others and chooses, every day, to use that authority in service of the group rather than as a demonstration of their own elevation above it. At seventeen, without a corporate training Programme or an MBA elective, these three were practicing that specific and difficult art.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Managing diverse groups under physically and mentally demanding situations, not once, not as a set-piece exercise, but as the daily reality of leading people who were tired, far from home, and depending on the person at the front of the formation to be steady when they could not be.*
>
> **Purpose:** *Every exercise, every march, every early morning was connected to something larger than a grade or a certificate. Service. National identity. The institution itself. Purpose was not a value statement at an NCC camp. It was the reason for the alarm clock.*

Chapter 4: The Choice They Made — and What It Cost and Gave

Campus Life — The Deliberate Selection

Campus life in the mid-1990s offered generous options. Music clubs. Cultural festivals. Student politics. Sports. The ordinary, rich social ecosystem that a university campus provides to young people at the exact stage of life when those

social ecosystems are most formative. These were real choices. The people who made them were not lesser for making them. University is for all of these things.

But Himmat, Amit, and Santosh made a different selection. Not against the other options, rather these three were not ascetics, not joyless, not pursuing discipline as an end in itself. They made the selection that the NCC offered: responsibility before recognition. Structure before comfort. The demanding thing before the enjoyable thing, in the understanding absorbed from the training itself, that the demanding thing had a compounding effect that the enjoyable thing did not.

The cost was real. Early mornings on parade grounds when the rest of the campus was asleep. Weekends at camps when peers were at cultural events. The particular social sacrifice of being present in a world, the NCC world, that most of their contemporaries did not inhabit and could not fully understand. The physical cost of the training itself.

What they received in exchange was not visible on a transcript. It was not a credential that could be listed on a resume in the way that a degree or a competition prize could be listed. What they received was something that takes years to fully understand because it is absorbed rather than earned: a character architecture that became the foundation of every professional decision they would make for the rest of their lives.

They chose discipline. And discipline, chosen early and practised consistently, becomes something more than a habit. It becomes identity.

> **Authenticity:** *Leading by example before anyone required it. Being the same person on the pre-dawn parade ground as in the evaluation meeting years later. Authenticity, built through years of being watched by people who were depending on you to be consistent, becomes automatic. The NCC made it automatic.*
>
> **Values:** *Integrity and respect are embedded not through instruction but through the daily lived requirement of earning authority from people who were under no obligation to give it. In the NCC, rank alone did not produce followership. The leader who could not be trusted lost the formation.*

PART THREE

THE PROFESSIONALS THEY BECAME

> *"They were calm under pressure. They were fair in decision-making. They respected people regardless of hierarchy. They did not panic when circumstances became difficult. Because they had experienced pressure much earlier. Not in conference rooms. In training grounds, long marches, and the responsibility of command."*

Chapter 5: Himmat Singh Rathore - The Leader Who Never Abandoned His People

Corporate Years — The Discipline That Transferred

Those who have worked with Himmat Singh Rathore describe the same quality across different organisations, different industries, different decades of his career: a command presence that is not performed. It does not announce itself. It does not require the room to acknowledge it before it operates. It simply exists, in the way he stands, in the quality of his attention, in the specific steadiness of a person who has spent years in conditions where steadiness was the difference between a team that held and a team that didn't.

His teams describe him as firm and deeply dependable, two qualities that appear to be in tension and are not, when they are held by a person who understands that firmness without dependability produces fear rather than trust, and dependability without firmness produces comfort without performance. He found the balance that the NCC had spent years teaching him to find: the balance of the leader who holds the standard and stands with his team in the difficulty of meeting it.

He never abandoned his people during difficult decisions. This is the phrase that appears most frequently when those who have worked with him try to name what distinguishes his leadership from the merely competent version. In organisations under pressure, and all organisations encounter pressure, the leader's most revealing decision is whether to stand in front of the difficulty alongside the team

or to manage it from a safe distance. Himmat had learned, on training grounds that had no safe distance, that leadership means the former.

> **Resilience:** *The capacity to absorb difficulty without projecting it onto the team, learned on a training ground, practised across a corporate career that encountered the same test in different forms.*

Chapter 6: Amit Sharma — The Leader Who Measured Success in Others

Corporate Years — The Mentorship That Multiplied

Amit Sharma became the kind of professional whose most significant contribution to any organisation cannot be measured in the conventional metrics, in revenue generated, deals closed, or strategies executed. His most significant contribution was the number of people who became better professionals because of the time spent in his orbit.

He invested in developing young professionals with the specific patience of someone who understands that development is slow and often invisible in the short term, and that the leader who invests in it is investing in something they may never see the full return on. The young manager who becomes a strong business leader five years after Amit has moved on is not a metric that appears in any annual review. Amit invested anyway, because the NCC had taught him, through the experience of being developed by officers who would never see the full result of their investment, that this is what leadership for is.

For Amit, leadership was never about individual success. It was about creating stronger teams for the future, teams that could function and grow independently of his presence, that carried the values and capabilities forward rather than depending on him to supply them. This orientation, away from the self and toward the collective, was not learned in a corporate coaching Programme. It was learned on a parade ground where the goal was never the individual cadet's performance but the formation's performance, and where the outstanding cadet was the one whose section moved best, not the one who looked best independently of the section.

> **Purpose:** *Building leaders within his teams as the primary measure of his own success not as a stated value but as the daily practice of someone who understood, from years of early leadership experience, that purpose is always about something larger than yourself.*

Chapter 7: Santosh Thakur — The Leader Who Built Trust Before He Built Anything Else

Corporate Years — The Partnership That Lasted

Santosh Thakur developed, across his professional career, a reputation for something that is rarer than most organisations acknowledge: the ability to build trust-driven partnerships across organisations and markets. Not relationships or partnerships. The distinction matters. Relationships can be maintained through charm and social intelligence. Partnerships require something more durable: the consistent demonstration, over time, of the qualities that the other party can rely on.

His analytical capacity helped him remain composed while reading complex situations, to find the path through problems that others approached with the anxiety that complexity tends to produce. But the trust was not built on the analysis. It was built on consistency. The people and organisations that partnered with Santosh Thakur trusted him because he had given them, transaction by transaction and decision by decision, sufficient evidence that the trust was correctly placed.

The hills of Himachal had given him the long view, the understanding that things develop slowly and that patience in the development of something real is not weakness but wisdom. The NCC had given him the specific, practical experience of building trust under pressure, of earning the confidence of a team in conditions where the team had every reason to withhold it unless the leader demonstrated, again and again, that they were worthy of it.

> **Responsiveness:** *Reading dynamic environments and responding with judgment rather than impulse, the specific capability of a leader who has been trained in situations where the appropriate response is never automatic and always requires both speed and accuracy.*

PART FOUR

THE INSTITUTION BEHIND THE PEOPLE

> *"The National Cadet Corps is often called the largest youth organisation in the world. But numbers alone do not define its impact. For generations of young Indians, the NCC has been a quiet academy of character building what the world will one day rely on, in the years before the world knows it needs it."*

Chapter 8: Three Stories Among Millions

A Tribute

The stories of Himmat, Amit, and Santosh are three among the thousands that the NCC has produced across its decades of operation, three among the millions of young Indians who stepped into the olive-green uniform at the right age, in the right conditions, and came out carrying something that their professional lives would spend decades drawing on.

Some from their circle are in the armed forces now, commanding battalions. The discipline of the parade ground became the discipline of operational command. The character built across years of cadet training became the character required to lead people in conditions that most of us will never encounter and none of us would wish to. Those who serve in uniform carry the NCC's legacy most visibly but the legacy extends far beyond the uniform.

Others from the same training grounds lead corporations. Direct hospitals. Run schools. Build businesses. Navigate the civil services. Each of them carries, in the specific way that they lead the people around them, the evidence of what the NCC built in the years when they were young enough for the building to go all the way down.

This is the NCC's deepest contribution is not the certificates, not the Republic Day parade, not the selection records. The deepest contribution is the character architecture that it installs before the professional world has an opportunity to install something cheaper in its place. Before ambition arrives. Before

competition arrives. Before the incentives that complicate integrity has had a chance to complicate it.

Discipline before ambition. Responsibility before recognition. Service before self-interest.

These are not slogans. For Himmat, Amit, and Santosh and for the millions like them, they are the sequence in which the important things were introduced. And that sequence, it turns out, matters as much as the things themselves.

When institutions invest in character formation at the right age, the benefits echo across decades. Not loudly. Faithfully.

> **Authenticity:** *The character built in the early years, before the performance incentives arrive, is the character that holds when the performance incentives argue against it. This is the NCC's most durable gift.*

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How the NCC built each pillar long before the corporate world asked for them

Authenticity	Leading by example before anyone required it; being the same person on the parade ground at 5 a.m. as in the boardroom at 9 a.m.
Values	Discipline, integrity, and service are embedded not as instructions but as daily lived experience, the kind that becomes identity rather than policy
Emotional Intelligence	Managing hundreds of cadets across languages, backgrounds, and fatigue levels, the practical daily work of reading people and responding to what they needed rather than what the schedule required
Purpose	Every activity connected to something larger than individual achievement-service, national identity, the institution itself; purpose not as a poster on a wall but as the reason for the morning alarm
Resilience	Physical endurance and mental toughness are tested continuously, not in theory but in terrain, in weather, in the particular exhaustion of a long march that still has three kilometres remaining
Responsiveness	Trained to read dynamic environments and respond with both speed and judgment because on the training ground, as in life, the situation does not wait for the leader to feel ready

Some leaders are trained in boardrooms. Some are shaped much earlier, when discipline, responsibility, and service are introduced before ambition. The boardroom refines what the parade ground built. But it cannot build what the parade ground built. That work happens only once, and only at the right age, and only if someone had the wisdom to create the conditions for it.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS LEARN FROM THE NCC'S EXAMPLE:

✔	Seek environments that challenge character, not just skills - the NCC's value was not in what it taught, but in the conditions, it created for who you became inside them
✔	Accept leadership responsibility early, the seventeen-year-old who commands a hundred cadets is building something the thirty-year-old manager will spend years trying to construct in a training room
✔	Build friendships and alliances on values rather than convenience. The brotherhood formed across differences in a shared uniform is more durable than any professional network assembled through proximity
✔	Lead through example, not authority, rank on a parade ground guarantees nothing if the formation does not follow; authority in the NCC was earned every day
✔	Let purpose precede ambition the leader who knows what they are for before they know what they want to achieve builds something more durable than the one who discovers purpose after the achievement
✔	Invest in the development of others as the primary measure of your own leadership success, Amit Sharma's most significant contribution cannot be found in any performance review
✔	Carry the long view into every professional relationship, Santosh Thakur's partnerships lasted because he understood that trust is built slowly and must be treated with the patience that slow-built things deserve

WHAT MISSES THE FOUNDATION THAT INSTITUTIONS LIKE NCC BUILD:

✗	Chasing leadership titles without the discipline that makes them mean something, the title is not the leadership; it is the evidence of the leadership, and only when the discipline preceded the title
✗	Treating leadership as power rather than responsibility - the cadet who used rank to elevate himself above the formation lost the formation; this truth does not change in a corporate environment
✗	Ignoring the role of character in long-term professional success, skills can be trained at any age; the character architecture that sustains leadership through the hard moments is built early or built slowly at great cost
✗	Expecting institutions to build leaders through knowledge transfer rather than through experience under pressure, character is not produced by lectures; it is produced by repeated exposure to demanding conditions with real consequences
✗	Underestimating the compounding value of early values formation, what the NCC built in three young men in the mid-1990s has been compounding across thirty years of professional practice

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about your own formation - the experiences, institutions, and people that shaped your leadership before the professional world had its chance.

Q1. What early experience before your career began that most shaped the leader you are today? Was it an institution, a person, a challenge, or something else entirely? Have you ever fully acknowledged its contribution?

Your reflection:

Q2. Think of a time when discipline learned early in your life - in a family, a sport, an institution, a relationship that helped you navigate a professional challenge that formal training had not prepared you for. What specifically did that early discipline give you?

Your reflection:

Q3. Amit Sharma's greatest contribution cannot be measured in conventional performance metrics,it lived in the people he developed. Are you investing in the development of others in this way? And if not, what would change in how you spend your time if you genuinely measured your leadership success by the number of people you carried forward?

Your reflection:

Q4. If you were to honestly assess the foundation beneath your current professional leadership, the character architecture that holds everything up, how deep does it go? And what experience, if any, built the deepest part of it?

Your reflection:

Q5. What institutions - schools, youth organisations, families, sports teams, communities are currently forming the next generation of leaders in your context? Are they receiving the support they need to do that work? And what is your responsibility toward them?

Your reflection:

"Some organisations train professionals. Some institutions quietly shape leaders. The National Cadet Corps has done both for generations. Not loudly. Not seeking recognition.

Simply by placing young people in the conditions that build the thing that all the recognition in the world cannot manufacture: ***character****."*

Long Live the NCC.

Jai Hind!

THE LEADER WHO NOTICED

And the Quiet Intervention That Changed Everything

Soumia Bhattacharya, Anshita Sharma, Aiswarya Nair, and the Leadership Power of Paying Attention
Bengaluru | 2012 – 2018

> *"Modern workplaces reward visibility. They celebrate the people who speak loudly in meetings. But some of the most serious struggles in organisations remain entirely invisible – because the people who are struggling the most are often the ones who continue delivering."*

Chapter 1: The High Performer Nobody Questioned

Bengaluru — A Technology Company — 2012

Anshita Sharma had been at the company for three years, and by every measure that organisations use to evaluate people, she was exactly what they wanted. She delivered on deadlines. She stayed late when projects demanded it. She raised her hand for difficult assignments without being asked. In the language of performance reviews, that particular dialect that converts human beings into a set of adjectives, she was reliable, efficient, dependable.

