

An Excerpt From

Two Birds in a Tree
Timeless Indian Wisdom for Business Leaders

by Ram Nidumolu
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

RAM NIDUMOLU

TWO
BIRDS

IN A



Foreword by
Chip Conley,
author of *Peak*

TREE



TIMELESS
INDIAN
WISDOM FOR
BUSINESS
LEADERS

More Praise for *Two Birds in a Tree*

“Through an illuminating journey into ancient Indian wisdom, *Two Birds* describes a new type of leadership that can help us manage our businesses successfully and sustainably, rather than at the expense of the planet and people. It beautifully shows that the true sustainability of humanity is actually a matter of the heart and mind, compelling us to act consciously for the future rather than continuing to ignore today’s realities.”

—**Jochen Zeitz, Director, Kering; former Chairman and CEO, Puma; and cofounder of The B Team**

“*Two Birds* provides unique insight about the balance needed between our roles in meeting the financial goals of our business and in improving society. The reader can quickly identify with each bird and the branches we all navigate in our career and personal lives to enable continuous learning and adapting.”

—**Kevin Kramer, President of Wiring Division and Vice President, Stoneridge, Inc.**

“Ram Nidumolu has done a beautiful service by reintroducing us to the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads. Far from being out of date, this wisdom is a contemporary, brilliant lamp that both exposes our current destructive ways and illuminates the way out of this perilous time. For those who yearn to offer meaningful leadership in service to this time, this book offers clear guidance.”

—**Margaret J. Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science* and *So Far from Home***

“A brilliant and inspirational look at how business—which today controls global economics and politics—can fix the messes it created. *Two Birds* encourages those responsible, now and in the future, to take the reins of leadership and truly lead.”

—**John Perkins, author of *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man***

“Those who read Ram Nidumolu’s remarkable book on the future of leadership will find a deep well of inspiration and wisdom. Both are things they desperately need at a time when so many of them are being forced to draw on their deepest selves to provide their people with purpose and a sense of direction.”

—**John Elkington, cofounder of Environmental Data Services, SustainAbility and Volans Ventures and author of *The Zeronauts***

“Nidumolu’s use of the Upanishads weaves an ancient story about Being that is still deeply relevant today but has been hidden by our Western ways of thinking. Being must be reawakened if we are to find our way out of the havoc our thinking has produced.”

—**John Ehrenfeld, former Director, MIT Program on Technology, Business, and Environment, and coauthor of *Flourishing***

“People forget facts and figures, but they remember good stories. It’s no accident that the world’s great spiritual leaders all teach by storytelling. Great business leaders know this too. Ram Nidumolu is a master storyteller. Read him and reap—great results!”

—**BJ Gallagher, coauthor of *A Peacock in the Land of Penguins***

“The most compelling executives today have mastered not only business strategy but the philosophical realms of social and environmental responsibility. *Two Birds in a Tree* cleverly explains how today’s business leaders can leverage ancient Indian wisdom to achieve holistic corporate and personal success today.”

—**M. R. Rangaswami, founder of Corporate Eco Forum and Indiaspora**

“The conversation about a new level of consciousness in business leadership is overdue. *Two Birds in a Tree* not only informs this important conversation. It inspires us with powerful stories rooted in ancient wisdom. I will share these beautiful allegories with colleagues and clients for years to come.”

—**Larry Dressler, author of *Consensus through Conversation and Standing in the Fire***

“A brilliant story-based approach to effective leadership, *Two Birds in a Tree* takes a very different path. Rather than offering the latest-and-greatest management theory or practice, it draws on insights from the world’s oldest recorded wisdom, making it enormously relevant to today’s business challenges.”

—**Dr. Chris Laszlo, coauthor of *Embedded Sustainability***

“*Two Birds* draws from the universal well of ancient wisdom and offers us stories and modern examples that literally change our minds about business. We imagine and live out of the idea of a separate self at our own peril and that of future generations. With this book, Dr. Nidumolu has provided the key that inspires and empowers us to change the mistaken idea of separation. It is a must-read for every person in an organizational leadership role.”

—**Yogacharya Ellen Grace O’Brian, Spiritual Director, Center for Spiritual Enlightenment**

“*Two Birds in a Tree* is truly inspiring. The writing style is beautiful and authentic, attributes that are rare for a book intended for business. The balance between personal experiences, personal observations, stories of business leaders, and stories from Upanishads is just exquisite and quite a feat. This is a book I will read and reread, since a book like this is a highly personal journey.”

—**Mohan Sodhi, Professor of Operations Management, Cass Business School, London**

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IN A
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*Timeless Indian Wisdom
for Business Leaders*

RAM NIDUMOLU



BK[®]

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
San Francisco
a BK Business book

Two Birds in a Tree

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To

My father,
who led a life of integrity and inclusion

My mother,
who lives by faith and family

The Ātman,
which I have sought these many years

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To Being's wide waters,
May the winds
Drive my life's actions.
ISHA UPANISHAD



