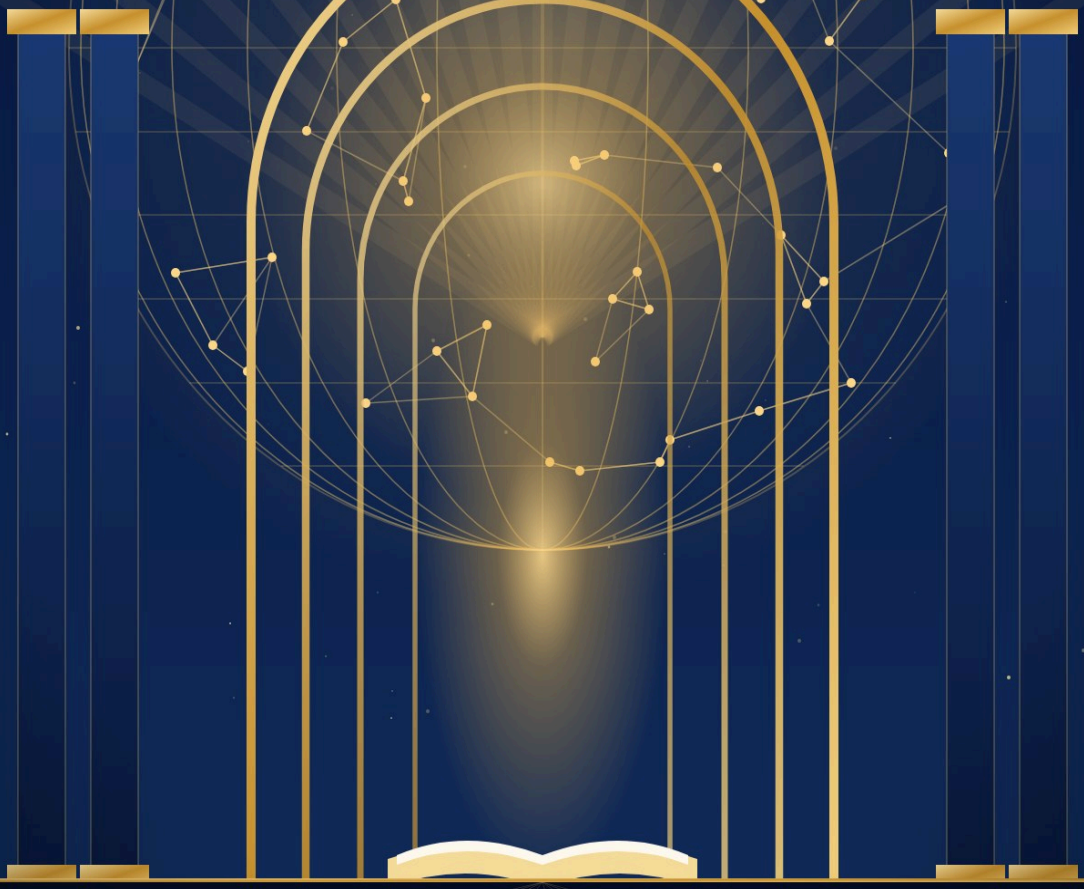
PRINCIPLES ISSUE · 2026

ORIVANA *Kala*

MEDIA · CINEMA · CULTURE · CREATIVE EDUCATION



DISTINGUISHED LEADERS.
DIVERSE JOURNEYS.
TIMELESS PRINCIPLES.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Lt General Shokin Chauhan

Indian Army (Retd.) · Former Defence Attaché to Nepal

"Leadership is an act of service before it is an exercise of authority."

16 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 006, July 2026

Leadership Is a Privilege of Service, Not of Position

Leadership is an act of service before it is an exercise of authority. Sixteen principles from a nearly four-decade military career, in his own words.

> *Leadership is an act of service before it is an exercise of authority.*

Lt General Shokin Chauhan, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM, entered the National Defence Academy in January 1976 and served for nearly four decades across some of the Indian Army's most demanding commands — the Siachen Glacier, counter-terrorist operations in Jammu & Kashmir, counter-insurgency in the North East, and command of the Assam Rifles. He later served as India's Defence Attaché to Nepal and as Chairman of the Ceasefire Monitoring Group in Nagaland. In retirement, he continues to serve through research, writing, and teaching.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words, presented here in full. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward. Given the length of this feature, we've placed his own words in pull-quotes at intervals throughout — so the most important lines aren't lost inside a long read.

01 Leadership Is an Act of Service Before It Is an Exercise of Authority

When people ask me what has remained constant throughout my military journey, my mind does not immediately travel to the battlefields where I served, the appointments I held or the decorations that came my way. Instead, it returns to the young gentleman cadet who walked through the gates of the National Defence Academy in January 1976, carrying little more than youthful enthusiasm, a deep love for his country and an incomplete understanding of what it truly meant to lead men. Like every young officer, I believed that courage was the defining quality of a soldier. It took me many years to realise that courage is only one part of leadership; character is what sustains it over a lifetime.

If I were asked to identify one principle that has guided me through nearly four decades in uniform, it would be this: leadership is an act of service before it is an exercise of authority. This belief was not acquired overnight. It was forged gradually through countless experiences, some inspiring, some painful, many humbling. Whether commanding a platoon in difficult terrain, leading troops in counter-insurgency operations, serving in the unforgiving environment of the Siachen Glacier, representing India abroad or later working to bring insurgent groups into dialogue, I found that the essence of leadership remained remarkably unchanged. People do not follow rank alone. They follow conviction. They follow fairness. Above all, they follow leaders whom they trust.

The Indian Army's motto, Service Before Self, is often quoted, but I believe its true meaning reveals itself only after years of living it. It is not about denying oneself recognition or comfort for its own sake. It is about recognising that, once you accept command, your personal preferences become subordinate to a much larger responsibility. The mission comes first. The nation comes first. The welfare of the men and women entrusted to your command comes first. Every significant decision I made was, in one way or another, influenced by that simple hierarchy of priorities.

There is a tendency to believe that leadership becomes easier as one rises in rank. My experience was exactly the opposite. Every promotion expanded not merely my authority but my accountability. As a young officer, I was responsible for a platoon. Later I commanded battalions, formations and organisations. Eventually, decisions carried strategic implications that extended far beyond the immediate battlefield. Yet regardless of the scale of responsibility, I found myself returning to the same fundamental question: What is the right thing to do, not for me, but for the institution, for my soldiers and for the nation?

The years also taught me another important lesson. Leadership is rarely about dramatic moments. Popular imagination often associates military leadership with combat, crises and decisive operations. Those moments certainly test one's resolve, but they are relatively few. The true test of character lies in ordinary days, in whether one treats the youngest soldier with dignity, whether one remains honest when compromise appears convenient, whether one accepts responsibility when mistakes occur, and whether one continues to uphold standards even when no one is watching. Trust is not built during battles; it is built during routine interactions long before the battle begins.

Looking back now, I realise that the Army gave me far more than a profession. It gave me a philosophy of life. It taught me discipline without rigidity, courage without arrogance and authority tempered by humility. It introduced me to extraordinary soldiers from every corner of India who demonstrated, through quiet professionalism rather than grand speeches, what devotion to duty truly means. Whatever leadership qualities people may attribute to me are, in reality, a reflection of the institution that shaped me and the remarkable men and women with whom I had the privilege to serve.

Today, in retirement, when I write, teach and engage with younger generations, I find that the principle remains unchanged. Leadership is still about service. Titles eventually disappear, uniforms are folded away and appointments pass into history. What endures are the institutions one leaves stronger, the people one has inspired and the values one refused to compromise. If there is one idea I would wish every young leader to carry forward, it is that leadership is never about oneself. It is a sacred trust placed in one's hands by others, and the only honourable way to repay that trust is through selfless service.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He locates the source of his leadership philosophy not in a single defining moment, but in the slow realisation that courage — the quality every young officer admires first — is only the entry point. Character is what has to sustain leadership over an entire career, long after the dramatic moments have passed. **Why it matters.** "Service Before Self" is a motto most people hear as a slogan. He treats it as an operating principle with a strict order of priority: mission, then nation, then the people under your command — with personal preference subordinated to all three. **Reflect.** *In whatever you lead, is your personal preference currently ranked above or below the people you're responsible for?*

02 Remain Calm, Remain Ethical, Remain Accountable

One of the first realities that military service teaches is that certainty is a luxury rarely available to commanders. The public often imagines that decisions made during military operations are based on complete information, detailed plans and perfect situational awareness. The reality is very different. Decisions are frequently taken in conditions of ambiguity, where information is incomplete, time is limited and the consequences of hesitation may be irreversible. Under such circumstances, leadership is tested not merely by the correctness of a decision but by the courage to make one.

Throughout my career, whether operating in the icy heights of Siachen, conducting counter-terrorist operations in Jammu and Kashmir, confronting insurgency in the North East or later participating in peace negotiations, I found that uncertainty was the one constant companion of leadership. The temptation in such situations is to wait for additional information, believing that greater clarity will eventually emerge. Experience, however, taught me that in many operational environments, waiting itself becomes a decision, and often the wrong one.

Over time, I developed a simple approach. First, gather the best information available without becoming paralysed by the pursuit of perfection. Second, listen carefully to professional advice, particularly from those closest to the ground, because leadership does not diminish by consulting others; it is strengthened by it. Third, once a decision has been made, communicate it clearly and execute it with conviction. A hesitant leader inevitably creates uncertainty throughout the organisation.

There were occasions during operational command when lives depended upon decisions taken within minutes. Those are moments that remain etched in memory long after the operation has concluded. They also reinforce an enduring truth: no commander ever makes such decisions alone. Behind every successful operation stands an entire team of dedicated officers, junior leaders and soldiers whose professionalism transforms decisions into outcomes. One of the greatest lessons I learnt was that success belongs collectively, while responsibility ultimately rests with the commander.

My understanding of decision-making also evolved significantly during my later years. Earlier in my career, operational success was naturally measured in military terms. Later, particularly while leading the Ceasefire Monitoring Group in Nagaland, I came to appreciate that some of the most important decisions are not those that initiate military action but those that create opportunities for peace. It requires one kind of courage to lead soldiers into combat. It requires another to extend a hand of reconciliation after years of conflict without compromising national security or institutional integrity. That experience broadened my understanding of what strategic leadership truly means.

Looking back, I believe the philosophy that guided my decisions can be summarised in three simple principles: remain calm when others are anxious, remain ethical when expediency appears attractive, and remain accountable irrespective of the outcome. A leader cannot always guarantee success. Circumstances, chance and the actions of others will always influence events. What a leader can control is the integrity of the decision-making process and the willingness to accept responsibility for its consequences.

Ultimately, leadership under uncertainty is an exercise in trust — trust in one's training, trust in one's team and trust in one's own values. Those anchors have served me well throughout my career.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He rejects the popular image of the decisive commander acting on perfect information. In his account, decisions get made under ambiguity by design — and waiting for more clarity is itself a choice, often the wrong one. **Why it matters.** His three-part discipline — gather the best available information without chasing perfection, consult those closest to the ground, then commit and execute with conviction — turns "trusting your gut" into a repeatable process rather than a personality trait. **Reflect.** *Where in your own decision-making are you currently waiting for more clarity that experience suggests may never fully arrive?*

03 Shaped More by People Than by Operations

People often assume that a soldier is shaped primarily by war. While conflict certainly leaves an indelible mark, I believe I was shaped even more profoundly by the people I encountered than by the operations in which I participated. A military career offers a unique privilege: it places one in close contact with humanity in its most testing circumstances. One witnesses courage, sacrifice, grief, resilience, hope and reconciliation, often within the same day. Those experiences gradually change not only the way one leads but also the way one understands life itself.

Some of my earliest lessons came not from senior commanders but from the young soldiers with whom I served. Many came from modest backgrounds, yet they possessed an extraordinary sense of duty and quiet dignity. I watched them endure extreme cold in Siachen, prolonged separation from families, physical hardship and constant danger without complaint. Their resilience was rarely dramatic; it was expressed through unwavering professionalism in the face of adversity. Observing them taught me humility. Leadership, I realised, is not sustained by speeches but by shared hardship and mutual respect.

The diverse regions in which I served also became classrooms in themselves. Kashmir taught me that security challenges are rarely simple and that every operation carries profound human consequences. The North East taught me patience and the importance of understanding history, identity and local aspirations before attempting solutions. My tenure with the Assam Rifles and later as Chairman of the Ceasefire Monitoring Group reinforced my conviction that peace cannot be imposed by force alone. Military success may create opportunities, but lasting peace emerges only when trust gradually replaces fear and dialogue replaces alienation.

Serving abroad as India's Defence Attaché in Nepal further expanded my perspective. Representing one's nation in another country demands a different kind of leadership. It requires diplomacy, cultural sensitivity and the ability to build relationships based upon mutual respect rather than authority. I discovered that while nations may pursue different interests, people across cultures respond to sincerity, consistency and integrity in remarkably similar ways.

Perhaps the greatest personal lesson I learnt over the years was that certainty should always be tempered by humility. The longer I served, the more I recognised the complexity of human affairs. Simple answers rarely solved difficult problems. Strategic patience often achieved outcomes that force alone could not. Listening carefully frequently proved more productive than speaking authoritatively. These lessons extended beyond soldiering and shaped my understanding of leadership, society and human nature.

Retirement has provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon those experiences through writing, teaching and research. Looking back, I realise that my military career did not merely teach me how to command troops; it taught me how to understand people. That, I believe, has been its greatest gift.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what shaped him most, he doesn't point to combat — he points to the young soldiers who endured Siachen's extreme cold and prolonged separation from family without complaint, and to the regions themselves, each one teaching a different lesson about patience, identity, and history. **Why it matters.** The line "my military career did not merely teach me how to command troops; it taught me how to understand people" reframes decades of operational command as, at bottom, an education in humanity — which is why the lessons carried directly into his later peace-building work. **Reflect.** *Think about the environment that has shaped you most, professionally or personally. Did it teach you more about the task at hand, or about the people you did it alongside?*

04 Integrity Is an Institutional Necessity, Not Just a Personal Virtue

Among all the virtues associated with leadership, I believe integrity occupies a unique position because it forms the foundation upon which every other quality depends. Intelligence may command admiration. Courage may inspire confidence. Professional competence may produce success. Yet without integrity, none of these qualities can sustain genuine leadership for very long. Soldiers possess an extraordinary ability to discern authenticity. They observe not only what their commanders say but, more importantly, how they behave when confronted with difficult choices.

To me, integrity has never been confined to the simple notion of telling the truth. It is something deeper. It is the alignment between one's values, one's decisions and one's actions. It means that the standards we expect from others must first be evident in our own conduct. It also means remaining faithful to those standards even when compromise appears easier, more convenient or personally advantageous.

Throughout my career, I discovered that the greatest tests of integrity rarely arrived in dramatic moments. They emerged quietly, in personnel decisions, in operational assessments, in performance evaluations, in accepting responsibility for mistakes, and in ensuring fairness even when the easier course would have been to avoid uncomfortable conversations. Leadership often demands choices between competing interests rather than between obvious right and wrong. It is during those moments that integrity becomes both the compass and the anchor.

I have always believed that a commander must create an environment in which subordinates feel confident that decisions are based upon fairness rather than favour, professional merit rather than personal preference, and institutional interest rather than individual convenience. Such confidence cannot be created through speeches or policy documents. It is built gradually through consistent conduct over many years. Once established, it becomes one of the greatest strengths of any organisation.

My experiences in conflict zones further reinforced this belief. Military operations are conducted under intense pressure where ethical judgement is constantly tested. The discipline of a professional army lies not merely in its ability to use force but in its ability to exercise restraint when restraint is required. I have always regarded this distinction as one of the defining characteristics of the Indian Army and one that every leader has a responsibility to preserve.

As I reflect upon my years in uniform, I am convinced that integrity is not simply a personal virtue; it is an institutional necessity. Organisations survive occasional operational setbacks. They recover from strategic mistakes. What they cannot easily recover from is the erosion of trust caused by compromised

integrity. That is why I have always regarded honesty, fairness and moral courage not as desirable qualities but as non-negotiable obligations.

In the final analysis, a leader's legacy is not determined by the number of successful operations commanded or prestigious appointments held. It is determined by whether those who served under him believed that he was fair, truthful and worthy of their trust. If I have managed to uphold those standards, I consider that to be among the most meaningful achievements of my career.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He defines integrity as something more demanding than honesty — it's the alignment between what you value, what you decide, and what you actually do, tested most in quiet moments like personnel decisions and performance evaluations rather than dramatic crises. **Why it matters.** His distinction — organisations recover from operational setbacks and strategic mistakes, but rarely recover from the erosion of trust caused by compromised integrity — explains why he treats honesty, fairness, and moral courage as non-negotiable obligations rather than desirable extras. **Reflect.** *Where in your own decisions do your stated values and your actual conduct quietly drift apart, even when no one is watching closely enough to notice?*

05 Cultures Differ, but the Principles of Leadership Are Universal

One of the greatest privileges of a military career is that it exposes one to worlds far beyond one's own experience. During my years in uniform, I had the opportunity not only to command soldiers from every region, language and faith of India, but also to represent my country abroad, interact with military leaders from other nations and participate in international engagements where the objectives extended beyond national boundaries. Those experiences gradually reinforced an important truth that I believe applies equally to military leadership, diplomacy and public life: while cultures differ, the fundamental principles of leadership remain remarkably universal.

When I first represented India overseas, I naturally viewed my role through the prism of national interest. That, after all, is the primary responsibility of any military officer serving abroad. Yet I soon realised that national interests are best advanced not merely through formal negotiations or official positions, but through relationships built patiently over time. Trust develops long before agreements are signed. Respect precedes influence. Nations may negotiate policies, but people build partnerships.

Serving in Nepal remains particularly significant in shaping this understanding. India and Nepal share a relationship unlike almost any other in the world. Our geography, history, religion, culture and military traditions have intertwined over centuries. Representing India there demanded not simply diplomatic skill but genuine sensitivity towards the perspectives, aspirations and concerns of our closest neighbour. It taught me that effective leadership begins not by speaking but by listening. One cannot expect to influence another society without first making a sincere effort to understand how that society perceives itself.

A similar lesson emerged later during my work in the North East, particularly while engaging with diverse stakeholders during the peace process. Although this was within our own country, the challenge was remarkably similar. Every community possesses its own history, memories and aspirations. Leadership in such circumstances requires patience, empathy and the willingness to recognise that durable solutions cannot be imposed solely through authority. They must be built upon dialogue, mutual respect and confidence.

These experiences also deepened my appreciation of India's unique civilisational strength. Our country has always demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to accommodate diversity without demanding uniformity. During my military career I had the privilege of commanding soldiers from every conceivable background. They spoke different languages, practised different religions and came from vastly different social environments, yet when they wore the uniform, they became one cohesive team united by a common purpose. That experience convinced me that diversity, when anchored in shared values, becomes a source of immense national strength rather than division.

International engagement also teaches humility. Every nation, irrespective of its size or power, believes its choices are shaped by legitimate historical experiences. It is easy to judge others from a distance; it is much harder, and far more valuable, to understand why they think as they do. This does not mean compromising one's national interests or abandoning principled positions. Rather, it means recognising that lasting cooperation is built through understanding before persuasion.

Perhaps the most enduring lesson I learnt from these international assignments is that leadership is ultimately about building bridges rather than walls. Military leaders are trained to protect borders, but they also have an important role in creating the conditions under which those borders become lines of cooperation rather than perpetual confrontation. Peace is sustained not simply by military preparedness but by relationships of trust between institutions, governments and people.

Looking back, I remain convinced that whether one commands a battalion, represents a nation abroad or participates in international peace efforts, the essential qualities remain unchanged. Integrity inspires confidence. Humility encourages dialogue. Professional competence earns respect. Above all, genuine leadership requires recognising that influence is never imposed; it is earned through conduct, consistency and credibility.

> *"Trust is not built during battles; it is built during routine interactions long before the battle begins."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His time representing India in Nepal and engaging communities in the North East taught him the same lesson twice, once abroad and once at home: effective leadership begins with listening, not speaking, and durable solutions can't be imposed by authority alone. **Why it matters.** "Diversity, when anchored in shared values, becomes a source of immense national strength rather than division" — coming from someone who commanded soldiers of every language, religion, and region of India under one uniform, this isn't an abstract ideal; it's an observed operational fact. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life are you trying to influence a group, community, or culture you haven't yet made a sincere effort to understand on its own terms?*

06 Exceptional Leadership Is Measured by What Others Become

One of the greatest privileges of serving for nearly four decades is the opportunity to observe leadership at every level, from young officers taking charge of their first platoons to senior commanders responsible for the security of entire regions. Looking back, I realise that while competence was common among the finest officers I encountered, greatness was comparatively rare. Competence enables an organisation to function efficiently. Exceptional leadership transforms an organisation and inspires people to achieve far more than they believed possible.

Early in my career, like many young officers, I tended to admire visible qualities: decisiveness, physical courage, tactical brilliance and professional knowledge. These attributes are undoubtedly important, particularly in military service where lives often depend upon sound judgement. Yet as my responsibilities increased, I discovered that the qualities which truly distinguished exceptional leaders were often quieter and less obvious.

The finest commanders I served under possessed remarkable emotional stability. During moments of crisis, when anxiety spread naturally through an organisation, they remained calm without appearing detached. Their composure inspired confidence because people instinctively take emotional cues from their leaders. Panic at the top quickly becomes panic throughout the organisation. Conversely, quiet confidence creates resilience even under the most difficult circumstances.

Another distinguishing quality was intellectual curiosity. Some assume that experience alone produces wisdom. My own observations suggest otherwise. Experience teaches only those who continue questioning their own assumptions. The best military leaders I encountered never stopped learning. They read widely, welcomed informed debate and remained open to alternative viewpoints. They understood that changing circumstances demand changing approaches while enduring principles remain constant.

Perhaps the rarest quality, however, was moral courage. Physical courage is rightly admired in the armed forces, but moral courage is often more difficult to demonstrate. It requires making decisions that may be professionally unpopular but ethically necessary. It demands accepting responsibility for failure while generously sharing credit for success. It requires telling uncomfortable truths to superiors, subordinates and sometimes even oneself. Over the years I came to believe that moral courage ultimately determines the credibility of leadership far more than operational success alone.

The best leaders also possessed genuine humility. Humility should never be confused with weakness or indecisiveness. On the contrary, it reflects confidence rather than insecurity. Leaders who are secure in themselves readily acknowledge the expertise of others, encourage initiative and celebrate the achievements of their teams without feeling diminished. They recognise that institutions become stronger when leadership is distributed rather than concentrated.

Another characteristic that consistently impressed me was compassion. Military organisations are often associated with discipline, precision and toughness, all of which are essential. Yet the most respected commanders never lost sight of the human dimension of leadership. They understood the anxieties of young soldiers, appreciated the sacrifices made by military families and recognised that genuine concern for people's welfare strengthens discipline rather than weakens it. Soldiers willingly accept hardship when they know their commanders genuinely care for them.

As I reflect today, I believe exceptional leadership is ultimately measured not by what a leader accomplishes personally but by what others become under that leader's guidance. Great leaders produce more leaders. They leave behind stronger institutions, more confident teams and higher standards than those they inherited. Their influence continues long after they have relinquished command because it has become embedded within the culture of the organisation itself. That, in my view, is the highest form of leadership.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates competence, which is common among fine officers, from greatness, which is rare — and locates the difference not in the visible qualities young officers admire first (decisiveness, tactical brilliance) but in quieter ones: emotional stability, intellectual curiosity, moral courage, humility, and compassion. **Why it matters.** Moral courage gets singled out as the rarest and most decisive quality — not because physical courage doesn't matter, but because it's easier to demonstrate. Telling an uncomfortable truth to a superior, or to yourself, is a harder and less celebrated act. **Reflect.** *Of the five quieter qualities he names — emotional stability, intellectual curiosity, moral courage, humility, compassion — which one do you most avoid practicing because it's uncomfortable rather than because it's hard?*

07 Setbacks Are Invitations to Deepen Understanding

Every long career inevitably contains moments of disappointment, uncertainty and reflection. Those who suggest otherwise have either forgotten the past or never truly examined it. Looking back today, I realise that many of the lessons which shaped my thinking did not emerge from success alone. They emerged from moments when events unfolded differently from expectations and compelled me to re-examine my own assumptions.

Early in my career, like most professional soldiers, I viewed success largely through an operational lens. A mission accomplished, a difficult objective secured or an insurgent network disrupted represented tangible achievements. Such outcomes remain vitally important because security is the essential foundation upon which all other national objectives depend. Yet as my responsibilities expanded, particularly in the North East, I gradually realised that military success, although necessary, is rarely sufficient.