These words were accurate. They were also, without anyone intending them to be, a kind of concealment. Because the same qualities that made Anshita an outstanding performer, the self-sufficiency, the willingness to absorb pressure quietly, the instinct to solve rather than complain, made her almost impossible to notice when things were not fine. High performers rarely ask for help. They simply carry more.

The signs were there. They are always there, for the people who know how to read them.

In team meetings, Anshita had started speaking less. Not dramatically, the change was not loud enough to register as a data point. Her responses were shorter. Her emails had changed. Earlier, they had carried warmth, a light comment, sometimes a quiet piece of humor that made the recipient smile before they got to the actual content. Now they were transactional. Efficient. Correct. Empty of everything except the information they were required to contain.

She had stopped attending the Friday chai ritual, the informal team gathering that, in most technology offices, is less about tea and more about the human permission to exist outside the work for thirty minutes. First occasionally. Then consistently. And she had lost noticeable weight. But in corporate culture, weight loss is processed as an achievement rather than a signal. So, no one mentioned it. Projects moved forward. Deadlines were met.

Anshita kept delivering. And kept disappearing. And no one saw both things at once.

Chapter 2: The One Who Looked

The Same Office — Across the Floor

Soumia Bhattacharya was not Anshita's manager. She was not in Anshita's team. She worked on a parallel project, and their paths had crossed with any frequency only during two organisation-wide initiatives the previous year, an internal innovation hackathon and a cross-team cultural festival, both coordinated under the HR leadership of Aiswarya Nair, who used such initiatives deliberately to dissolve the functional silos that organisations construct around themselves.

During those events, Soumia had observed Anshita the way that people with high emotional intelligence observe: not as a data collection exercise, but as a natural extension of genuine interest. She had seen Anshita energetic, creative, full of ideas that arrived faster than she could articulate them, the kind of presence that makes a group better simply by being in it.

The Anshita she was watching now was a different person in the same body. The energy was gone. The ideas had retreated. The warmth had been replaced by a careful, correct professionalism that held everyone at a manageable distance.

Soumia noticed the silence in the meetings. The missing chai appearances. The weight.

She trusted what she noticed. This is the specific quality of emotionally intelligent people that makes them rare and valuable in organisations: they do not second-guess their observations. They do not talk themselves out of concern by constructing explanations for why the change is probably fine. They trust what they see, and they act on what they trust.

She composed a message. She did not write what most people would have written. 'Are you okay?' is the question that almost always receives the same answer - 'yes, I'm fine', not because the person is fine, but because the question creates a binary where honesty would require more vulnerability than the asker has signaled they are ready for. Soumia understood this instinctively.

She wrote something else.

"I've noticed you seem a little quieter lately. I might be wrong. But if you ever want to step out for chai, I'm here."

Anshita read it three times. It was the first time in months that someone had acknowledged the change without demanding an explanation. The message did not ask her to justify herself. It did not require her to perform composure in order to reassure the person asking. It simply said: I see you. I might be wrong. But I'm here.

After a pause, she replied. "Yes please. Tomorrow?"

One message. Two sentences. The smallest possible acknowledgement that a person exists beyond their output. And it was enough.

> **Emotional Intelligence:** *Soumia did not ask 'are you okay?' She asked a question that created space without demanding entry. The distinction — between the question that requires the person to perform fine and the question that simply offers presence — is the entire story's hinge.*
>
> **Authenticity:** *The message was not strategic. It was not HR protocol. It was one human being saying to another: I have been paying attention, and what I see concerns me. That simplicity is its power.*

Chapter 3: The Tea Stall Conversation

Outside the Office Campus — The Following Evening

They met at a small tea stall just outside the campus. Not inside the office, that was a specific and deliberate choice, conscious or not, that created enough distance from the professional environment for something more honest to become possible.

Anshita did not narrate a dramatic crisis. There was no sudden confrontation, no scandal, no single event that had broken something that was previously whole. What she described was quieter and, in some ways, harder, the accumulation of smaller things over time.

Working under Venu Nambiar. Venu was not a bad manager. He was an extremely effective delivery manager - sharp with deadlines, laser-focused on project output, reliable in his own way. But he operated with a specific blind spot. He rarely explained context. Work arrived without an explanation of why it mattered. Deadlines appeared without the resources required to meet them comfortably. Expectations rose without support. Anshita described the feeling precisely: constantly running. Somehow standing still.

Soumia listened. She did not interrupt. She did not redirect. She did not reach for advice the way that well-meaning people often do, converting someone's experience into a problem to be solved before the person has finished describing what the problem actually is. She asked gentle questions. She allowed silence. She allowed Anshita to speak without the anxiety of being judged or managed.

At the end, she said something that required no resolution and provided the most important thing available:

"I may not have solutions. But I want you to know something. You're not invisible to everyone."

Being seen. In three years of delivering reliably and staying late and raising her hand for the difficult assignments, this was the thing that Anshita had most needed and least been offered. Not a solution. Not a process. The simple,

profound recognition that she existed in someone's awareness as a person rather than as a performance record.

> **Values:** *Soumia's presence at that tea stall was an expression of a value: that colleagues are human beings before they are productivity metrics, and that their humanity deserves to be seen even when, the productivity metrics are still looking fine.*

Chapter 4: The Quiet Intervention - and the Structural Solution

The Days and Weeks After

The conversation stayed with Soumia. She knew that what she had offered Anshita, presence, witnessing, the knowledge that she was not invisible, was necessary but not sufficient. Emotional support, genuinely given, does not change a structural situation. And the situation Anshita was describing had structural dimensions that required a different kind of intervention.

A few days later, Soumia scheduled a casual coffee with Aiswarya Nair, the HR leader she already knew through the organisation-wide initiatives. The conversation was discreet. Soumia did not frame it as a complaint or a formal escalation. She shared an observation: a colleague seemed overwhelmed, a great performer, and she thought she might burn out.

Aiswarya was an experienced HR professional with a specific understanding of what quiet interventions can achieve that public escalations cannot. She did not initiate a formal investigation. She did not put Venu Nambiar in a difficult position through a process that would have made him defensive rather than reflective. Instead, she began observing through routine one-on-one meetings with several members of Venu's team.

The pattern was consistent. Delivery pressure was high. Clarity was low. Several people felt stretched beyond reasonable limits. It was not a single problem. It was a management style that produced results at the cost of the people producing them, a cost that the quarterly reports did not capture and the performance reviews had not been designed to measure.

She scheduled a coaching conversation with Venu Nambiar. Not as criticism. As development. She helped him recognise the gap between driving results and leading people. Venu was not a malicious manager. He was simply too focused on output and too unaware of the emotional signals that his team was sending, the shorter responses, the missing chai appearances, the weight that nobody mentioned. He had Anshita's performance record. He did not have Anshita.

In parallel, Aiswarya quietly suggested that Gopi Krishnan, whose team was known for its balance, its clear communication, its genuine investment in developing people, raise an Internal Job Posting for an upcoming project expansion. She also advised Venu to have an open conversation with Anshita and encourage her to apply if the role aligned with her interests.

Within weeks, the IJP was announced. Anshita applied. Her performance record and technical expertise made her a natural fit. Within six weeks, she moved to Gopi's team.

And gradually, not overnight, but unmistakably, Anshita returned to herself.

> **Responsiveness:** *Soumia acted before burnout became breakdown. Aiswarya acted before the quiet withdrawal became a resignation. Responsiveness in the human context is not speed alone – it is the combination of seeing early and choosing to act on what you see.*
>
> **Purpose:** *Aiswarya's intervention was structural: a coaching conversation for Venu, an IJP for Gopi, a quiet pathway for Anshita. Every element was designed to serve the organisation's actual purpose – not its output metrics, but the human ecosystem that produces them.*

Chapter 5: What the Story Became

Years Later — The Inheritance

Anshita's energy returned. Her performance stabilised. Her confidence recovered in the way that confidence recovers when the environment no longer requires all of it to be spent on survival. She became a team leader.

The people on her team described her with a very specific quality. One that was not listed on any performance review. One that did not appear in any competency framework. One that you would not know to look for unless you had experienced its absence and felt what that absence costs.

"She notices people."

The same quality that Soumia had shown her, at a tea stall outside the office campus, in a conversation that changed nothing structural and everything essential. Anshita had received something, the experience of being seen, and she had carried it forward. She gave it to the people around her not as a technique or a leadership Programme initiative but as the natural expression of someone who understood, from the inside, what it means to deliver and disappear simultaneously, and who had decided that her presence as a leader would mean the people on her team would not have to.

For Aiswarya Nair, the episode reaffirmed a belief she often shared with other leaders: burnout rarely announces itself loudly. It appears in shorter conversations. In emotional withdrawal. In declining enthusiasm. In a name that used to appear at the Friday chai and then, gradually, does not. The real leadership challenge is not solving these problems after they have become crises. It is noticing them early enough for the response to be human-sized rather than institutional.

And for Venu Nambiar: the coaching conversation, and the loss of a high performer that might have been prevented, became the beginning of something better. He continued improving. He was not a malicious manager. He was simply one who had not been given a mirror. Aiswarya gave him one. He looked into it honestly. That honesty was the beginning of a different kind of leadership.

Sometimes leadership begins with a single act. The act of looking and then of saying: I see you.

AVEPRR Leadership Framework

How does emotional intelligence operate across every character in this story

Authenticity	Showing genuine concern rather than performing it, Soumia's message was not a script; it was the honest expression of someone who had actually looked and actually cared
Values	Treating a colleague as a human being before treating her as a performance metric, recognizing that what the spreadsheet said about Anshita and what was actually happening to Anshita were two different things
Emotional Intelligence	The capacity to read what is absent, shorter messages, missing from chai, quieter in meetings, and to understand that absence as a signal rather than a preference
Purpose	Building a workplace where people feel seen, understanding that the real work of an organisation is not its output but the people who produce it
Resilience	Helping Anshita find her way back, not by removing the difficulty but by ensuring she did not face it alone, and by creating the conditions for a structural solution
Responsiveness	Acting early, before burnout became breakdown, before the quiet withdrawal became a departure; choosing the inconvenience of a conversation over the ease of not noticing

Sometimes leadership is not about giving direction. Sometimes it is simply about noticing that someone is struggling and having the courage to say so, gently, without demanding an explanation in return.

HOW TO BE AND HOW NOT TO BE

WHAT AVEPRR LEADERS DO WHEN SOMEONE IS QUIETLY STRUGGLING:

✔	Pay attention to behavioural change, the quieter meetings, the missing chai, the transactional emails; these are not personality preferences, they are signals
✔	Ask the question that creates space rather than the question that requires performance. 'I might be wrong, but I'm here' opens a door; 'are you okay?' often closes it

✔	Listen before offering solutions, Soumia sat with Anshita's experience before reaching for a fix; that sequencing is the entire skill
✔	Intervene quietly when discretion is more protective than publicity. Aiswarya's approach preserved everyone's dignity because it was structural, not procedural
✔	Distinguish emotional support from structural solutions. Soumia gave the first; Aiswarya provided the second; both were necessary, and neither was sufficient without the other
✔	Create pathways back, the IJP, the coaching, the balanced team, the structures that allow a person to recover in dignity without having to announce that they needed to
✔	Let the experience of being seen become the experience you give others, Anshita's team knows she notices them; she notices them because she was once noticed herself

WHAT ALLOWS SILENT BURNOUT TO PERSIST UNCHALLENGED:

✗	Assuming silence means everything is fine. Anshita's silence was the emergency, not the evidence of its absence
✗	Treating productivity as the only measure of employee wellbeing, the performance review said reliable; the tea stall conversation said overwhelmed; only one of those was true
✗	Ignoring repeated signals of disengagement, the quieter meetings, the missing chai, the shorter emails arrived one by one; each one was individually explainable and collectively unmistakable
✗	Managing delivery without managing context, Venu's team delivered; they did not know why what they were delivering mattered; that gap costs more than the short-term efficiency it appears to save
✗	Waiting for formal escalation before acting, by the time a burnout becomes a formal complaint or a resignation, the intervention that would have been human-sized is no longer available

REFLECTION SPACE

These questions are about the people around you and about the quality of your attention to them.

Q1. Have you ever noticed a colleague silently struggling, the quieter in meetings, the missing informals, the change in the quality of their presence and said nothing? What stopped you? And what do you think the silence cost them?

Your reflection:

Q2. What small behavioural changes might indicate emotional distress in your team or colleagues? Have you trained yourself to read them? When did you last look at the people around you for signals that are not in the performance data?

Your reflection:

Q3. How comfortable are people in your team or workplace asking for help, really asking, not performing fine? And what does the answer to that question say about the environment your leadership is creating?

Your reflection:

Q4. Think of a time when someone simply listening, without advice, without solutions, without redirecting- changed your perspective or helped you carry something that had felt too heavy to name. What did that person give you that advice that you could not have given?

Your reflection:

Q5. Which AVEPRR pillar do you believe is most essential to emotionally intelligent leadership and where, honestly, are you weakest in practicing it? What would change in your team if you strengthened that pillar by even one degree?

Your reflection:

"Leadership is not always about solving problems. Sometimes it begins with noticing that someone is carrying one and choosing, in that moment, not to look away."

EPILOGUE

What Stories Leave Behind

The characters in these stories are composites drawn from real people, real industries, and real moments of decision. Any resemblance to specific individuals is a reflection of how universal these moments are, not of any single person's private story.

What is real is the pattern: that values are not decorative. They are load-bearing. The organisations and individuals who endure, who recover, who inspire; they are not the ones who got lucky, or the ones who were born exceptional. They are the ones who, in the small and large moments where it would have been easier to look away, chose not to.

Himmat, Amit, or Ranveer, Nalini, Mercy or any other character, and even Cheriyan and Arun Banerjee, in the cautionary versions of their stories, are all real in the sense that matters most. They are real because you have worked with people like them. Because you are a version of one of them, in one story or another or share a similar shade of character.