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CONTENTS

Foreword by Chip Conley	xi
Introduction: Being Inspired to Lead	1
Part 1: Being-Centered Leadership	13
Chapter 1: Being in Business	15
Chapter 2: Being Connected	29
Part 2: Recognition	43
Chapter 3: The Higher Reality of Rituals	45
Chapter 4: The Higher Reality of Business	57
Part 3: Experience	71
Chapter 5: Engaging with Experience	73
Chapter 6: Deepening the Experience	87
Part 4: Anchoring	99
Chapter 7: Anchoring in Suffering	101
Chapter 8: Anchoring in Well-Being	111
Part 5: Leading by Example	127
Chapter 9: Leading by Inclusion	129
Chapter 10: Leading as a Steward	145
Chapter 11: Leading as a Sage	161
Freedom	177
Conclusion: Real Business Freedom	179
Notes	187
Glossary of Sanskrit Terms	205
Acknowledgments	207
Index	211
About the Author	223

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FOREWORD

In the wake of experiencing the magnificent Maha Kumbh Mela celebration on the Ganges River in the winter of 2013, Ram Nidumolu handed me the manuscript for this book and asked me to write the foreword. Initially, I was surprised. I'm a Caucasian from the United States. How can I comment on a business book imbued with timeless Indian wisdom?

But, then, I thought back to how miraculously connected I felt at the world's largest festival that occurs every dozen years in India (smaller Kumbh Melas happen there approximately every three years). Kumbh Mela is fascinating not just because of its heritage but also because of what it can represent for our future.

Harvard University's website notes that a temporary city is created every twelve years in Allahabad to house Kumbh Mela's many pilgrims. "This city is laid out on a grid, constructed and deconstructed within a matter of weeks; within the grid, multiple aspects of contemporary urbanism come to fruition, including spatial zoning, an electricity grid, food and water distribution, physical infrastructure construction, mass vaccinations, public gathering spaces, and nighttime social events."¹

I was amazed by how a temporary city for 100 million people could be constructed and well managed over the course of the two-month religious pilgrimage. I asked one of the organizers of Kumbh Mela how this marvel occurred, and he simply said, "When you tap into the underlying spiritual needs of people—especially in an organizational context—be prepared to experience magic."

I have long been a believer in what I call *karmic capitalism*, the idea that eventually what goes around, comes around. This form of

FOREWORD

conscious capitalism recognizes the systemic effects—both organizationally and globally—of positive and negative intentions. What the world needs now are business leaders who recognize the ripple effect of their actions and decisions. Indian wisdom and philosophy are deeply rooted in the idea that we should evaluate the long-term, transformational effects of our influence rather than the short-term, transactional nature of how business usually operates.

One of the most valuable pieces of advice I ever received from a mentor was the suggestion that the more senior I was in an organization, the more I needed to think of myself as a role model. If you're a parent, you behave differently when you show up for your kids with the mind-set that you are a role model.

Your legacy is how you show up in life. Great leaders realize that they are the emotional thermostats and the oversized mirrors for those they lead. That's part of the reason I love this book so much. Ram has crafted a masterpiece not just for leading but also for living. If ever there was a book based on Gandhi's famous quote "Be the change you wish to see in the world," this is it.

One of my patron saints in business was Abraham Maslow, the humanist psychologist who created the iconic hierarchy of needs pyramid. Later in his life when he was studying the effect of positive psychology in companies, he coined the phrase *psycho-hygiene* to describe the intangible nature of what a healthy corporate culture provides its people. This is a book that will maximize the psychological health and hygiene of your organization and increase the probability of your peak performance. I hope you enjoy this book as much as I did!

CHIP CONLEY, founder of Joie de Vivre
Hotels and author of *Peak*

INTRODUCTION

Being Inspired to Lead

Being is One:
The wise say it
In many ways.

RIG VEDA

This is business, not personal.”

How many of us have heard this at work? It is as if we are expected to set aside our real being and put on our business persona when we enter through the corporate door. For that matter, how many of us ever talk of *being* in the workplace? Instead, almost all models of business leadership are typically about doing and having—that is, what should business leaders *do* in terms of actions and *have* in terms of capabilities to succeed? Yet these conventional models of leadership are failing us now as we careen from one global crisis to another.

This book is filled with more than forty stories meant to inspire business leaders to reimagine their role as human *beings* (rather than human *doings* or *havings*) in solving the global crises that business helped create. It includes stories from the wisdom of ancient India, personal experiences, and more than a score of examples of transformative business leaders. These timeless ideas are brought together through an overarching allegory of two birds in a tree that first appeared more than three thousand years ago in one of the world’s oldest sacred texts.

A New Narrative

To be honest, this is not the kind of book that I thought I would write. While this book is descriptive and personal, my professional career has been largely prescriptive and impersonal. You see, I've spent the last thirty years immersed in business data and analysis—first as a student completing long years of doctoral studies in business, then as an assistant professor of business at research universities, next as an entrepreneur implementing business solutions based on customer and product data, and finally as a sustainability consultant and researcher helping senior business executives of Fortune 500 firms. I'm an analyst through and through, you may say.

But this is not a book for analysts. This is also not a book of business practices for solving the world's problems. The solutions are not so neat, simple, and universal that they can be listed as practices. Instead, this is a book that tries to inspire a new kind of leadership. I chose this approach for a simple reason: we are storytelling and story-seeking creatures who are moved by descriptions (not prescriptions) about the kind of person we want to be. This book aims to explore through inspiration rather than prescribe through practices.