One of the most significant transformations in my thinking occurred during my tenure as Chairman of the Ceasefire Monitoring Group. Years of military experience had taught me how force could restore order. The peace process taught me how restraint, dialogue and patience could preserve it. Engaging with former adversaries was neither simple nor free from scepticism. Trust, after years of conflict, develops slowly and unevenly. There are inevitable setbacks, misunderstandings and moments when progress appears fragile. Yet it was precisely through those experiences that I came to appreciate the profound strategic value of persistence.

I discovered that leadership sometimes requires resisting the understandable desire for immediate results. Military operations often demand rapid decisions. Peace-building demands sustained patience. Both require courage, but they are different expressions of it. The former tests one's ability to act decisively under pressure. The latter tests one's ability to remain committed despite slow progress and occasional disappointment.

Another important lesson emerged from observing the extraordinary resilience of ordinary people. Throughout my career I encountered families who had endured violence, displacement and uncertainty with remarkable dignity. Their quiet determination reinforced my belief that security ultimately exists to protect human lives rather than abstract strategic concepts. The purpose of military power is not conflict itself but the creation of conditions in which peaceful societies can flourish.

Looking back, I no longer measure success solely by battles won or operations completed. I increasingly measure it by institutions strengthened, trust restored and opportunities created for future

generations to live in greater peace and security. That shift in perspective has perhaps been the most important personal evolution of my career.

Setbacks, therefore, should not be viewed merely as obstacles. They are often invitations to deepen one's understanding. They compel leaders to examine not only what happened but why it happened and what larger lessons may be drawn from the experience. In that sense, some of the most difficult moments of my career ultimately became the most valuable teachers.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His biggest shift in thinking wasn't triggered by a victory — it came from chairing the Ceasefire Monitoring Group, where he learned that force restores order but restraint, dialogue, and patience are what preserve it. Military success and peace-building require different expressions of the same courage. **Why it matters.** He redefines his own measure of success mid-career — from battles won and operations completed to institutions strengthened and trust restored. That's a leader revising his own scoreboard, not just his tactics. **Reflect.** *What's a setback in your own life that you've filed away as simply a loss, rather than examined for what it was actually trying to teach you?*

08 Technology Can Process Information; It Cannot Replace Wisdom

Every generation naturally believes that it is living through unprecedented change. Yet there is little doubt that the pace of transformation confronting today's young leaders is extraordinary. Technological advances, artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, information operations, space capabilities, autonomous systems and the rapid diffusion of knowledge are redefining both security and governance at a speed unimaginable only a generation ago. Future leaders will operate in environments where the distinction between war and peace, military and civilian domains, and physical and virtual battlefields will become increasingly blurred.

Yet despite these profound technological changes, I remain convinced that the defining qualities of leadership will remain fundamentally human. Technology can process information. It cannot replace wisdom. Artificial intelligence can generate options. It cannot determine values. Algorithms may assist decision-making. They cannot exercise moral judgement.

For this reason, I believe the most important attribute future leaders must cultivate is intellectual adaptability. They must be willing to challenge assumptions, embrace innovation and remain lifelong learners. Knowledge acquired at the beginning of one's career will not remain sufficient throughout it. Continuous education, professional reading, interdisciplinary thinking and openness to new ideas will become indispensable.

At the same time, I would urge young leaders not to neglect the timeless virtues that no technology can replace. Integrity will remain the foundation of trust. Empathy will remain essential for understanding people. Courage will still be required to make difficult decisions. Humility will continue to distinguish genuine confidence from arrogance. Character, in the final analysis, will remain the decisive factor separating leadership from mere management.

Another quality that I believe deserves far greater attention is strategic patience. Modern societies increasingly expect immediate outcomes, yet many of the most significant national challenges require sustained effort over decades. Whether building military capability, strengthening institutions, conducting diplomacy or promoting social cohesion, enduring success rarely arrives quickly. Leaders

must therefore develop the resilience to pursue long-term objectives without becoming distracted by short-term pressures.

Finally, I hope future leaders remember that public trust has become one of the most valuable strategic resources of any nation. Institutions derive their legitimacy not merely from legal authority but from public confidence. Every decision, every action and every interaction either strengthens or weakens that confidence. Leaders who consistently act with honesty, fairness and transparency contribute not only to their own organisations but also to the democratic resilience of the nation itself.

As I look towards the future with optimism, I remain encouraged by the remarkable talent and energy of India's younger generation. They possess opportunities that my generation could scarcely have imagined. My hope is that they will combine technological excellence with moral clarity, professional competence with humility, and ambition with an unwavering commitment to national service. If they succeed in doing so, I have little doubt that India will be exceptionally well served in the decades ahead.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Facing a future of AI, cyber warfare, and blurred lines between physical and virtual battlefields, his answer isn't to double down on technical mastery alone — it's to insist that wisdom, values, and moral judgement remain irreducibly human functions that no algorithm performs. **Why it matters.** "Character, in the final analysis, will remain the decisive factor separating leadership from mere management" is a direct challenge to any assumption that faster information processing produces better leadership. Information and judgement are not the same capability. **Reflect.** *As tools get faster at giving you options, are you spending proportionally more time developing the judgement to choose well between them — or less?*

09 Strength Without Compassion Becomes Oppression

One of the most enduring misconceptions about military leadership is that strength and compassion exist at opposite ends of a spectrum, and that a commander must somehow choose between them. My own experience has taught me precisely the opposite. The strongest leaders I have known were invariably the most humane, because they understood that military leadership is ultimately about people rather than weapons, formations or plans. Soldiers are not machines. They carry fears, aspirations, families and responsibilities. They place their lives in the hands of their commanders not because they are compelled to do so, but because they believe their leaders will use that authority wisely.

As a young officer, I naturally associated discipline with firmness. Over the years, I came to understand that discipline derives its real strength from fairness rather than fear. Soldiers willingly accept demanding standards when they are convinced that those standards are applied consistently and with integrity. They can distinguish immediately between firmness that serves the institution and harshness that serves only the ego of a leader. The former builds respect; the latter breeds resentment.

Many of my most enduring memories are not of operations but of conversations, with young officers anxious before their first command, with soldiers facing family difficulties thousands of kilometres away, with widows who had lost loved ones in service, and with local communities living amid prolonged conflict. Those encounters reminded me that leadership is exercised one human interaction at a time. Decisions may be strategic, but their consequences are always deeply personal.

Authority, too, changes its meaning with experience. When I first wore the ranks on my shoulder, I probably viewed it as the visible symbol of command. Today I regard it differently. Authority is not a

privilege conferred upon an individual; it is a responsibility entrusted by an institution. The more authority one receives, the greater the obligation to exercise restraint, fairness and humility. Leaders who become preoccupied with their own status gradually distance themselves from the very people they are expected to lead.

Humility, in my understanding, is not self-effacement. It is the quiet recognition that no leader succeeds alone. Every achievement attributed to a commander reflects the professionalism, courage and dedication of countless others. Throughout my career I was privileged to serve alongside extraordinary officers, junior leaders and soldiers whose competence frequently made success possible. Any recognition that came my way belongs as much to them as it does to me.

Compassion should never be mistaken for weakness. In fact, it often requires considerable courage. During years of counter-insurgency and peace-building, I learnt that understanding the human dimension of conflict frequently opens possibilities that force alone cannot create. Showing dignity to local populations, treating adversaries with fairness once they renounce violence, or ensuring that the welfare of one's own troops receives the highest priority are not acts of softness; they are expressions of confidence rooted in professional strength.

As I reflect today, I no longer see these qualities as competing values requiring careful balance. Strength without compassion becomes oppression. Compassion without strength becomes sentimentality. Discipline without empathy becomes mechanical obedience. Empathy without discipline undermines standards. Authority without humility becomes arrogance. Humility without authority becomes indecision. Leadership lies in integrating these qualities into a coherent whole, allowing each to reinforce rather than diminish the others.

Ultimately, people remember not how powerful a leader appeared, but how that leader made them feel, whether they felt respected, protected, inspired and valued. That, I believe, is the true measure of leadership.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He dismantles the idea that strength and compassion sit on opposite ends of a spectrum requiring balance — instead laying out six precise failure modes when any one quality is stripped of its counterpart: strength without compassion is oppression, discipline without empathy is mechanical obedience, and so on down the list. **Why it matters.** This reframes leadership development away from "finding the right balance" toward integration — each quality is meant to reinforce the others, not be traded off against them. That's a materially different, more demanding standard. **Reflect.** *Of his six pairings — strength/compassion, discipline/empathy, authority/humility — which one are you currently treating as a trade-off rather than something to integrate fully?*

10 Guard Your Credibility the Way You Guard Your Reputation

Among all the intangible qualities upon which leadership depends, trust is undoubtedly the most precious. It cannot be purchased, demanded or inherited. Rank may confer authority, but it does not automatically command trust. Trust is earned slowly through consistent conduct, tested under pressure and, if lost, restored only through sustained effort and personal integrity.

Looking back over my years in uniform, I have come to realise that trust is built long before it is ever tested. It is built in the countless ordinary moments that seldom appear in official records, when a commander keeps his word despite inconvenience, when difficult decisions are explained honestly

rather than concealed, when fairness prevails over favouritism, and when soldiers know that their welfare genuinely matters to those who lead them. These seemingly small actions accumulate quietly over time until they create an invisible bond of confidence between leader and led.

Some of the strongest demonstrations of trust that I witnessed occurred during operations where soldiers followed orders under conditions of immense danger. Such trust cannot be created overnight. It develops because people have repeatedly observed their leaders sharing hardships, accepting responsibility and demonstrating professional competence. In military life, trust is literally a matter of life and death. Soldiers are prepared to place themselves at risk because they believe that their commanders have weighed every decision carefully and will never expose them to unnecessary danger.

The same principle applies equally beyond the military. During my involvement in peace processes, I discovered that trust between opposing sides develops far more slowly than many imagine. Communities that have lived through years of violence carry memories that cannot be erased by a single agreement. Confidence must be built patiently through actions that consistently demonstrate sincerity, reliability and respect. Every promise honoured strengthens trust. Every commitment broken weakens it.

There have also been occasions when trust has been challenged. In such moments, the natural instinct of many leaders is to become defensive or seek explanations. My own experience suggests a different approach. When mistakes occur, the first responsibility of leadership is honesty. People are remarkably forgiving of genuine errors when they see accountability and a sincere determination to learn. They are far less forgiving of denial, concealment or attempts to shift responsibility elsewhere.

Trust also demands consistency between public principles and private conduct. Soldiers, colleagues and citizens quickly recognise discrepancies between what leaders advocate and how they behave. Leadership therefore requires a degree of personal discipline that extends well beyond professional competence. One cannot expect to inspire confidence while living by different standards from those expected of others.

As I have reflected upon these experiences over the years, I have become convinced that trust represents the true currency of leadership. Material resources, sophisticated technology and formal authority all have their place, but without trust they achieve only limited effectiveness. Institutions become resilient when trust exists between leaders and followers, between colleagues, and between the organisation and the society it serves.

If I were to offer one piece of advice to young leaders, it would be this: guard your credibility with the same determination that you guard your reputation. Reputation depends largely upon what others think of you. Credibility depends upon whether your conduct consistently justifies their confidence. The first may fluctuate with circumstances. The second becomes the foundation of enduring leadership.

> *"Strength without compassion becomes oppression. Compassion without strength becomes sentimentality."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a precise, practical distinction most people never separate — reputation is what others think of you and can fluctuate with circumstance; credibility is whether your conduct consistently justifies their confidence, and it's built or broken in ordinary moments no official record ever captures. **Why it matters.** His guidance for when trust is challenged runs against instinct: don't get defensive, don't seek explanations first — lead with honesty. People forgive genuine error readily; they rarely forgive denial or concealment. **Reflect.** *Are you currently more focused on protecting your reputation — what people think of you — or your credibility — whether your conduct actually justifies their confidence? What's the difference doing in your own life right now?*

11 Courage Must Always Be Guided by Judgement

Every military career contains decisions that remain vivid in memory long after individual operations have faded into history. Some involve tactical choices taken under intense pressure. Others concern people rather than plans. Still others require balancing competing responsibilities where every available option carries significant consequences. Looking back, I find it difficult to identify a single decision because leadership is, in many ways, a continuous process of choosing between imperfect alternatives.

One experience that remains particularly significant for me was commanding a prolonged hostage rescue and counter-terrorist operation in Kashmir. For more than two days, every decision had immediate implications for the lives of innocent civilians, the safety of my soldiers and the success of the mission itself. Such situations concentrate the mind in remarkable ways. They remind a commander that behind every tactical consideration lie human lives that can never be regarded merely as operational variables.

The operation reinforced an enduring lesson that has remained with me ever since: decisive leadership is not synonymous with reckless action. Public perception often celebrates speed and boldness, but experienced commanders understand that patience can sometimes be the most courageous decision of all. There were moments when immediate action appeared tempting. Yet restraint, careful assessment and disciplined execution ultimately produced a better outcome. That experience strengthened my conviction that courage must always be guided by judgement.

Other difficult decisions emerged during later years when responsibilities extended beyond purely military operations. Working towards peace in conflict-affected regions often required balancing legitimate security concerns with opportunities for dialogue. Such choices are seldom clear-cut. They require confidence in one's principles and an appreciation that strategic success sometimes demands political patience as much as operational effectiveness. These experiences reinforced my belief that national security is not advanced solely by demonstrating strength but also by creating conditions in which peace becomes sustainable.

Perhaps the greatest lesson difficult decisions have taught me is that leadership is ultimately a moral responsibility. Professional competence provides the ability to choose. Values determine what one chooses. There were occasions when expedient solutions presented themselves, but they did not always align with my understanding of fairness, integrity or institutional responsibility. In those moments, I found it essential to return to first principles rather than immediate convenience.

I also learnt that no leader should fear accountability. Decisions taken honestly, after careful deliberation and in good faith, deserve to be owned irrespective of their outcome. Success should never

create arrogance, nor should setbacks produce self-doubt. What matters most is whether the decision-making process reflected integrity, professionalism and concern for those affected.

Looking back today, I do not remember every operational detail. What remains with me are the lessons those decisions imparted. Leadership is rarely about choosing between right and wrong. More often, it involves choosing between competing goods while remaining faithful to one's values. That is perhaps why moral courage occupies such an important place in my understanding of leadership. Physical courage may win battles. Moral courage sustains institutions.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Commanding a hostage rescue operation over more than two days taught him that decisive leadership isn't the same as reckless action — restraint, careful assessment, and disciplined execution, even when immediate action felt tempting, produced the better outcome. **Why it matters.** "Physical courage may win battles. Moral courage sustains institutions" closes a thread that runs through nearly every principle here — the hardest decisions weren't between obvious right and wrong, but between competing goods, where only a clear return to first principles cut through the ambiguity. **Reflect.** *Think of a recent decision where speed and boldness were being celebrated around you. Was patience actually the more courageous option — and did you have the judgement to notice?*

12 Experience Raises Questions; Research Helps Answer Them

If there is one habit that has remained with me from the earliest days of my career until the present, it is the desire to keep learning. I have always believed that the profession of arms demands not only physical courage but intellectual discipline. Warfare evolves continuously. Technology changes. Societies transform. Geopolitics rarely stands still. A military leader who stops learning gradually begins relying upon yesterday's solutions for tomorrow's problems.

Throughout my career, books became companions almost as important as maps and operational orders. I found myself drawn not only to military history and strategy but also to political science, philosophy, economics and international relations. The more I read, the more I realised that security cannot be understood in isolation. Military power is influenced by diplomacy, economics, technology, culture and public opinion. Understanding these broader dimensions enabled me to place operational experiences within a larger strategic context.

My later decision to pursue doctoral research emerged naturally from this intellectual curiosity. Some people were surprised that a serving senior officer would devote time to rigorous academic work despite demanding operational responsibilities. For me, however, scholarship was never separate from soldiering. It was an extension of it. Experience raises questions. Research helps answer them. Field experience provides evidence. Academic discipline provides perspective.

Writing has also played an important role in my intellectual journey. Every article and every book has required me to examine my own assumptions, organise years of experience into coherent ideas and engage with alternative viewpoints. Writing imposes a discipline that conversation often does not. It compels clarity of thought. One cannot write persuasively without first thinking deeply.

Retirement, rather than marking the end of learning, has provided the freedom to pursue it with even greater intensity. Teaching, mentoring younger scholars, participating in strategic discussions and continuing to write have allowed me to remain connected with national security while contributing in a

different capacity. I consider this phase not a departure from military service but its continuation through scholarship.

Perhaps the greatest lesson continuous learning has taught me is humility. The more one studies, the more one recognises the complexity of the world. Simple answers become less convincing. Certainty gives way to informed judgement. Dogmatism gradually yields to intellectual openness. This does not weaken conviction; it strengthens it by grounding beliefs in careful analysis rather than assumption.

I often tell young officers that professional education should never be viewed merely as a requirement for promotion. It is a responsibility owed to the soldiers they will one day command and to the nation they are sworn to defend. Every book they read, every idea they examine and every perspective they challenge ultimately contributes to better decisions when circumstances demand them.

Looking back over my own journey, I remain deeply grateful that the Army encouraged intellectual growth alongside operational excellence. It allowed me to discover that the finest military leaders are rarely those who know all the answers. They are those who never stop asking questions.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats scholarship not as a departure from soldiering but as its extension — field experience raises questions that only sustained reading and academic discipline can properly answer, which is why he pursued doctoral research alongside demanding operational command rather than after it. **Why it matters.** "The finest military leaders are rarely those who know all the answers. They are those who never stop asking questions" reframes professional education from a box to check for promotion into an obligation owed directly to the people you'll one day command. **Reflect.** *When did you last deliberately study something outside your immediate field, purely because it might sharpen the judgement you bring to the work you already do?*

13 Military Power Creates the Opportunity for Peace; Wise Statecraft Makes It Last

When people think about soldiers, they naturally associate us with war. It is an understandable perception, yet one that captures only part of the truth. The profession of arms is not about the pursuit of conflict; it is about preventing it wherever possible and, when conflict becomes unavoidable, ensuring that it ends on terms that allow peace to endure. If there is one lesson my years in uniform have taught me, it is that military power, however essential, can never by itself create lasting peace.

The military performs an indispensable function. It protects national sovereignty, creates conditions of security and prevents violence from overwhelming society. Without security, development cannot flourish, democratic institutions cannot function effectively and ordinary citizens cannot live with confidence. Yet security should never become an end in itself. It is the foundation upon which peace, prosperity and human dignity are built. Once that foundation exists, other institutions of the state must carry the responsibility forward.

My own understanding of this evolved gradually over many years. As a young officer engaged in operational duties, success was naturally measured in military terms. Objectives were secured, threats neutralised and missions accomplished. Those experiences remain immensely important because without operational success there can be no stable environment in which peace can take root. However, later responsibilities, particularly those connected with dialogue and ceasefire management in the North East, revealed another dimension of national security that no textbook had fully prepared me for.

I came to appreciate that people rarely abandon conflict merely because they have been defeated. More often, they move away from violence when they begin to see a more honourable and hopeful alternative. That alternative cannot be provided by soldiers alone. It requires political leadership with vision, administrators who govern fairly, educators who expand opportunities, communities willing to reconcile, and institutions capable of inspiring public confidence. Military strength creates the opportunity for peace; wise statecraft transforms that opportunity into lasting stability.

Throughout my interactions with former insurgents, local communities and civil society representatives, I was repeatedly reminded that dignity matters profoundly. Every society wishes to be heard. Every community wishes its identity to be respected. Every individual wishes to feel that justice is possible. Addressing these aspirations does not weaken the state; when done within the framework of the Constitution and the rule of law, it strengthens national unity by making citizens stakeholders in peace rather than reluctant participants in conflict.

International engagements reinforced the same lesson. Across the world, sustainable peace has rarely emerged through military means alone. It has required institutions that enjoy legitimacy, economies that create opportunity, and societies that possess sufficient confidence to look beyond the grievances of the past. This is not idealism; it is strategic realism. Peace that rests solely upon coercion remains fragile. Peace supported by trust becomes resilient.

I have therefore come to believe that the highest achievement of a soldier is not merely to prevail in battle but to help create conditions in which future generations need not fight the same battles again. History will always remember victories won on the battlefield, but perhaps the greater legacy lies in the lives quietly transformed because conflict gave way to peace.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates two things often collapsed into one: the military's role in creating security, and the political, economic, and social work required to convert that security into lasting peace. Soldiers can open the door; they can't walk everyone else through it. **Why it matters.** "People rarely abandon conflict merely because they have been defeated. More often, they move away from violence when they begin to see a more honourable and hopeful alternative" — a hard-won observation from someone who spent years engaging former insurgents directly, not a theoretical claim about conflict resolution. **Reflect.** *In any conflict you're currently part of — at work, in a community, in a relationship — have you been focused on winning it, or on building the honourable alternative that would make continuing it unnecessary?*

14 Integrity, Competence, Curiosity, Humility — and Never Losing Faith in India

Every generation inherits a nation built through the sacrifices of those who came before it. It also inherits the responsibility of leaving that nation stronger for those who will follow. If I were to offer one piece of advice to young Indians contemplating a life of service, it would be to remember that service is not merely a profession. It is a commitment to something larger than oneself.

When I joined the Army as a young man, India was a very different country. Our institutions, our economy and our strategic environment have all undergone profound transformation. Today's young Indians possess opportunities that my generation could scarcely have imagined. They have access to technology, education and global exposure on an unprecedented scale. Yet despite these changes, the qualities that define meaningful leadership remain remarkably constant.

The first is integrity. Talent may open doors, but character determines how far one ultimately travels. In every profession there will be moments when convenience and principle point in different directions. Those are the moments that define a career far more than promotions or public recognition. Never compromise the values that brought you into service in the first place.

The second is competence. Good intentions alone are never sufficient. Patriotism is a noble sentiment, but it must be matched by professional excellence. Whether one serves in uniform, in government, in diplomacy, in academia or in industry, the nation deserves individuals who constantly strive to improve themselves. Excellence is itself a form of national service because it strengthens the institutions upon which society depends.

Third, remain intellectually curious. The world is changing at extraordinary speed. New technologies, new ideas and new geopolitical realities demand leaders who are willing to learn continuously. Do not become prisoners of yesterday's assumptions. Read widely, listen carefully and never believe that experience alone is enough. Every generation must rediscover wisdom for itself.

Equally important is humility. Leadership should never be confused with status. The finest leaders I have known remained approachable despite great responsibility. They understood that every appointment is temporary and every position ultimately belongs to the institution rather than the individual. Humility protects leaders from arrogance, encourages honest advice and strengthens teamwork.

Finally, never lose faith in India. Ours is an ancient civilisation and a young nation, remarkable not because we are free from challenges but because we possess the resilience to overcome them. Throughout my military career I witnessed ordinary Indians display extraordinary courage in circumstances of immense adversity. That resilience convinced me that India's greatest strength lies not merely in its geography, military capability or economic potential but in the character of its people.

If young Indians dedicate their talents to strengthening our institutions, protecting our constitutional values and serving society with honesty and competence, I have no doubt that India's finest years still lie ahead.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for advice to young Indians entering any form of service, he offers five things in sequence — integrity, competence, intellectual curiosity, humility, and faith in the country itself — none of them contingent on the specific profession chosen. **Why it matters.** "Talent may open doors, but character determines how far one ultimately travels" applies well outside the military or public service — it's a claim about how careers of any kind actually unfold over decades, not just at their start. **Reflect.** *Of his five — integrity, competence, curiosity, humility, faith in something larger than yourself — which one did you enter your own career with, and which one have you had to build since?*

15 Leadership Is a Privilege of Service, Not a Privilege of Position

This is perhaps the most difficult question because every life is ultimately interpreted by others rather than by oneself. Nevertheless, if future generations were to remember one principle from my journey, I would hope it would be this: leadership is a privilege of service, not a privilege of position.

Throughout my career I occupied many appointments, each carrying different responsibilities and challenges. Yet every one of those appointments eventually came to an end. Uniforms are folded away.

Offices are occupied by successors. Medals become memories. Such is the natural rhythm of every profession. What endures is not the office one held but the manner in which one discharged its responsibilities.

Over the years I gradually realised that institutions matter far more than individuals. No commander, however capable, is indispensable. The true measure of leadership lies in whether an organisation becomes stronger, more confident and more resilient after one has departed. If those who come after us inherit better systems, stronger traditions and a culture of integrity, then our service has had lasting meaning.