StoRRies is not a manual for how to be good. It is an invitation to notice that the choices you make in ordinary moments are not ordinary. That is the way you treat a distributor when the numbers are against you, the way you respond when a junior person raises something inconvenient, the way you show up in the 11 p.m. document revision that no one asked for, these are the things that accumulate into a life and a career and an organisation worth having.

Take what is useful. Argue with what is not. And if a story has lodged somewhere in you, if you find yourself thinking about Gautham's decision on a long commute, or an act of any of the characters that inspires you, when someone asks you to define legacy, then it has done its work.

These are StoRRies. They are yours now.

CHARACTERS AT PLAY

Traits · Behaviors · AVEPRR Lens

1.The Modern-Day Chakravyuha

Abhimanyu Deshmukh -*The Protagonist - Three Versions Across Five Years*

Version One — The Achiever (2018–2019): Analytical, structured, reliable; climbing efficiently toward a destination he had not chosen; performing successfully for audiences whose approval he had come to need without noticing when he started needing it

Version Two — The Fracturing (2019–2020): Still delivering. Quietly fraying. Recognizing, in the lie he typed to his mother and in the silence after his father's question, that the external architecture and the internal reality had diverged in ways that acceleration could not correct

Version Three — The Recalibrated (2020–2023): Slower. More deliberate. Having paid the cost of one value-based decision in front of an uncomprehending peer group and having found, in paying it, that the cost was bearable and the value was real

AVEPRR Arc: Lost Authenticity to approval, Purpose to pressure, and Emotional Intelligence to survival, then recovered all three through the specific, unglamorous, sustained work of honest self-examination and deliberately chosen recalibration.

His Father -*The Retired Officer - The Question That Changed Everything*

Significance: He asked the question that the whole story was building toward, without knowing he was asking it, without drama, from behind a Sunday newspaper. 'Are you becoming the person you wanted to become?' Seven words. The most powerful intervention in the story. He did not offer advice. He did not diagnose. He simply held up the original question, the one that had existed before the trajectory, before the WhatsApp group pride, before the LinkedIn profile and waited.

AVEPRR Significance: He embodies Purpose in its most stripped-down form: the understanding that the 'why' of a life is not a detail to be answered later but the foundation that determines whether everything built on top of it is going in the right direction

His Mother -*Three Words - The Mirror That Fit in a Message*

Significance: Her message, 'Have you eaten?' did not intend to be a mirror. It was a mother's ordinary concern, the most routine of all check-ins. What made it a mirror was Abhimanyu's response to it: the automatic 'yes' typed by someone who had practised fine for long enough that fine had become the default answer to every question, including this one. Her message did not expose his state. His reply did. And the exposure, in the privacy of a balcony at night, was the beginning of the honest examination that followed

The Mentor -*The Reflective Sounding Board - Language Before Direction*

Significance: The mentor gave Abhimanyu something that is often undervalued in discussions of mentorship: not direction, but language. The ability to name what is happening - maze, misalignment, identity fracture is the precondition for doing something about it. Before you can navigate differently, you need to be able to describe where you are. The mentor provided the vocabulary. Abhimanyu did the navigation.

The Corporate System -*The Maze - Real, Navigable, and Never Entirely Benign*

Significance: The system is not a villain. It is a structure, extraordinarily well-designed to reward certain things and to make the rewarded things feel like the right things. Performance ratings. Billing hours. Quarterly cycles. Internal comparison. None of these are malicious. All of them, operating together, create the specific pressure that makes a person keep running without asking why, because stopping to ask why feels, inside the structure, like falling behind. The structure is the Chakravyuha. It requires no malicious intent. It simply requires you to enter.

2. **The North Star**

Deepak Singh

P&L Leader – The Conviction That Held Through Two Brutal Quarters

Core Traits: Diagnostically precise, emotionally steady, willing to absorb institutional pressure without substituting others' urgency for his own clarity

Defining Decision: Starting with a question rather than a plan, and having the patience to receive the honest answers, including Denoy's, before deciding what the plan would be

Under Pressure: Responded to Rajeev's challenge not with defensiveness or retreat but with the specific confidence of a person who has done the analytical work: 'We are bleeding not because MSMEs don't scale. We are bleeding because we abandoned differentiation.'

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary across all pillars. Most precisely on Purpose, rebuilding the SBU around its original reason for existence as a strategic act, not a philosophical one and Resilience, absorbing two quarters of further revenue decline after the pivot without reversing

Denoy D'Cruz

The Institutional Memory – The Quiet Voice That Held the Map

Core Traits: Analytical, precise, patient; the kind of professional whose value to an organisation is highest precisely when the organisation is least willing to hear it

The Key Act: Answering the first question with specificity rather than safety, naming what the SBU had been built for, what it had abandoned, and what it needed to return to, in a room where that answer required the courage to diverge from the consensus

Significance: He was the North Star's keeper. Not because he held authority, he held none, but because he held memory. And memory, in a drifting organisation, is the most valuable form of leadership available

AVEPRR Score: Authenticity and Values in the truest form, speaking the institutional truth when the institutional pressure was to suppress it

Rajeev

Senior Leader – The Legitimate Urgency That Tested Conviction

Core Traits: Pragmatic, numbers-driven, genuinely invested in the SBU's survival, whose pressure was not antagonism but the authentic expression of institutional concern about a unit in decline

Significance: Rajeev is not a villain. He is the most instructive kind of resistance: the reasonable, well-intentioned, institutionally backed alternative view. Deepak's ability to hold his conviction against Rajeev's legitimate urgency without dismissing it, without being absorbed by it, is the story's central leadership test

The Space He Gave: He allowed Deepak room when he was not yet convinced. That space offered by a senior leader who could have closed it was the precondition for everything that followed

The Twenty-Two

The Team – From Process Answers to Purpose Answers

Significance: Their transformation is the most precise measure of the pivot's success. They began answering 'what are we here to solve?' with process descriptions. They ended answering it with conviction. That shift from function to purpose as the organizing principle of daily work is what the monthly town halls, the customer stories, and the cultural regrounding produced. They did not change their jobs. They changed the reason they were doing them

3. The Rise of Stubborn Himmat Singh Rathore

Himmat Singh Rathore

The Man at the Centre – Stubborn, Dignified, Irreducible

Core Traits: Disciplined to the point of ritual, ethically precise, emotionally honest without being emotionally performed, carrying a purpose so deeply internalized that nine rejections could not dislodge it

Behaviors: Cleared the written UPSC examination nine times. Returned to the SSB nine times. Held his ethics at ₹1,200 per month. Wore a pressed shirt when there was no audience for the press. Drank tea instead of weeping. Filed the rejection letters in a tin box rather than leaving them as wounds. Worked in two demanding sales roles while preparing for examinations that would determine the direction of his life.

Motivation: Service not as an abstraction but as something specific and inherited, carried in the bloodline of both his father's secret service assignments and his mother's daily service to a household that demanded everything she had. The Army was the form he wanted this motivation to take. It did not define the motivation itself.

The Rusted Tin Box: This is the story's most important symbol. The letters he folded carefully and stored rather than destroyed represent the particular discipline of someone who does not pretend the difficult thing did not happen, but also does not allow it to be the dominant thing. The box kept the rejections contained. They were real. They were not the whole story.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary across all six pillars, not in the sense of someone who performed them effortlessly, but in the sense of someone for whom the performance of them was the daily work of a decade. This is the framework under maximum sustained pressure.

Gayatri Bai

His Mother – The Story's Most Powerful Presence

Core Traits: Brilliant, constrained by circumstance, dignified without performance, providing stability through presence rather than words

Behaviors: Completed her B.Ed. while raising two children largely alone. Taught on contractual assignments to supplement a household income that had no security. Sat at the same wooden table as her son, each fighting their own battle and made the tea on the mornings when he came home with a folded letter.

Significance: Gayatri Bai is the story's deepest source of Authenticity the woman who demonstrated, before her son had words for the concept, that dignity is a

choice made independent of circumstance. She never allowed her struggle to become her identity. He watched this every day of his formative years. Everything he became was, in part, the result of what she modelled without knowing she was modelling it.

The Tea: When Himmat asked for ginger tea after his first rejection, he was not asking for tea. He was asking for normalcy the continuation of the ordinary morning, the proof that the world had not ended because the letter had said no. She gave him exactly that. This is the highest form of Emotional Intelligence: knowing what someone actually needs when what they ask for and what they need are the same thing.

AVEPRR Score: She is the framework's embodiment before it was named. Every pillar present, every pillar practised across decades without recognition or reward.

Pooja Singh

The Younger Sister - The Weight He Carried Quietly

Core Traits: Present in the story as the person whose future was one of the stakes of every decision Himmat made

Significance: Pooja represents the specific weight of familial responsibility that shapes the decisions of the eldest child in a household under financial pressure. Himmat's choices to persist, to work, and not to compromise his ethics for a higher salary were not made in a vacuum. They were made with full awareness that his sister's stability was part of what his discipline was protecting. She never had to know this. He knew it.

The NCC Fraternity

The Witnesses – The People Who Stayed

Core Traits: Loyal, present, sharing silence as fluently as they shared tea

Behaviors: Stayed in contact through the decade. Shared preparation notes. Met for tea that was more about company than about tea. Sat in the particular silence of people who understand each other's difficulty without needing it explained.

Significance: They are proof that resilience is never entirely individual. Himmat's persistence was his own, the discipline, the ironed shirt, the folded letters, the repeated returns to the SSB but it was sustained in an environment that included people who saw him and stayed. The support system does not deserve less credit for being quiet. Quiet support is often the most durable kind.

The SSB Selection Board

The Institution That Said No — Nine Times

Significance: They are never personalized in this story and should not be. The SSB was not wrong to make the assessments it made. It was looking for a specific configuration of qualities for a specific institutional purpose. The finding of 'not recommended' was not a verdict on Himmat's character rather it was a compatibility assessment between a person and an institution. That the same qualities found not recommended by the SSB were eventually found highly valuable by a multinational corporation is not ironic. It is the illustration of something important: character has multiple appropriate platforms, and the platform that says no does not determine the value of the character.

The Customers and Colleagues

The Pressure Ecosystem — The Daily Test

Significance: They are the environment in which Himmat's Authenticity was most practically tested, because they offered the alternative every day. The colleague who suggested the counterfeit component swap was not malicious. They were practical. The customer who mocked his accent was exercising a form of power that the retail dynamic made available to them. They were the conditions. His responses to those conditions are the data about who he was. And the data was consistent, day after day, across years.

4. The Resume That Told the Truth

Swapna Naik

HR Professional — The Woman Who Deleted the Better Version

Core Traits: Composed, values-grounded, clear enough about her professional identity that she was willing to risk an opportunity rather than begin it on a foundation that would not hold

The Defining Act: Deleting the revised résumé on the third day. Not dramatically. Alone. Without an audience. The choice was made in a modest apartment in Yelahanka with no one watching, which is precisely what makes it the story's central demonstration of Authenticity.

What the Gap Built: The skilling centre gave her the insight that made her not just a better HR professional but a philosophically grounded one, someone who understood that her function was not process management but trust architecture. That understanding came from the eight months the polished résumé would have erased.

AVEPRR Score: Full marks across all pillars. Most precisely on Authenticity, choosing truth when the system explicitly invited a different choice, and on Purpose, arriving at a definition of her function that could only have been found through the experience of being in it during its failure.

Jawahar Naresh Uday (JNU)

The Discerning Interviewer - The Leader Who Evaluated Foundation

Core Traits: Quiet, observant, unhurried; who had spent thirty-five years learning to distinguish between the answer that has been prepared and the answer that is being constructed from genuine experience

The Key Moment: He did not react to the gap with alarm or with the defensive protocols that most institutional interview processes provide. He asked about it directly. And then he listened completely, without the interventions of the interviewer who had already concluded and is waiting for the candidate to confirm it.

What He Hired: Not a perfect résumé. A credible person. The distinction he made in that room between the polished candidate and the honest one is the story's most precise statement of what effective leadership evaluation actually looks like.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary on Emotional Intelligence, reading what the honest answer revealed about the person beneath the candidate, and recognizing that as the most important information available. And on Values, prioritizing foundation over flawlessness.

The Former Colleague

The Voice of Pragmatic Convention — The Well-Meaning Alternative

Significance: She is not the villain of this story. She offered genuinely good advice by the standards of the professional convention she was operating within. Her draft was well-constructed. Her logic was sound. Her intention was kind. And she represents the most difficult kind of influence to decline the pragmatic, caring, statistically defensible alternative offered by someone who genuinely wants you to succeed. Swapna's choice to delete the document was made against that specific gravity, which is what gives the choice its weight.

The Young Women of the Skilling Centre

The Lesson Swapna Did Not Expect to Receive

Significance: First-generation graduates preparing for interviews they had spent their whole education working toward. They did not give Swapna advice. They gave her a mirror, the specific, clarifying perspective of people for whom the things that corporate HR manages as administrative functions are, in reality, the mechanisms that determine whether a life trajectory changes direction. Watching them prepare, Swapna understood that organisations fail not because people lack talent but because leadership lacks values. That insight was the gap's most valuable product. The polished résumé would have erased it.

5. The Call In the Rain

Amit Sharma

South Zone Channel Sales Leader — The Grounded Advocate

Core Traits: Disciplined, data-grounded, honest under pressure, relationally intelligent without being sentimental

Behaviors: Met Arulchamy in person rather than managing the crisis through email. Gave an honest answer rather than a reassuring one. Built the regional review case entirely on data rather than appeal. Called with the outcome personally rather than delegating the communication. Never overpromised and therefore never lost credibility.