We are at a turning point in our history, as our science and instincts tell us. What we do in the next twenty years in business will determine our future way of life, our children's heritage, and the fate of many species on Earth. It is hard to imagine that for our entire history until the 1800s, a person could expect to live for less than thirty years on average (while now that number is seventy). Indeed, for much of human history, our lives were "poor, nasty, brutish, and short," in the philosopher Hobbes's memorable phrase.

Capitalism and business (by which I mean modern industrial and services corporations) enabled the large-scale production of goods and services that lifted entire countries out of this misery in just two centuries. As a result, global per capita income increased tenfold between 1800 and today, with a hundredfold increase in America alone. All this progress was achieved despite the world's population

increasing sevenfold, rising from 1 billion to 7 billion, in the same period. It is an economic achievement without parallel in the history of the world.

Yet this growth in human prosperity has come at a great cost to the larger context that is foundational to business, such as nature, humanity, and the credibility of the economic institutions of capitalism. Two-thirds of our water and land ecosystems (forests, wetlands, coral reefs, oceans, etc.) are now degraded significantly. We are at risk of a global warming of 4°C–6°C above preindustrial levels, largely because of industrial activity.¹ We are losing species at a hundred to a thousand times the rate of their natural loss. At this rate, we will kill off 30 percent of the world's species by 2050 and 50 percent by 2100.² We are triggering the sixth great extinction of species on Earth, called the Anthropocene since it is due to human industry.

Over twenty thousand children die every day from poverty, hunger, preventable diseases, and related causes.³ The vast majority of the 100 million people who are expected to die by 2030 from pollution, hunger, disease, and natural disasters if the world does not act fast on climate change will be the world's poor.⁴

In America, only about 30 percent of employees feel engaged in their work.⁵ This alienation has increased as the gains of business have largely accrued to those at the top. While the ratio of CEO pay to average employee pay in America was about 30:1 in 1980, it is now around 243:1.⁶ The spate of corporate scandals in recent years has led to a crisis in the public's trust in the integrity of business leadership. In 2012, only 18 percent of the global public trusted business leaders to tell the truth.⁷

Yet these statistics have done little to fundamentally change business. Even worse, they seem to have numbed the public. Here's another statistic as proof: in a recent survey of twenty-two thousand people in twenty-two countries, the percentage of people who thought ecological problems were "very serious" had dipped to its lowest in twenty years.⁸ We desperately need a different approach for making the case for change.

While people tune out as numbers foretell a dire future, narratives cling to the mind. We instinctively know what psychology has concluded: real change happens not through the practices of the reason-driven mind, which rationalizes what we have already decided, but through the emotion-driven mind, which is moved by the images that stories and other narratives evoke deeply.⁹

If the great English statesman Winston Churchill had said that he had nothing to offer but “more data analysis,” instead of “blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” as he roused his people to war, his message would have been much less compelling. This is why I will try to describe a new model of business leadership through stories.

The Fundamental Question

After three decades of observing, teaching, and participating in business and business leadership, I have come to the conclusion that something tremendously important has been missing all along. *It is the question of why business and business leadership exist at all.*

In truth, the buck stops with business leaders, such as corporate leaders and corporate investors. They are the ones who have to balance the interests of governments, the public, customers, other investors, and other stakeholders in business. If business is chiefly responsible for our current mess, then it makes sense that business should be chiefly responsible for fixing it.

When business leaders see business as disconnected from the world and pursue a purpose that is limited to themselves and their company, they are following a closed model of capitalism. They differentiate their company and themselves from others by asking, How can I do better than others within my closed system? How can I get a bigger share of a limited pie than others?

It is no wonder that the popular approaches are failing us because they do not focus on restoring the context so that business can operate well. We need a new purpose that puts the restoration of nature, our humanity, and institutional credibility at its core.

Business has tried to fix the symptoms without going to the root of the problem. It has done the minimum and given us corporate social responsibility initiatives that are peripheral to a company. Instead, what we need is a more inclusive approach that asks leaders to make the setting in which they and their companies operate central to their decision making.

In such an inclusive approach, while leaders recognize the importance of profits and growth, they don't see them as the primary goals. Instead, they see them as the outcomes of larger goals that preserve and renew the foundations of business.

Amid the pressures of everyday activities and the business demands of the short term, establishing the priority and resources to take care of the contextual foundations is hard unless there is a strong motivation to do so. For all these reasons, business leaders need to first get *inspired* before they are willing to act. But what's the key to inspiration's door?

Being: The Mother of All Concepts

My own experience has convinced me of the need for fundamental changes in the underlying beliefs that drive the mind-sets of business leaders. In turn, these beliefs are heavily influenced by a business leader's identity or sense of business self.

When our inner sense of our business self and our beliefs about business and its context change, then our behaviors, practices, and outcomes will follow. At first, this insight seems remarkably easy to implement—all we need to do to improve business is to improve the inner selves of its leaders. Of course, changing one's inner self is the ultimate quest and concern of the world's ancient religions and philosophers. Millennia have been devoted to this quest, yet the process of real inner change is rarely easy or clear.

When talking of identity or sense of self, we begin with the surface identities we assume in our personal and business lives. As we dig down, we realize that our sense of self is really much deeper than our

surface identities, such as the organizational title given to us by our company. It is also much deeper than our attributes (such as our business skills, age, or gender) or even our definitions (such as our name).