I have also come to believe that leadership is fundamentally about enabling others to succeed. Early in one's career there is a natural tendency to focus upon personal achievement. With maturity comes the recognition that genuine satisfaction arises from seeing younger officers grow into confident commanders, from witnessing institutions flourish independently and from observing ideas continue to influence long after one's own role has ended. That is the quiet satisfaction that retirement offers: the opportunity to see the next generation carry the torch further than one's own generation ever could.

There is another principle that has become increasingly important to me over the years, the belief that strength and humanity are not competing values but complementary ones. A nation must possess the capability to defend itself with determination. At the same time, it must never lose sight of the values that make defence worthwhile. Military power derives its legitimacy from the just purposes it serves. Compassion gives strength its moral direction.

If, many years from now, someone were to say that I tried to serve my country with integrity, treated people with fairness, strengthened the institutions entrusted to my care and never stopped learning, I would regard that as a far greater tribute than any personal distinction. Ultimately, every life is measured not by what it accumulates but by what it contributes.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what single principle he'd want future generations to remember, he chose not a specific accomplishment but a definition — leadership belongs to service, not to the position one occupies. Positions end; the manner in which their responsibilities were discharged is what endures. **Why it matters.** "No commander, however capable, is indispensable" is a genuinely rare thing for someone at the top of a hierarchy to say sincerely — it shifts the measure of success from personal achievement to whether the institution is stronger, and the next generation more capable, after you've gone. **Reflect.** *If your current role or position ended tomorrow, what would remain — not your title, but the actual manner in which you discharged its responsibilities?*

16 Purpose Is Revealed Through Thousands of Ordinary Decisions

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learnt is that purpose is not discovered in extraordinary moments alone. More often, it is revealed through thousands of ordinary decisions made consistently over many years. We tend to remember defining events, major operations, promotions, public responsibilities and significant achievements. Yet those moments are sustained by habits developed quietly over a lifetime: honesty in small matters, discipline when no one is watching, respect for others regardless of rank, and the willingness to continue learning long after one believes he has mastered his profession.

When I reflect upon my own journey, I do so with gratitude rather than nostalgia. I have been privileged to serve alongside remarkable soldiers whose courage far exceeded public recognition, to represent my

country abroad, to participate in efforts that contributed to peace in regions affected by prolonged conflict, and later to continue serving through research, writing and teaching. Each phase of my life reinforced the same truth — that service to the nation does not end when one removes the uniform. It simply finds new avenues of expression.

I have often been asked whether retirement creates a sense of separation from military life. My answer has always been that while one may retire from active service, one never retires from responsibility. The values instilled by the Army — discipline, integrity, respect for institutions, compassion for people and commitment to the nation — remain lifelong companions. They continue to guide one's thinking, writing and engagement with society.

I also believe that leadership should never be viewed as the preserve of those in high office. Every citizen exercises leadership in some measure, within the family, the workplace, the community or the nation. Leadership begins the moment one accepts responsibility rather than waiting for someone else to act. It is expressed not only through grand decisions but through everyday conduct that strengthens trust and inspires confidence in others.

As I look towards the future, I remain deeply optimistic about India. Ours is a nation of immense diversity, extraordinary talent and enduring resilience. Challenges will undoubtedly continue to arise, as they always have throughout history. Yet I have seen enough of the courage and character of our people to remain confident that India will continue to overcome adversity through unity, determination and democratic strength.

If I may leave readers with one final thought, it would be this. We often spend our lives asking what we wish to achieve. As the years pass, I believe a more meaningful question emerges: What do we wish to leave behind? My answer has become increasingly simple. I hope to leave behind stronger institutions than those I inherited, younger leaders better prepared than my own generation, and a small contribution to the strategic thought of our nation through my writing and scholarship.

In the final analysis, a meaningful life is not defined by the positions we occupy but by the values we uphold, the people we inspire and the causes we serve. Everything else is temporary. Service, character and purpose endure.

> *“What do we wish to leave behind?”*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His closing thought reframes leadership as available to everyone, not reserved for high office — it begins the moment someone accepts responsibility rather than waiting for someone else to act, expressed through everyday conduct as much as grand decisions. **Why it matters.** The shift from "What do we wish to achieve?" to "What do we wish to leave behind?" is the same evolution that runs through his answer on setbacks and his answer on legacy — a career-long move away from personal accomplishment toward what outlasts the person who built it. **Reflect.** *If you asked yourself his final question honestly right now — what do you wish to leave behind, rather than what do you wish to achieve — would the answer change anything about how you're spending this year?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Leadership is service before it is authority. People don't follow rank alone. They follow conviction, fairness, and leaders they trust — built in ordinary moments long before any crisis arrives.

Context without accountability becomes excuse; process matters more than outcome. A leader can't guarantee success, but can control the integrity of the decision-making process and the willingness to own its consequences.

Integrity is an institutional necessity, not a personal virtue. Organisations recover from setbacks and mistakes. They rarely recover from the erosion of trust caused by compromised integrity.

Strength and compassion are not opposites requiring balance — they need integration. Strength without compassion becomes oppression. Compassion without strength becomes sentimentality. Each quality is meant to reinforce the others.

Guard your credibility the way you guard your reputation. Reputation is what others think of you. Credibility is whether your conduct consistently justifies their confidence. Only one of them is the true foundation.

Purpose is revealed through thousands of ordinary decisions. Not extraordinary moments alone, but honesty in small matters, discipline when no one is watching, and respect for others regardless of rank.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"Uphold, without any compromise, ethical values and principles."

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01 Financial Expertise Is the Framework, Not the Whole Role

Prior to transitioning to a CFO role, I had spent many years leading the Controllership function which supported the CFO by ensuring pristine integrity of the books through seamless delivery of numbers relating to financial performance of the business and the presentation of the same to various constituencies including regulators, shareholders and customers. This germinated within me a progressive appreciation that financial leadership requires much more than financial expertise, rather, financial expertise provides the framework around which is constructed the wider contours of a CFO's role to weave together a holistic framework binding the various variables of the business, the risks and opportunities that it is exposed to and the building blocks of people and resources that go to translating it to reality. Binding this entire structure together is the core principle of governance, which ensures the right application of policies and processes with due compliance to all the regulatory protocols and sensitivity to market forces. This brought about a fundamental change in my thought processes, the way I approached my responsibilities, and how my leadership style needed to be both collaborative as well as inclusive, collaborative with all other peer functions and business verticals and inclusive of all the data points and fact patterns that are the output of the financial systems. The realization gradually dawned upon me that it was not only important for a CFO to support the CEO in taking the right decision but also create an environment where the same is accepted after due debate and discussion. As I progressed in my career and assumed higher levels of responsibility, this core realization took firm root and I gained an appreciation that the numbers and financials provided a basis for contextualizing one's overall approach and one should not be constrained in one's approach by a rigid interpretation of the numbers beyond using these as the skeleton around which to build one's entire approach to the business way forward.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He describes how years leading the Controllership function showed him that financial expertise is the framework around which a CFO's wider role is built, weaving together the business, its risks and opportunities, and its people and resources. Governance, in his account, is what binds that structure together. **Why it matters.** The shift changed his leadership style: collaborative with peer functions and business verticals, and inclusive of every data point the financial systems produce. A CFO's task is not only to support the CEO's decision but to create an environment in which it is accepted after due debate, and to treat numbers as the skeleton of an approach rather than a rigid constraint. **Reflect.** *Where are you treating numbers as the whole answer, when they are only the skeleton of one?*

02 Serve the Broader Priority, and Explain It

As a CFO of a constituent region in a global bank whose businesses are distributed across many geographies, success lay in understanding the broader organizational priorities versus the specific priorities of my own region or geography. A situation arose during the global financial crisis of 2008 which originated in the US and had impact in various degrees in various parts of the world. India for one, continued to be relatively less impacted as the country continued to register its potential and promise. The global contagion created a constraint of capital for the company where conservation needs had to be prioritized forsaking the opportunities for growth available by deploying the capital in country. I therefore had to be party to a decision to align the allocation of capital, distributing the excess capital out to the Head Office, de-prioritizing the allocation of the capital for growth initiatives in country and deferring the initiatives for a later date. This entailed explaining the issue to the local organization, the relative choice of priorities and build consensus in place of dissent for the broader good of the enterprise. This preceded a significant degree of discussion and dissent in the local management committee about the wider repercussions of this decision on the country initiatives which could not be aborted halfway. I put forward the proposition that one had to approach this in an orderly manner and put forward a proposal to the Head Office as to what would be a logical culmination of suspending some of these initiatives in a rational way to derive the maximum benefit out of the effort already extended and to truncate this in a logical and well thought way also ensuring that the market perceives this in the right spirit.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Writing from the 2008 global financial crisis, he describes being party to a decision to distribute excess capital to the Head Office and defer growth initiatives in India, a country that was still showing its potential. Success as the CFO of a region, he says, lay in understanding the organisation's broader priorities against those of one's own geography. **Why it matters.** The decision meant explaining the choice of priorities to the local organisation and building consensus in place of dissent. Where initiatives could not simply be aborted halfway, he proposed an orderly way to suspend them, so that the effort already made delivered maximum benefit and the market read the decision in the right spirit. **Reflect.** *When a decision you support costs the people closest to you, how do you explain it, and what do you do for the work already under way?*

03 Numbers Need Judgement Beside Them

As a financial leader, one often encounters situations where one has to balance the outcome of financial analysis created out of numbers, with professional judgment and intuition. I can discuss two examples, risk modelling and capital planning. Typically, under current IndAs principles of accounting one develops credit loss estimates out of a statistical projection of probability of loss assessment under different scenarios of default and residual loss in an actual default situation. Even where these statistical models are sharpened with actual portfolio performance data one needs to often add judgmental buffers if it is felt that the model does not accurately cover a situation owing to some level of, say, macro-complexity or uncertainty difficult to quantify. These buffers themselves are created based on an underlying modelling process with the parameters governing these models being subject to judgmental calibration. Equally when performing capital adequacy assessment under different scenarios, for a Bank under the methodology under the Basel protocols one encounters certain situations where certain risks are amenable to defined quantitative modelling such as credit or market risk whereas risks such as compliance or legal risks or reputational risks may not be amenable to

quantitative modelling and so it requires a judgmental assessment. These assessments create an override on the outcome of the quantitative results. The entire approach is woven into a narrative text which becomes an exposition of the cohesive rationale explaining points beyond the ambit of quantitative models Many such other examples may be encountered.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He uses two examples, risk modelling and capital planning. Credit loss estimates under IndAs are built from statistical models, yet he notes that judgemental buffers are often needed where the model cannot fully capture macro complexity or uncertainty, and those buffers are themselves subject to calibration. **Why it matters.** In capital adequacy assessment under the Basel protocols, credit and market risk lend themselves to quantitative modelling, while compliance, legal and reputational risks do not. Those need judgemental assessment, which overrides the quantitative result and is explained in a narrative that sets out the rationale beyond the models. **Reflect.** *Where a model in your work gives a clear answer, and what does it fail to capture?*

04 Responsible Growth Is Calibrated, Not Guessed

There is no clear answer to this question. Responsible growth is an outcome of various variables that govern the performance of the organization through mitigation of a combination of market, business, financial and other risks. One has to assess the interplay of these risks and develop an optimality of outcome calibrated for various scenarios from benign to difficult. Therefore one has to segment the financial achievement into categories, a base level that can be achieved in a non-negotiable manner and then progressively a set of successive scenarios that involve a risk return combination at various inflexion points. At each stage there is a trade-off that a business leader must evaluate both in terms of a success factor and opportunity loss and then take a calculated decision basis the resources and capital at his disposition. This choice under the same set of parameters may well be different at various points in time depending on the external and internal factors at play. This approach is also enshrined in the approaches organizations adopt towards budgeting. Typically, an annual budget is in the context of a longer-term strategic plan that spans say three years expecting an interplay of environmental and business variables over this period. The annual budget becomes a more regimented process under a more rigidly parameterized set of assumptions. As the year progresses, these aspirational numbers get updated, calibrating the risk exposure to the outcome expected. The final outcome of the year sets a different tone to the strategic plan of subsequent years which are reset on a rolling basis.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He begins honestly: there is no clear answer. Responsible growth is the outcome of many variables, so a leader must assess how market, business and financial risks interact and calibrate the outcome across scenarios from benign to difficult. **Why it matters.** In practice he separates a base level of achievement that is non-negotiable from successive scenarios that each carry a different risk and return, and weighs success against opportunity loss at every stage. He sees the same logic in budgeting: an annual budget sits within a longer strategic plan, is updated as the year progresses, and the year's outcome resets the plan for the years that follow. **Reflect.** *What is the non-negotiable base in your plan, and what are you adding above it at what risk?*

05 Boards Work Through Coordinated Committees

In my professional experience, two of the most important governance bodies that play a key role in the Board governance are the Audit Committee (AC) and the Risk Committee (RC) and I have the unique experience of participating or leading either or both. The AC and RC have different remits and

functional scope that can create potential synergy and overlap between them and this has to be managed in a complementary way without creating conflict as they play distinct yet symbiotic roles in an organization. Coordinating their coverage agendas to avoid duplication or inconsistency in their respective oversight and advisory processes enhances the overall risk management framework. While the AC primarily focuses on financial reporting, internal controls and compliance ensuring the intrinsic reliability of the financial information, the RC has a wider remit in addressing the entire spectrum of risks and developing strategies to mitigate these risks. Having said this, effective coordination and collaboration between these committees becomes crucial for robust risk governance and ensuring sustainable growth by leveraging their respective strengths and areas of expertise. By prudent sharing of critical information on risk appetite or strategic and other risks that may impact the quality of financial reporting and auditing processes and conversely by sharing insights on risk management and mitigation processes (e.g. through the use of financial derivatives or hedging techniques), the AC or RC can mutually gain valuable insights. A similar confluence exists between IT Risk Committees and AC. Effective board governance requires the coordinated interplay of these committees through knowledgeable resources and cross-participation. Fundamental is of course the adequate level of skills in the Board that elevates the quality of decision making and discussion and deliberation in these forums. One of the important takeaways of the discussion in each Committee is the approach towards crystallization of salient summary outcomes that drive the necessary messages without getting lost in detail. It is essential for this purpose that the stewardship of these Committees vest with individuals who are in possession of a complete mastery of the content.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Having participated in or led both, he singles out the Audit Committee and the Risk Committee as two of the most important governance bodies. The Audit Committee focuses on financial reporting, internal controls and compliance; the Risk Committee has a wider remit across the full spectrum of risk. **Why it matters.** Their remits overlap, so he stresses managing that overlap in a complementary way: coordinating agendas, sharing information on risk appetite and mitigation, and extending the same confluence to IT Risk Committees. Underneath it all he places adequate skills on the Board, the discipline of crystallising salient outcomes without getting lost in detail, and stewardship by people with complete mastery of the content. **Reflect.** *In a group you sit on, who owns the summary that reaches the decision-makers, and do they master the content?*

06 Independence Begins With Preparation and Honest Purpose

There are a few fundamental attributes that go behind this. First and foremost is adequate and in-depth domain knowledge constantly updated by reference to latest regulatory or other updates and equally the quality of coming well prepared for the meetings. Often, it helps to have a pre-meeting, for example in an Audit Committee context with the CFO or the statutory auditor to understand the materials better and the critical issues awaiting deliberation and discussion at Board level or committee level given general constraints of time and attention span of members. As long as there is honesty of purpose in asking a question and sides are not being taken and games not being played to compromise the interests of the organization, credibility of the Director is never compromised. Absent these traits, trust and respect is lost and then it is very difficult to re-create. Also, one must choose the issues to debate and be wary of discussing trivialities just to make a point, thereby displaying a magnanimity of intent which always augurs well. It is also important while presenting a differing strain of thought not to be pedantic but to keep an approach of optionality and possibility.

> *"Financial expertise provides the framework around which is constructed the wider contours of a CFO's role."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. For a director to challenge management and keep trust, he starts with in-depth domain knowledge, constantly updated, and coming well prepared. A pre-meeting, for example with the CFO or the statutory auditor in an Audit Committee context, helps one understand the materials and the critical issues before deliberation. **Why it matters.** Credibility is never compromised, he says, as long as a question is asked with honesty of purpose and no sides are taken or games played. Once trust and respect are lost they are very hard to re-create. He adds a discipline of choosing which issues to debate, avoiding trivialities, and presenting a differing view with optionality and possibility rather than pedantry. **Reflect.** *Before you next disagree in a meeting, what would you need to have done to ask with honesty of purpose?*

07 Culture Goes Beyond Compliance

A culture of governance accountability and responsibility goes much beyond mere compliance with rules and regulations. One has to transcend beyond the written word and imbibe the spirit of the written word and translate these percepts to a culture that pervades over every tenet of behavior. While accountability and responsibility have a reciprocal relationship inasmuch as one is the converse of the other, governance constitutes the framework that binds all of this together into an organic and vibrant existence that is behind every thought action and deed of the organization. Rules and regulations find their place in the compendium that may be in the reference domains of various regulators. An organization achieves the right standards of governance if these are instilled in the code of behavior of every member of the organization and it is that code that creates the accountability to a framework and the responsibility of each member to adhere to it. It is important to appreciate that culture is organic whereas any compendium of regulations et al is mechanical in the ultimate analysis.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates governance from compliance by asking one to transcend the written word, imbibe its spirit, and turn it into a culture that pervades every tenet of behaviour. Accountability and responsibility, as he puts it, are reciprocal, and governance is the framework that binds them. **Why it matters.** Rules and regulations belong to the compendium that regulators refer to. An organisation reaches the right standard when those principles are instilled in the code of behaviour of every member, because that code creates both accountability to a framework and each person's responsibility to adhere to it. Culture is organic, whereas a compendium of regulations is, in the ultimate analysis, mechanical. **Reflect.** *Which of your organisation's rules would still be followed if no regulator were watching, and why?*

08 Risk Aversion Has a Cost

One of the greatest facets of the evolution of my learning and maturity is the development of an understanding of risk. This has been the result of an exposure to multiple organizations, their business exposure to various elements of risk as well as their specific vulnerability to environmental, economic, business and reputational risks, how it shapes their strategies to mitigate the same. This has resulted in the development of an understanding of the most optimal approach to risk taking including identifying the various types of risks and evaluating the magnitude and potential impact of these risks on an

enterprise's operations. I have accordingly understood that a thoughtful approach to risk taking is underscored by developing a comprehensive risk management framework enshrined in policies and procedures for risk identification assessment, monitoring and mitigation. Emerging from this assessment is an approach that develops the company's risk profile under various scenarios and their mitigation as opposed to an approach that does not take into account these various elements that goes to undermine the overall effectiveness of the risk management framework. It follows as a corollary to all of this that an organization that is completely risk averse actually fails to exploit its business opportunities leaving a lot of money on the table and impairing the economic return to shareholders.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces his understanding of risk to exposure to many organisations, their business exposures, and their vulnerability to environmental, economic, business and reputational risk, and how that shaped their strategies. **Why it matters.** A thoughtful approach, he concludes, rests on a comprehensive framework of policies and procedures for identifying, assessing, monitoring and mitigating risk, and on a risk profile developed under various scenarios. The corollary is that a completely risk-averse organisation fails to exploit its opportunities, leaving a lot of money on the table and impairing the return to shareholders. **Reflect.** *Which opportunity are you declining because of a risk you have not actually assessed?*

09 Bad News Must Be Communicated, Never Suppressed

In our lives we often encounter situations where there is bad news and the same has to be communicated. I have learnt that the worst approach is to suppress the news, which is not an option. When something like this happens, one has to agree on a cogent communication strategy that is inclusive to all stakeholders calibrating the extent of disclosure appropriate to the audience. The communication should include salient details of the incident, an analysis of the developments that led to this incident based on all available facts and a commitment to come back with further updates as more fact patterns emerge. As required by the regulatory framework, there should be a communication to regulators, and exchanges. Much is achieved by the tone of the communication, factual yet constructive and concise but not obtuse or attempting concealment or suppression. A constructive communication underlines remedial steps being contemplated, impact on customers and steps being taken to prevent recurrence. In my life I have encountered several such situations, viz. performance below expectations to a significant customer fraud compromising the organization's reputation, customer loyalty, market and regulatory standing. Delivering this message in the right tone to each constituency, acknowledging failure but proceeding to a sharp analysis of events and failure in systems contributing to the same and steps to prevent recurrence as well as recompense losses of those affected was a very deep learning experience, more than what many successes taught me.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He states it plainly: the worst approach is to suppress bad news, and suppression is not an option. One has to agree a cogent communication strategy that includes all stakeholders and calibrates disclosure to the audience, including regulators and exchanges where the framework requires. **Why it matters.** The message should set out the salient details, an analysis of what led to the incident, and a commitment to update as facts emerge. Tone carries much of it: factual yet constructive, concise but never concealing, with remedial steps, the impact on customers and the steps to prevent recurrence. He says delivering such messages, including after a significant customer fraud, taught him more than many successes. **Reflect.** *What bad news are you holding that your stakeholders would rather hear from you than discover?*

10 Go Beyond the Call of Duty When the Organisation Is in Crisis

A situation that has stayed with me is a regulatory order served on a microfinance company on whose Board I served to temporarily cease and desist operations. This outcome was as a result of a perceived behavior whereby there was inadequate policy on pricing of products and insensitivity in collection practices. This choking of the company's lifeline had a potentially debilitating impact on the solvency of the organization. The local team was not fully equipped to deal with this situation and therefore I felt that the best approach would be for me to go beyond the call of duty as a director to assist management in developing a multi-dimensional action plan to cope with the situation. It started with taking stock of the situation through a root-cause analysis of the problem understanding the points that created this regulatory perception and developing a granular action plan involving risk, business, finance, IT and Compliance. The action plan was monitored very closely and the effort resulted in the development of a remediation plan to the satisfaction of the regulators that eventually led to the lifting of the order. A concomitant part of the effort was a cogent communication plan with regulators in an open and constructive manner keeping them transparently apprised of the stagewise progress. Equally important was the assimilation of learnings from the episode.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He recalls a regulatory order requiring a microfinance company, on whose Board he served, to temporarily cease operations, after perceived inadequacies in pricing policy and insensitivity in collection practices. The order threatened the company's solvency, and the local team was not fully equipped to respond. **Why it matters.** He chose to go beyond the call of duty as a director and help management build a multi-dimensional plan: a root-cause analysis, then a granular action plan across risk, business, finance, IT and compliance, monitored very closely. Open, constructive communication with the regulators, with transparent progress updates, led to the order being lifted, and he stresses assimilating the learnings from the episode. **Reflect.** *When your organisation is in trouble, what would you do that sits outside your formal role?*

11 Build for the Long Term, Even at a Short-Term Cost

This to my mind does not bear any elaboration as this is an inevitable part of the responsibilities of a leader to balance short term and long-term objectives. The attainment of the longer-term objective often happens through accretion of short-term targets but there is also the question of strategic choices that imply some compromises in short term profitability as resources have to be diverted for creating the foundation of the longer-term plan. This is a choice that is an essential part of the operating ethos of a company and is fundamental to building a credible and resilient institution as certain business initiatives may have a longer payback period. The fructification of these initiatives is often as critical to long term sustenance even by diverting some resources from attainment of short-term objectives.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He says this needs little elaboration: balancing short-term and long-term objectives is an inevitable part of a leader's responsibility. Long-term goals are often reached through the accretion of short-term targets. **Why it matters.** Strategic choices sometimes mean accepting lower short-term profitability because resources must be diverted to lay the foundation of the longer-term plan. That choice is part of a company's operating ethos and fundamental to building a credible, resilient institution, since some initiatives have a longer payback period. **Reflect.** *What are you funding today that will only pay back after your current targets are met?*

12 Trust Follows the Leader Who Stands by the Team

In my assessment the one quality which actually creates trust in a leader is the realization and faith that the leader will stand by his team irrespective of the outcome of a decision. In typical organizational dynamics, decisions are taken based on the best available data set and this may meet different degrees of reliability and also be subject to underlying assumptions. Typically, these are discussed collaboratively and then the leader takes some calls based on best available information. The team then executes and some plans fructify and some go awry. The best leader is one who passes on the glory of his successes to the team but stands up for failures without pinpointing responsibility to others especially externally. In internal meetings of course there is room for post mortem to learn from mistakes but to the outside world, a leader who stands steadfast behind his team earns the maximum extent of respect and cooperation. This inculcates a culture in the team to give of their best knowing that the leader will not be unreasonable and this elevates the quality of team-spirit and participation manifold.