Motivation: A deep, armed-forces-shaped belief that the right answer said clearly is always more durable than the comfortable answer said quickly. And a genuine understanding that in markets built on relationships, the quality of the relationship is the quality of the business.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary across all six pillars. Authenticity in every conversation. Values in protecting the partnership beyond convenience. Emotional Intelligence in reading what Arulchamy's question was actually asking. The purpose of building a sustainable regional ecosystem. Resilience in holding the internal debate without breaking the external relationship. Responsiveness in acting before the competitor's offer could become the default decision.

Arulchamy Pandiyan

Senior Distributor – The Man Whose Question Was the Test

Core Traits: Operationally disciplined, commercially astute, loyal to relationships he believes are reciprocated, unwilling to be managed as a channel when he has invested as a partner

Behaviours: Called Amit directly rather than escalating through formal channels. Asked the defining question honestly and without aggression. Gave the competitor's offer its full weight and then chose to decline it, not because the terms were better but because the trust was.

Motivation: Partnership. Arulchamy had invested three years of operational effort and market relationships in building the southern network alongside Amit. What he needed to know was whether that investment had been in a company or in a person and, having established the answer, he was willing to stay on terms he had not originally asked for.

AVEPRR Score: Arulchamy is not a leader in the corporate sense, but he demonstrates the framework's core values: the honesty to ask the real question, the resilience to wait for the real answer, and the authenticity to make his decision based on what was actually true rather than what was most financially advantageous.

PasuRaja

Young Area Manager – The Student Who Graduated Later

Core Traits: Observant, early-career, not yet equipped to understand what he was watching in real time

Behaviors: Watched the Amit-Arulchamy dynamic with the mild confusion of someone who could see the investment but not yet the return. Retained the memory. Eventually understood the lesson and carried it into his own leadership.

Significance: PasuRaja's arc is the story's longest-running lesson. He represents every person who has watched a senior leader make a decision that seemed disproportionate at the time and only understood it years later, from the vantage point of their own experience. The lesson Amit demonstrated for Arulchamy was also, without either of them knowing it, the lesson he was demonstrating for PasuRaja.

AVEPRR Score: His later leadership built on the understanding that trust is the only sustainable competitive advantage is the deferred fruit of what he observed. Purpose and Authenticity, developed through watching someone else practice them.

The Finance and Strategy Leadership

Policy Custodians – The Room That Data Eventually Moved

Core Traits: Institutionally rigorous, governance-focused, oriented toward systemic discipline over individual relationship management

Behaviours: Designed and issued the circular without consulting the channel. Defended the policy in the regional review on legitimate financial grounds. Were

moved, ultimately, not by appeal to relationship value but by data that made the asset-protection case in financial terms they could engage with.

Significance: They are not the villains of this story. They are a structural reality: organisations making decisions at a level of abstraction that does not include the voices most affected by those decisions. The lesson is not that finance was wrong. It is that decisions made without the channel's input carried a relationship cost that was never modelled alongside the working capital benefit.

AVEPRR Score: Partial on Responsiveness, they responded when presented with data, which is the correct institutional behaviour. Weak on Emotional Intelligence, the circular's design did not include any mechanism for understanding the channel's experience before implementation.

The Competitor

The Unseen Pressure – Present Only as a Better Offer

Significance: The competitor never appears directly in this story. They are a phone call that Arulchamy received and did not return. They offered higher margins and longer credit presumably better terms, on paper, than what Amit eventually secured. They lost anyway, not because their offer was inferior but because trust is not a term that appears on a competitor's price list. The competitor represents what is always true in relationship-driven markets: the alternative is always available, always potentially better on measurable terms, and always unable to replicate the one thing that cannot be manufactured quickly, the history of a kept promise.

The Retail and Contractor Ecosystem

Unnamed and Numerous – The Downstream World

Significance: They are the people whose working lives were restructured by a circular they never received. Retailers who had planned procurement cycles. Contractors who had quoted projects. Electricians whose margins were part of a system that had been changed without their knowledge. They do not appear in the story's conversations, but they are the reason those conversations mattered because Arulchamy's network was built on commitments to these people, and the

circular's threat to those commitments was the real source of the call he made to Amit on a rainy evening in Chennai.

6. When Ambition Turns Dangerous

Navya

Management Trainee – The Youngest, The Most Vulnerable, The One Who Eventually Told the Truth

Core Profile: Five months into her career, still learning the invisible rules of corporate life, without the framework to identify manipulation when it arrived wearing the costume of concerned seniority

Manipulation Mechanism: Samson targeted her anxiety about gossip as a specific, legitimate concern for a young woman building her professional reputation in a new environment. He then amplified it and offered a solution that required her to do something she did not understand the full consequences of. This is not a failure of her judgment. It is a precise exploitation of the vulnerability that inexperience creates.

The Recovery: When Aiswarya's investigation created the conditions for her to tell the full truth, when the cost of telling it was made safe and the cost of not telling it was made clear, she told it. That decision, made under its own form of pressure, was the act that completed the investigation.

AVEPRR Score: Her final act, telling the truth about how the complaint was constructed, is Authenticity under pressure. The rest of her story is a lesson in what organisations owe to the youngest people inside them.

Sundar

Technology Professional – The Man Who Was Offered Everything and Refused

Core Profile: Mid-career, technically capable, carrying an old complaint that had become a ceiling. The history of that complaint was used against him twice: first as leverage to secure his cooperation, then as the mechanism through which the false harassment complaint was made plausible.

The Refusal: He was offered a promotion, a salary hike, a performance bonus, and the erasure of the record that had been limiting his career for years. He refused all of it. Calmly. Without performance. And then told them he would report any further pressure. That sentence delivered without drama to people who had more power than he did is the story's most precise demonstration of Values under pressure.

AVEPRR Score: Full marks on Values. His refusal was not heroic in a visible sense; he did not go to HR that day, he did not make a scene, he did not create a record. He simply declined and drew the line. The fact that the conspiracy continued to find another mechanism to silence him does not diminish what he held.

Jagadish and Mercy (JAME)

General Managers – Two Capable Leaders Who Chose Wrong

Core Profile: High-performing by every measurable standard. Strong numbers, genuine client relationships, and real leadership of their respective teams. The AVEPRR framework's most instructive negative illustration: the person who performs all the external indicators of good leadership while harbouring, under the surface, a willingness to cross every line when the cost is high enough.

The Critical Decision: The dinner was the origin. The conversation that turned shared frustration into a shared plan. At any point in that conversation, either of them could have said: This is not who I am. Neither did. The plan that emerged was not impulsive it was deliberate, constructed over time, involving multiple people. That deliberateness makes it harder to explain as a moment of weakness and more accurate to describe as a revelation of character.

The Irony: The succession they tried to prevent became the consequence of their exposure. Jaydev Rajaram led India. Jagadish and Mercy left without the dignity that twenty-five years of combined service in the organisation had built. The ambition that was supposed to protect their careers destroyed them.

AVEPRR Score: The complete inversion of the framework most precisely on Values (which they abandoned in the dinner conversation), Emotional

Intelligence (they could not read their own motivations clearly enough to see where they were taking them), and Purpose (which they reduced to personal advancement at the expense of every other consideration).

Samson

Manager – The Instrument Who Mistook Proximity to Power for Power

Core Profile: Not the architect. Not senior enough to have designed the conspiracy. But willing enough to be useful to it, and motivated enough by the prospect of favour from the people above him to execute what was needed.

The Mechanism: He understood Navya's vulnerability and used it with precision. The approach as a concerned senior. The warning about gossip. The solution required the complaint. The incentive of the business role. Each element was calibrated to the specific psychology of a twenty-two-year-old in her first job. This is not incompetence. It is a specific kind of social intelligence deployed in the service of manipulation.

AVEPRR Score: Zero on Values, purpose, and authenticity. Samson represents what organisations produce when they reward results without scrutinizing methods, people who have learned that useful output, delivered to the right person, is sufficient.

Nalini Krishnan

Committee Chair – Thirty Years Distilled into Nine Words

Core Profile: A seasoned senior leader whose most important quality in this story was not her knowledge or her authority but her specific capacity to hear the gap, the thing that was not said, the pause that carried more information than the sentence it interrupted.

The Key Act: She did not rush to a conclusion. She did not trust the apparent completeness of Navya's account. She wrote nine words to Aiswarya. Those nine words and the judgment behind them are what made the investigation possible.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary on Emotional Intelligence, the most precise demonstration in the story of what it means to hear beyond words. Exemplary on

Purpose, she was not interested in closing the case quickly. She was interested in closing it correctly.

Aiswarya Nair

Regional HR Leader – Discretion and Courage in the Same Professional

Core Profile: The rarest combination in organisational life: someone who can conduct a sensitive investigation without leaking it, and who dares to follow the evidence wherever it leads, including upward, toward people with more authority than the person conducting the investigation

The Method: Observe first. Ask later. Conclude last. Twelve days of quiet, methodical investigation that stayed invisible to its subjects until it was complete. The discipline of that invisibility, the resistance to the temptation to confront prematurely, to signal findings before they were documented, to allow the conspiracy to construct a counter-narrative, is what produced the completeness of the final picture.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary on Authenticity (following the truth rather than the comfortable conclusion), Resilience (twelve days of sustained investigation under the institutional weight of two senior leaders), and Responsiveness (the investigation was complete and actionable; the organisation acted on it without delay).

7. Compassion is a Strategy

Binod Sahu

Senior Manager – The Process Professional Who Made the Human Choice

Core Traits: Methodical, fair, documentation-driven; the kind of professional whose value to an organisation is precisely his predictability and who demonstrated, in one unobserved moment, that predictability and compassion are not opposites

The Defining Decision: He was not obligated by any process, any policy, or any professional expectation to choose Option Three. He was obligated only by his own understanding of what kind of leader he intended to be and by the specific,

quiet knowledge that the way he treated a person in their most vulnerable moment would define that relationship for everything that followed

What He Did Not Do: He did not mention the email. He did not reference the hospitalization. He did not adjust the formal policy. He created space through the quality of a single message, and then he let the space do the work that no escalation could have done

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary across all six pillars. Most precisely on Emotional Intelligence, reading context rather than just data, and on Values, choosing dignity over leverage in an unobserved moment where the choice was entirely his own

Sheetal Gupta

Vendor Account Lead – The Person Behind the Performance Record

Core Traits: Capable, professionally inconsistent during a period of personal crisis; carrying a weight she had not disclosed and that the professional ecosystem had no mechanism to detect

The Accidental Disclosure: The email was not intended to be seen. Its accidental arrival in Binod's inbox was the kind of coincidence that professional environments are not designed to handle because they are designed around what people choose to disclose, not what circumstance reveals. The accidental disclosure created the test. What Binod did with it created the outcome

The Recovery: Her recovery was not a performance of gratitude. It was the natural response of someone who had been given the conditions to restore themselves space, dignity, the absence of pressure and who, restored, returned to the full capability that the performance record had never reflected

AVEPRR Score: Her thank-you, without explaining, was its own form of Authenticity: the acknowledgement of what had been given without overstating it or making it transactional

The Internal Stakeholders

The Expectation and the Pressure

Significance: They are present in this story as the environment that had been watching the escalation path and expecting its completion. They represent the institutional momentum of process, the quiet pressure of a system that had been set in motion and whose natural endpoint was vendor penalty or replacement. Binod's decision to pause that momentum was not made against them. It was made in spite of their irrelevance to the question he was actually answering, which was not 'what does the process require?' but 'what does this situation, understood fully, call for?'

8. The Uniform You Wear Inside

Farook Omar

The Cadet from Kerala — Precision as Character, Not Performance

Core Traits: Methodical, composed, value-settled in the sense that his principles did not require recalculation under pressure because the calculation had already been done

Behaviors: Polished his boots before inspection, not for inspection. Held the compass steady when Santosh was ready to move. Said 'we missed it, we report it' without elaboration, without drama, without moral lecture. His character communicated itself through precision and economy rather than expression and argument.

The Key Insight: Farook's most important quality in this story is not that he was more honest than Santosh; it is that honesty did not cost him the same internal struggle that it cost Santosh, because Farook had already done the work of value formation before the forest tested it. He did not choose integrity in the dark. He arrived at the dark with integrity already chosen. This is the difference between character and decision-making.

Later Life: Built a successful business employing hundreds from his community. Remained punctual, ethical, and grounded. The compass that held steady in the forest held steady in every boardroom that followed.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary across all pillars. Most precisely visible on Authenticity, the boots polished when no one was watching, the report made when no one would have caught the lie, and on Values, whose settled quality meant the forest offered him a temptation that his character had already resolved.

Santosh Thakur

The Cadet from Himachal Pradesh — The Harder Journey to the Same Place

Core Traits: Intense, competitive, expressive, self-aware in a specific and valuable way that makes a person capable of seeing their own impulse clearly enough to choose differently

Behaviors: Led naturally in daytime discussions. Competed fiercely. Felt the full pull of Thomas's whisper without concealing it from himself. Chose to report the missed checkpoint despite every competitive instinct arguing against it. Became an NCC officer in later life, voluntarily, to give others the test that had formed him.

The Internal Conflict: Santosh's conflict in the forest is the story's real drama. Farook's response was settled. Santosh's was fought for. And the value of what he chose is inseparable from the fact that he had to genuinely choose it — that the other option was real and available and appealing and he declined it anyway. Integrity that costs nothing proves nothing. Integrity that costs something is the only kind that builds character.

Later Life: University faculty member. NCC officer. Shaping young minds with values he had to struggle to choose. His struggle is his credential.

AVEPRR Score: In the moment of the forest: demonstrates Authenticity, Values, Emotional Intelligence, and Responsiveness under genuine pressure. Over his lifetime: demonstrates Purpose (the NCC officer role was deliberate service) and Resilience (accepting the deduction without resentment, without excuse).

