



## Nurturing leadership in the outsourcing industry

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The world is divided in its opinion... while some would argue that leaders are born, others would argue that leaders are created.

There are three ways to build leadership in an organization:

1. The Build model, where leadership at various levels is predominantly nurtured through the ranks.
2. The Buy model, where leadership at different levels is predominantly hired from outside the company.
3. The Hybrid model, where leadership is a mix of talent from within and outside of the company.

I find the outsourcing industry leaning more toward the build model, with a strong emphasis on building leadership within the ranks.

Jay Kumar\* was just another college graduate when he joined WNS a decade ago. Having worked in a family run business, Jay had come from a non-corporate background. He had a qualification from a local University in travel and tourism and had decided to pursue his passion of working for the airlines industry. From a trainee agent, Jay is today an Associate Vice President, managing 350 plus employees across three global delivery centers and generating revenue in excess of USD 5 million. "Sure, I would have risen up the ranks in other industries, but definitely not at this pace," said Jay on nurturing leaders in BPOs.

"I think leadership is an art of achieving what the science of management thinks is impossible... at a very young age, leadership skills are spotted and nurtured in the outsourcing industry. People are made responsible for their own P&L, which means igniting the entrepreneurial spirit. You are made responsible to deliver processes that are critical to the client's

business, which are some of the leading names globally. Interpersonal skills are of utmost importance as all leaders in this industry are constantly balancing customer requirements and employee performance. Exposure to cultures across different geographies, different domains, make this industry a perfect platform for developing leadership skills," he added.

### Honing Leadership

The outsourcing industry looks for and recognizes two core elements in an individual - performance and team management skills, while building its leadership pool. Performers are recognized and honed quite early by giving them additional responsibilities and exposure to different profiles. Simply put, the outsourcing industry has far more opportunities in terms of roles and profiles to offer as compared to traditional industries and companies. For instance, the manufacturing industry sees an employee in the same role for close to 5-6 years, before he can be given a career or role progression. And, inter-departmental transfers are far and few because of the dearth of commensurate profiles. The leaders identified are supported with training programs and empowered with the potent combination of authority and responsibility.

### Support with Impactful Training Programs

There are numerous training programs to fill the gaps. Most leading companies in the outsourcing industry also partner with leading academic institutions to offer executive training programs. "I was nominated for training programs that were conducted by the in-house Learning Academy as well as external training outfits. Prominent among these training interventions was the Harvard Management Series. Other than

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that, there were a host of training programs, including Time Management, Business Writing Skills, Delivering Through People, Developing Young Managers, which helped in my holistic development,” said Jay. The function of training and development has indeed seen a paradigm shift after the world took to outsourcing and offshoring. With manpower being the backbone of the industry, there has been no shortcut, but to train and continuously skill employees.

At WNS, the normal life cycle of an employee begins at an agent-level and moves up to the Lead Coach (a WNS terminology) level in 3 ½ to 4 years. Lead coach is a transition between the agent and team leader position. It is the position, where leaders are recognized and put on a separate track for learning and development. While employees are given responsibilities at every stage, they are also adequately trained to handle the pleasures and challenges of being a team lead. For instance, tasks like leading a team meeting, or conducting an engagement session wherein 4-5 people are gathered to have a spontaneous celebration on the targets achieved, are all examples of honing leadership skills in an individual.

### **Empowerment to Enable a Faster Learning Curve**

“One of the factors that distinguishes leadership in this industry from others is the high level of empowerment,” said Jay. “Leaders at every rung of the ladder are much more empowered than their counterparts in other industries. They are made responsible to run their own businesses and are aptly rewarded on showing excellent results. For instance, in the year 2001, I was given the position of a Team Lead. By the year 2004, based on my performance, I rose to the position of a Service Delivery Manager, having risen four ranks, and in another six years, I am an Associate Vice President managing three delivery centers. My initial team of 30 has today grown to 350,” he added.

I have observed over the years that by the time the progression from being a team lead to senior management happens in the BPO industry, the organization sees a leader - a mature, astute professional - who understands the nuances of the company and the industry. And, I have also found that a manager who has risen up the ranks is far more acceptable to the team than the one who makes a lateral move.

By giving people a variety of roles in the early stages of their career with team responsibilities, the outsourcing industry creates leadership from within effectively. Jay is just one among the millions, whose leadership skills have been honed at the right stage of his career... placing him in a coveted position today!

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