> *"A leader who stands steadfast behind his team earns the maximum extent of respect and cooperation."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. For him the one quality that creates trust is the faith that the leader will stand by the team irrespective of the outcome of a decision. Decisions rest on the best available data and assumptions; some plans succeed and some go awry. **Why it matters.** The best leader passes the glory of success to the team but stands up for failures without pinpointing responsibility on others, especially externally. A post-mortem has a place in internal meetings, but to the outside world a leader who stands steadfastly behind the team earns the maximum respect and cooperation, and the team gives its best knowing that. **Reflect.** *The last time something went wrong, what did you say to people outside your team?*

13 From Direct Authority to Influence

As I transitioned from being an executive responsible for running a function to providing oversight and independent judgment at board level, there were several subtle shifts which took me some time to understand and appreciate. As an executive one exercises direct authority and has direct access to information including all the building blocks that go behind it as well as being associated with the process as they take shape. As a Board member, one has authority but it is of a surrogate and vicarious nature, exercised indirectly by respect and influence. One has access to information with limited lead time and detail and it often comes in a preformatted form, whereby one can seek additional detail but within limitations. Therefore, one has to develop several skills, notably the ability to understand the data that is presented and ask incisive questions that underscore the depth and breadth of understanding, connect dots and elicit responses that complement the gap. Equally through this process one develops bridges of credibility. Also, by demonstrating a degree of maturity and acumen bred out of years of experience in multiple situations, one contributes in a manner that enhances one's acceptability. Furthermore, the fact that one is a little remote from day-to-day vicissitudes, enhances the clarity of thought and objectivity of decision making by visualizing multiple scenarios and what-if situations.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Moving from executive to board member, he describes authority that is surrogate and vicarious rather than direct, exercised through respect and influence, and information that arrives with limited lead time and detail, often in a preformatted form. **Why it matters.** That calls for new skills: understanding the data presented, asking incisive questions that show depth of understanding, connecting dots, and eliciting responses that fill the gap. Credibility and acceptability grow through maturity and acumen, and being a little removed from day-to-day vicissitudes improves clarity of thought and objectivity through multiple scenarios. **Reflect.** *If you lost direct authority tomorrow, what questions would you rely on to be heard?*

14 Founders Need the Full Picture

I have found that start-up entrepreneurs in their excitement and enthusiasm to see their ideas to fruition tend to become unipolar in their thinking and fail to develop an appreciation of the connected interplay of various factors that influence the outcome of their enterprise. For example, they often tend to de-emphasize the importance of prudent accounting principles and methodologies for income recognition or risk evaluation. These matters may lead to qualifications by statutory auditors or emphasis of matter in their reports to the Board and paradoxically these very lacunae have an impact on the valuation of the enterprise in the eyes of the market thus impacting the very objectives they seek to achieve. Often these companies have a cross-border operation and then they need to develop an appreciation of aspects like management of currency risks or regulatory compliance in different jurisdictions. Thus, they tend to create an ambitious footprint without an adequate understanding of the underlying risks and create unforeseen vulnerabilities. Other common omissions lead to appreciation of data privacy considerations, IT security considerations and making adequate investments to address these requirements.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. From mentoring start-up entrepreneurs, he sees a common pattern: in their excitement to see ideas through, founders become unipolar in their thinking and miss the interplay of the factors that shape the outcome. **Why it matters.** He points to de-emphasised accounting principles for income recognition and risk evaluation, which can lead to auditor qualifications and affect valuation in the eyes of the market. He adds cross-border blind spots, such as currency risk and regulation in different jurisdictions, and omissions around data privacy, IT security and the investment needed to address them. **Reflect.** *Which part of your business are you treating as someone else's problem until it becomes your valuation problem?*

15 Excellence Without Empathy Does Not Deliver

Professional excellence by itself cannot lead to results without empathy and an understanding of people. The organization is comprised of people of varying capabilities and the leader has to shape the team to drive it towards overall excellence. Empathy in turn inculcates a culture of commitment that drives employees to maximize their effort and commitment. There is also a huge dissemination effect by observing others in the organization. In my professional experience there was an instance where a promising employee got impacted by a debilitating illness. Despite a lot of pressure to grant him a financial settlement and replace the vacancy because of headcount pressures I called my team into a huddle and said that we owed it to our colleague to individually step up and fill in for him. Despite work pressures the entire team readily agreed and this created a positive influence that no amount of financial incentives or inducements could achieve. This underscores the enormous positive impact of

empathy on the part of the leader that delivers an extremely impactful message that resonates across the organization.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He says professional excellence cannot by itself produce results without empathy and an understanding of people. An organisation is made of people of varying capabilities, and the leader shapes them towards excellence. **Why it matters.** His example is a promising employee struck by a debilitating illness. Despite pressure to grant a financial settlement and replace him because of headcount constraints, he asked the team to step up and fill in for their colleague, and they agreed. He says this had a positive influence that no financial incentive could have achieved. **Reflect.** *When did you last choose to carry a colleague rather than replace them, and what did your team learn from it?*

16 Quantitative Rigour and a Broader Lens

My engineering degree at IIT Kharagpur put me through a syllabus of quantitative rigor that led to exceptional sharpening of numerate and basic analytical skills. It created the capacity to deal with abstruse and complex mathematical and statistical models that created a mental framework for decision making by breaking a complex problem into simple variables understanding their interplay and developing a predictive ability to simulate outcomes. The range of courses in basic physical sciences to applied disciplines enabled me to get a clear understanding of how technology has been built on the basic principles of physical sciences. If IIT provided the quantitative foundational depth, IIM was a completely different experience by exposing me to a range of economic principles, behavioral sciences, elements of political history and social sciences that led to a deep appreciation of the softer skills and widening as well as deepening of the intellectual span. It taught me to look at history and sociopolitical as well as economic issues with a different lens and exposed me to an academic fraternity that were actually putting these skills to work in a variety of industry and policy situations. To this day I feel that my engineering degree created a quantitative bias in me that enabled me to relate to financial management theory, risk modelling or capital planning and translate these to situations that I encountered as CFO. It is my firm conviction that an Engineer/MBA is in no way an inferior qualification for a CFO as is sometimes attributed.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He credits IIT Kharagpur with quantitative rigour and the capacity to break a complex problem into simple variables and simulate outcomes, and IIM Calcutta with exposure to economic principles, behavioural sciences, political history and the social sciences. **Why it matters.** Together they gave him the intellectual span and softer skills he later brought to financial management theory, risk modelling and capital planning as CFO. He is firmly of the view that an Engineer/MBA is in no way an inferior qualification for a CFO. **Reflect.** *Which of your two strongest skills do you lean on too heavily, and which have you under-developed?*

17 Teach Ethics Through Real Cases

I think universities must instill in future leaders the strongest sense of ethical conduct and values that will propel their conduct like a beacon through their lives. This should be done through a curated set of courses enunciating the core principles of ethical conduct supported by case studies from live business situations drawing upon examples of business leaders who have abided by the highest principles of ethical conduct as well as those of the other kind. Examples can be drawn from real life successes and failures and what are the lessons to be drawn from such case studies. The development of ethical

conduct can be the ultimate outcome of prudential risk management and compliance principles that will equip students with an awareness that will serve them well through their careers.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. If he could influence future finance professionals, he would want universities to instil the strongest sense of ethical conduct and values, to propel their conduct like a beacon through their lives. **Why it matters.** He proposes a curated set of courses on the core principles of ethical conduct, supported by case studies from live business situations, with leaders who held the highest principles as well as those who did not, and with lessons drawn from real successes and failures. Ethical conduct, he adds, can be the ultimate outcome of prudential risk management and compliance principles. **Reflect.** *Which real case, a success or a failure, taught you the most about ethics?*

18 Choose Your First Organisation Carefully

I would urge a young finance professional to be judicious in their initial career choices as this leaves a permanent imprint on their career. They should serve their initial period of apprenticeship in a firm or organization known for the quality of their financial systems, policies and processes. This creates a firm imprint in their minds and becomes a template for their future learning and what they can apply to other situations. This may entail some degree of compromise on the speed of their progression but rather than getting frustrated, they should use this period to maximize their learning by an exposure to the wide repertoire of learning materials available.

> *"Universities must instill in future leaders the strongest sense of ethical conduct and values."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His principle for a young finance professional is to be judicious in the initial career choices, because they leave a permanent imprint. The apprenticeship should be served in a firm known for the quality of its financial systems, policies and processes. **Why it matters.** That creates a template for later learning that can be applied in other situations. It may mean some compromise on the speed of progression, but he asks them to use the period to maximise learning from the wide repertoire available, rather than getting frustrated. **Reflect.** *What is your current employer teaching you that you could carry into any future role?*

19 Listening Changed Me Most

Over the years the experience that has changed me most as a person is to learn to devote a greater attention to listening skills. I have learnt that becoming more receptive to the views of others as expressed in conversation or discussion leads to a diversity of thought that breeds a richness and enables in the formulation of one's own ideas in a more inclusive way that not only enhances the intellectual content but also other dimensions as human appeal, attention to various risks in execution or highlighting points that initially eluded me. This has been a single most important factor in developing my overall acumen and the qualities I bring to bear.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The experience that changed him most as a person was learning to devote greater attention to listening. Becoming more receptive to others' views, in conversation or in discussion, brings a diversity of thought and a richness to one's own ideas. **Why it matters.** It makes one's thinking more inclusive, adds human appeal, draws attention to risks in execution and highlights points that had eluded him. He calls it the single most important factor in developing his overall acumen and the qualities he brings. **Reflect.** *In your next discussion, what could you learn by speaking last?*

20 Look Beyond Achievement to a Fuller Life

This is indeed a question that prompts you to look back on your life. As I picture myself as a young strapling cast into the complex world of commercial life in Mumbai from the relatively sheltered environs of business school, I would tell myself to do something yet simultaneously realizing whether it is at all possible, namely to develop a more inclusive view of life. In my academic life, I was imbued with a spirit to strive for academic excellence to the exclusion of many other facets of life that would have contributed to developing a richer view of life. If I were to live life again, I would have sought to participate to a greater degree in community initiatives as an example. Another aspect I would have focused on is to make a greater effort to nurture relationships. I do realize that this has been greatly facilitated by the enormous strides made in social media that we lacked in our younger years. Another theme I would focus on is to make a greater effort to participate more closely and emotively in the growth phase of my children because I have realized sadly that as they go through adolescence their own lives acquire a centrality and the childhood experience does not come back for sharing.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Speaking to his younger self, a young man cast into commercial life in Mumbai from the sheltered environment of business school, he would encourage a more inclusive view of life. He had been driven by academic excellence to the exclusion of other facets of life. **Why it matters.** He would have taken part more in community initiatives, made a greater effort to nurture relationships, and participated more closely and emotively in the growth of his children, since childhood does not come back for sharing once adolescence gives them lives of their own. **Reflect.** *What are you postponing today that will not be available to share later?*

21 Uphold Ethical Values Without Compromise

A principle that I have sought to follow throughout my life, I do not know with what degree of success, is to uphold without any compromise ethical values and principles. Across my experience initially as a junior executive and then ascending the layers of seniority to the world beyond executive life, in the world of Boards, I have learnt that respect is ultimately earned through one's conduct and that has as much influence on others as other parameters of success. These values are developed in one's initial years and one has a chance to display them in later life that this is a silent ambassador that is instrumental to earning the respect of peers and others alike. In doing so one often has to choose between an easier and more difficult path but the choice has enduring value that manifests itself in multifarious ways. Inasmuch as exercising this choice has not always been easy, I would not trade this for anything else.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The principle he has tried to follow throughout his life, without knowing, he says, with what degree of success, is to uphold ethical values and principles without any compromise. Respect, he has learnt, is ultimately earned through one's conduct and carries as much influence as other measures of success. **Why it matters.** Those values are formed in one's initial years and displayed later, a silent ambassador that earns the respect of peers and others. It often means choosing between an easier and a more difficult path, and although it has not always been easy, he says he would not trade it for anything else. **Reflect.** *Which choice in the last year was the harder path, and would you make it again?*

22 No Principle He Would Change

> I searched repeatedly but could not find any single principle that I had once held strongly but would like to change because of my experience.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked which belief he once held strongly but changed because of experience, he answers with candour: he searched repeatedly and could not find any single principle that he would change. **Why it matters.** We have kept this answer exactly as given. It stands beside his answer on the principle that has stayed with him, as a statement that the values he formed early have held through his career. **Reflect.** *Which of your beliefs have you tested against experience, and which have you simply not examined?*

23 How Can Corporate India Close the Gap?

> A question I often ask, to which I do not have a complete answer is how in a developing economy like India the business community can express a greater degree of social awareness and contribute to the well-being of the community. As our country is progressing rapidly along the path of economic development, sadly the disparities between different strata of society are increasing. How can corporate India help in closing this gap, for which there could be several ways say enhancing the scope of CSR activities, greater participation in the community efforts such as skilling. This is something for which I do not have a complete answer.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The question he still asks is how, in a developing economy like India, the business community can express a greater degree of social awareness and contribute to the well-being of the community. **Why it matters.** He observes that as the country advances rapidly in economic development, the disparities between different strata of society are increasing. He wonders how corporate India can help close the gap, perhaps by enhancing the scope of CSR activities and greater participation in community efforts such as skilling, and says plainly that he does not have a complete answer. **Reflect.** *What can your organisation do within its own reach to narrow the gap he describes?*

24 Choose the Right Principle Without an Eye on the Outcome

> The one principle from my entire journey that I would like to be remembered is that here was somebody who always chose the path of the right principle without an eye on the outcome, who was not influenced by any other factor other than upholding the principles that would lead the organization who had retained my services in the right direction first ethically and then upholding customer interests. If I was an executive, I sought to maximize the performance of the organization in a

> legitimate way whereas as an Independent Director I sought to spare no effort to enhance the effectiveness of the Board even if this entailed presenting an alternate view to the majoritarian view.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for the one principle he would want to be remembered by, he describes someone who always chose the path of the right principle without an eye on the outcome, influenced by nothing except upholding principles, first ethically and then in the interest of customers. **Why it matters.** As an executive he sought to maximise the organisation's performance in a legitimate way; as an Independent Director he sought to spare no effort to enhance the Board's effectiveness, even when that meant presenting a view different from the majority's. **Reflect.** *When did you last present a view the majority did not share, and what did it cost you?*

25 Hold Your Core Principles Sacrosanct

> I would like to narrate here an experience that I encountered in my Board experience. I was a member of a Board of a Bank that merged with a NBFC that amounted to a virtual management buyout. I would like to believe that I had played a formative role in the evolution of the Bank Board. This was not appreciated by the incoming management, the MD of the NBFC who became the MD of the bank as a succession arrangement. After a few weeks, he called me and said that he was uncomfortable with my participation in one other NBFC Boards. He started saying that his NBFC had certain proprietary practices and he feared loss of competitive position. I countered that there was no regulatory prohibition, I was signatory to a code of ethics and a fit and proper declaration and would follow in letter and spirit. As he still appeared to harbor doubt, I offered that the relationship was built on trust and if that was brought to question, it was not acceptable to me and I would rather walk away. Not expecting such a position, he protested that this was an extreme reaction. I stuck to my point of view and this is something I have not regretted, as I held my core principles sacrosanct.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He closes with an episode from a Bank Board that merged with an NBFC in what amounted to a virtual management buyout. The incoming managing director, formerly of the NBFC, voiced discomfort about his participation on another NBFC's Board, citing proprietary practices and competitive position. **Why it matters.** He answered that there was no regulatory prohibition, that he was a signatory to a code of ethics and a fit-and-proper declaration, and that he would follow both in letter and spirit. When doubt persisted, he said the relationship was built on trust, and that if trust were questioned he would rather walk away. He has not regretted it, as he held his core principles sacrosanct. **Reflect.** *Where is your line, and would you walk away if it were crossed?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Choose the path of the right principle without an eye on the outcome. Ethics first, then the customer's interest, whether as an executive or as an independent director.

Financial expertise is the framework, not the whole role. Weave together strategy, risk, people and governance, and treat numbers as the skeleton of an approach.

Numbers need judgement beside them. Where risks cannot be quantified, make the judgement explicit and explain the rationale.

Prepare, ask honestly and choose your issues. Independence on a board rests on knowledge, honesty of purpose and not debating trivialities.

Never suppress bad news. Communicate factually and constructively, with remedial steps and a commitment to update.

Trust follows the leader who stands by the team. Pass on the glory of success and stand up for failures.

Respect is earned through conduct. Ethical values formed early are a silent ambassador throughout a career.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/abhijit-sen



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Angelos Tsavdaris

President, Hellenic-Indian Chamber of Commerce and Economy

“Honour people\u2019s trust through actions for which you are prepared to take responsibility.”

13 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 026, October 2026

Honour People's Trust

Leadership, trust and human dignity. Thirteen principles from the President of the Hellenic-Indian Chamber of Commerce and Economy on international cooperation, institutional leadership and creating opportunities across borders.

> *Honour people's trust through actions for which you are prepared to take responsibility.*

01 Can I Honestly Explain My Decision to the People It Affects?

The principles I consider non-negotiable are respect for human dignity, integrity, and consistency between words and actions. When a decision affects people, I feel responsible for considering its real consequences and being honest about what we can achieve. I believe we must create opportunities responsibly, without raising expectations that we cannot substantiate.

In my dealings with institutions, I am guided by transparency, respect for rules, and a commitment to the purpose we serve. Trust is built gradually through consistency and the willingness to take responsibility, particularly when difficulties arise.

In international partnerships, I consider mutual respect, an understanding of cultural differences, and mutual benefit essential. A partnership endures when each side feels heard, is treated as an equal, and sees commitments translated into action.

The question I return to is simple: can I honestly explain my decision to the people it affects and take responsibility for it?

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names three non-negotiables: respect for human dignity, integrity, and consistency between words and actions. He applies them to people, to institutions and to international partnerships, each in turn, and reduces them to a single question he keeps returning to. **Why it matters.** For him, trust is built gradually through consistency and the willingness to take responsibility, particularly when difficulties arise. He also insists that opportunities be created responsibly, without raising expectations that cannot be substantiated. **Reflect.** *Could you honestly explain your last significant decision to the people it affected, and take responsibility for it?*

02 Trust Is Reinforced Every Day

I believe lasting trust begins with a willingness to listen to and understand others. In international partnerships, we need to understand each party's priorities, way of thinking, and operating context, without assuming that our own approach is the only right one.

Clarity is equally essential: explaining from the outset what we seek to achieve, what we can offer, and where our limitations lie. Different expectations can be discussed and brought into alignment, provided there is honesty and room for meaningful dialogue.

Trust is reinforced every day when we honour our commitments, communicate difficulties promptly, and take responsibility when something does not proceed as agreed. The way we handle a disagreement reveals the strength of our relationship.

In cooperation between Greece and India, I consider it particularly important that each side feels its identity, contribution, and aspirations are respected. When this reciprocity is accompanied by consistent action, we can build relationships that stand the test of time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He begins with listening: understanding each party's priorities, way of thinking and operating context, without assuming that one's own approach is the only right one. Clarity from the outset about what we seek, what we can offer and where our limitations lie comes next. **Why it matters.** In his view, trust is reinforced daily by honouring commitments, communicating difficulties promptly and taking responsibility when something does not proceed as agreed. The way a disagreement is handled reveals the strength of the relationship. **Reflect.** *In a partnership you are part of, when did you last communicate a difficulty promptly instead of waiting?*

03 Human Dignity Sets a Firm Boundary for Our Choices

For me, responsible leadership means understanding that every decision has consequences for people and that an institutional role carries an obligation to listen, exercise fair judgement, and be accountable. It also requires making difficult decisions and being able to explain clearly the reasons behind them.

As President of the Hellenic-Indian Chamber of Commerce & Economy, I consider it my duty to seek common ground among different aspirations. This requires all parties to be heard, including those with less influence, and transparent, consistent criteria to be applied. An institution's mission must be served with independent judgement and a focus on long-term benefit.

When considering an initiative, I am concerned both with the outcome we seek and with how we will achieve it: who benefits, who bears the cost or risk, and whether the people affected understand what it truly means for them. For me, human dignity sets a firm boundary for our choices.

I believe the quality of leadership becomes particularly evident when one must reconsider a decision, acknowledge a mistake, or decline an opportunity that conflicts with one's principles. My aim is to contribute to partnerships that deliver meaningful results and leave behind greater trust, fair opportunities, and lasting relationships.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He describes responsible leadership as an obligation to listen, exercise fair judgement and be accountable, and to explain clearly the reasons behind difficult decisions. As President of the Hellenic-Indian Chamber of Commerce & Economy, he sees it as his duty to seek common ground among different aspirations. **Why it matters.** He asks of every initiative both what outcome is sought and how it will be achieved: who benefits, who bears the cost or risk, and whether the people affected understand what it means for them. He locates the quality of leadership in the moments when one must reconsider a decision, acknowledge a mistake or decline a conflicting opportunity. **Reflect.** *For a decision you are considering now, who bears the cost or risk, and do they know it?*

04 Respect for the Person Who Decides to Work in Another Country

For me, the starting point is respect for the person who decides to work in another country. Behind that decision lie expectations, family responsibilities, and often significant personal sacrifices. We have a responsibility to take that trust seriously.

The first principle is honest, understandable information. Every worker should know in advance the nature of the job, pay, working hours, accommodation conditions, any costs they will bear, and their rights and obligations. They should also understand which stages depend on an employer's selection and decisions by the competent authorities, without misleading promises of employment or a visa.

The second principle is fair treatment, supported by clear contracts, safe working conditions, respect for occupational skills, and protection against discrimination and exploitation. Skills assessment and certification can help improve the match between people and jobs. Responsible, lawfully operating partners, protection of personal data, and accessible ways to report problems without fear of retaliation are also necessary.

These are the principles I believe EUTOPIA should serve. Our responsibility also extends to taking an interest in what happens after arrival: smooth integration, communication, and the timely identification of difficulties. The success of such an effort is measured by its ability to create real opportunities for workers and meet business needs on the basis of fairness and mutual respect.

> *"Human dignity sets a firm boundary for our choices."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Speaking about the EUTOPIA programme, he starts from the person behind the decision to work abroad: their expectations, family responsibilities and often significant personal sacrifices. He treats that trust as a responsibility to be taken seriously. **Why it matters.** He sets out two principles: honest, understandable information about the job, pay, hours, accommodation, costs, rights and obligations, without misleading promises of employment or a visa; and fair treatment, through clear contracts, safe conditions, protection from discrimination and exploitation, and accessible ways to report problems without fear of retaliation. Success is measured by real opportunities for workers and by meeting business needs on the basis of fairness and mutual respect. **Reflect.** *If someone built a major life decision on what you told them, would they have the full picture?*

05 What a Partnership Leaves Behind

I believe cooperation between two countries acquires meaningful value when its benefits are felt in people's everyday lives: when it creates opportunities for young people, broadens access to knowledge, strengthens skills, and enables more individuals and small businesses to participate in progress.

Human interaction is equally important. Through education, culture, tourism, and professional cooperation, people get to know one another, move beyond stereotypes, and learn to appreciate different ways of thinking and living. This mutual understanding gives depth and resilience to relations between countries.

In the relationship between Greece and India, I see particular value in the opportunity to connect our historical and cultural heritage with the needs of today's societies. We can build links among

universities, businesses, professionals, and young people, allowing cooperation to gain continuity through their participation.

For me, a meaningful measure of success is what a partnership leaves behind: more knowledge, greater trust, fair opportunities, and people who want to continue creating together. That is where its long-term value for both peoples lies.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He measures cooperation between two countries by whether its benefits are felt in people's everyday lives: opportunities for young people, access to knowledge, strengthened skills, and wider participation by individuals and small businesses. **Why it matters.** Human interaction, through education, culture, tourism and professional cooperation, moves people beyond stereotypes and gives relations depth and resilience. For Greece and India, he sees value in connecting historical and cultural heritage with the needs of today's societies, through links among universities, businesses, professionals and young people. **Reflect.** *What will your current partnership leave behind: knowledge, trust, fair opportunities, and people who want to keep creating together?*

06 Ask Before Judging

My involvement in cooperation between Greece and India has led me to place particular value on listening and personal interaction. To understand someone from a different cultural background, you need to give them space to explain how they think, what matters to them, and what they expect from your relationship. You must also be willing to reconsider your own assumptions.

Differences in communication, working pace, or decision-making require patience, clarity, and a willingness to adapt. A delay or a different approach can easily be misinterpreted if we do not first seek to understand its reasons. That is why I consider it valuable to ask before judging and to confirm that we have understood one another.

Through this process, we can discover shared values: care for family, respect for knowledge, hospitality, and the desire to offer better prospects to the next generation. These values are expressed differently in each society and become meaningful when we recognise them in people's actions, beyond generalisations and stereotypes.