Subedar Thej Bahadur

The Silent Builder — The Nod That Was Enough

Core Traits: Observant in the way that only experience makes possible; economical in the way that authority does not require words to communicate itself; present in the story as its moral endorsement

Significance: Subedar Thej Bahadur's nod is the story's most important moment not because it rewarded the choice that Farook and Santosh had made but because it confirmed what was already true: that their choice had been seen, that its quality had been recognized, and that the institution of the NCC operated with enough integrity to notice and acknowledge the internal uniform even when the external uniform was what the inspection was officially assessing.

What He Represents: He is the institution at its best the version of authority that builds character in others, not by imposing standards but by demonstrating that the standards are real, that the people who hold them are seen, and that the nod is worth more than the trophy because it comes from someone who cannot be fooled.

AVEPRR Score: His economy is itself the most precise expression of Authenticity: he says nothing unnecessary. He confirms what is true. He trusts the person receiving the nod to understand what it means.

Thomas

The Voice of Convenience — The Temptation Given a Name

Core Traits: Practical, pragmatic, navigating his own pressure ecosystem, not malicious in his whisper but genuinely offering what seemed to him a reasonable solution to an unfair situation

Significance: Thomas is the most important supporting character in this story because he represents the option. Every ethical decision requires the availability of the alternative, otherwise there is no choice, only inevitability. Thomas made the alternative available with the specific framing that makes it most seductive: 'no one can track it.' He was not wrong about the tracking. He was wrong about what tracking is for. The person who needs external tracking to maintain internal integrity has already failed the test.

What He Represents: Every person who has ever offered you the easier path, not out of malice, but out of pragmatism and who has given the temptation a voice that it otherwise would have remained as merely a thought. The test is not whether the whisper is available. It is what you do with it.

The 336 Cadets

The Competitive Context – The Silent Pressure

Significance: They are never individualized in this story. They are present as weight, the weight of ranking, of comparative performance, of the knowledge that three hundred and thirty-four other people are also navigating the forest and that every checkpoint missed is a relative advantage surrendered. Their presence in the story is the context that makes the choice difficult. Without them, the missed checkpoint is a minor navigation error. With them, it is a competitive cost. The story requires them to be real.

9. The Altitude Trap

Naanu Kumar

Founder and CEO – The Man in the Mirror

Core Traits: Determined, self-made, technically gifted, relational in his early years; increasingly self-referential and feedback-resistant in the growth years; humbled and slowly recalibrating in the rebuilding years

Behaviors — The Rise: Stayed late when others left. Treated his job as preparation. Built trust through reliability. Made decisions with data and consultation. Created space for colleagues to contribute to the organisation's purpose.

Behaviors — The Drift: Shortened leadership meetings. Replaced collaborative decisions with late-night unilateral ones. Approved hires and spending without financial scrutiny. Pursued visibility over strategy. Dismissed the feedback of the people who had built the organisation alongside him. Allowed the departure of his most important leaders without genuine reckoning.

Behaviors — The Recovery: Sought executive coaching. Revisited foundational values. Reached out to people he had distanced. Accepted the discomfort of honest self-assessment. Began rebuilding with humility rather than velocity.

Motivation: In the early years, genuine purpose, the desire to build something meaningful from a position of limited advantage. In the growth years: ego consolidation, the need to be confirmed as the sole architect of success. In the recovery: something closer to his original motivation, with the weight of earned wisdom behind it.

AVEPRR Score: Early: exemplary on Authenticity, Values, Purpose, and Responsiveness. Mid-period: near-complete failure on all six pillars. Recovery: work in progress, Resilience and Authenticity showing the strongest return; Emotional Intelligence is still developing.

The Head of Technology

Co-Architect of the Engineering Foundation – The First to See

Core Traits: Rigorous, systems-oriented, professionally grounded, honest about what the data showed, even when it was unwelcome

Behaviors: Built the technical architecture that enabled the company's scale. Raised the warning signals internally when the drift became visible. Left when it became clear that those signals were not being received. His departure was not a personal decision — it was a professional verdict.

Motivation: Belief in building something that works correctly, not just something that looks successful. When those two things diverged, he chose honesty over comfort.

AVEPRR Score: High on Values and Authenticity throughout. His departure was, in its own way, an act of Responsiveness, a refusal to be complicit in a direction he could see was wrong.

The Head of Sales

Builder of Market Reach – The Commercial Conscience

Core Traits: Relational, commercially sharp, patient in building the kind of client trust that compounds over time

Behaviors: Constructed the company's revenue engine from a standing start. Tried to surface the drift through the channels available to him. Left when those channels closed. Took with him not just his skills but the institutional memory of every client relationship he had built.

Motivation: Genuine investment in the company's success, not just as a career milestone but as a shared project. His resignation was the resignation of a person who had been made to feel that the sharing had ended.

AVEPRR Score: Consistent on Values and Purpose. His exit was an act of self-respect, the refusal to remain in a situation where the values he had helped define were no longer being honoured.

The Finance Leader

Voice of Financial Discipline – The Ignored Conscience

Core Traits: Methodical, precise, professionally fearless in communicating uncomfortable financial realities

Behaviors: Installed financial discipline in an organisation that had been running on enthusiasm and early-stage energy. Continued to raise signals about spending without discipline as the drift accelerated. Was progressively marginalized. Departed when her role had been effectively reduced to documentation of decisions she had not been consulted on.

Motivation: Professional integrity. She knew what the numbers meant before anyone else did. She said what the numbers meant. And she left when saying it was no longer possible.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary on Authenticity, Values, and Responsiveness throughout. Her story illustrates what happens when an organisation's financial conscience is structurally separated from its decision-making authority.

The People and Culture Leader

Guardian of the Organisational Soul – The Last to Leave, The Most Missed

Core Traits: Deeply empathetic, organizationally astute, capable of translating abstract values into daily practice

Behaviors: Built the invisible architecture, purpose, values, people practices, that made the company a place people invested themselves in. Stayed the longest of the four. Left when it became clear that the architecture was being dismantled from above. Her departure was the moment the company's soul walked out of the building.

Motivation: Genuine belief in the possibility of organisations that treat people as their most significant asset. When that belief was no longer reflected in the decisions being made, continuation became impossible.

AVEPRR Score: The embodiment of the full AVEPRR framework. Her Emotional Intelligence was the organisation's most valuable leadership resource, and the resource most completely absent from the decisions that led to its collapse.

The Chinese Investment Group and Oversight Teams

The Mirror the Organisation Tried to Avoid

Core Traits: Institutionally rigorous, financial-accountability focused, ultimately unmoved by narrative when the numbers told a different story

Behaviors: Invested on the basis of a compelling story and a demonstrable product. Deployed oversight when that story began diverging from financial reality. Cancelled the second phase of funding when it became clear that the governance gap was structural rather than situational.

Significance: The investors were the first outside mirror held up to Naanu's leadership, the first party with both the standing and the independence to say: what you are telling us and what we are seeing are not the same thing. The cancellation of the second funding phase was not a market judgment. It was a leadership judgment.

The Early Employees

The Three Hundred Who Believed – and the Five Hundred Who Were Present at the Fall

Significance: They are the most numerous and the least visible characters in this story. They are the people who joined because the founder's vision was compelling, who stayed through the difficult months because the leadership's honesty made the trust worth maintaining, and who were eventually laid off because a series of leadership decisions made their positions untenable. They did not make those decisions. They bore the consequences of them.

AVEPRR Significance: Every pillar of the AVEPRR framework, when exercised by leadership, serves these people. Every pillar, when abandoned, harms them first and most directly. The mass layoffs were not a business event. They were the human cost of a leadership failure, and they deserve to be read as such.

The Former Batchmates and Well-Wishers

The Quiet Loyalists – Present in the Orbit, Indispensable in the Recovery

Core Traits: Patient, grounded, loyal without being sycophantic, the rarest combination in the ecosystem around any successful founder

Behaviors: Maintained their relationship with Naanu through the years of drift without enabling it. Stayed in the orbit without being absorbed into the performance of success. Became available when he was ready to be honest. Guided the recovery informally, without title, without compensation, with the kind of investment in another person's growth that is its own reward.

AVEPRR Significance: They represent what genuine Responsiveness looks like, not the reactive kind that responds to crisis, but the steady kind that remains available across time and remains honest when honesty is what the other person actually needs.

The Executive Coach

The Unnamed Catalyst – The Person Who Asked the Questions Nobody Else Could

Significance: The executive coach does not appear in the story's dramatic scenes. There is no confrontation, no revelation, no moment of cinematic clarity. What the coach provided was more important and less dramatic than any of those things: a structured space in which Naanu could examine, honestly and without defence, the gap between who he had intended to be and who he had become.

This is the work that leadership development actually requires, and it is almost always invisible.

AVEPRR Significance: The coaching relationship restored, first, Naanu's access to his own Emotional Intelligence — the pillar that had collapsed most completely during the drift years. Without that restoration, the other pillars could not have followed.

10. The Escalation that could not wait

Gautam Shetty

Regional Sales Manager — The Leader Who Understood What the Situation Required

Core Traits: Situationally aware, values-grounded, decisive without being impulsive; the kind of professional whose most important quality was not technical knowledge but the clarity of understanding that some decisions are made not by process but by conscience

The Defining Sequence: Heard the complaint. Understood the evidence risk. Recognized the trust cost of delay. Picked up his helmet. Rode 38 kilometers. Stood in the ICU without a shield. Apologized before defending. Collected contaminated samples barehanded. Returned the next day with the truth. Not one of these actions was required by a protocol. All of them were required by who he was.

What He Did Not Do: He did not defend the company when the evidence was in front of him. He did not wait until morning, when waiting would have destroyed the evidence. He did not tell the production team their records were correct when they had not looked at the right thing. Each of these was available to him. He declined each of them.

AVEPRR Score: Full marks across all six pillars, but most precisely on Authenticity and Responsiveness, which in this story are not separate qualities but the same quality viewed from two angles: being honest about what the situation is, and acting on it at the speed the situation requires

The ICU Doctors and Nurses

The Healthcare Professionals – Those Who Were Right

Core Traits: Clinically precise, professionally accountable, carrying the specific responsibility of people whose patients cannot advocate for themselves

The Nurses' Signal: The shivering observation, noticed, documented, and reported correctly, was the signal that made the entire investigation possible. The nurses did not manage the observation, defer it or wait to see if it happened again. They reported it. That clinical instinct, practised daily in a high-stakes environment, was the trigger for everything that followed.

The Doctors' Response: They expected an argument. They received honesty. Their observation, 'you came here to understand', is the story's most precise measurement of what Gautam's response had communicated. Not competence. Not professionalism. Understanding. The rarest and most valuable quality a supplier representative can demonstrate in a clinical environment.

AVEPRR Score: Their insistence that someone come and see the issue personally, rather than accepting a remote resolution, was itself an act of purpose. They were not protecting a business relationship. They were protecting their patients.

The Production and Quality Assurance Teams

The Internal Resistance – And the Correction

Core Traits: Process-oriented, record-dependent, initially defensive in the way that all quality and manufacturing teams are when external complaints challenge internal documentation

Significance: Their initial defensiveness is not a character flaw. It is the natural institutional response of people whose professional identity is built on the correctness of their processes, and who read a complaint first as a challenge to that correctness rather than as evidence that the correctness has a gap. What matters is not the initial defence but what happened when the evidence was placed on the table: they looked. They found the sealing defect. They found the 18-hour packaging violation. They were honest about what they found.

The Institutional Outcome: Manufacturing protocols revised. Sterilization compliance stricter. Quality controls strengthened. The crisis that one man had ridden toward in the dark became the catalyst for systemic improvement. That is the durable leadership dividend of choosing truth over convenience.

The ICU Patients

The Reason – Unnamed, Present, Essential

Significance: They appear in this story as the weight behind every decision. They were not in the room when Gautam arrived. They were not consulted. They were not aware of the complaint or the ride or the samples or the investigation. They were simply present, in beds behind curtains, fighting the particular battles of critical illness, as the reason that every other character in this story had a responsibility to get the decision right. Their vulnerability is the story's moral foundation. Their safety is the only metric that ultimately mattered.

11. When Debt Knocked

Muthu Velusamy

Business Owner – The Man Who Traced the Consequence

Core Traits: Strategic, analytically grounded, emotionally steady, future-focused without being naive about the present

Behaviors: Refused the impulsive exit when the impulsive exit was the easiest option available. Built a twenty-four-month financial model instead of an appeal. Communicated with suppliers and the bank with the same directness, no softening, no concealment. Held the family disagreement without weaponizing it. Managed the recovery with disciplined patience rather than anxious improvisation.

Motivation: The long view, specifically, the understanding that a business that sells its capacity to relieve short-term pressure has not survived its crisis; it has merely delayed and deepened it. Muthu's driving question throughout was not 'how do we get through this month?' but 'what kind of business do we need to be in five years, and what decisions now make that possible?'

AVEPRR Score: Full marks across all six pillars. Authenticity with every stakeholder - bank, supplier, family. Values in protecting the legacy and the supplier relationships. Emotional Intelligence in managing the family fracture without allowing it to fracture the decision. The purpose of holding the long view under acute short-term pressure. Resilience in sustaining the discipline of recovery through months that offered no applause. Responsiveness in acting with structured speed before the crisis closed off the options that planning still made available.

The Elder Brother

Co-Manager and Operations Head – The Voice of Immediate Reality

Core Traits: Practical, risk-averse, operationally grounded, oriented toward concrete and immediate relief

Behaviours: Proposed the warehouse sale as the fastest path to liquidity relief. Maintained his position during the family disagreement. Eventually allowed the tension to cool as the recovery trajectory became visible.

Motivation: Protection of the family from a risk that felt existential in the present. His instinct to sell the warehouse was not wrong as a response to the pressure — it was a misreading of the full consequence chain. He was solving for survival; Muthu was solving for survival with competitive capacity intact.