As we continue this stripping away of identities, attributes, and definitions, we come to the question of who we really are at our core, behind the shifting qualities and limitations of our life. We arrive at the question, What is the essence of a human being? In doing so, we are revisiting an inquiry that is at least three thousand years old and gave rise to the world's first philosophical idea: the concept of a fundamental reality called Being that is beyond and prior to all attributes and limiting definitions.¹⁰

Put simply, Being is *the very essence of existence (to be) that is available to us at our core*. According to this view, all things in the world emerge from this reality, which is their fundamental essence. The philosopher-sages of the civilizations of Greece, India, China, and the Middle East twenty-five hundred to three thousand years ago were especially preoccupied with Being. It has been described in many ways (the One behind the many, Ultimate Reality, Truth, the Eternal, Godhead, and even God) and through many tongues (Brahman, Sat, Nirvāṇa, Tao, Sein, Ousia, Ontos, and others). It may be the mother of all concepts since it is about the very nature of existence itself.

Being and related concepts have transcended religious, spiritual, cultural, and philosophical boundaries over the past three thousand years and have become embedded in our ways of living and speaking today.¹¹ For example, there are eight forms related to the verb *to be* in English, more than those for any other verb. In truth, Being is relevant to anyone interested in what it means to be a human being.

The Upanishads

If the search for Being was the first philosophical quest, then ancient India was the place where this quest reached the peak of its early

development. Insights on Being, our real identity or sense of self, and many other topics were explored in a series of texts, of which a group of philosophical books called the Upanishads is the most important. While hundreds of Upanishads have been written over time,¹² twelve to thirteen are considered the most important.

The Upanishads are also called Vedānta, or the end of the Veda. This is because they are the essence of the wisdom contained in the Vedas, the sacred works of ancient India that were foundational to Vedic religion and its later variation, Hinduism. However, because the Upanishads deal with Being, *they are meant to transcend Hinduism itself and be relevant to all religions and cultures.*

Many of the principal Upanishads were composed during 800–600 BCE, before the time of the Buddha. Although the authors of the Upanishads are unknown, they describe sages whose purpose was to educate disciples through instruction and their life's example. The Upanishads convey their wisdom through stories, assertions, imagery, exhortations, descriptions of procedures, and other forms of instruction. They were composed in Sanskrit, the language of the learned classes of ancient India and one of the oldest Indo-European languages.

While the imagery and language used in the Upanishads are often culturally grounded (and sometimes anachronistically male oriented), the underlying meaning is universal. For example, the Upanishads used the image of two birds in a tree to describe the inner struggle between selfish and selfless interests that we all face. I will use this metaphor and the journey of bringing these birds together as the book's overarching vision of how business leadership can restore the larger context of business while pursuing corporate-specific interests.

The stories in the Upanishads may sometimes appear simplistic and even repetitive, much like Aesop's Fables or other folk tales. But this very simplicity and repetition of truths are what lead to a deeper illumination. The core truth the stories convey is that Being is the foundational reality of this world and is accessible to everyone. Moreover, this realization is the best of all human knowledge.

While different ancient religions and cultures have resonated with the central concepts of the Upanishads,¹³ for me, there is a personal reason. As a person of Indian origin, I have developed a particular fascination with and understanding of the Upanishads in the last twenty-five years. In the process, they have become “the consolation of my life, and will be the consolation of my death,” as the German philosopher Schopenhauer wrote. My own experiences in applying the Upanishads have given me a direct perspective on leadership approaches. I will draw on them throughout this book as I outline the journey to Being-centered leadership.

Being-Centered Leadership

Being-centered leadership is the *effort to lead from a place of seeking to realize Being*. Because this realization is never complete, Being-centered business leadership is an ongoing effort to apply one’s sense of Being to business life—it is a vision of leadership at its highest level.

A key part of Being-centered leadership is to realize that we are damaging ourselves when we damage the larger context that is foundational to business. Moreover, a sense of shared purpose in restoring these foundations is not at odds with individual purpose. It is central to its realization.

Given that Being has preoccupied millennia of religious thinkers, philosophers, and cultures, it is not too much to ask that it be included in business thinking and action too. It has been a central quest of our species, especially when we faced existential crises, and it is what helped us reconnect to our world.

As such, Being is the inspiration for making the contextual foundations of nature, humanity, and institutional credibility central to business leadership. With the help of the Upanishads, my own experience, and examples of many CEOs of our time, I hope to illustrate the importance of an awareness of Being for business leaders.

Who Should Read This Book?

While this book is about business leaders in corporations and investment firms, it is really for all people who are interested in playing a leadership role (regardless of their position in an organization) in enabling the better world that is the promise of real capitalism.

The purpose of this book is to inspire inner change in aspiring business leaders. This book is therefore about how to be an entrepreneur of the inner world in order to fundamentally transform the way business operates.¹⁴ Since everyone has an interior, every person associated with business has the potential to be a business leader. More important than job title is the sense of curiosity, caring, aspiration, and search for meaning in the reader.