I believe bridges between cultures are built when people feel they can cooperate while preserving their identity. For me, this is one of the most important possibilities in the relationship between Greece and India: to know one another more deeply, learn from each other, and translate mutual respect into shared work.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He places listening and personal interaction at the centre of cooperation between Greece and India. To understand someone from a different cultural background, he says, you need to give them space to explain how they think and what they expect, and be willing to reconsider your own assumptions. **Why it matters.** Differences in communication, working pace or decision-making call for patience, clarity and a willingness to adapt. A delay or a different approach can be misinterpreted if we do not first seek to understand its reasons, which is why he values asking before judging and confirming that we have understood one another. **Reflect.** *Where have you interpreted a delay or a different approach without first asking the reason for it?*

07 Preserving Our Credibility Is a Responsibility We Owe

I believe that when interests conflict, we must first clarify our responsibilities, to whom we are accountable, and the capacity in which we are making a decision. Particularly when representing an institution, we must distinguish personal or commercial benefit from the mission entrusted to us.

For me, the guiding criteria are lawfulness, honesty, fair treatment, and respect for human dignity. Before making a difficult decision, I consider it essential to examine the facts, listen to those affected, and ask who will bear the consequences, especially when they have less ability to defend their interests.

Integrity also requires concrete action: disclosing a conflict of interest, seeking independent judgement, and, where necessary, stepping aside from the decision-making process. It also requires the courage to set boundaries or decline a partnership when its terms undermine trust and our principles.

One personal test I find useful is this: could I openly explain this decision to everyone it affects, using the same reasoning? The more difficult path may carry an immediate cost. Preserving our credibility, however, is a responsibility we owe to the people who trust us and to the partnerships we want to endure.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. When interests conflict, he begins by clarifying responsibilities: to whom we are accountable, and in what capacity we are deciding. Representing an institution means separating personal or commercial benefit from the mission entrusted to us. **Why it matters.** His criteria are lawfulness, honesty, fair treatment and respect for human dignity. Integrity also requires concrete action: disclosing a conflict of interest, seeking independent judgement, stepping aside where necessary, and having the courage to set boundaries or decline a partnership whose terms undermine trust and principles. **Reflect.** *Which of your current decisions would you be comfortable explaining to everyone it affects, using the same reasoning?*

08 Responsibility Continues After an Initiative Begins

I believe responsible opportunity creation begins with how we define success. Alongside financial returns, we need to consider the quality of jobs, the knowledge and skills people gain, and an initiative's contribution to the local community.

Leaders must incorporate this responsibility into the design of every partnership. This means realistic goals, transparent terms, careful selection of partners, and meaningful discussion with those affected. It also means considering whether infrastructure and available resources can support the growth being pursued, and how benefits, costs, and risks are distributed.

I consider investment in people's capabilities particularly important. Education, the transfer of expertise, and support for local entrepreneurship give a partnership value that continues over time. A person who gains meaningful skills can broaden their choices and contribute more to their community.

Responsibility continues after an initiative begins. We need to monitor results, listen to participants' experiences, and correct what is not working. For me, an opportunity is worth developing when there are sound grounds to believe it will improve people's lives, together with a commitment to assess whether it is fulfilling that purpose in practice.

> *"Could I openly explain this decision to everyone it affects, using the same reasoning?"*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He begins by redefining success: alongside financial returns, the quality of jobs, the knowledge and skills people gain, and an initiative's contribution to the local community. Responsibility is built into the design of every partnership through realistic goals, transparent terms, careful selection of partners and meaningful discussion with those affected. **Why it matters.** Investment in people's capabilities, through education, transfer of expertise and support for local entrepreneurship, gives a partnership value over time. Responsibility does not end when the initiative begins: results must be monitored, participants' experiences heard and what is not working corrected. **Reflect.** *How would you know whether an initiative of yours is fulfilling its purpose in practice, and who would you ask?*

09 Taking Responsibility for the Expectations You Create

One experience that has shaped my understanding of responsibility is the effort to develop the EUTOPIA programme. International labour mobility brings together different needs: businesses seeking staff and people hoping for better professional prospects. Between these needs lie procedures, uncertainties, and decisions that have a profound effect on human lives.

The greatest challenge is to create prospects while remaining absolutely clear about what you can actually offer. Preparing candidates and strengthening their skills is valuable, but selection by an employer and decisions by the competent authorities follow their own processes. These limitations must be explained from the outset, even when more optimistic wording would be easier or more appealing.

This effort has led me to pay closer attention to how others understand what we tell them. Something we say may become the basis on which a person plans the next steps in their life. That is why providing accurate information is a substantial responsibility.

The lesson I take from this is that leadership also requires taking responsibility for the expectations you create. It means working persistently to develop an opportunity, explaining its conditions honestly, and remaining available to listen to the concerns of the people who trust you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the effort to develop the EUTOPIA programme as the experience that shaped his understanding of responsibility. Between businesses seeking staff and people hoping for better prospects lie procedures, uncertainties and decisions that profoundly affect human lives. **Why it matters.** The greatest challenge, he says, is to create prospects while remaining absolutely clear about what can actually be offered, even when more optimistic wording would be easier. Something we say may become the basis on which a person plans the next steps in their life, so accurate information is a substantial responsibility. **Reflect.** *What have you said that someone may be planning their life around, and is it exactly what you can deliver?*

10 Cultivate Your Credibility First

I would encourage young people to cultivate their credibility first. To honour their commitments, prepare thoroughly, and have the courage to say “I do not know” when necessary. A willingness to learn and ask for help is an important asset in any professional career.

I would also advise them to remain curious about the world: to learn about other cultures, listen to different views, and work with people whose experiences differ from their own. Particularly in international relations, meaningful understanding requires the ability to consider an issue through another person’s eyes.

Ambition needs to be accompanied by patience and ethical judgement. Before accepting a proposal or making a decision, it is worth asking whether they can openly stand behind their choice and what consequences it will have for others. They should treat every person with the same respect, regardless of their position or whether they can be useful to them.

Finally, I would encourage them to find ways to share what they learn and create opportunities for others as well. Professional success acquires deeper meaning when it is connected to a useful contribution to society. They should move forward boldly, correct their mistakes, and build a career they can be proud of, both for what they achieved and for how they achieved it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His first advice to young people is to cultivate credibility: to honour commitments, prepare thoroughly, and have the courage to say “I do not know” when necessary. He also asks them to remain curious about the world and to consider an issue through another person's eyes. **Why it matters.** Ambition, he says, needs patience and ethical judgement, and every person deserves the same respect regardless of position or usefulness. He encourages them to share what they learn and create opportunities for others, and to build a career they can be proud of for what they achieved and how they achieved it. **Reflect.** *Which of your habits would a younger colleague learn credibility from, and which would they not?*

11 Translate Trust Into Work of Meaningful Value for Both Peoples

I believe the next generation of leaders should approach the relationship between Greece and India with mutual respect, equality, and long-term commitment. Each country has different capabilities, needs, and priorities. Meaningful cooperation requires understanding these differences and developing proposals in which each side recognises a clear and fair benefit.

Consistency between intentions and implementation is particularly important. Initiatives need specific goals, clear responsibilities, and continuity, even when the people who launched them change. I consider it a responsibility of leaders to build institutional relationships that can evolve and support the next generation of partnerships.

At the same time, we need to broaden participation. Small and medium-sized enterprises, universities, young professionals, and local communities must have a place in, and access to, the opportunities being created. Knowledge exchange and skills development can strengthen this participation and help benefits endure.

For me, fairness and sustainability must be criteria for every joint initiative: how people are treated, how natural resources are used, and what prospects we leave to future generations. I would like

tomorrow's leaders to see the relationship between Greece and India as an ongoing responsibility to create together, learn from one another, and translate trust into work of meaningful value for both peoples.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. For the next generation of leaders in the Greece–India relationship, he asks for mutual respect, equality and long-term commitment, with proposals in which each side recognises a clear and fair benefit. Consistency between intentions and implementation matters, as do specific goals, clear responsibilities and continuity beyond the people who launched an initiative. **Why it matters.** He wants participation broadened to include small and medium-sized enterprises, universities, young professionals and local communities, supported by knowledge exchange and skills development. Fairness and sustainability, covering how people are treated, how natural resources are used and what prospects are left to future generations, should be criteria for every joint initiative. **Reflect.** *Who is not yet part of the opportunities you are creating, and what would it take to include them?*

12 A Clear Conscience Is What Gives an Achievement Meaning

For me, success means being able to recognise meaningful value in what I create and feeling that the way I have worked is consistent with my principles. A professional achievement acquires particular meaning when it benefits people, strengthens trust, and creates prospects that endure.

Over time, my attention has shifted more towards the durability and quality of results. Achieving a goal remains important, but I am equally interested in what follows: whether a partnership develops, whether commitments are honoured, and whether the people involved feel their trust was justified.

In my institutional role, I consider it particularly meaningful to help create relationships and opportunities that can continue beyond my own involvement. To enable partners to move forward together, open paths for younger people, and allow an effort to become the foundation for what comes next.

Ultimately, what gives an achievement meaning is being able to look back with a clear conscience: to have worked honestly, taken responsibility for my choices, and contributed something useful. The esteem of the people with whom we have worked and the continuing value of our shared work are, for me, among the most meaningful measures of success.

> *"Trust enables us to move forward together, even when we differ."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He defines success as recognising meaningful value in what he creates and feeling that the way he worked is consistent with his principles. Over time his attention has shifted towards the durability and quality of results: whether a partnership develops, commitments are honoured and the people involved feel their trust was justified. **Why it matters.** In his institutional role, he finds it most meaningful to help create relationships and opportunities that continue beyond his own involvement. His final measure is looking back with a clear conscience, having worked honestly, taken responsibility and contributed something useful. **Reflect.** *Looking back on your work so far, what has endured beyond your own involvement?*

13 Honour People's Trust Through Actions for Which You Are Prepared to Take Responsibility

> The principle I would like to leave to future generations is this: “Honour people’s trust through actions for which you are prepared to take responsibility.”
>
> When someone trusts us, they give us the ability to influence a part of their life. This requires honesty of intention, consistency in our commitments, and the courage to acknowledge our mistakes. It also requires us to consider the consequences of our decisions for people who may lack the power to make their voices heard.
>
> In every relationship, institution, or partnership across borders, trust enables us to move forward together, even when we differ. If we nurture it with respect and responsibility, we leave future generations something valuable: the ability to continue building on what we have created.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for one principle to leave to future generations, he gives this sentence, and then explains it: when someone trusts us, they give us the ability to influence a part of their life. **Why it matters.** That trust requires honesty of intention, consistency in our commitments and the courage to acknowledge our mistakes, together with attention to people who may lack the power to make their voices heard. Across borders, trust is what allows people to move forward together, even when they differ, and it is what future generations can continue to build on. **Reflect.** *Whose trust have you been given, and what are you doing to deserve it?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Honour people's trust through actions for which you are prepared to take responsibility. When someone trusts us, they give us the ability to influence a part of their life.

Can I honestly explain my decision to the people it affects?. The question he returns to, and takes responsibility for the answer.

Trust is reinforced every day. By honouring commitments, communicating difficulties promptly and taking responsibility when something does not proceed as agreed.

Human dignity sets a firm boundary for our choices. Ask who benefits, who bears the cost or risk, and whether the people affected understand what it truly means for them.

Take responsibility for the expectations you create. Explain the conditions honestly, even when more optimistic wording would be easier.

Ask before judging. Confirm that we have understood one another before interpreting a delay or a different approach.

A meaningful measure of success is what a partnership leaves behind. More knowledge, greater trust, fair opportunities, and people who want to continue creating together.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Dr. Sahdev Singh

Deputy Secretary, Government of India · Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare

"A public position is a responsibility, not a privilege."

17 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 025, October 2026

Learn Continuously, Serve with Integrity

A career in public service is not defined by where you begin, but by how much you continue to learn, serve and contribute. Seventeen principles from a Deputy Secretary, Government of India, on governance, law, institutions and agriculture.

> *A career in public service is not defined by where you begin, but by how much you continue to learn, serve and contribute.*

01 A Career Is Not Defined Only by Where One Begins

My journey has taught me that a career is not defined only by where one begins, but by the willingness to learn, adapt and take responsibility at every stage.

Beginning my professional journey early in life taught me the value of discipline, perseverance and self-reliance. As I moved through different responsibilities and institutions, I realised that every assignment has something to teach us if we approach it with an open mind.

Public service, in particular, requires continuous learning because the issues we deal with are constantly changing. Knowledge, experience and integrity must therefore develop together.

For me, the journey has been less about positions and more about learning how to contribute meaningfully wherever I am placed.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He starts from the fact that his professional journey began early, after his 10th standard, and treats that beginning as a teacher rather than a limit. Discipline, perseverance and self-reliance came first, and every later assignment added something to learn if approached with an open mind. **Why it matters.** He puts learning, adaptability and responsibility ahead of position. Knowledge, experience and integrity, in his view, have to develop together, because the issues public service deals with are constantly changing. **Reflect.** *Looking at where you began, which habits did that early start build in you, and are you still learning with the same openness at every stage?*

02 A Public Position Is a Responsibility, Not a Privilege

A public position is a responsibility, not a privilege.

Holding an office gives an individual certain authority, but public service gives that authority a purpose. The real measure of public service is not the designation one holds, but the difference one's work makes to institutions and to people's lives.

A public servant must remember that citizens ultimately experience government not through policies and files, but through the way those policies are implemented.

Integrity, accountability, responsiveness and empathy therefore have to be part of administration, not merely words in official documents.

The responsibility of a public servant is to use authority with restraint, knowledge with humility and position with a clear sense of public purpose.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates the authority an office gives from the purpose that authority serves. The real measure of public service, he says, is the difference one's work makes to institutions and to people's lives, not the designation one holds. **Why it matters.** Citizens experience government through the way policies are implemented, not through policies and files. That is why integrity, accountability, responsiveness and empathy have to be part of administration itself rather than words in official documents. **Reflect.** *If someone judged your work only by how it was implemented and experienced, what would they say about the way you use your position?*

03 Integrity Begins When Personal Convenience Ends

Integrity begins when personal convenience ends.

In public life, there will always be pressures, competing interests and situations where the easiest decision may not necessarily be the right one. Integrity means having the clarity to distinguish between what is convenient and what is correct.

It also means consistency. A person's principles cannot change depending on who is present, who is watching or what position one occupies.

For me, integrity is ultimately about being able to take a decision, explain the reasoning behind it and remain comfortable with that decision even when there is no external recognition for doing the right thing.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats integrity as a practical test, not a slogan. In public life there will always be pressures and competing interests, and the real skill lies in telling what is convenient from what is correct. **Why it matters.** Consistency is central to his definition: a person's principles cannot change depending on who is present, who is watching or what position one occupies. His own measure is being able to take a decision, explain the reasoning and stay comfortable with it even when there is no external recognition. **Reflect.** *When did you last take a decision that was correct but not convenient, and could you explain the reasoning without discomfort?*

04 Efficiency Is Important, but Responsiveness Is Equally Important

Good governance begins with understanding the purpose behind a process.

Rules and procedures are necessary because institutions cannot function without systems. But procedures should serve public objectives rather than become an end in themselves.

People-centric governance requires administrators to understand the realities behind the file—the farmer waiting for an outcome, the student seeking an opportunity, the citizen trying to access a service or the community affected by a policy.

Efficiency is important, but responsiveness is equally important.

The strongest institutions are those that combine sound systems with sensitivity to the people those systems are intended to serve.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He does not dismiss rules and procedures, which institutions need in order to function. His point is that procedures must serve public objectives rather than become an end in themselves. **Why it matters.** People-centric governance, for him, means seeing the reality behind the file: the farmer waiting for an outcome, the student seeking an opportunity, the citizen trying to access a service, the community affected by a policy. The strongest institutions combine sound systems with sensitivity to the people those systems serve. **Reflect.** *Behind the file, form or process you handle most often, who is actually waiting, and have you looked at their reality lately?*

05 Understand the Law Deeply Enough to Apply It Fairly

Law provides the framework within which administration must function, but good administration also requires judgement.

An administrator must understand not only the letter of the law but also its purpose, constitutional values and practical implications.

There can be situations where a purely mechanical interpretation of a rule may fail to address the underlying public interest. That does not mean ignoring the law. It means understanding the law deeply enough to apply it fairly, rationally and in its proper context.

Knowledge of law provides the foundation; judgement, fairness and experience determine how that foundation is translated into responsible administration.

> *"A public position is a responsibility, not a privilege."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Drawing on his experience in law and administration, he says law is the framework within which administration must function, but good administration also requires judgement. An administrator has to understand the letter of the law as well as its purpose, constitutional values and practical implications. **Why it matters.** He is careful to say that this does not mean ignoring the law. It means knowing it well enough to apply it fairly, rationally and in context, with knowledge as the foundation and judgement, fairness and experience deciding how that foundation becomes responsible administration. **Reflect.** *Where in your own work have you applied a rule mechanically when understanding its purpose would have served the public interest better?*

06 Build Systems That Outlast Individuals

In my view, institution-building means creating robust systems, capable people, effective processes and enabling infrastructure that continue to function efficiently even when individual officers move on. A strong institution should not depend on any one individual.

For example, as an administrator, I focused on strengthening the work environment through improvements in IT and digital infrastructure, workplace facilities, training centres and field offices. These initiatives helped create a more conducive and efficient environment for employees.

Such improvements go beyond physical infrastructure. They facilitate better communication, coordination, training, knowledge sharing, faster decision-making and improved productivity, enabling

employees to deliver better results within a given period.

The ultimate objective is to create a ready, responsive and service-oriented institutional ecosystem in which people, processes, technology and infrastructure work together effectively.

I believe the true test of leadership is not how much an individual accomplishes personally, but how much institutional capacity he or she leaves behind. My approach is therefore to build systems that outlast individuals, develop people who can sustain them, and create an enabling environment that continuously improves efficiency, effectiveness and quality of service delivery.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. In his view, institution-building means creating robust systems, capable people, effective processes and enabling infrastructure that keep functioning even when individual officers move on. He grounds this in his own work as an administrator: strengthening IT and digital infrastructure, workplace facilities, training centres and field offices. **Why it matters.** He argues that such improvements go beyond physical infrastructure, because they enable better communication, coordination, training, knowledge sharing and faster decision-making. His test of leadership is how much institutional capacity one leaves behind, not how much one accomplishes personally. **Reflect.** *If you left your role tomorrow, what systems and people would keep the work running, and what would stop?*

07 A Farmer Is Already an Entrepreneur

I believe Indian agriculture must move beyond a production-centric approach towards an entrepreneurship- and market-centric approach. While increasing agricultural productivity remains important, farmers must also be empowered with the skills and resources needed to create value and participate meaningfully across the agricultural value chain.

A farmer is already an entrepreneur, making decisions relating to inputs, investment, technology, production, risk and markets. However, farmers need better market intelligence, business acumen, price-negotiation skills, risk-management capabilities and access to finance to realise the full economic potential of their efforts.

In my role in public administration and the Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, and while holding the additional charge of Director, CCS NIAM, I have come to appreciate the importance of agricultural marketing in improving farmers' economic returns. Efficient aggregation, grading, standardisation, storage, processing, value addition and market linkages can strengthen farmers' bargaining power and help them secure a greater share of the value generated beyond the farm gate.

Our objective should be to empower farmers as informed entrepreneurs with greater market access, economic choices and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Agriculture must be viewed as a complete economic value chain rather than merely an activity of production. Farmers already make entrepreneurial decisions every day, but they need appropriate skills, information, finance and institutional support to make those decisions more rewarding. **Why it matters.** Recognising farmers as entrepreneurs shifts the focus from how much they produce to how effectively they can market their produce, manage risks and capture value. Stronger agricultural marketing systems can help improve farm incomes and bargaining power. **Reflect.** *How can we move beyond treating farmers merely as producers or beneficiaries and enable them to become informed, confident agricultural entrepreneurs?*

08 The Farmer and the Market Are Part of the Same Ecosystem

I believe the most important change required in Indian agriculture is to transform the relationship between farmers and markets from a largely transactional relationship into a strong, transparent and mutually beneficial business partnership.

Traditionally, agricultural development has focused considerably on increasing production, while market access, price discovery, value addition and consumer preferences have received comparatively less attention. Higher production alone does not necessarily translate into higher farm income. Agricultural marketing must therefore become an integral part of agricultural development.

In my view, five priority areas are essential to this transformation: strengthening market intelligence and price transparency; developing Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) as professionally managed business enterprises; investing in post-harvest infrastructure, storage, processing and value addition; building trust-based, long-term partnerships between farmers and market participants; and developing farmers as entrepreneurs with better business and risk-management skills.

Agricultural marketing institutions have a crucial role in connecting producers, markets and consumers through capacity building, market-oriented education, research and industry partnerships. These efforts should create transparent and efficient value chains that protect the interests of both farmers and consumers.

Ultimately, agricultural policy must focus not only on increasing productivity but also on improving farmers' incomes, choices, bargaining power and ability to secure a fair share of the value they create.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Farmers and markets must be treated as interconnected parts of the same agricultural ecosystem. Production decisions need to be supported by reliable market information, efficient supply chains, adequate infrastructure and opportunities for value addition. **Why it matters.** A shift towards transparent and mutually beneficial market partnerships can help FPOs negotiate better terms, reduce post-harvest losses, improve market access and create more predictable business relationships. This can make agricultural growth more rewarding for farmers while strengthening links with consumers. **Reflect.** *Does the way we measure agricultural success capture improvements in farmers' incomes and bargaining power, or does it focus mainly on how much they produce?*

09 Not an Occupation of Last Resort

I believe young people can play a transformative role in making Indian agriculture more competitive, profitable, sustainable and attractive. Their familiarity with technology, data, innovation and entrepreneurship offers significant opportunities to address challenges across the agricultural value chain.

From my experience in government, higher education and agricultural administration, I see considerable potential to nurture the next generation through agricultural marketing education, entrepreneurship development, agribusiness incubation, industry partnerships and practical exposure to emerging value chains.

Agriculture should be presented not merely as cultivation, but as a diverse field of opportunities in agri-business, digital agriculture, research, food processing, agricultural marketing, logistics, supply-

chain management and value addition. Institutions such as CCS NIAM can contribute by equipping young people with professional knowledge, entrepreneurial capabilities and an understanding of both agricultural realities and market opportunities.

Our focus should be on developing not only job seekers but also job creators who can establish viable enterprises, strengthen FPOs, improve market linkages and develop innovative solutions to farmers' real challenges. With appropriate mentoring, institutional support, finance and industry connections, young entrepreneurs can bridge the gap between farmers and markets.

Ultimately, young people must become the bridge between the farm and the future—combining technology with entrepreneurship, innovation with inclusion, and business growth with farmers' welfare. By channelising their talent towards practical agricultural challenges, we can create meaningful opportunities for employment, enterprise and nation-building.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Young people can contribute to agricultural transformation not only as cultivators but also as entrepreneurs, researchers, technologists, marketers and innovators. Agricultural education and practical industry exposure can help them identify opportunities across the value chain. **Why it matters.** Developing job creators alongside job seekers can generate rural employment, strengthen agricultural markets and improve farmers' access to technology, services and value addition. Institutions such as CCS NIAM can help connect education, entrepreneurship and industry requirements. **Reflect.** *How can we equip young people to turn agricultural challenges into viable business opportunities that benefit both farmers and the wider rural economy?*

10 The Ability to Learn, Unlearn and Relearn

Lifelong learning has taught me that expertise is never complete.

The moment we believe that we know enough is often the moment our ability to grow begins to decline.

Every new assignment exposes us to unfamiliar problems, different perspectives and new ways of thinking. Learning therefore should not stop with formal education or professional qualifications.

Curiosity is an important professional quality because it keeps us willing to ask questions, examine assumptions and understand changing circumstances.

In a rapidly changing world, the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn may be more valuable than any single qualification.

> *"Integrity begins when personal convenience ends."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He says plainly that expertise is never complete, and that the moment we believe we know enough is often the moment our ability to grow begins to decline. Each new assignment brings unfamiliar problems, different perspectives and new ways of thinking. **Why it matters.** Learning, for him, does not stop with formal education or professional qualifications. Curiosity keeps us willing to ask questions, examine assumptions and understand changing circumstances, and in a rapidly changing world the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn may be more valuable than any single qualification. **Reflect.** *What assumption in your work have you not examined for a long time, and what would you have to unlearn to question it?*

11 Experience Becomes More Valuable When It Is Shared

Experience becomes more valuable when it is shared.

Those who have benefited from institutions, mentors and opportunities have a responsibility to pass knowledge forward.

Mentorship should not mean telling the next generation what to do. It should help young people develop the ability to think independently, question assumptions and make informed decisions.

The objective of education should not simply be to create qualified individuals, but thoughtful and responsible citizens capable of contributing to society.