AVEPRR Score: Authentic in his concern and his position. Where he struggled was in Purpose — the long-view orientation that would have led him to trace the full consequence of liquidation rather than stopping at the immediate relief. His position was the understandable one. It was not the right one.

Farook Omar

Key Supplier Representative – Trust Made Operational

Core Traits: Relationship-driven, long-horizon thinker, commercially rigorous but not transactionally cold

Behaviors: Listened to Muthu's direct, unadorned account of the situation. Extended sixty additional days of credit. Set a clear expectation, 'don't make us

regret it', that was itself an act of respect: it treated Muthu as someone capable of meeting a standard rather than someone to be managed.

Motivation: A decades-long credit history that had been built without a single concealment. Farook's decision was not charitable; it was a rational extension of credit to a borrower whose track record, in every interaction that had preceded this one, justified the extension.

AVEPRR Score: Demonstrates Emotional Intelligence in hearing what Muthu's directness signaled about character. Values in honouring a long relationship rather than protecting only the immediate account balance. His single sentence, 'you've been straight with us for years', is the story's most precise articulation of what trust capital actually looks like when it is drawn on.

The Bank's Lending Team

Institutional Creditors – Persuaded by Plan, Not Predicament

Core Traits: Institutionally cautious, analytically rigorous, responsive to structured evidence

Behaviors: Listened to a presentation built on a twenty-four-month model rather than a narrative. Approved a restructuring facility with strict monitoring conditions. Were repaid ahead of the revised schedule.

Significance: The bank represents a structural reality of crisis navigation: institutional creditors cannot be moved by emotion, and should not be. What moves them is the quality of the thinking that sits behind a request. Muthu's model gave them something to evaluate rather than something to sympathize with. That distinction determined the outcome of the conversation.

The Hospital Chains

Unnamed Debtors – The Origin of the Crisis

Significance: They do not appear in this story as actors but as a force, the delayed payments that created the liquidity crisis, the systemic expansion logic that made their own cash flow problems Muthu's problem. They represent what is always true in supply chains: the financial decisions of large buyer's ripple through their

vendor networks with a speed and severity that the buyers themselves often do not see. The hospital chains were not malicious. They were managing their own pressures. The consequence for the Velusamy business was the same regardless of the intention.

12. The Mother's Ledger

Anju Nair

The Silent Architect — The Most Complete AVEPRR Leader in This Book

Core Traits: Composed without being cold, disciplined without being rigid, empathetic without being self-sacrificing; the specific kind of person whose strength is visible only in its effects, because the person herself never draws attention to it

The Invisible Ledger: Every financial decision is made precisely and without complaint. Every vendor promises honoured. Every neighbour received without judgment. Every difficult night was processed privately and every morning presented with composure. The ledger was real. Its entries compounded across years into the characters of two people and the stability of a wider community.

The Answer That Contained Everything: 'I knew what it was for.' Four words. The entire story is the elaboration of those four words, the demonstration that purpose, clearly held, transforms constraint from suffering into structure, from endurance into investment.

AVEPRR Score: The full framework, lived without the framework's name. Authenticity in private consistency. Values in non-negotiable commitments. Emotional Intelligence in giving stability rather than anxiety. Purpose in the clarity of her endurance. Resilience in the morning after every difficult night. Responsiveness in the community that reached for her precisely because she was reliable.

Rahul

The Chartered Accountant — Discipline Without Fear

Core Profile: Quiet observer who grew up watching his mother's financial precision and dignified commitments; who absorbed the discipline as responsibility rather than as anxiety; who became professionally known for the exact qualities he watched daily in a household that could not afford a different model

The Inheritance: He honours commitments. He prepares before he promises. He never defaults casually. These are professional virtues that are taught explicitly in ethics courses and learned durably only at a kitchen table where the commitments were always kept, and the preparation was always visible.

AVEPRR Score: Authenticity and Values most precisely, being the same in professional life as the person who watched his mother negotiate with dignity and recalculate in the dark. The character was installed before the profession gave it a context.

Rekha

The Community Development Professional – Empathy as Craft

Core Profile: Expressive, sensitive, observant of emotional weather; who chose to work with communities because she had been trained, without knowing she was being trained, in exactly the skills that community work requires

The Inheritance: She listens before advising. She holds space for conflict without escalating it. She is described as fair, not as a performance but as a baseline, the natural expression of someone for whom fairness was the daily operating standard of the household she grew up in.

AVEPRR Score: Emotional Intelligence, most precisely, the listening practice, the non-judgment, the composure in conflict all absorbed from a living room education that no curriculum could have replicated.

The Community

The Recipients – The Evidence of Ripple

Significance: Property disputes resolved. An elderly widow was helped by a bank officer. A neighbour's crisis is absorbed without judgment. Each of these

interactions was a demonstration of the AVEPRR framework in its most direct application not in an organisation, not in a boardroom, but in the specific, unglamorous, necessary work of being the steadiest person in the room when others needed steadiness. The community reached for Anju because she was reliable in a way that required nothing from the people who needed her.

13. From Survival To Significance

Ali Imran

The Man at the Centre – Three Versions of the Same Determination

Phase One — The Survivor: The boy who had no safety net and no manual and learned everything by doing it. His resilience was real, his values were formed by watching what trust meant when you had nothing else to offer, and his purpose was specific enough to function: eat in a good restaurant, own a two-wheeler, wear branded clothes.

Phase Two — The Builder: The distribution professional whose entire competitive advantage was his integrity, a man whose supply chain partners trusted him because he had demonstrated, across thousands of individual decisions, that he would not sacrifice their interests for his own short-term numbers. His values were not performed. They were structural.

Phase Three — The Founder Who Overreached: A man who took the intelligence that had built one kind of business and assumed it would build a different kind without the additional knowledge that the different kind required. The ten failures were not failures of character. They were failures of learning, specifically, the failure to understand that the expertise required for manufacturing was different from the expertise that had built the distribution business, and that the difference mattered more than his track record suggested it would.

Phase Four — The Leader in Progress: The most demanding version of Ali Imran. The one who accepted what had gone wrong without explanation or deflection. Who sought counsel in a room where he was not the most experienced person. Who began rebuilding with the specific discipline that the factory floor

had told him he had been missing. This phase is not finished. That may be the most important thing about it.

AVEPRR Arc: Built Purpose and Resilience in Phase One. Demonstrated Values in Phases One and Two. Lost Authenticity, Responsiveness, and Emotional Intelligence in Phase Three. Is rebuilding all six in Phase Four, with the understanding that rebuilding requires more than recommitment; it requires proof, sustained over time.

The Retailers and Distributors

The Supply Chain Partners — Trust as Both Asset and Obligation

Significance: They trusted Ali Imran before he had a brand, a business, or anything except his word and his demonstrated commitment to their interests. That trust became the foundation of the distribution business. It also became the clearest signal of the manufacturing business's deterioration, because the retailer complaints and the distributor strain were not just operational signals. They were the evidence that the trust that had built everything was being asked to absorb a weight it had not been extended to carry.

AVEPRR Significance: They represent the reciprocal dimension of Values: trust is not just something you build, it is something you are obligated to protect. Ali Imran's Values were demonstrated most precisely in how he treated these partners during the good years. The cost of the manufacturing period was most acutely felt in how those same partners experienced the shift.

The Employees

The 100+ People on the Factory Floor — The Human Weight of Leadership Decisions

Significance: They are the story's most important silent characters. Over one hundred people whose livelihoods were staked on decisions that Ali Imran was making, about quality, about hiring, about strategy, about the willingness to seek advice he did not have. Their silent waiting on the factory floor was the image that finally communicated to him what the last months of the manufacturing operation had been producing. The factory floor's silence was not just a business signal. It was a human one.

AVEPRR Significance: Leadership decisions are never private. They cascade through every level of an organisation and land most heavily on the people with the least power to protect themselves from them. The rebuild Ali Imran is undertaking is not only for his own benefit. It is for the one hundred people whose futures depend on whether the person at the top of their organisation has learned what the factory floor tried to teach him.

The Market

The Force That Changed While He Was Watching His Own Story

Significance: The market is not a character in the conventional sense. But it is the force that makes the story's lesson most precise: the market had changed dramatically since the 1990s. Consumer behaviour, retail dynamics, competitive intensity, supply chain technology, all of it had evolved. Ali Imran had not invested in understanding that evolution because his existing knowledge had been sufficient for long enough to feel like it would always be. The market's evolution was not a surprise. It was a gradual reality that his failure to stay current had allowed to become a gap between where he stood and where the market was.

14. Reading The Room

Vijay

The Negotiator – Prepared for the Wrong Conversation, Present Enough to Notice

Core Traits: Analytically rigorous, professionally conscientious, capable of pivoting when the signal arrived, though not of reading the signal without help

The Two Vijays: There are two versions of Vijay in this story: the one who walked in with forty slides and talked at James for twenty minutes, and the one who received a five-word note, closed his laptop, and asked the question that built a four-year partnership. The distance between those two versions is the distance between information delivery and genuine enquiry. Both are present in the same person. The second requires the first to let go.

The Defining Act: Closing the laptop. Not the apology, not the question, though both were important. The physical act of closing the laptop was the visible

commitment to the pivot. It signalled to James, without words, that the exchange had changed from performance to conversation.

AVEPRR Score: Authenticity in the apology. Values in the pivot. Resilience in abandoning six weeks of preparation mid-room. Responsiveness in the question that followed. Most precisely on Purpose, understanding, in real time, that the deal was a means and the partnership was the end.

Nisha

The Note-Taker – The Most Valuable Intelligence in the Room

Core Traits: Observant without performing observation; present without the agenda that obscures presence; willing to act on what she noticed by the specific, low-key mechanism of a torn notepad corner

The Insight That Changed Everything: 'He stopped blinking normally. People do that when they're pretending to listen but have already left.' This is not a casual observation. It is the product of a specific attentiveness that most professionals in that room would not have maintained, because most people in that room were oriented toward the presentation rather than toward the person receiving it.

What Her Role Actually Was: The note-taker. But the most valuable contribution in the room came from the note-taker. This is the story's deepest lesson about where Emotional Intelligence actually lives in an organisation: not necessarily in the most senior person, not necessarily in the most prepared person, but in the person who is free enough from the performance to observe what the performance is producing.

AVEPRR Score: Emotional Intelligence at its most precise, reading what was absent, naming it accurately, delivering it at exactly the right moment with exactly the right economy of expression. Five words. The entire negotiation turned on them.

James

The Decision-Maker – The Person the Presentation Missed

Core Traits: Quiet, formally attentive, carrying a concern that had nothing to do with price and that no amount of benchmark analysis was equipped to address

The Real Question: He had not come to Gurgaon to negotiate a price. He had come to assess whether this partner would be present consistently, whether the relationship would have the continuity that his previous vendor had failed to provide. That question was never going to be answered by a slide deck. It could only be answered by a conversation. Vijay's pivot made that conversation possible.

What He Confirmed: Four years of partnership without a single escalation. The structural protections that addressed his continuity concern held. This was not an accident. It was the direct result of a meeting that identified his actual concern rather than addressing the commercial surface above it.

AVEPRR Significance: James represents the person on the other side of every negotiation, every meeting, every professional exchange who has a concern that is not the stated concern, whose real question is always about something human underneath the commercial terms. The leader who can reach that question is the one whose partnerships last.

15. The Man Everyone Knew

Deepak Nayyar

The Man at the Centre – Three Versions of the Same Person

Core Traits (The Rise): Charismatic, socially intelligent, entrepreneurially energetic, fluent across every social register, but without the discipline that would have made any of those qualities compound into something lasting

Core Traits (The Collapse): Defensive, avoidant, skilled at relocating accountability to circumstances, genuinely unable to distinguish between the warmth of the conversation and the reliability required after it

Core Traits (The Rebuild): Deliberately slower, structurally honest, practicing the discipline of saying no as rigorously as he had once practised the charm of saying yes

Motivation (Pre-collapse): Visibility and the avoidance of discomfort. The yes was never about generosity; it was about escaping the moment's friction. The side ventures were never about strategy; they were about identity without accountability.

Motivation (Post-collapse): Genuine reconstruction. Not of reputation, that came later, but of self-respect. The first person he needed to be reliable for was himself.

AVEPRR Score: Pre-collapse: near-zero on all six pillars in practice, despite surface performance of several. Post-rebuild: genuine and demonstrated strength on all six - particularly Authenticity (the admission), Resilience (the three years), and Responsiveness (the decision to act on every piece of honest feedback rather than manage it).

The Family

The First Mirror and the Final Measure

Core Traits: Patient beyond what was reasonable, then honestly exhausted, then, when the evidence changed, genuinely responsive to the new reality

Behaviors: Absorbed the financial consequences of his inconsistency for years. Reflected his pattern back to him in the behaviour of his children. Held the household together through the collapse. Recalibrated, slowly but genuinely, as the three-year rebuild provided consistent evidence of change.

Significance: The family is the story's moral centre. Professional credibility can be rebuilt with new partners who do not know the old pattern. Family credibility can only be rebuilt with the same people who watched the pattern at its worst. The fact that the family relationship was repaired is not a warm detail, it is the most rigorous evidence of the transformation, because it required consistency in the presence of full historical knowledge.

AVEPRR Significance: They are the clearest example of the framework's Purpose pillar in its most personal application: the people for whom the rebuild ultimately had to be real, not performed.

The Business Partners

The Rotating Cast of Disappointed Expectations

Core Traits: Initially hopeful, drawn in by Deepak's genuine social intelligence and apparent enthusiasm. Eventually, protective, withdrawing not in anger but in self-preservation.

Behaviors: Extended opportunities. Received warm affirmations. Followed up. Received more warm affirmations. Eventually stopped calling. Some returned, cautiously, during the rebuild. Their willingness to offer one more chance and to report the outcome honestly to others was the mechanism through which the professional rehabilitation became visible.

