



### **Sanjiv Mehta, CMD of India's largest consumer goods company HUL, talks about the pandemic, how it has influenced leaders and leadership, and the need to look ahead**

It's been a tough one-and-a-half years for the world in general. Here's how the pandemic and the lockdowns it triggered, influenced India's largest consumer goods company, the Rs 46,000 crore Hindustan Unilever (HUL) and its chairman and managing director Sanjiv Mehta. In a freewheeling conversation with TOI+, Mehta talks about the idea of leadership and what it takes to be a leader at a time of crisis. He also talks about HUL's pandemic efforts, the government's vaccination strategy, and what needs to be done. Edited excerpts:

#### **Q: How the pandemic has reshaped the idea of leadership**

**A:** In many ways, the pandemic has redefined leadership, with the rules of leadership engagement being rewritten. Today, in a world marked by disruption and threat, the jobs of leaders have never been more challenging or more important. It has come home to roost that leadership is not for the meek. But neither is it for the arrogant, self-centred or the blindly self-righteous. You need the brave, but you also need the modest. You need people who can hold themselves accountable. At the same time, you need leaders who are curious and experimentative because what we have seen during the pandemic is driving into the unknown. The other important bit is people have realised that the jobs of leaders is one of great responsibility. People have started talking much more about building a future that has the capacity to weather the storms. Moreover, the number of business leaders globally talking

about social and climate issues has gone up. As leaders, you have to look at how you can make a significant positive impact – in terms of not just your business, but also on the broader societal and environmental issues, and while it may sound clichéd, you have to be purpose-driven.



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### **On how leaders should be purpose-driven**

They need to go beyond making and selling products. You need to look at the long-term interest of both the organisation and the world. At Unilever, we talk about the classic model – the long-term compounding model or the multi-stakeholder model; I think this is a model, which should become the only way of doing business in the future.

Second, as leaders, you have to combine ambition with humility. I have coined a word called 'Humbition,' which merges 'humility' with 'ambition.' You require ambition because it can lead you to triumph and overcome challenges. And when you're talking about a world where in many ways, you have to look at it exponentially, that's where ambition comes in. Ambition lends fluidity to your thinking. However, you should remain firmly rooted to the ground. As part of the 'Reimagine HUL' agenda, we have been working on building ecosystems - the consumer, the customer and operations ecosystems. These are based on data and technology. Ambition allows you to bring the kind of fluidity – an iterative thought process, rather than a once-in-a-year strategy. Therefore, you should be willing to continuously experiment. You should be willing to not only create but destroy; constructive destruction is what I term it. The third is sense making. Sense making is pulling together disparate views to create a plausible understanding of the complexity around us, and then testing it, refining it, at times abandoning it and starting over. What this pandemic has taught us is that one, you cannot predict a no-risk world. Second, despite all the terabytes of information on how the pandemic is going to shape, its intensity, when the next wave will come and so on, the fact is you don't know what will happen. Therefore, you have to be able to supplement planning with what I call 'intelligent reaction.' You should have an antenna to gauge the challenges, and with a deep appreciation of the environment. Sense making is about learning, it is about taking in new and complex information, it is about seeing patterns in complexity, and in many ways, thinking around polarity – lives and livelihoods or efficiency versus effectiveness. These are all polarities, which you have to learn to deal with.



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The fourth, which is oft spoken about is speed and agility. This is not about your activity being linked to the time-clock. The way I have defined speed is through three interconnected capabilities. One is recognition speed - how quickly you can look at external stimuli and recognise it as an opportunity or a threat. The second is decision speed. How quickly in an organisation you can respond to the opportunity or threat that you have identified. And the third is execution speed - once you have decided what to do, how quickly can you execute. This is very important, not just for business organisations, but also for governments.

Fifth is the recognition that collaboration has become critical. I always say that the days of lone riders are over. Whether it's a business or a society, you can't be working on your own. You require effective relationships and alliances. I'll give you a simple example. When we airlifted 5,500 concentrators, one option was for us to go and donate it to different hospitals or government authorities. But then, we thought a better way would be to set up an ecosystem in different cities where people can borrow, use, and return it. That way, we will be able to use our management expertise and impact many more people. This required us to create an ecosystem, which we would have found it difficult to do by ourselves. That's when the team tied-up with KVN Foundation and Portea and we have been able to launch it in nearly 10 cities with massive impact.

As leaders, you can't just be looking at the present. Otherwise, you will miss an opportunity in the future. You have to use two lenses - one, a microscope to scrutinise today's challenges with a huge amount of magnification, and the second is the telescope to consider the opportunities of the future. Only then would you be able to navigate through the present and build the future.

### **The need for courage — and vulnerability**

When it comes to vaccination, the world has done brilliantly. Normally, it would take years for a vaccine to be developed but now we have vaccines developed by scientists in different parts of the world with remarkable speed and manufactured in other parts of the world. A great example of collaboration. On the other hand, if you look at multilateral organisations, which were set up mainly after the Second World War, have they met their purpose? The answer would be No. The WHO is lost in politics and the UN is not visible at all. Also, it's a two-speed world. America is opening up because a large part of the population has been vaccinated. But if you look at Africa, the number of people who have been vaccinated is very low.

India is one of the largest vaccine producers and we will be able to vaccinate our people. The question is whether we can vaccinate a large section of our people in four months, which is ideal, or it may take seven to eight months at the current rate. But we will get there. But there are many other nations who will struggle. This really brings home the point of collaborating — the world will have to work together to really make a difference. Otherwise, there'll be many people who will be left behind. We must realise that the pandemic is not over anywhere until it is over everywhere.

This brings up the question of courage as well. Throughout history, people have talked about courage in all walks of life, from war to sports to politics. But in today's circumstances, courage and boldness are also about showing your vulnerability and being an authentic leader. Only when you acknowledge that you are vulnerable and authentic, can you establish trust. Courage also implies that you will not be overwhelmed by the speed of change and you're comfortable with the concept of minimal viable products rather than perfect products. Take our Shikhar app, for instance, which is a game changer for us with adoption in over 5,50,000 outlets. When we started 'Reimagine HUL' we did not have a perfect idea of how the app would evolve. Right now, we are on version 4! We have been able to do this brilliantly because we kept improving on it. Had we gone in for perfection, it may not have worked.



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### **On compassion and brutal optimism**

Another vital element of leadership is compassion. It is not just desirable but urgent and necessary. Earlier, when we used to talk about leadership, we used to talk about vision, passion, oratory skills etc. Now, if you have to be prepared to alleviate human suffering, if you have to be prepared to address the issues in a systemic fashion; and to do this, you will have to bring compassion to the centre of leadership.

The last point is what I call brutal optimism. When you have a crisis, people crave for leadership. I talk about brutal optimism — brutal because you have to tell people the truth. You can't gloss over the magnitude or intensity of a crisis. However, you can't stop there; you must tell people how you are going to lead them out of the crisis or navigate through the crisis. These are some of the important traits that leaders need to have. Many of these traits were not very important in a world which was

much more predictable, a world where compassion was not such a big factor. But now, they have become extremely important. From my perspective, one has been trying to play the traits that I have defined, and one has been trying to inculcate these traits in our leaders.

[Leaders need 'humbition' — humility + ambition: HUL chief - Times of India \(indiatimes.com\)](https://www.indiatimes.com/Leaders-need-humbition-humility+ambition-HUL-chief-Times-of-India/indiatimes.com)