If our experience can help a young person avoid a mistake, see a possibility or develop confidence in their own ability, sharing that experience becomes a meaningful form of public service.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He holds that those who have benefited from institutions, mentors and opportunities have a responsibility to pass knowledge forward. Mentorship, in his view, is not telling the next generation what to do. **Why it matters.** It is helping young people think independently, question assumptions and make informed decisions. The aim of education is thoughtful and responsible citizens, and if experience helps a young person avoid a mistake, see a possibility or gain confidence, sharing it becomes a meaningful form of public service. **Reflect.** *Whose mistake could your experience help someone avoid, and when will you share it?*

12 Authority Can Compel Compliance, but It Cannot Create Genuine Trust

Authority can compel compliance, but it cannot create genuine trust.

Trust is built through consistency, competence, fairness and the willingness to take responsibility.

People observe what a leader does much more closely than what a leader says. If a leader expects discipline but does not demonstrate it, or expects accountability but avoids it personally, credibility is quickly lost.

Leadership therefore begins with example.

The most enduring influence comes when people respect not merely the position a person occupies, but the values and conduct associated with that person.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a clear line between authority and trust. Trust, he says, is built through consistency, competence, fairness and the willingness to take responsibility. **Why it matters.** People watch what a leader does much more closely than what a leader says, so a leader who expects discipline or accountability without demonstrating it quickly loses credibility. Leadership therefore begins with example, and the most enduring influence comes when people respect the values and conduct of the person, not only the position. **Reflect.** *Is there a standard you expect from others that you do not consistently demonstrate yourself?*

13 Adaptability Is Applying Principles Intelligently to Changing Circumstances

Every new responsibility initially appears unfamiliar, but unfamiliarity can also be an opportunity to learn.

Moving between different areas taught me not to approach a new assignment with the assumption that previous methods will automatically work in a new environment.

The subject may change, but certain fundamentals remain constant—understanding the problem, listening to stakeholders, studying the available evidence, understanding the institutional framework and then taking responsibility for a decision.

Adaptability is therefore not about abandoning one's principles. It is about applying those principles intelligently to changing circumstances.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Having worked across different areas of government and administration, he treats unfamiliarity as an opportunity to learn. Moving between areas taught him not to assume that previous methods will automatically work in a new environment. **Why it matters.** The subject may change, but the fundamentals stay constant: understanding the problem, listening to stakeholders, studying the evidence, understanding the institutional framework and then taking responsibility for a decision. Adaptability is not abandoning one's principles but applying them intelligently. **Reflect.** *In your last unfamiliar assignment, which fundamentals did you rely on, and which old methods did you have to leave behind?*

14 Good Judgement Develops Through Reflection

Books can provide knowledge, frameworks and perspectives, but experience teaches us the complexity of applying them.

Real situations rarely arrive as neatly defined problems. They involve competing priorities, incomplete information, human emotions, institutional constraints and consequences that may not be immediately visible.

Experience teaches us to listen carefully before deciding, to understand different perspectives and to recognise that a technically correct decision may still require thoughtful implementation.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that good judgement develops through reflection—by looking back at decisions, understanding their consequences and remaining willing to learn from them.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He says books provide knowledge, frameworks and perspectives, but experience teaches the complexity of applying them. Real situations rarely arrive as neatly defined problems: they involve competing priorities, incomplete information, human emotions, institutional constraints and consequences that may not be immediately visible. **Why it matters.** Experience teaches listening carefully before deciding, understanding different perspectives and recognising that a technically correct decision may still require thoughtful implementation. For him, the most important lesson is that good judgement develops by looking back at decisions, understanding their consequences and remaining willing to learn from them. **Reflect.** *Which past decision have you not yet looked back on, and what might it teach you?*

15 Leave Behind More Capability Than You Inherited

Do not measure your career only by the positions you occupy. Measure it by the value you create and the institutions, people and communities that are stronger because of your contribution.

Positions change. Responsibilities change. Organisations change.

What remains is the integrity with which we performed our responsibilities, the knowledge we shared, the people we helped develop and the systems we helped strengthen.

A meaningful career should therefore leave behind more capability than it inherited.

> *"Authority can compel compliance, but it cannot create genuine trust."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His advice to the next generation of civil servants, professionals, educators, entrepreneurs and institution-builders is not to measure a career only by positions occupied, but by the value created and the institutions, people and communities made stronger. **Why it matters.** Positions, responsibilities and organisations change. What remains, he says, is the integrity with which responsibilities were performed, the knowledge shared, the people helped to develop and the systems strengthened, so a meaningful career should leave behind more capability than it inherited. **Reflect.** *When you move on from your current role, what capability will remain that was not there when you arrived?*

16 Learn Continuously, Serve with Integrity

Learn continuously, serve with integrity, and leave every institution and every person you touch stronger than you found them.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for his personal philosophy of life and public service in a single sentence a student could read twenty years from now, he gives three commitments: learn continuously, serve with integrity, and leave every institution and every person stronger than you found them. **Why it matters.** The sentence ties together the themes of the whole series: lifelong learning, integrity in the use of authority, and the measure of a career as what it leaves behind, in institutions and in people. **Reflect.** *Which of the three commitments, learning, integrity or leaving others stronger, needs the most attention in your own life right now?*

17 The Most Lasting Measure of a Career

The most meaningful part of a career in public service is difficult to reduce to a position or designation.

For me, it is the opportunity to contribute—to institutions, to public administration, to knowledge and, ultimately, to people.

A career becomes meaningful when the work continues to have value beyond the period in which one performs a particular responsibility.

If something I have learned can help strengthen an institution, assist a colleague, guide a student, contribute to farmers' welfare or help a young person think differently about public service, then that is

perhaps the most lasting measure of a career.

> *"Learn continuously, serve with integrity, and leave every institution and every person you touch stronger than you found them."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. In his closing reflection, he says the most meaningful part of a career in public service is difficult to reduce to a position or designation. For him, it is the opportunity to contribute to institutions, to public administration, to knowledge and ultimately to people. **Why it matters.** A career becomes meaningful when the work continues to have value beyond the period in which one performs a particular responsibility. If something he has learned can strengthen an institution, assist a colleague, guide a student, contribute to farmers' welfare or help a young person think differently about public service, that is, in his words, perhaps the most lasting measure of a career. **Reflect.** *What of your work will still have value after you have moved on from it?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A career is not defined only by where one begins. It is defined by the willingness to learn, adapt and take responsibility at every stage.

A public position is a responsibility, not a privilege. Authority gains its purpose from the difference one's work makes to institutions and to people's lives.

Integrity begins when personal convenience ends. Principles cannot change depending on who is present, who is watching or what position one occupies.

Build systems that outlast individuals. The true test of leadership is how much institutional capacity one leaves behind.

A farmer is already an entrepreneur. Our objective should be to empower farmers as informed entrepreneurs with greater market access, economic choices and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Authority can compel compliance, but it cannot create genuine trust. Leadership begins with example.

Learn continuously, serve with integrity, and leave every institution and every person you touch stronger than you found them. A meaningful career should leave behind more capability than it inherited.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"If the problem is with us, so is the solution."

21 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 024, September 2026

If the Problem Is With Us, So Is the Solution

Real change happens when governance, people and nature work together for a better tomorrow. Twenty-one principles from Banda, Bundelkhand, and a career in people-centric governance.

> *Real change happens when governance, people and nature work together for a better tomorrow.*

01 If the Problem Is With Us, So Is the Solution

If I had to name one principle, it would be this: if the problem is with us, so is the solution. I have said this to villagers, to my staff and to myself many times, and it has carried me through the hardest moments.

When I reached Banda as District Magistrate in 2018, the district was known for drought, dry wells and people leaving for the cities. It would have been easy to wait for a big budget or a big scheme. Instead we asked a simple question. What can we do ourselves, with what we already have? Most of the answers turned out to be low-cost or no-cost, and they worked because people owned them.

Behind this principle sits another belief that I hold very close. Positive change is not only possible, it is necessary, and it comes from unlocking human potential with empathy and compassion. When things are uncertain, I go back to people. They rarely let you down.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Arriving in a district defined by drought and out-migration, he deliberately rejected waiting for a big budget or scheme, asking instead what could be done with what was already there. Most of what followed turned out to be low-cost or no-cost, and worked specifically because people owned it rather than received it. **Why it matters.** Pairing the principle with the belief that positive change "is not only possible, it is necessary" turns it from a coping strategy under resource constraints into a conviction he returns to deliberately whenever things are uncertain. **Reflect.** *Facing your own hardest or most resource-constrained moment, have you waited for a bigger budget or scheme, or asked what could be done with what you already have?*

02 People Are Not Short of Wisdom; They Are Short of Trust and Opportunity

I come from a modest background, and that has shaped me more than any training. I know what it means when a hand pump goes dry or when a family has to make a hard choice about a child's schooling. That memory keeps me honest about who government is really for.

My years as District Magistrate of Banda, from August 2018 to February 2020, were a turning point. Bundelkhand taught me that people are not short of wisdom, they are short of trust and opportunity. When we sent village heads and young rural entrepreneurs on learning tours to Ralegan Siddhi, where Anna Hazare worked, and to Hiware Bazar, which Padma Shri Popat Rao Pawar transformed, they came back changed. Seeing a working model village with their own eyes did more than a hundred meetings could.

I have also learnt a lot from people who quietly built change on the ground, including the Padma Shri awardees who today mentor Model Gaon. And of course from Mahatma Gandhi's idea of Gram Swaraj and Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's vision of PURA, providing urban amenities in rural areas. Both remind me that India's future is decided in its villages.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than bringing in outside experts, he sent village heads and young rural entrepreneurs to see Ralegan Siddhi and Hiware Bazar with their own eyes, villages transformed by Anna Hazare and Padma Shri Popat Rao Pawar respectively, trusting that direct experience would do what meetings couldn't. **Why it matters.** Naming his modest background as shaping him "more than any training" grounds this principle in lived memory, knowing what a dry hand pump actually costs a family, rather than in administrative theory about participation. **Reflect.** *Is there a group of people you work with or serve who you've assumed lack expertise, when what they actually lack is trust and opportunity to act on what they already know?*

03 Roll Out the Red Carpet, Not the Red Tape

For me, people-centric governance means rolling out the red carpet, not the red tape. The citizen is not a file number or a beneficiary on a list. He or she is the reason the office exists.

In practice it means three things. First, people should be part of deciding what needs to be done, not just told about it afterwards. Second, the process should be simple enough that an ordinary villager can access it without a middleman. Third, the administration should be visible and reachable, out in the field, not only in the office.

Administrators can keep people at the centre by building participation into the system itself. A Jal Chaupal in the village, a village manifesto written by the villagers, a public meeting before a decision rather than after it. When people help design something, they protect it. When something is designed for them without them, it usually stays on paper.

I also believe trust in institutions has to be earned again and again. Every small act, answering a complaint on time or keeping a promise made in a village, adds to that trust.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He gives people-centric governance three concrete, testable requirements, deciding before being told, accessing a process without a middleman, an administration visible in the field, rather than leaving it as an abstract phrase anyone could claim. **Why it matters.** "When people help design something, they protect it. When something is designed for them without them, it usually stays on paper" is the operating logic behind the Jal Chaupal and village manifesto tools he built his actual work around. **Reflect.** *In a process or system you've built for other people, did they help design it, or was it designed for them and handed down?*

04 Understand the Local Reality First, and Respect Local Knowledge

Listening is the most underrated skill in administration. Many good schemes fail not because the idea was wrong but because nobody asked the people it was meant for.

In Banda, before we started on water, we held Jal Chaupals in villages and spoke about water budgeting, how much water comes in, how much goes out, and what that means for the next summer. People already knew their old wells and ponds better than any survey. They knew which ones had dried up and why. Our job was to listen and then reconnect them with those traditional water sources.

Model Gaon follows the same idea through the village manifesto. Before anything is planned, the villagers themselves set the agenda for development. What they want might be better income, self-employment for young people or stopping migration. It might be very different from what an outsider assumes.

So my lesson is simple. Understand the local reality first, and respect local knowledge. Then design. Solutions that grow out of a community's own understanding last much longer than those dropped from above.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. At the Jal Chaupals, villagers already knew their old wells and ponds better than any survey could capture, which ones had dried up and why. His job wasn't to bring new data but to listen to data that already existed in the community and reconnect them with it. **Why it matters.** "Many good schemes fail not because the idea was wrong but because nobody asked the people it was meant for" locates failure at the design stage, before implementation even begins, which is a harder and more preventable kind of failure to admit to. **Reflect.** *Has a plan or idea of yours ever failed not because it was wrong, but because you designed it without first asking the people it was meant to serve?*

05 A Policy Stops Being the Government's and Becomes Theirs

On paper, a scheme has a target, a budget and a timeline. On the ground, it needs people who believe in it. That gap is where most of an administrator's real work lies.

A few things have helped me bridge it. One is to break a big goal into small, visible actions that people can do themselves, digging contour trenches near hand pumps, desilting a pond, setting up rooftop rainwater harvesting. When people see results in their own village, the policy stops being the government's and becomes theirs.

Another is to bring in culture and emotion, not just instructions. In Banda we organised Kuan Talab Puja and Jal Marches. Respecting a well or a pond as something sacred made conservation a matter of faith and pride, not only a government order.

The third is follow-through. Monitoring, regular review and recognising those who do good work keep the momentum alive. Change becomes lasting when it moves from a campaign to a habit.

> *"People are not short of wisdom; they are short of trust and opportunity."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the exact gap between a scheme's paper existence, its target, budget, timeline, and its ground reality, people who believe in it, and treats bridging that gap as most of an administrator's actual work. **Why it matters.** Organising Kuan Talab Puja (well and pond worship ceremonies) and Jal Marches shows a deliberate choice to make conservation a matter of faith and pride rather than relying only on instructions, a cultural strategy as much as an administrative one. **Reflect.** *In something you're trying to make stick, have you relied only on instructions, or have you found a way to connect it to something people already hold sacred or take pride in?*

06 The Solution Must Sit With the Community, Not With the Administration

India has already shown the way through villages like Ralegan Siddhi and Hiware Bazar. What they teach us is that a village can transform itself when its people come together around a shared goal and have honest, committed leadership from within.

A grassroots intervention becomes sustainable when three conditions are met. The community must own the agenda, so the plan is theirs and not a project imposed from outside. There must be local leaders, changemakers who stay in the village long after the officer or the NGO has moved on. And there must be an economic engine, because a village that cannot earn cannot sustain anything.

Short-term pushes fail when they depend on one officer, one grant or one event. In a career with many postings, I have seen this again and again. What survives a transfer is what the people have made their own. That is why I keep saying that the solution must sit with the community, not with the administration.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names three specific, checkable conditions for sustainability, community ownership of the agenda, local leaders who outlast any individual officer or NGO, and an economic engine, rather than a general appeal to community involvement. **Why it matters.** "What survives a transfer is what the people have made their own" is tested knowledge from a career with many postings, not theory. He has personally watched initiatives collapse the moment the officer attached to them moved on. **Reflect.** *Of the initiatives you're currently part of, which ones would survive you leaving, and which ones exist only because you're still there holding them together?*

07 If One of These Is Missing, the Model Is Incomplete

Model Gaon grew out of what we tried in Banda, and it rests on three pillars that I believe can guide any village.

The first is the village manifesto. Villagers decide their own development agenda, whether it is increasing income, creating self-employment, reducing migration or building toward model village status. Every villager should have access to it.

The second is the changemaker. In every village there are people who are ambitious, creative, willing to take risks and genuinely want to help others. We identify them and help them grow into trusted social leaders who carry the village forward.

The third is turning agriculture into an enterprise through Farmer Producer Companies. It is not good to remain stuck in loss-making farming. When farmers come together they gain bargaining power, can add value through sorting, grading and processing, and can deal with the market on better terms.

Underneath all three is the idea that a village's development should be financially viable, socially equitable and eco-friendly at the same time. Inspired by Gandhi ji's Gram Swaraj and Dr. Kalam's PURA, Model Gaon tries to bring together technology, people, traditions, skills and entrepreneurial spirit. If one of these is missing, the model is incomplete.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names all three pillars of Model Gaon precisely, village manifesto, changemaker, Farmer Producer Companies, and states plainly that the model is incomplete if even one is missing, rather than presenting them as independently optional components. **Why it matters.** Turning agriculture into enterprise through Farmer Producer Companies, giving farmers collective bargaining power and the ability to add value through sorting, grading, and processing, is a concrete economic mechanism, not just an aspiration toward village prosperity. **Reflect.** *In a model or framework you've built, are all its pillars actually reinforcing each other, or is one quietly missing while you treat the model as complete anyway?*

08 Do Maa: Two Mothers

I often talk about the idea of Do Maa, two mothers. One is the mother who gave birth to us and the other is Mother Earth, our water, forests and land. If we serve the first, we must also serve the second. When people see it this way, sustainability stops being a distant global issue and becomes a personal duty.

Climate action becomes real when it enters everyday routines. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, as observer for Anandpur Sahib in Punjab, we tried to show that even an election can be green. We set up Green Booths where voters received saplings, reduced single-use plastic in EVM training, dispatch and collection, and asked candidates of all parties to plant a sapling every day before going out to campaign. Our slogan was a free, fair, transparent and environment-friendly election. I was happy to see the idea later picked up elsewhere.

Governments can build such small green habits into routine processes. Institutions can lead by example. Communities can protect their own ponds, trees and soil. And each individual can start with one tree, one less plastic bag, one bucket of water saved. These small steps, repeated by millions, matter more than any speech.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. As election observer for Anandpur Sahib in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, he embedded climate action into the mechanics of the election itself, Green Booths handing out saplings, reduced plastic in EVM training and collection, candidates planting a sapling daily, rather than treating sustainability as a separate campaign. **Why it matters.** "These small steps, repeated by millions, matter more than any speech" is a specific bet on scale through repetition over scale through rhetoric, consistent with his broader preference for low-cost, community-owned action over top-down declarations. **Reflect.** *Is there a routine process in your own work or life where you could embed a sustainable habit directly, the way he embedded it into election administration itself?*

09 Respect the Water Budget of a Place

Development and conservation are not enemies. The mistake we made for many years was to treat water as unlimited and nature as free. Bundelkhand paid the price for that.

The principle I follow is simple. Respect the water budget of a place, and reconnect people with their traditional water sources. If we hold the rain where it falls, recharge the ground and revive our traditional wells and ponds, we can meet our needs without draining the future.

In Banda our campaigns, Bhujal Badhao Peyjal Bachao and then Kuan Talab Jiyao Abhiyan, were built on this. Ponds were desilted, wells revived, contour trenches dug and rainwater harvesting promoted,

mostly through people's participation. Groundwater began to respond.

So any development plan should ask a few basic questions. Does it respect the water budget of the area? Does it revive or destroy traditional water bodies? Does it involve the people who will live with the consequences? If we answer these honestly, the balance usually follows.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the two actual campaigns by their real names, Bhujal Badhao Peyjal Bachao and Kuan Talab Jiyao Abhiyan, and the specific actions underneath them, desilting ponds, reviving wells, digging contour trenches, rather than describing water conservation in general terms. **Why it matters.** Reducing any development plan to three honest questions, water budget, traditional water bodies, the people who'll live with consequences, gives a portable test that doesn't require Bundelkhand's specific conditions to apply elsewhere. **Reflect.** *Applying his three questions to a current project of yours, water budget, impact on existing resources, involvement of those who'll live with the outcome, would it pass?*

10 Technology Works Best When It Serves Participation, Not When It Replaces It

Innovation in government does not always mean technology or large budgets. Some of the most effective innovations I have seen were low-cost or no-cost ideas built on people's participation.

Governments should actively encourage innovation in three areas: how they reach people, how they involve people, and how they use what already exists. In Banda we tried this across water conservation, jail reforms, malnutrition, education, elections and agriculture. In the 2019 elections, for instance, creative voter awareness efforts helped lift turnout in the district significantly. We also organised a Startup and Innovation Summit so that young people and rural entrepreneurs could bring their ideas forward.

What helps a good idea move from concept to implementation? A clear purpose, a small pilot that shows results quickly, a team that believes in it, and leaders willing to give officials room to try. Accountability and innovation can go together if we are transparent about what we are doing and why. I have also found that technology works best when it serves participation, not when it replaces it.

> *"Just as a mother gives us life, the earth also sustains us like a mother."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He lists the actual range of areas this was tried across in Banda, water conservation, jail reforms, malnutrition, education, elections, agriculture, demonstrating that his approach to innovation wasn't confined to a single signature programme but applied as a general method. **Why it matters.** Naming a specific, measurable outcome, voter turnout rising significantly in the 2019 elections through creative awareness efforts, grounds the claim about innovation in something verifiable rather than only in intention. **Reflect.** *In your own organisation, is innovation generally treated as requiring a large budget or new technology, or is there room for the low-cost, participation-built kind he describes?*

11 An Interesting Idea Stays in a Presentation. An Impactful Idea Finds Owners.

An interesting idea stays in a presentation. An impactful idea finds owners.

From what I have seen, the ideas that last have a few things in common. They solve a problem that people themselves feel, not one that only an outsider sees. They are simple enough to be copied in the next village without needing me or any officer there. They cost little, so they do not collapse when funding stops. And they can be measured, the number of wells revived, the rise in water level, the increase in voter turnout, the income of a Farmer Producer Company.

Most importantly, they connect with people's values. In Banda, water conservation became a people's movement when it was linked to faith, pride and the future of their children. That emotional connection is often the difference between a project and a movement.

So when I look at an idea, I ask: who will own it after we leave? If there is a clear answer, the idea has a chance.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He gives four specific, checkable tests for whether an idea will last: does it solve a problem people themselves feel, can it be copied without him or any officer present, does it cost little enough to survive funding ending, and can it be measured in concrete terms like wells revived or turnout increased. **Why it matters.** "Who will own it after we leave?" is the single question he actually uses to evaluate every idea, a practical filter that ties directly back to Principle 6's finding that what survives a transfer is only what people have made their own. **Reflect.** *Apply his question to an idea or initiative you're currently running: who would own it after you left, and is the answer actually clear?*

12 Citizens Are Not Just Consumers of Public Services. They Are Partners in Governance.

Citizens are not just consumers of public services. They are partners in governance, and in many cases they are the real solution.

When the people of Banda's gram panchayats came out to dig trenches and clean their ponds, they were not helping the government. They were helping themselves, and the government was supporting them. That is how the relationship should be.

Responsibility can be shared quite naturally. The government should provide direction, resources, knowledge and a fair system. Communities should set their priorities and protect what is built. Civil society and organisations like Model Gaon can train changemakers and connect villages to markets and schemes. Corporates can contribute through CSR, as ICICI Foundation has done by supporting Model Gaon. And every individual can take responsibility for one thing in their own surroundings.

When everyone holds a small piece of responsibility, communities become far more resilient than when everything is left to the state.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reverses the framing of a specific moment: when gram panchayat members dug trenches and cleaned ponds, he insists they weren't helping the government, they were helping themselves, with the government in the supporting role rather than the other way around. **Why it matters.** Naming ICICI Foundation specifically as a real example of corporate CSR supporting Model Gaon makes the shared-responsibility model concrete rather than aspirational, showing it already functions with an actual named partner. **Reflect.** *In a system you're part of, is responsibility actually distributed the way he describes, government, community, civil society, corporates, and individuals each holding a piece, or has it defaulted to the state carrying everything?*

13 Development Must Be Measured by How It Reaches the Last Person, Not by Its Averages

Development must be measured by how it reaches the last person, not by its averages.

Institutionally, we need systems that go to people instead of waiting for people to come to them. Field visits, village meetings and simple, local-language processes matter a great deal for those who are poor, illiterate or far away.

Socially, we must ensure that the voices of women, small and marginal farmers and the poorest families are heard in village decisions. In Farmer Producer Companies, for example, the rules require that at least one director is a woman and that half the members are small or marginal farmers. Such provisions are important, but the spirit behind them matters more.

Behaviourally, the biggest change is empathy. Those of us in positions of authority must see the person in front of us as someone with dignity and potential, not as a problem to be managed. My own work on issues like jail reforms and malnutrition taught me that people at the margins respond remarkably when they are treated with respect.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He structures inclusion across three distinct levels, institutional (systems that go to people), social (representation rules like requiring a woman director and half the members being small or marginal farmers in Farmer Producer Companies), and behavioural (empathy), rather than treating inclusion as a single fix. **Why it matters.** "Such provisions are important, but the spirit behind them matters more" is a notable admission from someone who helped design the provisions himself, that rules alone don't guarantee the inclusion they're meant to produce. **Reflect.** *In a system you've helped design with inclusion rules built in, are the rules actually being followed in spirit, or just in letter?*

14 Leadership Is Less About Authority and More About Trust

Public service taught me that leadership is less about authority and more about trust. People follow you when they believe you are sincere and that you will stand with them.