Significance: They represent what happens to the people inside the orbit of a person who has charm without follow-through. They are not villains. They are people who made rational decisions based on accumulated evidence, and who, when the evidence changed, updated their decisions accordingly. That update is the definition of a reputation rehabilitated.

The Mentors and Coaches

The Honest Counsel That Finally Found an Open Door

Core Traits: Experienced enough to see the pattern clearly, patient enough to wait for the moment when Deepak was ready to hear rather than manage the feedback

Behaviors: Delivered the diagnosis, fear of commitment masquerading as enthusiasm, scatter as avoidance, with the directness that only becomes possible when the recipient has stopped defending. Did not soften it. Did not frame it as potential. Named it a pattern.

Significance: They could not have reached Deepak earlier. Not because the diagnosis was unavailable, it had been available for years. But because he had been too defensive to receive it. The collapse was not what broke him. It was what removed the defences through which he had been processing every previous piece of honest feedback as someone else's problem.

AVEPRR Significance: Represent Responsiveness at its most useful: the counsel that meets a person at the moment they are finally capable of acting on it, rather than performing reception while filing it away.

The Professional Circle

The Network That Knew His Name and Forgot to Call

Significance: This is the most instructive character in the story, because it is not a person; it is a collective memory. The professional circle that had Deepak's number in every phone but had quietly stopped using it for anything consequential. They did not do this consciously. There was no meeting, no decision, no formal withdrawal of trust. It happened the way all reputation erosion happens: through accumulated small decisions, made individually by dozens of people who each had a version of the same experience and drew the same conclusion independently. The rehabilitation of that collective memory, one delivered project at a time, over three years, is the story's most precise demonstration of how credibility actually works.

16. When The Vaults Stayed Open

Charles Rodrigues

Managing Director — The Voice That Set the Non-Negotiables

Core Traits: Decisive, human-centred, capable of institutional clarity that converts crisis into direction before the direction is fully formed

Defining Act: 'Twenty thousand people. By morning, every one of them needs to know two things: that their job is safe, and that we know they exist.' Said at 8 p.m. on the night of the lockdown announcement. Not a communications strategy a human commitment that preceded the strategy and governed every subsequent decision.

AVEPRR Score: Authenticity in the nakedness of the commitment, no polish, no performance, two sentences to his CHRO. Purpose in the clarity that the institution's function was its people and its borrowers, and that no short-term pressure would override that clarity.

Ethan Mathews

CHRO – The Architect of Human Infrastructure at Scale

Core Traits: Strategically visionary, operationally committed; who understood that twenty thousand people needed a human experience rather than a human resources response

The Twenty-Thousand-Call Initiative: Conceived alongside Charles's commitment, designed with Sreenivasan, executed across the full HR and HRBP network. Each call in the employee's own language. Each call asking two questions that no policy document could answer. The most operationally demanding act of institutional empathy in the organisation's history.

AVEPRR Score: Emotional Intelligence at organisational scale, the understanding that confidence is built through the specific experience of being personally seen, not through the announcement of policies. The call was the policy.

Sreenivasan

Senior HR Leader – The Co-Architect and the Voice on the Ground

Core Traits: Detail-oriented, language-sensitive, capable of the field empathy that makes a call to a branch officer in a remote district feel like a personal act rather than an institutional one

Defining Act: He built the tracking architecture that made twenty thousand calls accountable and personally conducted a significant portion of them. His call to the southern Tamil Nadu collections officer, received with 'a phone call came, I felt a little lighter', is the story's most precise measurement of what the initiative actually produced in a human life.

AVEPRR Score: Values in the insistence on personal calls in each employee's own language; Emotional Intelligence in the quality of each individual conversation, received as a human exchange rather than a compliance exercise.

Ranveer Singh

Head of Operations – The Builder of the Hybrid Model

Core Traits: Operationally precise, pragmatic under pressure, capable of redesigning a thirty-year field model in seventy-two hours without discarding what made it work

Defining Act: The hybrid operations model that kept essential field activity running under lockdown and scaled progressively as conditions allowed, built for the field officer first, not for management's reporting convenience; and the real-time operations dashboard that gave Chennai field visibility for the first time in the institution's history.

AVEPRR Score: Resilience in the speed and quality of the model's construction; Responsiveness in its continuous adaptation as the pandemic's conditions changed across two years.

Abraham

Head of Strategic Initiatives – The Connector Who Extended the Circle

Core Traits: Systems thinker, relationship-oriented, who understood that the institution's human responsibility did not stop at its employee boundary

Defining Act: The customer outreach directive, every relationship manager would personally reach every borrower, not to transact but to hear. That directive converted a crisis communication into a permanent relationship management practice and produced the portfolio retention that drove the two-year revenue growth.

AVEPRR Score: Purpose, the understanding that the NBFC's borrowers were the reason the institution existed, and that a lockdown was an argument for reaching toward them more directly, not for retreating behind formal communication channels.

Devankana

Head of Learning – The Architect of Capability at the Speed of Deployment

Core Traits: Learner-centred in both design philosophy and execution; who understood that a technology transformation without capability transformation was not a transformation at all

Defining Act: The learning sprint, six months of compressed digital capability building, integrated with the deployment schedule, designed in vernacular languages for actual field officer use cases. The adoption rate Ranveer tracked was Devankana's real product; the technology was the vehicle, not the destination.

AVEPRR Score: Authenticity in the learner-first design principle; Responsiveness in the continuous redesign of learning modules based on real adoption data from the field.

Biswajeet Banerjee

Head of HRBP – The Institutional Connective Tissue

Core Traits: Network intelligence, policy translation, the specific capability of someone who understands both what leadership has decided and what the field actually needs to hear in order to implement it

Defining Act: The daily HRBP briefing, structured, plain-language, multilingual, followed by a live question window — that converted Chennai's emergency decisions into field-implementable clarity across every geography the institution served, every day throughout the crisis.

AVEPRR Score: Values in the commitment to clarity, a policy that cannot be understood cannot be implemented; Responsiveness in the daily cadence that matched the pace of a rapidly evolving situation.

Sasikumar

Head of Risk – The Proactive Guardian

Core Traits: Analytically rigorous, institutionally protective, who understood that the pandemic's risk landscape required a human-sensitive triage framework rather than a standard credit response

Defining Act: The seventy-two-hour borrower triage framework, three categories, three response protocols, operational before the first post-lockdown field contact. And the ongoing benefit of the digital transformation: a risk function that could see delinquency forming three weeks before it would previously have been visible.

AVEPRR Score: Resilience in the speed and quality of the framework construction; Purpose in the design principle, to protect the borrower's long-term relationship with the institution, not only the institution's short-term exposure.

17. The Answer You Were Carrying All Along

Jawahar Naresh Uday (JNU)

The Mentor – The One Who Stayed

Core Traits: Still, unhurried, more interested in the person finding their own clarity than in the experience of providing clarity; who had learned that the space before a response carries more weight than the response itself

The Defining Act: Asking 'tell me about your mother' rather than engaging with the professional question as stated. The question was not strategic. It was the expression of a mentor who understood that the answer the protégé needed was already present, in the formation they had received long before any organisation gave it a name, and that the right question could make it visible.

Thirty Years of the Same Tremor: Every question he had heard for three decades carried the same anxiety beneath it: the split between who the person was and what the world was currently rewarding. His response was never to resolve that split from the outside. It was always to help the person discover that they already had the resources to resolve it from within.

AVEPRR Score: The full framework, embodied as practice. Most precisely on Emotional Intelligence, listening without rushing, staying without performing urgency, creating conditions for the answer rather than providing one, and on Purpose, which in his own life had clearly been defined as the development of other people's clarity rather than the demonstration of his own.

The Protégé

The Young Professional – Successful on Paper, Unsettled in Spirit

Core Profile: Early thirties, capable, navigating a year of accumulated weight: job market shifts, a family transition, ethical dilemmas at work, values colliding with incentives. The anxiety was real. The answer was also real, it had been present for

thirty years, in the life of a woman who had never described what she was doing as leadership.

The Shift: When the story of the mother unfolded, the anxiety softened. The voice steadied. The quality of attention changed from anxious extraction to grounded recognition. The answer became visible not because JNU provided it but because the right question made it impossible to continue not seeing it.

The Departure: They did not leave with certainty. Certainty was not available. They left with clarity, the knowledge of the orientation, the understanding of the source, the willingness to practice rather than to perfect. That is enough. It is more than enough.

AVEPRR Score: In the process of the conversation itself: Authenticity in naming the conflict honestly, Emotional Intelligence in allowing the unexpected question to go somewhere personal, Purpose in receiving the recognition that the endurance of the mother's life was the template they had been searching for externally.

The Mother

The Silent Teacher — The Answer That Was Always Present

Presence: She was not in the room. She was not named. She was not asked. She appeared because a thirty-year mentor who knew how to ask the right question understood that she was where the answer lived.

What She Taught Without Teaching: Financial constraint held with dignity. Hardship navigated without complaint. Endurance grounded in purpose, not in the abstract sense but in the specific sense: she knew what the effort was building and that clarity made it sustainable. The AVEPRR framework lived before it was named.

AVEPRR Significance: She is this story's connection to The Mother's Ledger, the same principle, seen from a different angle. The ledger she kept was the answer the protégé had been carrying. JNU's question was simply the mechanism that made the carrying conscious.

18. The Antidote

Rudra Pratap Singh (RPS)

Senior Leader HRBP – The Conscience

Core Traits: Principled, courageous, data-driven, emotionally intelligent, institutionally fearless

Behaviors: Challenged authority with facts, not emotion. Protected performers with documented evidence. Refused to comply with unethical directives even under threat of termination. Built an alliance rather than a faction. Stayed in role despite punitive measures and transfers. Spoke truth to power at personal cost.

Motivation: A deep, internalized sense of professional duty ; shaped by military values, that treated organisational integrity as a non-negotiable, not a negotiable.

Concerns / Tensions: Operated largely without institutional protection. His courage existed in spite of the system, not because of it. Vulnerable to retaliation precisely because the system rewarded compliance.

AVEP-RR Score: Full marks on all six pillars. RPS is the benchmark character of this story - the living proof that the framework is not aspirational but operational.

Arjun Maurya (AM)

Senior Business Head – The Strategist

Core Traits: Steady, tenured, credible, politically aware without being politically compromised, results-oriented

Behaviors: Pushed back on the cull with profitability data. Used his twenty-year track record as institutional armor. Collaborated with RPS without needing to control the initiative. Accepted the reinvestigation mandate and expanded its scope with integrity. Submitted findings directly to GHQ, bypassing a compromised chain.

Motivation: Institutional loyalty - genuine, not performative. He had spent two decades building something real. He was not willing to watch it be systematically dismantled by people who had earned nothing.

Concerns / Tensions: His long tenure was both his shield and his exposure - he was too embedded to be easily dismissed, but also too visible to act without consequence if GHQ had chosen differently.

AVEP-RR Score: Exemplary on Accountability, Values, Purpose, and Responsibility. Displayed Resilience throughout. His Empathy was quieter but present, most clearly in how he brought RPS back to Bangalore during the reinvestigation.

Sunil Cheriyan (SC)

COO, India – The Careerist

Core Traits: Risk-averse, self-serving, conflict-avoidant with subordinates, socially connected upward, ethically hollow

Behaviors: Designed the cull not to fix the business but to protect himself from accountability for three years of poor leadership. Weaponized the CHRO role. Became personally vindictive when challenged. Monitored LinkedIn and social media obsessively. Tried to claim the RPS-AM initiative as his own. Exited without institutional consequence until GHQ intervened.

Motivation: Survival. Every action SC took was calibrated to protect his position not to serve the organisation, its people, or its clients.

Concerns / Tensions: He is not a villain of dramatic proportions. He is the more dangerous kind: a mediocre person in a senior role who uses institutional authority as a personal shield. The organisation failed in not detecting this sooner.

AVEP-RR Score: Zero on Accountability, Values, and Empathy. Some surface-level Purpose performance, enough to survive - but no genuine orientation toward organisational good. Resilience only in the self-preservation sense.

Vikrant Verma (VV)

CHRO, India – The Executioner

Core Traits: Spineless, approval-seeking, willing to weaponize HR authority, lacks professional identity independent of his seniors

Behaviors: Overrode his own HR mandate to become the SLT's most effective instrument of harm. Threatened RPS with a performance rating as a weapon. Remained silent during mass terminations of above-average performers. Had no independent voice in the SLT despite nominally leading the people function.

Motivation: Belonging. VV's actions were not driven by ambition or malice in the classic sense rather they were driven by the desperate need to remain in the room where decisions were made, regardless of what those decisions cost others.

Concerns / Tensions: VV is a cautionary portrait of what happens when HR leadership becomes subordinated to executive power rather than serving as its conscience. The function was inverted entirely under his stewardship.

AVEP-RR Score: Failed on all six pillars. Uniquely damaging because his failure occurred in the function most responsible for upholding the framework.

Sujay Keni (SK)

New COO – The Incomplete Reformer

Core Traits: Competent, globally experienced, communicative, but ultimately institutionally cautious when institutional courage was required

Behaviors: Conducted genuine townhalls. Held one-on-ones. Improved morale. But warned Ramasamy Rao to comply rather than investigate. Did not act on the early signals from Hyderabad that Rao had tried to surface.

Motivation: Stability. SK wanted to rebuild the organisation without creating further turbulence, an understandable goal that led him to suppress truth-tellers at a critical juncture.

AVEP-RR Score: Strong on Purpose and Empathy in the early phase. Failed on Responsibility when it mattered most- specifically in the Ramasamy Rao episode.