If this book is meant for every aspiring leader, then why focus on stories of CEOs? The first reason is pragmatic: more than anyone else, the CEO is the person most responsible for managing the relationship between the company, its stakeholders, and the world at large. As a result, CEOs have the most opportunity for integrative leadership and the most influence on a company's journey toward real capitalism. The second reason is vicarious: we are all curious about what it is like to be a CEO and to face the challenges that CEOs face. CEOs are the showbiz celebrities of the modern world where the main show in town is business.

The third reason is motivational: we repeatedly hear about CEOs behaving badly and losing the trust of society, but we hunger for stories of CEOs who can inspire us with their values, beliefs, and actions. And the final reason is exemplary: despite the difference in influence, CEOs have experiences that are relevant examples for our own settings since they deal with changes to an interior world where we are essentially similar. We are all human and subject to similar internal struggles.

How to Read This Book

Though we have much in common with one another, no two journeys are the same in the exploration of Being. Just as even a well-embellished road map does not reveal the specific distances, the pitfalls and shortcuts, and the stops and starts along the way, this book too may not give you all the details you may want. It is important to keep in mind that the goal is inspiration, not detailed practices.

I have provided a four-stage road map—the REAL road map—as a way to organize what can be something of a messy topic. But it is best to think of the book as a broad narrative that embellishes the road map, sometimes taking detours to see interesting wonders, often describing ancient and contemporary stories along the way, occasionally encountering strange sights that need another visit to understand, and frequently pointing out personal experiences that deepened my own journey.

A great deal of this cultural landscape may be new, as if the road map were now suddenly written in a strange language and marked with strange names, symbols, and other references that your cultural upbringing cannot interpret readily. You'll need to remind yourself that you don't have to understand every sign and conversation or pronounce every name well, that you are only passing through to get a feel for the place and region.

During this exploration, you may become impatient and want to be told what to do: Which specific road should I take and where should I turn and where should I stop for nourishment? I'm afraid I'll not have many of these answers because this is only a road map. You will have to create the guidebook yourself because this is your own unique journey, after all. Two helpful pointers are the "Tweets and Seeds" sections at the end of every chapter—the former lists the key conclusions in tweetable form (less than 140 characters each), while the latter provides food for deeper thinking. Together, they provide an easy way to grasp the many ideas in this book.

Despite this help, if the concept of Being remains relatively unfamiliar even at the end of this journey, you are in good company. Being has continued to remain elusive even after the best minds, storytellers, and sages in history have tried to explain it. This is because Being is (by definition) beyond the reach of our ordinary senses. Yet it is something we also grasp intuitively since it is the essence of our own beingness. *So near, yet so far—this is the irreducible mystery of Being.*

Why then should you even attempt this exploration, if all you have is a high-level road map with some interesting scribbles? For the same reason that hundreds of millions before you have: to understand themselves better, to know who they are and where they came from as they make this inner journey.

In exploring this oldest of questions there is the opportunity to change business, and through it, the world itself. In the poet T. S. Eliot's memorable phrase, there is the hope that "we shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all the exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

This is the promise of Being-centered leadership.



TWEETS

- What business does in the next 20 years will determine our way of life, our children's heritage, and the fate of many species on Earth.
- We are well on our way to the 6th great extinction of species on Earth, called the Anthropocene since it will be due to human industry.
- Business needs a new purpose that puts a restored larger context at the center of its decision making.
- Being is the very essence of existence (*to be*) that is available to us at our core.
- Being-centered leadership is the effort to lead from a place of seeking to realize Being through business.

SEEDS

- To what extent do you think future technologies will address the problems we face today? Are all these crises really overblown?
- How much do the needs of the contextual foundations of business figure centrally in your own company's decision making?
- How important has your own identity or sense of self been in shaping your personal beliefs and behaviors? Which identities do you most relate to?
- How relevant do you think the ancient concept of Being is to today's world? How might you adapt it to a modern setting such as yours?
- What is the role of inspiration in encouraging changes in your behavior?



PART I

Being-Centered Leadership

We see great changes in this world.
Mountains falling down, . . .
The wind-ropes being cut,
The earth being submerged, and
The gods departing from their places.

MAITRĪ UPANISHAD



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Being in Business

He who sees himself in all beings,
 And all beings in his own self,
 Loses all fear and embraces the world.

ISHA UPANISHAD

There are two birds, two dear friends, who live in the very same tree.” So say the Upanishads, ancient Indian philosophical texts about the nature of reality.¹ “The one lives in sorrow and anxiety and the other looks on in compassionate silence. But when the one sees the other in its power and glory, it is freed from its fears and pain.” These two birds are symbolically perched at two different levels in the tree.²

The first bird, which lives in constant anxiety, is in the lower branches of the tree. Its view obstructed by the many branches of the surrounding trees, it hops around nervously, pecking at fruit both sweet and sour. So focused on eating fruit, it loses sight of the world around it and gets caught up in satisfying its immediate material desires. It is disconnected, in a way, from its environment and other beings and jumps from branch to branch, from one disappointment to another.

The second bird is perched atop the tree itself on its main trunk. From this highest perch, it has the broadest view of the tree and the lower bird. It can see vast expanses of earth stretching outward for miles and miles. It sees its feet attached to the tree, feels connected,

and sees the lower bird moving frantically, following appetite after appetite, as it strips the tree bare of its fruit. The second bird does not eat fruit but simply watches, content to Be in its place at the top of the tree.