Integrity is the foundation. Without it, no plan, however clever, will survive. Patience is equally important, because real change in a village or an institution takes time and it rarely moves in a straight line. Accountability means owning the result, good or bad, and not hiding behind procedure.

On decision-making, I have learnt to listen widely, decide clearly and then involve the team fully. Teamwork, foresight and dedication count for much more than individual brilliance. Many of the

successes credited to me in Banda were really the work of countless officials, panchayat members and ordinary villagers.

All of this applies equally outside government. A company, a startup or a social enterprise also runs on trust, integrity and the ability to bring people together around a shared purpose.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He directly redistributes credit for his own Banda successes, naming them as the work of countless officials, panchayat members and ordinary villagers, rather than accepting sole credit for outcomes publicly attributed to him. **Why it matters.** "Accountability means owning the result, good or bad, and not hiding behind procedure" sets a standard that applies in the opposite direction to the credit-sharing above, taking full ownership of failure while distributing credit for success. **Reflect.** *When something you led succeeded, did you redistribute credit the way he does? When something failed, did you own it fully, or did procedure provide cover?*

15 Champion Change One Step at a Time

Resistance is natural. Whenever you challenge the status quo, some people will doubt you and some will oppose you. I have learnt not to take it personally.

What helps is starting small and letting results speak. When people see one revived well or one improved booth, scepticism softens. In Banda the 2019 general elections came right in the middle of our water campaign. Afterwards we took it forward in a second phase, with even more speed. Setbacks like that are part of the journey. You adjust your timing and your method, but you keep the purpose.

Limited resources can actually be a strength. They push you towards low-cost solutions and people's participation, which are often more durable than expensive ones.

My motto has always been to champion change one step at a time. You do not need to win every battle on the first day. You need to keep moving in the right direction and keep people with you.

> *"Leadership is less about authority and more about trust."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats the 2019 general elections landing in the middle of his water campaign not as a derailment to describe apologetically, but as a specific, real example of adjusting timing and method while keeping the underlying purpose intact. **Why it matters.** Reframing limited resources as "actually a strength" that pushes toward low-cost, participation-built solutions connects directly back to Principle 1's founding insight in Banda, that constraint often produced more durable answers than a large budget would have. **Reflect.** *The last time a setback disrupted your timeline, did you keep the underlying purpose intact while adjusting method, or did the setback derail the purpose itself?*

16 When We Trust Young People With Meaningful Work, They Usually Exceed Our Expectations

Young Indians are the biggest resource this country has. They have energy, ideas, comfort with technology and, very often, a strong sense of fairness.

In governance, they can be watchdogs, volunteers and innovators who help systems work better. In climate action, they can lead tree plantation drives, water conservation and plastic reduction in their own neighbourhoods. In social innovation and rural transformation, they can become the changemakers that every village needs, starting enterprises, forming Farmer Producer Companies and bringing new knowledge back home.

Institutions must open the door for them. That means internships and fellowships in government, platforms like startup and innovation summits, learning tours to model villages, and real responsibility rather than token roles. When we trust young people with meaningful work, they usually exceed our expectations.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names concrete institutional mechanisms, internships and fellowships in government, startup and innovation summits, learning tours to model villages, as what's actually required to open the door for young people, rather than leaving the invitation abstract. **Why it matters.** "Real responsibility rather than token roles" is the specific distinction he draws, the same one that runs through his approach to village changemakers: genuine ownership produces genuine results, symbolic inclusion does not. **Reflect.** *Are the young people you work with given real responsibility, or token roles dressed up as opportunity?*

17 Begin Where You Are, With What You Have

Begin where you are, with what you have.

You do not need money, influence or connections to start. Pick one problem in your own village, colony or college that you genuinely care about. Talk to the people affected by it and listen carefully. Then do one small thing that helps, clean a pond, teach a child, plant trees, help someone access a government scheme.

Learn continuously. Visit places where change has already happened, read, ask questions and find mentors. Be creative and willing to take some risk. Communicate well, because bringing people along is half the work.

Above all, be patient and consistent. Resources and recognition tend to follow genuine work done over time. Many of the most respected changemakers in rural India started with nothing but commitment.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His advice to someone with limited resources, influence, or connections isn't to wait until they acquire those things. It's to pick one problem they genuinely care about and do one small, concrete thing, clean a pond, teach a child, plant trees. **Why it matters.** "Resources and recognition tend to follow genuine work done over time" inverts the usual assumption that resources must come first, suggesting instead that sustained genuine work is what actually attracts them. **Reflect.** *Is there a problem you genuinely care about that you've been waiting for resources, influence, or connections to address, when you could begin with one small thing right now?*

18 The India of 2040 Is Being Built by the Choices We Make in 2026

I hope the next generation inherits an India where villages are not places people leave, but places they want to stay in. Villages with good income, clean water, healthy children, quality education and opportunities for young people. Where farming is a profitable enterprise and not a burden.

I hope they inherit a country that has learnt to live in harmony with nature, where our rivers, ponds, forests and soil are healthier than they are today. And I hope they inherit institutions that people trust, where governance is transparent, participatory and genuinely focused on citizens.

To move closer to that vision, we must start today. Revive our water bodies. Plant and protect trees. Make every village write and follow its own development agenda. Invest in local leaders. And make empathy a basic quality of everyone in public life. The India of 2040 is being built by the choices we make in 2026.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His vision of India in 10 to 20 years is anchored in a specific, testable condition, villages people want to stay in rather than leave, with farming as a profitable enterprise rather than a burden, not an abstract notion of national progress. **Why it matters.** Naming empathy as "a basic quality of everyone in public life" alongside concrete infrastructure goals, water bodies revived, trees planted, local leaders invested in, treats a human quality as equally necessary to the vision as physical and institutional change. **Reflect.** *What choice are you making today, in 2026, that's actually building toward the future you hope to see, rather than just hoping for it?*

19 Keep People at the Centre and Trust Them

Keep people at the centre and trust them.

Whether you are an administrator, an entrepreneur or a citizen, the best solutions come from the people closest to the problem. If you involve them, respect their knowledge and give them ownership, they will surprise you with what they can achieve.

I would add one more thing: serve with empathy. Positions, budgets and powers are temporary. What remains is the difference you made in someone's life and the trust you built. That is the real measure of public service.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for one principle to leave with the next generation of administrators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers, he doesn't limit it to government. The same instruction, keep people at the centre and trust them, applies equally to an administrator, an entrepreneur, or a citizen. **Why it matters.** "Positions, budgets and powers are temporary. What remains is the difference you made in someone's life and the trust you built" offers a measure of success that doesn't depend on holding office, applicable long after any specific role ends. **Reflect.** *By his real measure, the difference made and the trust built, not the position held, how would you currently score in your own role?*

20 If the Problem Is With You, So Is the Solution

If the problem is with you, so is the solution.

Do not wait for someone else to change things. Start with one step, however small, and bring others along. Change is not only possible, it is necessary, and it begins with you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for one thought a young reader should remember above all others, he returns directly to his opening principle, now addressed to "you" rather than "us," closing the loop between where his own journey began and what he wants to leave behind. **Why it matters.** Repeating "change is not only possible, it is necessary" word for word from Principle 1 confirms this isn't a new idea added for a strong ending, it's the actual foundation every other principle in this feature was built on. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life or work is the problem actually with you, in a way that means the solution is too, and are you waiting for someone else to start?*

21 That Shift in Belief Was the Biggest Achievement

I would like to share one more thought. In Banda, people once believed that drought was their fate. Within a short time, through their own effort in reviving wells and ponds, they began to believe that water could return. That shift in belief was the biggest achievement, bigger than any number we could report.

This is why I believe every village can become a model village. It needs a clear agenda written by its own people, a few committed changemakers and an economy that rewards hard work. Model Gaon exists to support exactly that.

And finally, let us remember our two mothers, the one who raised us and Mother Earth who sustains us. If we care for both, we will rarely go wrong.

> *"Keep people at the centre of every decision, and trust them."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given one final, open opportunity to add anything, he names a belief shift, from drought as fate to water as recoverable, as the achievement he's actually most proud of, bigger than any measurable number his administration could report. **Why it matters.** Closing on Do Maa again, the two mothers who raised us and who sustain us, returns to Principle 8's emotional foundation one last time, confirming it as a belief he holds personally, not only as a public messaging device. **Reflect.** *What's the most significant shift in belief, not a project or outcome, but an actual change in how people saw their own possibilities, that you've contributed to in your own work?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

If the problem is with us, so is the solution. Arriving in a drought-struck district, the question wasn't what budget was needed, but what could be done with what was already there.

People are not short of wisdom; they are short of trust and opportunity. Seeing a working model village with their own eyes, at Ralegan Siddhi and Hiware Bazar, did more than a hundred meetings could.

Roll out the red carpet, not the red tape. When people help design something, they protect it. When something is designed for them without them, it usually stays on paper.

An interesting idea stays in a presentation. An impactful idea finds owners. The real test of any idea: who will own it after we leave?

Citizens are not just consumers of public services. They are partners in governance. When people dig trenches and clean their own ponds, they are not helping the government. They are helping themselves.

Development must be measured by how it reaches the last person, not by its averages. Systems should go to people instead of waiting for people to come to them.

Keep people at the centre and trust them. Positions, budgets and powers are temporary. What remains is the difference made and the trust built.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"Stories make ideas human."

17 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 023, September 2026

Be Flexible in Your Approach, but Firm in Your Values

Stories make ideas human. Seventeen principles from a former Air Force professional turned entrepreneur, filmmaker, writer and founder of the Ahmedabad International Literature Festival.

> *Stories have the power to connect people, inspire change and build a more compassionate society.*

01 I Am, in Many Ways, the Sum of All Those Experiences

Everything I have experienced in my journey has taught me something. I believe I am, in many ways, the sum of all those experiences. The Indian Air Force taught me discipline, technology, responsibility and self-reliance. At a very young age, it taught me how to take care of myself, support my family and serve the nation with pride and a sense of purpose. Entrepreneurship taught me how to build—ideas, products, businesses and opportunities. It also gave me the financial independence to pursue the passions that were close to my heart. Literature made me more sensitive and observant. Cinema taught me collaboration and showed me how different people, talents and perspectives can come together to create something meaningful. And the Ahmedabad International Literature Festival taught me perhaps the most important lesson—that passion and purpose can come together to touch people's lives and contribute to society.

I don't think any single experience made me who I am today. Each phase came at a different age, with different challenges, opportunities and aspirations. Each one added something to me. What remained constant was my desire to learn, to grow and to keep moving forward with a sense of purpose.

So, when I look back, I don't see one defining chapter. I see a collection of experiences, each shaping the next. And perhaps that is what the journey really is—learning, evolving and becoming a little more complete with every phase of life.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He credits no single defining chapter. Each phase, from the Air Force to the festival, added something different. **Why it matters.** The constant across every phase was the desire to learn, to grow and to keep moving forward with purpose. **Reflect.** *Which phase of your own life taught you something the others could not?*

02 I Would Rather Lose Something While Remaining True to Myself

I believe that, by nature, every human being has some degree of self-interest. I am no different. I have my own likes, dislikes, ambitions and opinions, and I am a fairly opinionated person. But I try to ensure that my opinions are guided by reason, experience and a clear sense of what I believe is right.

With time, my personal interests have evolved into a larger sense of purpose. What matters to me personally is often connected to the larger interest of the people and society around me and ultimately to the nation. I have never been comfortable with partisan thinking. I value honesty, integrity and the intention of the people I work with and associate with.

The larger purpose behind this way of thinking is to contribute, in whatever way I can, towards creating a better society for generations that will come after us.

I have paid a price for holding on to these principles. At different points in my life, I have lost businesses, friendships and relationships because I was unwilling to compromise on certain values. But I have made peace with those losses. Because at the end of the day, I would rather lose something while remaining true to myself than gain something by compromising what I believe in. These principles are not just ideas I talk about, but they are my lived experiences, core values and the way I have chosen to live my life.

For me, purpose is ultimately finding a balance between what we want for ourselves and what we can contribute to the world around us. If my journey can make even a small difference to the society and leave something meaningful for future generations, that gives greater meaning to everything I do.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the price of his values plainly: lost businesses, friendships and relationships. **Why it matters.** Purpose, for him, is a balance between what we want for ourselves and what we can contribute to the world around us. **Reflect.** *What have you been unwilling to compromise on, and what has it cost you?*

03 Not Just Another Festival

When we started Ahmedabad International Literature Festival in 2016, we never wanted to create just another festival. We wanted to create a space where people could come with curiosity and questions and go back with some answers, perhaps more questions, and maybe a new direction in life.

For me, literature has never existed in isolation. I wanted it to have a conversation with young people and society—with journalism, cinema, art, culture and everything that influences the way we think and live. We were never obsessed with making AILF bigger. We wanted to make it deeper. We wanted people to participate, question, discuss, debate, deconstruct and contribute—not simply sit in an audience and consume content.

I think over the years, AILF has stayed true to that idea. The love and trust people have given the festival has been incredibly encouraging.

But the journey has also taught me that building a cultural institution is much more challenging than running a normal business. When you work with creative people, everyone comes with their own aspirations, expectations and ideas. And sometimes, even when your intentions are genuine, your resources don't allow you to fulfill everyone's expectations. That can be painful because you care deeply about the people and the platform.

A cultural institution survives not only on resources but on passion, commitment and the ability to keep finding a way forward. There have been difficult moments, but the belief in what we are trying to create has kept me going.

Today, AILF is no longer just a festival for me. It has become a part of my life. It has given me friendships, conversations, ideas and perspectives that I may never have encountered otherwise.

And when I look back, I realise this was perhaps the life I was searching for all along—a life where my work allows me to meet people, exchange ideas, create conversations and, hopefully, make some small contributions to the society around me.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. AILF began in 2016 with one aim: to be deeper, not bigger, a place for participation rather than consumption. **Why it matters.** He is candid that a cultural institution is harder than a normal business, and that it survives on passion and commitment as much as resources. **Reflect.** *Is what you are building designed to be bigger, or deeper?*

04 Stories Make Ideas Human

I have always felt that facts and information are important, but by themselves they can remain abstract. They give us knowledge, but they do not always touch us. They tell us what happened, but they don't necessarily make us feel why it matters.

Stories have a different power. They make ideas human.

I experienced this myself about two years ago.

One day, a person I barely knew called me and said, "Sir, I am in your city and would like to meet you." I invited him to my office. He came with his wife. During our conversation, he told me that he had written a story and screenplay and asked if he could narrate it to me.

I listened. I liked the story.

Then he said, "If you support me, we can make a short film."

I had never planned to enter film production. But I thought about it for a moment. I had the resources; he had the story, the screenplay and the vision. So, I said, **"Let's do it."**

That simple conversation gave birth to **SERENE FILMS**.

The film, *Sukhnath Mogra Ni Vaarta*, was made in Gujarati and has been running successfully on WAVES OTT for more than a year. The person who walked into my office that day was **Omkar Pethkar**. He later wrote the screenplay and directed our Hindi feature film **Drop Out**, which had a good theatrical run and subsequently reached a prestigious OTT platform.

We later produced another short film, *Heer Aur Raanjha*, written and directed by **Tamal Dutta**, which is also streaming on WAVES OTT. We are now working on several more ambitious projects.

When I look back, I find the journey fascinating.

A film company was not born from a business plan. It was born from a story.

And that, for me, is the power of storytelling.

Data can inform us. Facts can educate us. But a story can make us feel. It can give a face to an idea, emotion to information and meaning to an experience.

Facts tell us what is happening. Stories help us understand why it matters.

Facts can inform us. Ideas can challenge us. But stories can move us. And sometimes, a story does more than communicate an idea—it changes the direction of a life.

Perhaps that is the greatest power of a story: it can change not only the way we see the world, but sometimes the direction in which we choose to walk.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Serene Films began with a single conversation: a stranger, a screenplay and a willingness to say yes. **Why it matters.** For him, facts inform but stories make us feel why something matters. **Reflect.** *What story has changed the direction in which you chose to walk?*

05 Fearless in Thought, Responsible in Expression, Independent in Spirit

I believe creativity should challenge minds, not target people. It should provoke thought, not provoke hatred.

It should remain independent of activism. A creator may have convictions, but art should not become merely a vehicle for an agenda. The moment creativity loses its freedom to explore, question and interpret, it risks losing something essential to its very nature.

Let creativity be fearless in thought, responsible in expression, and independent in spirit.

> "A *film company was not born from a business plan. It was born from a story.*"

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Creativity should challenge minds without targeting people, and stay free of any agenda. **Why it matters.** Freedom to explore, question and interpret is, in his view, essential to the nature of art. **Reflect.** *Where does your own work draw the line between provoking thought and provoking hatred?*

06 Business with Dignity

For me, entrepreneurship has never been only about creating financial success for myself or the people around me. It is equally about creating value for the people and businesses we work with.

One of my greatest satisfactions as an entrepreneur comes from seeing how the systems, technology and support we provided decades ago have helped our clients transform their businesses—making them more accurate, efficient and faster. When something we created years ago continues to make a difference in someone's business today, that gives me a sense of fulfilment that goes beyond financial success. We have always believed in standing by our clients and supporting them whenever they need us.

My simple principle is "**Business with Dignity.**"

I tell my team and fellow entrepreneurs: **Be proud of what you do, regardless of the size or scale of your business.** Every honest business contributes to an industry, creates value, supports livelihoods and, in its own way, contributes to the building of the nation.

Entrepreneurship is not just about building a business. It is about building value, earning trust and leaving something better than you found it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His measure of entrepreneurship is value created for clients, still working years later. **Why it matters.** Every honest business, whatever its size, supports livelihoods and builds the nation. **Reflect.** *Would you be proud of your work if no one measured its size?*

07 What We Are Able to Give Back

If something I create can outlive me and continue to have meaning for others, I would consider that my small contribution to the world.

We come into this world with nothing and eventually leave with nothing. Perhaps the real measure of our journey is not what we accumulate for ourselves, but **what we are able to give back while we are here.**

My thought process is, "I will try to make the world a little better than I found it."

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He measures a life by what it gives back, not by what it accumulates. **Why it matters.** Lasting meaning for others is the only legacy he asks of his work. **Reflect.** *What are you building that could outlive you?*

08 Never Drop Out of Life

In fact, my movie **Drop Out** is based on the same subject. I would advise the young generation:

Never drop out of life just because you could not follow the first plan.

Life is not only about success. It is about discovering who you are, finding what gives your life meaning, and having the courage to begin again.

Be patient. Good things take time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His film Drop Out carries the same message he gives young people: a failed first plan is not the end. **Why it matters.** Life, he says, is about discovering who you are and having the courage to begin again. **Reflect.** *What would you begin again if the first plan had not worked?*

09 Development Should Not Make Us Less Human

The world is changing at an unprecedented pace and so is India. Technology, business, media and changing social behaviour have transformed the way we live, think and interact. While these changes have brought remarkable possibilities, they have also made us increasingly focused on the self—our success, our possessions, our opinions and our ambitions.

In this race to achieve more, we sometimes forget the deeper essence of life and the human values that give it meaning. We seldom pause to reflect on a simple truth: everything is temporary—even life itself. Perhaps this forgetfulness has contributed to a growing impatience, aggression and insensitivity in society.

This is where literature, cinema, art and cultural institutions have a responsibility far beyond entertainment. They must create spaces where people can pause, reflect, question, feel and reconnect with what makes us human. They can remind us of empathy, compassion, humility, relationships and the value of living together—not merely competing with one another.

Progress should not come at the cost of sensitivity. Development should not make us less human.

Technology may shape the future, but culture must help humanity remain at its heart.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He sees culture's role as creating spaces to pause, reflect, question and feel. **Why it matters.** Rapid change has made us more focused on the self, and culture can remind us of empathy and humility. **Reflect.** *When did you last pause, in the middle of a race to achieve more?*

10 Agree to Disagree, to Move Forward Together

At the heart of it all, I believe human beings are fundamentally good. We may hold different beliefs, affiliations, ideologies and interests, and sometimes we may strongly defend the principles we believe in. That diversity is a natural part of society.

What matters is that our personal beliefs and differences should not come in the way of our collective progress as a society and as a nation. We may disagree on many things, but there is a larger common aspiration that connects us: we all want a better life, a harmonious society and a stronger, more compassionate nation.

Perhaps the maturity of a society lies not in making everyone think alike, but in creating the space for different people to think differently and still move forward together.

We must learn to agree to disagree—not to end the conversation, but to reach a meaningful and constructive outcome.

Because ultimately, progress is not about proving that one side is right. It is about finding enough common ground for all of us to move forward.

> *"Technology may shape the future, but culture must help humanity remain at its heart."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He starts from the belief that human beings are fundamentally good. **Why it matters.** A mature society makes space for different people to think differently and still move forward together. **Reflect.** *Where could you look for common ground instead of proving yourself right?*

11 You Can Never Be Certain of the Outcome

One of the biggest lessons I have learnt through my journey in creativity is that, no matter how sincerely you work or how carefully you plan, **you can never be certain of the outcome.**

I experienced this deeply while making *Drop Out*. During production and post-production, there were moments when things simply did not happen according to plan. The music was getting delayed, decisions were getting stuck, and there were times when I genuinely did not know what would happen next or what I could do about it. The most difficult part was knowing that I had done everything I could, yet some things were simply beyond my control.

Even before the film's OTT release, there was another period of uncertainty and helplessness. Waiting without knowing what the outcome would be was perhaps more difficult than the work itself.

I have experienced something similar with the Ahmedabad International Literature Festival. In business, you can often work with numbers, systems and relatively predictable outcomes. But in creativity, you are dealing with people, emotions and responses. You may curate what you believe is a meaningful session, but you cannot be certain how the audience will receive it.

That, perhaps, is both the difficulty and the beauty of creative work.

You can control your effort, your intention and the quality of your work—but you cannot control how the world will respond to it.

And perhaps creativity teaches us something that business sometimes does not: **to keep faith, remain patient and continue moving even when the outcome is uncertain.**

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He describes the helplessness of waiting during Drop Out, which he found harder than the work itself. **Why it matters.** In business you work with systems; in creativity you work with people, emotions and responses. **Reflect.** *What are you waiting on that is beyond your control?*

12 A Project May Have One Vision, but It Takes Many People

One thing that has worked well for me in my journey is giving people space and giving due credit for their contribution. I have learnt that every person involved in a project, whether big or small, has a role to play—and every process has its own importance.

At the same time, I have to remain graceful with people and patient in every situation. In a collaborative project, one moment of arrogance, impatience or high-handedness from my side can sometimes jeopardise months of work.

I have realised that leadership is not about being a boss. If I start behaving like one, collaboration can quickly break down. People need to feel respected, heard and valued.

Every individual and every process also have the potential to influence the outcome. What may appear small or insignificant can sometimes create a major obstacle if it is ignored.

For me, successful collaboration is about respecting people, giving them space, acknowledging their contribution and staying patient—even when things do not go as planned.

Because ultimately, a project may have one vision, but it takes many people to bring that vision to life.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names space and due credit as what makes collaboration work. **Why it matters.** Leadership, he says, is not about being a boss. **Reflect.** *Who on your team deserves more space, or more credit?*

13 Dignity, Integrity and Character

> Dignity, Integrity and Character

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. These are his three non-negotiables. **Why it matters.** He holds to them even when compromising might make a project, relationship or opportunity easier. **Reflect.** *What are your own non-negotiables?*

14 Start With What You Have

> **Start With What You Have**
>
> To all the young creators and entrepreneurs, I would say: **start with what you have.** Do not keep waiting for the perfect opportunity, perfect resources or perfect circumstances. They may never arrive exactly as you imagine them.
>
> Begin with whatever is available to you, take the first step and keep moving. When you genuinely believe in what you are doing and remain committed to it, support often comes from unexpected places and unexpected people.
>
> I have also learnt that **not taking a risk can sometimes be the biggest risk in life.** Of course, every risk must be considered thoughtfully, but fear of failure should not stop us from trying.
>
> You may not know where the journey will take you. You only need enough courage to begin.
>
> **Start with what you have. Believe in what you are doing. Take the risk. The journey will teach you the rest.**

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His advice to young creators is to stop waiting for perfect circumstances. **Why it matters.** Not taking a risk can sometimes be the biggest risk in life. **Reflect.** *What first step could you take this week with only what you have?*

15 Be Flexible in Your Approach, but Firm in Your Values

> **Never compromise on your core values.**
>
> You may change your plans, your methods, your profession or even your direction in life. You may have to adapt, negotiate and make compromises along the way. But do not compromise on the values that define who you are.
>
> Success may come and go. Circumstances may change. People may applaud you today and question you tomorrow. But when everything else changes, your values are what remain with you.