Prakash Venky (PV)

CHRO (New) – The Well-Intentioned Failure

Core Traits: Experienced, values-oriented, decent in intention, but politically naive and ultimately unable to hold the line under proximity to power

Behaviors: Supported RPS's Hyderabad investigation fully. Then, it was exposed entirely to SR in Jaipur. Absorbed daily abuse from SR without pushing back or escalating. Allowed blood-is-thicker-than-governance to shape his reading of the APAC COO relationship.

Motivation: Genuine good intentions undermined by a failure to recognise that his neutrality in the face of SR's behaviour was not diplomacy - it was complicity.

AVEP-RR Score: High on Values in intent; failed critically on Responsibility and Accountability at the decisive moment in Jaipur.

Srikant Ramanan (SR)

India COO (2nd) – The Nepotism Hire

Core Traits: Deeply insecure, entitled, devoid of business acumen, using aggression to mask incompetence

Behaviors: Created institutional disruption from Day One. Humiliated the CHRO publicly and privately. Had no engagement with business development. Proposed and executed the reverse transition that destroyed the acquisition. Leaked investigation details within hours of receiving them.

Motivation: Ego protection. SR's entire organisational presence was oriented around the management of his own image and the result was that his image, and the damage it caused, became the organisation's most persistent problem.

AVEP-RR Score: Complete absence of all six pillars in practice. A living case study in what happens when leadership selection is governed by relationship rather than values.

Swati Sharma (SS)

BUH Hyderabad – The Complicit Enabler

Core Traits: Target-pressured, ethically compromised, chose institutional protection over institutional integrity

Behaviors: Handed a subordinate's credentials to an abusive manager. Dismissed harassment complaints. Exited complainants on fabricated performance grounds. Served as Akash Dhavan's internal intelligence ally.

Motivation: Survival under target pressure, combined with a moral calculus that placed her career above the safety of the people in her care.

AVEP-RR Score: Failed on Values, Empathy, and Responsibility. Her Accountability was entirely inverted - she used her authority to shield wrongdoers rather than address them.

Praveen Misra (PM)

Manager – The Predator

Core Traits: Manipulative, exploitative, protected by hierarchy, using institutional authority as cover for personal predation

Behaviors: Used stolen credentials for fraud. Directed fear-based management of a vulnerable team. Exited complainants. Used small gestures of reward to maintain silence.

AVEP-RR Score: Total failure. The opposite of every pillar - a character whose entire conduct was oriented around extracting value from others while providing none.

Naresh Reddy (NR)

Manager – The Extortionist

Core Traits: Transactional, coercive, using managerial sign-off power as a revenue stream

Behaviors: Mandated team dinners with alcohol after every salary cycle. Required a twenty percent kickback on travel claims. Framed extortion as team-building and career protection. Threatened team members into silence.

AVEP-RR Score: Total failure. NR represents the petty but corrosive end of leadership failure; the kind that is most harmful precisely because it is so proximate and every day.

Akash Dhavan (AD)

Business Head – The Double Agent

Core Traits: Patient, methodical, professionally convincing, operating a double identity across years

Behaviors: Was on a competitor's payroll while occupying a senior internal role. Orchestrated client migration. Used his position to suppress investigations. Leveraged SK's inclination toward stability to neutralize Ramasamy Rao.

Motivation: Financial and competitive - the most deliberately malicious motivation in the story. AD chose this.

AVEP-RR Score: The complete inversion of the framework - every pillar deliberately weaponized against the organisation it was meant to serve.

Ramasamy Rao (RR)

National Admin & Facilities Head – The Honest Man in a Corner

Core Traits: Truthful, observant, ethically grounded, but constrained by personal vulnerability and institutional abandonment

Behaviors: Knew the truth and could not act on it. Was warned off by SS. Was not supported by SK when he tried to escalate. Ultimately, RPS told the truth when it created the conditions of safety that the organisation itself had failed to create.

Motivation: Family protection. His silence was not cynicism; it was the survival calculation of a man who had been given no institutional protection and had everything personal at stake.

AVEP-RR Score: High on Values and Empathy at the personal level. Low on Accountability and Resilience but the question the framework asks here is whether individual resilience can compensate for institutional failure. In RR's case, it could not until RPS created the conditions that made it possible.

The Young Fresher

Unnamed – The Bravest Person in the Building

Core Traits: Courageous beyond her circumstances, grounded in personal values, unwilling to be defined by fear

Behaviors: Walked into a senior leader's workspace with no institutional protection, no guarantee of outcome, and full awareness of what she was risking. Told the complete truth. Did not frame it diplomatically. Did not ask for anything in return.

Motivation: Values, pure and simple. She had not yet learned the corporate language of strategic silence. This was not naivety, it was moral clarity.

AVEP-RR Score: Operates on Values, Purpose, and Resilience with a purity that the most senior leaders in this story failed to demonstrate. She is the moral north of this entire narrative.

The Deceased Employee

Unnamed – The Ghost That Broke the First Silence

Core Traits: Her story is not characterized by traits but by consequence: the consequence of an organisation that failed in its most basic duty of care.

Significance: Her case was the first direct legal accountability moment in the story. The fact that her settlement was withheld for eight months after her death and cleared only under court threat and after RPS intervention is the clearest possible evidence of an organisation that had confused institutional self-protection with institutional responsibility.

AVEP-RR Significance: Her story is the origin of the word Responsibility in this narrative. Every person in the SLT who delayed her settlement had the opportunity to be responsible. None of them chose it.

The Manager on Maternity Leave

Unnamed – Weaponized in Absence

Significance: Her credentials were stolen. Her professional identity was used to commit fraud while she was absent exercising a legal right. That she later dared to escalate to GHQ directly despite the risk to her own position; makes her one of the story's most quietly significant figures.

AVEP-RR Significance: Her story illustrates that Responsibility runs both ways: the organisation failed her; she then held the organisation responsible. Her escalation, alongside others, was what forced the GHQ's hand.

19. Where Leadership Truly Began

Himmat Singh Rathore

The Disciplined Pillar — Rajasthan to the Boardroom

Core Traits: Command presence without performance, firmness without arrogance, dependability as the foundation of authority rather than a supplement to it

What the NCC Built: The specific resilience of someone who has led people through physical exhaustion and held the standard when the easier option was to lower it, carried into a corporate career where the exhaustion changes form but the requirement to hold the standard does not

Corporate Identity: The leader whose people never had to wonder where he stood or whether he would be there when the decision was difficult. The consistency came not from temperament alone but from years of practicing it in conditions where inconsistency had visible consequences

AVEPRR Signature Pillar: Resilience, the long march, the difficult decision, the team that needed him to carry the weight when he was carrying his own

Amit Sharma

The Purpose-Driven Mentor — Delhi to Every Team He Led

Core Traits: Investment in others as the primary metric of professional success; the specific generosity of the leader who gives time to development that they may never see the return on

What the NCC Built: The orientation away from individual performance toward collective capability — learned on a parade ground where the formation's result was the only result that mattered, and carried into organisations where the equivalent lesson required the same discipline to practise

Corporate Identity: The manager people sought out when they wanted to grow — not just to succeed, but to understand why they were growing and what it was for

AVEPRR Signature Pillar: Purpose — building leaders within his teams as the primary expression of what he understood leadership to be for

Santosh Thakur

The Trust Builder – The Hills to Every Partnership He Formed

Core Traits: Analytical steadiness, patience born from landscape and discipline, the specific capacity to build trust through consistency rather than through charm

What the NCC Built: The long view, the understanding that trust is built slowly, that relationships worth having taken time, and that the patience required to build them correctly is not a constraint on performance but its foundation

Corporate Identity: The professional whose partnerships lasted because they were built on evidence rather than enthusiasm, the partner whose word, given once, required no further confirmation

AVEPRR Signature Pillar: Responsiveness, reading dynamic environments with the calm of someone who has been trained to distinguish between the urgent and the important, and to respond to the important even when the urgent is louder

The National Cadet Corps

The Institution – The Quiet Academy of Character

What It Is: The largest youth organisation in the world. A voluntary Programme that takes young Indians from every state, every background, every language, every economic context, and places them in the same uniform with the same standards applied to all

What It Builds: Not skills. Character. The distinction is important. Skills can be taught at any age. Character, the deep, tested, habitual orientation toward integrity, responsibility, and service, is most durably built when it is introduced early, before the habits of convenience have had a chance to settle

Why It Matters: The NCC produces its results quietly. There is no billboard. There is no press release when a former cadet becomes the leader who held their team together through the organisation's worst quarter, or the manager who chose dignity over leverage in an unobserved moment, or the officer who commanded with authority because they had earned authority rather than been given it. The NCC's contribution is visible only in the quality of the people it produces, and in the specific, recognizable quality of their leadership decades after the uniform came off

AVEPRR Alignment: The NCC does not teach the AVEPRR framework by name. It teaches every pillar of it by requirement through the daily lived experience of conditions that demand Authenticity, Values, Emotional Intelligence, Purpose, Resilience, and Responsiveness from every cadet, every day, for years

20. The Leader Who Noticed

Soumia Bhattacharya

The Colleague Who Looked – Attentive Awareness as Leadership

Core Traits: Observant without being intrusive; emotionally intelligent in the specific, practical sense of trusting what she noticed, rather than explaining it away; willing to act on concern across hierarchical and functional distance

The Defining Act: A two-sentence message that did not demand explanation, did not express concern, and did not ask Anshita to justify herself. 'I've noticed you seem a little quieter lately. I might be wrong. But if you ever want to step out for chai, I'm here.' This is the whole story in three sentences.

What She Did Not Do: She did not ask 'are you okay?' She did not escalate to HR immediately. She did not offer advice before being asked. She noticed, she named it gently, and she offered presence without conditions.

AVEPRR Score: Exemplary on Emotional Intelligence, Authenticity, and Values. Her response to Anshita's silence was not a strategy, it was the honest

expression of someone who genuinely saw another person and genuinely cared what that person was carrying.

Anshita Sharma

The High Performer Who Was Disappearing – Silently

Core Traits: Reliable, technically strong, self-sufficient to the point of invisibility; whose very competence made her harder to notice, because the signals she was sending were behavioural rather than performance-based

The Silent Struggle: She kept delivering. That is the most important and most heartbreaking detail of her story. The thing that was supposed to signal that she needed help, declining performance, never arrived, because she absorbed the pressure rather than expressed it. Her silence was not fine. Her silence was the emergency.

The Inheritance: She became a team leader whose defining quality was noticing people. The experience of being seen, once received, became the thing she gave to others, not as a Programme or an initiative but as a natural extension of having understood, from the inside, what its absence costs.

AVEPRR Score: Her final act, becoming the leader who notices, is the framework's full circle: resilience rebuilt through connection, purpose restored through the act of giving forward what was once given to her.

Aiswarya Nair

Regional HR Leader – The Architecture of Quiet Interventions

Core Traits: Experienced, discreet, structurally minded; who understood that the right intervention is not always the formal one, and that quiet systemic action often produces better outcomes than the escalation process that would have put everyone on the defensive

The Method: Observed before concluding. Coached rather than disciplined. Created a structural pathway, the IJP, the Gopi Krishnan connection, and the open conversation with Venu, that addressed the root cause without requiring anyone to be publicly exposed or humiliated.

AVEPRR Score: Responsiveness in its most sophisticated form: early, targeted, systemic. And Purpose, the understanding that the organisation's real function is the health of the people inside it, and that function requires active stewardship.

Venu Nambiar

Delivery Manager – The Blind Spot and the Mirror

Core Traits: Sharp on delivery, effective on output, genuinely invested in project success; operating without the mirror that would have shown him the human cost of his results-first environment

Significance: He is this story's most instructive cautionary figure, not because he was wrong in his intent, but because intent without awareness produces outcomes that intent alone cannot explain. He cared about the project. He simply did not see the person delivering it. The coaching conversation gave him a mirror. He looked. That act of looking was the beginning of something better.

AVEPRR Score: The gap was in Emotional Intelligence, not capacity for it, but the daily practice of it. His story demonstrates that emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait. It is a learnable orientation, available to anyone willing to receive honest feedback about where they are not yet exercising it.

Gopi Krishnan

Balanced Manager – The Structural Solution, Embodied

Significance: He appears briefly in this story but represents something essential: the proof that the organisation already contained what Anshita needed. She did not need a different organisation or a different career. She needed a different environment, one where expectations were clear, delegation was responsible, and development was genuinely invested in. Gopi's team was that environment. Aiswarya knew it existed and placed Anshita inside it.

AVEPRR Score: He embodies Purpose, building a team culture that serves the people in it, and Emotional Intelligence, in the daily, unglamorous practice of communicating clearly, delegating responsibly, and actually noticing the people who report to him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rakesh Rayiramkandath is an accomplished HR leader, Emotional Intelligence coach, and organisational leadership researcher with over two decades of experience across US MNCs, large family-run enterprises, and high-growth startups spanning IT, BFSI, healthcare, and fashion. He has led transformative HR, Talent Management, and Organisation Development initiatives across India and global markets, shaping people strategies that deliver both performance and purpose.

His doctoral research work centres on authentic leadership, positive organisational psychology, intergenerational workforce dynamics, and employee mental well-being. His research has been published in peer-reviewed management refereed journals, and the AVEPRR Leadership Model at the heart of this book was first featured in *SAMVAD: SIBM Pune Research Journal (2025)*. Rakesh brings a rare blend of strategic depth, practitioner insight, and academic rigour. He is an LDP alumnus of IIM Calcutta.

He is the Founder of Githam Consulting Pvt. Ltd., a Bengaluru-based firm committed to enabling MSMEs with enterprise-grade HR through Fractional CHRO services, Talent Management, and Organisation Development interventions.

At the core of his work lies a clear conviction: sustainable organisations are not built by systems alone, but by leaders who lead from within, with Authenticity, Values, Emotional Intelligence, and Purpose blended with Resilience and Responsiveness.

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