Like most images in the Upanishads, this one is an allegory for life. We can also look at it as an allegory for how we lead our lives in business and how business itself works. By *business*, I mean the modern industrial and services corporations where many of us in industrialized societies work. The first bird—the bird moving from appetite to appetite—is the individual ego. This is the self we often are at work: feeling fearful and anxious, acting protectively, viewing our life narrowly, and constantly comparing ourselves with others to create our sense of self. It is the business persona we have come to adopt—it is analytical and impatient and measures its successes largely in material gains with little consideration for how those gains may impact the world.

The second bird, free of fear and confident of the future, is the Being (Brahman) that is the foundational reality of the world.³ It is described as a golden-hued bird that is also the universal self (Ātman), the authentic, unbounded, and everlasting self of all living beings. This fearless presence within us enables us to view our human condition with compassionate understanding and a larger perspective. This perspective is often missing in business.

Although the concept of Being is hard to define precisely, it broadly refers to our essential nature, or quality of existence, which we share with all other living beings, human or not. This shared commonality, or essence, gives living beings their name. Because of it, we call ourselves living *beings*; we are neither living *doings* nor living *havings*.

Today, much like the lower bird in the Upanishads, business seems to have lost its genuine sense of connection to humanity, nature, and its institutional credibility, which is the larger context within which

it operates. It has lost its sense of Being. Many business leaders seem to have distanced themselves from the rest of the world, and the impact of business decisions on the world outside the company rarely appears to be a central factor.

Such a sense of separation is one major reason for the great ecological, humanitarian, and institutional crises that threaten our very existence and well-being—the growing threat of climate change, the ongoing destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity, the growing public concern with ethical breaches among many businesses, the spreading inequality between business executives and other people in society, the seeming disregard for societal well-being by financial institutions and other large corporations, and the increasing alienation of employees from their corporations. Business as usual that is based on separation from humanity, nature, institutional credibility, and ultimately Being engenders crises as usual.

How can we respond to these overwhelming crises that seem to be converging in ever-increasing fury? Human beings have a deep and shared connection with other humans, as well as with other living beings in nature and with the world itself. Being-centered leadership⁴ is about anchoring in this foundational reality of shared connections. It is about freeing business to renew itself while simultaneously restoring balance to its shared connections to its larger context.

It is about how we can *be* as leaders to alleviate business's deep schism with humanity, nature, and its credibility with the public. Being-centered leadership is the effort to lead from a place of seeking to realize Being. In terms of our allegory, it is the great quest to realize the higher, golden-hued bird within us while engaging with the world through the lower bird that we embody. The end goal is business that is more holistic and sustainable in the long term because it continually nurtures the larger context in which it is deeply and existentially embedded.

The Axial Age and the Upanishads: Wisdom of the Sages

We can find inspiration for dealing with our multiple crises by considering the period 800–300 BCE, called the Axial Age.⁵ The common emphasis of Axial Age philosophies was not so much on what you believed but on rediscovering the fundamental nature of the human being and who you were as a person. When this realization of our core nature occurred, changes in our beliefs, values, and behaviors followed naturally. The Axial Age is relevant for developing a new model of business leadership today in three ways:

- First, the changes and uncertainty about the future that we are seeing worldwide today are similar to those of Axial Age civilizations. Wars, migrations, natural calamities, and the disintegration of long-established empires and civilizations caused tremendous turmoil and societal strife.⁶ It does not take much of a leap of imagination to see how the present age might be similar.
- Second, the business leaders of today exert an influence on society that is similar to that of the high priests of the Axial Age. Since the Industrial Revolution, the market economy has become central to everyday life, just as religion was central to the lives of Axial Age peoples. As a result, business leaders affect societal well-being like the priests did in the past.

For example, business leaders have a major influence on the values and behavior of people, particularly with regard to work, consumption, and social status. In their impact on government policy and the officials who get appointed or elected, business leaders mirror the influence that the priests once had on rulers and royal policy. Through their understanding and control of the mechanisms of capitalism (the new “religion” of modern society), business leaders exert the kind of power that the priests exercised over religious practices.

- Third, the loss of trust in business leadership and corporations as institutions of capitalism today bears a remarkable similarity to the loss of public trust in the high priests of traditional religion in the Axial Age. Public skepticism sprung largely from the inability of these religions and their priests to explain the tremendous changes that were taking place and reassure the public about the future.

In the Maitrī Upanishad, the story is told of a king who turns to a wandering ascetic, rather than his priests, for counsel on how to cope with the changes. In describing these changes (summarized in exaggerated terms in the quote that begins part 1) and talking of his helplessness, the king laments, “I am like a frog that cannot escape from a waterless well. Only you can help me.” Not only were the established religions and priests helpless in reassuring the people, they were themselves considered a chief cause of the disruption. The increasing demands of the priests for patronage imposed a large burden that led to public resentment and distrust.

The ways in which Axial Age civilizations responded to the changes that took place are hopeful signs for our modern-day Axial Age. Transformational ethical principles and practices developed in India, China, the Middle East, and Greece gave rise to the great religions of Judaism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, and others. Even Christianity and Islam were later influenced by these practices.

While the particulars of each tradition were different, these religions had something of a shared commonality of wisdom—the connectedness of all and the rediscovery of the fundamental nature of Being.

The Principle of Correspondence

Let’s begin with the word *Upanishad* itself. While its conventional meaning is that of sitting near a teacher for instruction, for the

teachers and their students who learned an Upanishad, its real meaning was “hidden connection”—such as that between the two birds in the tree.⁷ The individual who saw the hidden connections between the universal self and the individual self could also understand the correspondence between all beings in the world.

The Upanishads go even further: the persons who constantly saw this correspondence between themselves and other beings could *become* them. They could expand their consciousness and sense of self to *include* other beings they were connected to. In doing so, they developed a profound empathy with all beings in the world and with the world itself.⁸ *This all-important principle of correspondence is central to the Upanishads.* To see a correspondence between two things was to recognize an essential similarity between them.

The principle of correspondence was not scientific and could be abused if it was applied too indiscriminately. However, it provided a metaphorical way of seeing the world that was closely aligned with how our minds function. As modern cognitive science has shown, the mind works primarily through a wide variety of conceptual *metaphors*—implicit comparisons between two seemingly dissimilar things that nevertheless have something in common—that are the building blocks of our abstract thinking.⁹ We use metaphors to point out this commonality, or correspondence.

The Upanishads described this correspondence not just through metaphors (such as the two birds in a tree) but also through similes and other comparisons that made the meaning more vivid and memorable. The integrative vision of the Upanishads was of a world where a deeper structure and unity bound seemingly disparate and changeful things together.

Not only was this supposed to reflect reality, but it also had great pragmatic value. In the midst of uncertainty, one could take comfort in something that was stable and lasting. The value of this worldview is captured in one of my favorite verses in the Isha Upanishad (the most beautiful, simple, and lyrical of all the Upanishads): “He who

sees himself in all beings, and all beings in his own self, loses all fear and embraces the world.”

The Axial Age in India and elsewhere was indeed a period of tremendous uncertainty and change. Because the priests did not have satisfactory responses to the problems of the time, the Axial Age wisdom that developed in response was successful because it reminded people of their fundamental interconnectedness to one another, to nature, and to the world. Might a similar wisdom help business reconnect to the world—to Being—in this *Neoxial* Age?

Being in Business

Many of the thousands of books on business leadership deal with issues that are relevant to the lower bird from the Upanishads: How do I work effectively? What qualities do I need to have to be successful? How do I get ahead in the world of business? Business leadership at this level is about doing and having, themes that are indeed important from this narrow viewpoint.

But if business leadership is about *being*, then an additional set of considerations becomes vitally important. These considerations have to deal with the commonality of existence that undergirds business, business leaders, and all other beings. A corporation, a start-up, a family-owned company, or any other business is then considered an integral part of an interconnected network of beings (whether individual or collective) that share the same foundational reality.

Moreover, the scope of business—such as business purpose and vision, stakeholders, success criteria, and management approaches—now becomes much broader to include these hidden connections (or externalities) of business to humanity, nature, and Being. Business leaders can no longer justify their actions solely in terms of the lower bird of material gain since Being-centered leadership requires a broader sense of collective and individual self that extends outward to humanity, nature, and ultimately Being.

Through the lens of Being-centered leadership, business is not just about the right to pursue material self-interest, such as material profits and growth, but also about recognizing and nurturing its connections to humanity and nature. The responsibilities toward them become an authentic part of such a sense of connection. Doing becomes guided by this broader vision and purpose. After all, if, under our law, corporations are treated as having many of the rights of individuals, can we not expect that they too have responsibilities for nurturing their connections beyond just profit? Shouldn't they be expected to have empathy, just as human beings do? These responsibilities extend even beyond the life of a business since its impacts survive its material existence.

The Upanishads tell us that these expectations are reasonable because of the principle of correspondence between human beings and corporations. All beings, whether individual or collective, are connected inextricably to one another because they are ultimately expressions of the foundational reality of Being.¹⁰ When business leaders realize these hidden connections, they will *naturally* embody a genuine sense of the responsibilities that arise from these connections. In this way, business becomes more holistic through Being-centered leadership, thereby bridging its great schism with humanity, nature, and institutional credibility.

The story of the late Anita Roddick, founder and former CEO of the Body Shop, is an inspirational example of a Being-centered leader. Her connection to humanity was forged at the age of ten when she came across a book on the Holocaust.¹¹ What she saw “kick-started [her] into a sense of outrage and a sense of empathy for the human condition.”¹²

Years later, Roddick set up a small cosmetics shop in England where she sold skin-care products to survive.¹³ She was a big believer in the power of stories, and cosmetics allowed women to tell stories. She said, “[In] every group I have spent time with, women will always corral around a well and tell stories about the body, birth, marriage

and death. Men only have conversations or memories about their first shave. But women will always use the body as a canvas, a playground. Even when they were taken to the gallows, women would always want to put some makeup on.”¹⁴

The Body Shop became one of the earliest companies in the world to fight for protecting nature, but Roddick was not just about nature. She campaigned vigorously for tribes and indigenous populations in solving livelihood and human rights problems created by corporations, and she provided a sustainable livelihood for Amazonian Indian tribes by trading in brazil nuts, which produced an oil for moisturizing and conditioning. As she said, “For me, campaigning and good business is also about putting forward solutions, not just opposing destructive practices or human rights abuses.”¹⁵

Other groups that Roddick worked with included indigenous tribes in India and Nepal, sesame seed farmers in Nicaragua, aloe vera growers in Guatemala, marula growers in Namibia, and the Ogoni people of Nigeria. She campaigned actively for Greenpeace and other activist organizations and led campaigns against the use of sweatshops by corporations, animal testing in cosmetics, unfair trade practices, domestic violence, and many other practices that demonstrated her passionate caring for humanity.¹⁶

Throughout all these causes, she built the Body Shop into a billion-dollar global corporation (or a multilocal business, as she called it)¹⁷ with more than two thousand stores in fifty markets serving hundreds of millions of customers. She passed away in 2007 of a brain hemorrhage, leaving her wealth to charities and a company globally revered for its ethical principles.¹⁸

Roddick was a shining example of a Being-centered leader, connecting deeply and fearlessly to the larger context of business and fighting vigorously to preserve and renew it as an integral part of doing business. She was a true exemplar of the core principles of Being-centered leadership covered in this book:

- Seeing business as embedded in and deeply connected to a larger context of nature and humanity because of the relationship of these elements to Being (part 2)
- Recognizing that individual business purpose has to be aligned with a *shared* business purpose that preserves and renews the larger context of business (also part 2)
- Viewing the outer world of work as a projection of inner aspiration (part 3)
- Redefining business success as ensuring the long-term holistic health of all stakeholders (part 4)
- Having the courage to embody these principles in one's own life (part 5)

Being-Centered Leadership and Business Performance

Business leaders who are skeptical of the business worth of the principles of Being-centered leadership may well ask, Can such a Being-centered business also do well in terms of conventional measures of success, such as material profits and market value? If not, the case for such a business is a much harder sell to skeptical business leaders.

The outcome from a Being-centered business (which should more correctly be called a *beingness*) is a company that emphasizes ethically, environmentally, and socially sustainable business practices that also lead to financial success. All Being-centered businesses are sustainable businesses in terms of outcomes because they actively work to preserve and renew their larger context of nature, humanity, and institutional credibility.

So what is the evidence that sustainable businesses do better than other businesses, even when it comes to conventional measures of performance? In one of the most comprehensive analyses ever conducted, a team of researchers at Harvard Business School (HBS) compared ninety companies that voluntarily adopted environmentally and socially sustainable practices with ninety companies that

did not.¹⁹ The two samples were matched in terms of size, industry, and other variables, so that differences in performance would be most likely due to their stance on sustainability.

The HBS researchers found that the sustainable companies were more likely to be long-term oriented, had organized processes and procedures for engaging all their stakeholders, had incentives to compensate top executives on sustainability performance, and had boards that saw themselves as responsible for sustainability. On the whole, sustainable companies ran their businesses very differently from others.

The researchers tracked the performance of these two groups of companies over eighteen years, beginning in 1993. They found that sustainable companies outperformed the other companies significantly in market value as well as accounting measures such as return on assets and return on equity. For example, an investment of \$1 in early 1993 in a portfolio of sustainable firms would have increased to \$22.6 by the end of 2010, using market prices for the companies' shares. By contrast, a similar investment of \$1 in the companies with no focus on sustainability would have grown only to \$15.4.²⁰ This difference of 47 percent in market returns is large by any measure.

My own qualitative research on thirty Global 500 companies that are using sustainability to drive business innovation, which was published in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2009, came to similar conclusions.²¹ The message here is clear: regardless of how you measure performance, sustainable companies dramatically outperform other companies over the long term.²²

All this evidence gives me confidence to conclude the following: Being-centered companies that deeply value their companies' connections to their larger context do better than those that don't, even on conventional measures of success. The challenge is that even when business leaders recognize the importance of the larger context, they often fail to make it central to their everyday decisions.

For many business leaders, short-term expediency overshadows the impact of their decisions on the larger context of business. This

is because their recognition of the larger context is only skin deep. It has not penetrated their belief systems and personal and business identities so that they are willing to risk the consequences of making context-restoring decisions that don't pay off immediately.

The inspiring example of Anita Roddick shows how personal commitment and beliefs regarding the larger context of business (and the courage to act on them) are core ingredients of true leadership. The timeless wisdom of the Upanishads and the Axial Age show that such a commitment and belief system can result from the quest for Being, which can deeply reconnect business to its larger context.

If we are to solve the global crises that business helped create, it is time for business leaders to lead from the very human foundation that we call Being.



TWEETS

- *Being* refers to our essential nature, or quality of existence, which we share in common with all other living beings, human or not.
- Each of us comprises a lower bird of narrow ego and a higher bird of innate being, or universal self (Ātman), with a larger perspective.
- Being-centered leadership is our quest to become the higher bird while engaging with the world through the lower bird we embody.
- The word *Upanishad* means “hidden connection” between the world and us, a principle that applies to a person as well as a business.
- Axial Age wisdom can connect business to the world through Being-centered leadership.

SEEDS

- What do you think the “personal” responsibilities of corporations are? Where would you draw the line in comparing a business to a person?
- How can business leaders benefit from asking themselves who they truly are?
- What are the hidden connections of your business to the world that you or other business leaders often disregard?
- What do you think really keeps business leaders from including the larger context in their decisions (as Anita Roddick did), beyond the surface causes?



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