Be flexible in your approach, but firm in your values.

Because ultimately, what you achieve in life matters—but **who you become while achieving it matters even more.**

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. This is the one principle he would leave to a reader twenty years from now. **Why it matters.** Plans, methods and even professions can change; the values that define who you are should not. **Reflect.** *Which of your methods could you change, and which values never?*

16 Gratitude Should Not Have an Expiry Date

Keep a space in your heart for those who stood by you and loved you when you needed them.

It does not mean forgetting what happened later, nor does it mean allowing yourself to be hurt again. It simply means choosing gratitude over bitterness and remembering the good without denying the difficult.

Because relationships may change, but **gratitude should not have an expiry date.**

> *"Gratitude should not have an expiry date."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The story he would preserve is about remembering those who stood by you. **Why it matters.** Gratitude here means choosing it over bitterness, without denying what was difficult. **Reflect.** *Who stood by you when you needed them, and have you thanked them?*

17 Live with Courage, Create with Conviction

Live with courage, create with conviction, treat people with dignity, remain grounded in your values—and never stop believing in the possibility of a better tomorrow.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. This is the message he chose to add in his own words. **Why it matters.** It gathers the threads of the whole series: courage, conviction, dignity and values. **Reflect.** *Which of these four would you most like to strengthen?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Be flexible in your approach, but firm in your values. Plans, methods and even professions can change. The values that define who you are should not.

Stories make ideas human. Facts tell us what is happening. Stories help us understand why it matters.

A film company was not born from a business plan. It was born from a story. Serene Films began with one conversation and a willingness to say yes.

Business with Dignity. Be proud of what you do, regardless of the size or scale of your business.

Start with what you have. Not taking a risk can sometimes be the biggest risk in life.

We must learn to agree to disagree. Not to end the conversation, but to reach a meaningful and constructive outcome.

Gratitude should not have an expiry date. Choose gratitude over bitterness, and remember the good without denying the difficult.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"The true measure of a life is not what we accumulate, but what we give back."

16 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 022, September 2026

The True Measure of a Life Is Not What We Accumulate, but What We Give Back

True leadership is defined not by the authority one holds, but by the positive difference one makes in the lives of others. Sixteen principles from a career in economics, education, and public service.

> *True leadership is defined not by the authority one holds, but by the positive difference one makes in the lives of others.*

01 Titles and Status Are Fleeting; the Difference We Make Endures

Throughout my journey as an academic, researcher, and public servant, I have come to understand that true leadership is defined not by the authority one holds, but by the positive difference one makes in the lives of others.

Early in my career, I believed that success was measured through titles, publications, or recognition. Over time, however, I realised that genuine fulfilment comes from empowering others, whether by mentoring young researchers, shaping inclusive policies, or contributing to community development.

My guiding principle has always been that knowledge must serve humanity. Whether through my academic work in economics and development studies or through my engagement with government and civil society, I strive to bridge theory and practice for social good.

I also believe strongly in humility and continuous learning. No matter how many years of experience one gains, there is always more to learn from others, especially from the communities we aim to serve.

Finally, integrity and consistency in values, both personal and professional, have remained the cornerstone of my journey. Titles and positions are fleeting, but the values we uphold and the difference we make in people's lives endure far beyond any professional milestone.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He describes a real shift in how he measured success, from titles, publications, and recognition early on, to genuine fulfilment found in empowering others, whether through mentoring, policy work, or community development. **Why it matters.** "Titles and positions are fleeting, but the values we uphold and the difference we make in people's lives endure" places the emphasis on what actually outlasts a career, not the markers most academic and professional paths are built to chase. **Reflect.** *Are you currently measuring your own success by titles and recognition, or by the difference you're actually making in someone else's life?*

02 True Leadership Is Defined by Service, Not Authority

Leadership, to me, is fundamentally about service, empathy and vision. Having worked across academic, governmental and community sectors, I have learned that effective leadership requires listening more than instructing.

A good leader must understand the aspirations and struggles of those they serve, and must create pathways for collaboration rather than control.

I also believe that leadership demands moral courage, the willingness to make difficult decisions that align with ethical principles, even when they are unpopular. Transparency and accountability are indispensable, particularly in public and academic institutions where trust must be earned continuously.

Equally important is the capacity to inspire hope and confidence in others, especially the youth, who represent the future of any nation or institution. My leadership philosophy is therefore rooted in the idea that true leadership is not defined by authority, but by the ability to uplift others and create sustainable, positive change.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats listening as a leadership skill that has to come before instructing, not a courtesy performed after decisions are already made, requiring genuine understanding of the aspirations and struggles of the people being led. **Why it matters.** Naming moral courage specifically as the willingness to make unpopular but ethically aligned decisions distinguishes real leadership from simply being liked or avoiding controversy, a harder and less comfortable standard. **Reflect.** *Think of your last unpopular decision. Did you make it because it was ethically right, or did you avoid it because it would cost you support?*

03 Education Is the Progressive Discovery of the Human Being

I strongly believe that education is not merely the transmission of information, but the progressive discovery of the human being. This is a principle I have consistently emphasised throughout my academic career, particularly through my work in economics education and human capital development.

Education should nurture critical thinking, ethical awareness and social responsibility, alongside technical competence. It must empower individuals to become active contributors to society, not passive recipients of knowledge.

I have often highlighted the importance of contextualising education to address real-world challenges such as poverty, inequality and sustainable development. My philosophy is that education, when combined with empathy and purpose, becomes a transformative force capable of shaping both individuals and societies for the better.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He deliberately expands the definition of education beyond information transfer, treating critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility as equally essential outcomes alongside technical competence, not optional additions to it. **Why it matters.** Insisting that education be contextualised to real-world challenges like poverty and inequality, rather than taught in the abstract, ties his academic philosophy directly to the development work that runs through the rest of his answers. **Reflect.** *In your own learning, or in how you teach or mentor others, is critical thinking and ethical awareness treated as central, or as something secondary to technical competence?*

04 When Economics Centers on Human Dignity, Growth Numbers Become

Real Welfare

My work in economics is driven by the conviction that economic policies must ultimately serve human welfare and dignity. I have spent much of my career studying how developing economies, particularly in Africa and Asia, can achieve inclusive and sustainable growth.

I firmly believe that economic growth should not be measured solely by GDP figures, but by improvements in people's quality of life, access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities.

My research has often focused on structural transformation, informal sector development and regional integration as pathways to reducing poverty and inequality. I also advocate strongly for evidence-based policymaking that incorporates the voices of marginalised communities.

Ultimately, I see economics as a tool for social justice, one that must be applied with compassion and rigour to create real, measurable improvements in people's lives.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He rejects GDP alone as the measure of successful economic policy, replacing it with quality of life, access to education, healthcare, and employment, a shift from an abstract number to whether people's actual circumstances improved. **Why it matters.** Advocating for evidence-based policymaking that specifically incorporates the voices of marginalised communities means the evidence itself has to include people usually left out of the data that shapes policy in the first place. **Reflect.** *In your own field, is success currently measured by an abstract number, or by whether it actually improved something concrete in people's lives?*

05 Inclusive Growth Rests on Four Pillars

In my view, inclusive economic growth rests on four key pillars: equitable access to education and skills development, gender and social inclusion, sustainable use of resources, and strong institutional governance.

Education equips individuals with the tools to participate meaningfully in the economy, while gender and social inclusion ensure that growth benefits reach all segments of society, not just a privileged few.

Sustainability ensures that development today does not compromise future generations, and good governance guarantees transparency, accountability and efficient use of resources.

My research and policy engagements have consistently emphasised these interconnected pillars as essential for building resilient, inclusive economies, particularly in developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

> *"PhD does not merely denote a Doctor of Philosophy."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He gives inclusive growth a precise structure, four named pillars rather than a vague call for fairness, each addressing a distinct failure mode: exclusion from skills, exclusion by gender or group, resource depletion, and weak governance. **Why it matters.** Treating sustainability as ensuring "development today does not compromise future generations" ties environmental responsibility directly into economic inclusion, rather than positioning them as competing priorities. **Reflect.** *Of his four pillars, education access, gender and social inclusion, sustainability, and governance, which one is most neglected in the systems you're closest to?*

06 Economic Justice Is Not Granted; It Is Built Through Unity and Shared Purpose

Global economic dynamics are undergoing significant transformation, with shifting power balances between the Global North and Global South. I believe that developing nations must strengthen regional cooperation, enhance industrial capacity and invest in human capital to reduce dependency on traditional economic powers.

Initiatives such as intra-African trade, South-South cooperation and coalitions like BRICS+ can play pivotal roles in reshaping global economic governance to be more equitable.

At the same time, I emphasise that economic sovereignty must be paired with sound domestic policies, strong institutions and social investment, so that growth translates into meaningful improvements in citizens' lives. I remain a strong advocate for multilateralism grounded in fairness, transparency and mutual respect among all nations, both developed and developing.

True economic justice, in my view, is not simply granted by global institutions but is built through the unity, innovation and shared purpose of nations working together toward common prosperity.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He pairs a call for developing nations to strengthen regional cooperation and reduce dependency with an explicit caveat: economic sovereignty only produces real benefit for citizens when it comes paired with sound domestic policy and strong institutions at home. **Why it matters.** This is his own stated position on a genuinely contested area of international economic policy. He frames it as a call for fairer multilateralism rather than opposition to any specific country, but it engages directly with debates about global economic power that reasonable people weigh differently. **Reflect.** *Where do you see the balance between external cooperation and internal institutional strength playing out in your own country's or region's development?*

07 Policy Is Not a Static Document; It Is a Living Commitment to Human Welfare

Public policy, to be effective, must be dynamic, evidence-based and responsive to the needs of the population it serves. I have always advocated for policies that are inclusive, participatory and grounded in rigorous research.

One of my core principles is that policy formulation should involve continuous consultation with stakeholders, including marginalised and vulnerable groups, to ensure that interventions address actual needs rather than assumed ones.

I also stress the importance of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track policy outcomes and make necessary adjustments over time. Furthermore, I believe that policies must balance short-term economic objectives with long-term social and environmental sustainability.

In essence, effective policy design requires humility, flexibility and a genuine commitment to improving human welfare, recognising that policy is not a static document but a living framework that must evolve with society's changing needs.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He specifically names monitoring and evaluation frameworks as essential, treating policy as something that must be tracked and adjusted over time rather than written once and assumed to work as intended indefinitely. **Why it matters.** Insisting policy address "actual needs rather than assumed ones" through continuous consultation with marginalised groups directly challenges policymaking that relies on assumptions about what people need rather than asking them. **Reflect.** *Is there a policy or plan in your own organisation that was designed once and never revisited, the way he warns against?*

08 PhD Stands for Patience, Honesty, and Dedication

My doctoral journey was, without doubt, one of the most transformative experiences of my academic career. Beyond the acquisition of specialised knowledge in economics, it profoundly shaped my critical thinking, research rigour and analytical precision.

The process taught me the value of intellectual humility, recognising that knowledge is continuously evolving and that rigorous inquiry requires openness to new ideas and constructive criticism.

My doctoral experience also instilled in me a deep sense of perseverance and resilience, as academic research often involves navigating uncertainty, setbacks and the iterative process of refining ideas.

Moreover, it reinforced the importance of mentorship and collaboration, as I learned as much from my supervisors and peers as from my own independent research. This period cultivated in me the qualities of patience, precision and purpose that continue to define my professional and personal ethos.

As I often tell my own doctoral students today: PhD does not merely denote a Doctor of Philosophy; it also signifies Patience, Honesty and Dedication, three qualities that anchor genuine intellectual and personal growth throughout a scholar's life.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reframes the PhD acronym itself as a mnemonic for the character qualities the process actually demands, patience, honesty, and dedication, alongside its formal meaning as a Doctor of Philosophy. **Why it matters.** Crediting mentorship and collaboration as sources of learning equal to his own independent research pushes back against a common myth of the solitary scholar, acknowledging that even doctoral-level work is built with others. **Reflect.** *In your own most demanding period of learning or growth, did you credit the people who taught and supported you as much as your own independent effort?*

09 Academic Leaders Must Move Away From Top-Down Authoritarian Governance

Effective academic leadership requires a delicate balance between maintaining institutional standards and fostering an environment conducive to research, teaching and innovation.

I believe strongly in participatory governance, where faculty, staff and students are actively involved in decision-making processes, thereby cultivating a sense of ownership and accountability across the institution.

Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration and open dialogue is also essential to break down silos and stimulate creative and critical thinking.

Additionally, I emphasise the need for transparent and merit-based systems for promotion, funding and resource allocation to maintain trust and motivation within the academic community.

In my view, academic institutions must continuously invest in capacity building, both for early-career scholars and established academics, to remain competitive, relevant and impactful in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. This requires a shift from top-down, authoritarian management styles toward more inclusive, participatory approaches, which, in my experience, cultivate innovation, resilience and long-term institutional excellence.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He specifically names participatory governance, faculty, staff, and students actively involved in decisions, as the mechanism for building ownership and accountability, rather than treating institutional standards and inclusive process as competing priorities. **Why it matters.** Calling directly for a shift away from top-down, authoritarian management styles is a specific institutional critique from someone with real standing inside academic administration, not an abstract preference for a friendlier workplace culture. **Reflect.** *In an institution or organisation you're part of, is decision-making genuinely participatory, or top-down with the appearance of consultation?*

10 Young Researchers Are Our Most Valuable Resource for Sustainable Progress

Mentorship has always been at the heart of my academic and professional practice. I firmly believe that guiding young researchers, students and early-career professionals is not just a duty but a moral responsibility, one that ensures the continuity and advancement of knowledge and societal progress.

Effective mentorship requires patience, active listening and the ability to tailor guidance to the unique needs, strengths and aspirations of each individual. I strive to create an environment where mentees feel safe to explore ideas, make mistakes and grow both intellectually and personally.

Beyond technical knowledge, I emphasise the development of critical thinking, ethical judgement and resilience, qualities that are essential for long-term success in research, policy or professional practice.

I also believe in leading by example, demonstrating integrity, discipline and a genuine passion for knowledge, which often inspires mentees more than instructions or theoretical guidance alone.

Ultimately, my mentorship philosophy centres on empowering individuals to become independent, confident and socially responsible contributors to their fields, recognising that investing in young talent is investing in the future of research, education and sustainable development.

> *"Setbacks are not failures; they are opportunities to refine strategies."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He calls mentorship "a moral responsibility" rather than an optional extra to a research career, tying it directly to the continuity of knowledge and societal progress, not just individual career development for the mentee. **Why it matters.** Creating an environment where mentees "feel safe to explore ideas, make mistakes and grow" is a specific, practical standard that goes beyond simply transferring technical knowledge, addressing the psychological conditions that actually let learning happen. **Reflect.** *Do the people you mentor or supervise feel genuinely safe making mistakes in front of you, or do they perform certainty to avoid your judgment?*

11 The Central Challenge Is to Build an Ecosystem Where Everyone Has a Genuine Opportunity

Entrepreneurship and innovation are critical drivers of economic development, particularly in emerging and developing economies. I believe that fostering a culture of entrepreneurship requires more than access to finance; it necessitates supportive policy frameworks, quality education and mentorship, as well as robust infrastructure.

My research has consistently highlighted that inclusive entrepreneurship, especially empowering women, youth and marginalised communities, has transformative potential to reduce poverty, generate employment and stimulate local economic growth.

I also emphasise the importance of innovation ecosystems that connect universities, industry and government, ensuring that knowledge translates into practical, scalable solutions. Moreover, I advocate for policies that reduce bureaucratic barriers and promote access to markets, technology and capital for small and medium enterprises.

In my view, the central challenge is not merely to create more entrepreneurs, but to build an ecosystem where everyone, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background or geographic location, has a genuine opportunity to innovate, grow and contribute to sustainable development.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reframes the entrepreneurship challenge away from simply producing more entrepreneurs, toward building the ecosystem, policy frameworks, education, mentorship, infrastructure, that determines who actually gets a genuine opportunity to try in the first place. **Why it matters.** Naming women, youth, and marginalised communities specifically as groups with transformative potential when included treats inclusive entrepreneurship as an economic strategy, not only a matter of fairness. **Reflect.** *In your own community or field, is the barrier to entrepreneurship really a lack of entrepreneurs, or a lack of genuine access to the ecosystem that would let more people try?*

12 Neither Growth at Any Cost, Nor Environmental Protection at the Expense of Human Development, Is the Right Goal

Balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability is one of the most pressing challenges of our time. I believe that neither growth at any cost, nor environmental protection at the expense of human development, is the right approach.

Instead, we must pursue a model of sustainable and inclusive growth that integrates environmental stewardship into economic planning from the outset.

This involves investing in renewable energy, promoting resource efficiency and encouraging sustainable agricultural practices, while simultaneously addressing poverty, unemployment and social inequality.

I also advocate for strong regulatory frameworks and incentives that encourage businesses and communities to adopt environmentally responsible practices without compromising economic opportunities. Ultimately, achieving this balance requires collaboration between governments, private sector actors and civil society, recognising that long-term prosperity is only possible when economic development and environmental sustainability are pursued together, rather than as competing objectives.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He explicitly rejects both extremes, growth at any cost and environmental protection at the expense of human development, refusing to treat this as a binary choice and instead describing environmental stewardship as something integrated into economic planning from the start. **Why it matters.** Insisting environmental and economic goals be "pursued together, rather than as competing objectives" pushes back on a framing that often forces communities and policymakers to choose one over the other. **Reflect.** *In your own decisions, do you currently treat sustainability and growth as genuinely compatible goals, or as a trade-off you're quietly choosing one side of?*

13 Resilience Is the Capacity to Learn, Adapt, and Continue With Integrity

Throughout my career, I have encountered numerous challenges, ranging from navigating complex bureaucratic systems to managing large-scale research projects under constrained resources. One particularly formative experience was leading a multi-country research initiative during a period of significant political and economic instability.

Despite unforeseen obstacles, including funding delays and logistical challenges, we successfully completed the project by fostering strong collaboration, maintaining transparent communication and adapting our strategies to changing circumstances.

This experience taught me the importance of resilience, patience and problem-solving under pressure. I learned that setbacks are not failures but opportunities to refine strategies, strengthen partnerships and innovate solutions.

It also reinforced my belief in the power of teamwork and shared responsibility, as overcoming complex challenges is rarely achieved alone. Ultimately, this experience deepened my understanding that resilience is not simply the ability to recover from difficulties, but the capacity to learn, adapt and continue moving forward with integrity, even amid uncertainty.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He offers a specific, real example, a multi-country research initiative during political and economic instability, rather than a general claim about resilience, grounding the principle in an actual test of funding delays and logistical breakdowns. **Why it matters.** Redefining resilience as "the capacity to learn, adapt and continue moving forward with integrity," rather than simply the ability to recover, adds a standard that recovery alone doesn't guarantee, integrity maintained throughout the difficulty, not just survival of it. **Reflect.** *Think of your own hardest professional setback. Did you recover from it, or did you also maintain your integrity and keep learning throughout it, the way he distinguishes?*

14 Integrity Builds Trust, Lifelong Learning Creates Progress, Service Gives Success Its Purpose

If I could offer three guiding principles to young professionals and future leaders, they would be: first, uphold integrity and ethical conduct in all endeavours, as trust and credibility are the foundation of any successful career or initiative.

Second, embrace lifelong learning and adaptability, recognising that knowledge and skills must continuously evolve to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Third, prioritise service to others and social responsibility, understanding that true success is measured not only by personal achievement, but by the positive impact one has on communities, institutions and society at large.

These principles, in my experience, form the foundation for sustainable personal and professional growth, as well as meaningful contributions to society.

> *"Seek knowledge with humility, act with integrity, lead with compassion."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for three guiding principles to leave with young professionals, he gives integrity, lifelong learning, and service to others as a sequence, not a list of equal options, each building on the credibility and relevance the previous one establishes. **Why it matters.** Defining true success as measured "not only by personal achievement, but by the positive impact one has" extends the same standard he's applied throughout, to policy, to mentorship, to entrepreneurship, down to the individual level of personal career success. **Reflect.** *Of his three, integrity, lifelong learning, service to others, which one would you say currently gets the least deliberate attention in your own life?*

15 Build a Life of Purpose, Not Merely a Career of Success

If I could summarise a single message for the next generation, it would be this: seek knowledge with humility, act with integrity and lead with compassion.

The world is constantly evolving, presenting new challenges and opportunities, and it is essential to remain adaptable while staying true to core ethical principles. Education and professional achievement are important, but they must be complemented by empathy, social responsibility and a genuine commitment to the wellbeing of others.

I would encourage young people to embrace collaboration over competition, to value diverse perspectives and to recognise that meaningful impact often comes from collective effort rather than individual accolades.

Finally, I would remind them that resilience, patience and continuous learning are essential tools for navigating an uncertain and rapidly changing world. My hope is that they carry forward a sense of purpose that transcends personal gain, striving to create positive change for their communities, their countries and the world at large, ultimately building a life of purpose, not merely a career of success.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His three-part summary message, seek knowledge with humility, act with integrity, lead with compassion, pairs each virtue with a specific action rather than leaving them as abstract qualities to admire. **Why it matters.** The final distinction, "a life of purpose, not merely a career of success", is the same idea that opened his very first answer, that titles and status are fleeting, now offered forward to the next generation rather than only reflected on in his own life. **Reflect.** *By his own closing distinction, are you currently building a career of success, or a life of purpose? What would change if you were honest about the difference?*

16 The True Measure of a Life Is Not What We Accumulate, but What We Give Back

As I reflect on my journey as an academic, researcher and policy advocate, I am reminded that the true measure of a life is not what we accumulate, but what we give back.

Every lecture delivered, every paper published, and every policy discussion I have contributed to carries the hope of empowering others and improving lives, whether through advancing knowledge, mentoring the next generation, or influencing more equitable and sustainable development.

I have learned that patience, humility and perseverance are indispensable, particularly when navigating complex challenges in research, governance or social development. Above all, I believe that our legacy is defined not by titles or accolades, but by the positive difference we make in the lives of others and the enduring values we instil in those who follow.

It is this conviction that continues to guide my work and inspires me to contribute meaningfully to society, both today and for future generations.

> *"The true measure of a life is not what we accumulate, but what we give back."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given the chance to add one final, unprompted reflection, he returns to the same measure that opened his very first answer, not accumulation but contribution, confirming it as the actual foundation the other fifteen principles were built on. **Why it matters.** Naming lectures, papers, and policy discussions specifically as carrying "the hope of empowering others" ties his everyday professional output directly to the larger legacy he describes, rather than treating legacy as separate from the daily work itself. **Reflect.** *By his measure, not what you accumulate but what you give back, what would your own answer be right now if you were honest about it?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Titles and positions are fleeting; the difference you make in people's lives endures. Genuine fulfilment comes from empowering others, not from titles, publications, or recognition alone.

True leadership is defined by service, not authority. Listening must come before instructing. Moral courage means making unpopular decisions that align with ethical principles.

Economic growth should be measured by quality of life, not GDP alone. Access to education, healthcare, and employment are the real markers of whether growth is actually working.

PhD also stands for Patience, Honesty, and Dedication. Intellectual humility means recognising that knowledge is always evolving, and that rigorous inquiry requires openness to criticism.

Resilience is the capacity to learn, adapt, and continue with integrity. Not simply the ability to recover from setbacks, but to keep your integrity intact throughout the difficulty.

Uphold integrity, embrace lifelong learning, and prioritise service to others. In that order. Trust and credibility are the foundation everything else is built on.

The true measure of a life is not what we accumulate, but what we give back. Legacy is defined not by titles or accolades, but by the positive difference made in the lives of others.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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“Kindness and strength were never opposites. They were always the same muscle.”

17 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 021, September 2026

Kindness and Strength Were Never Opposites

They were always the same muscle. Seventeen principles on kindness, psychological safety, and choosing to be human, always.

> *They were always the same muscle.*

01 Kindness Is Not Weakness; It Is a Sign of Maturity and Strength

Kindness has never been the opposite of strength for me. It has always been one of the clearest signs of it.

Early in my career, I absorbed the belief that being taken seriously meant being tough, decisive, unemotional. I saw kindness treated as something soft, something that had to be managed carefully so it wouldn't be mistaken for weakness.

Over time, I realised the opposite was true. The leaders who influenced me most were not the ones who dominated a room. They were the ones who listened without needing to prove anything, who could hold a difficult conversation with warmth instead of coldness, who made people feel safe enough to tell the truth.

That is when I understood: kindness is not the absence of strength. It is what strength looks like when it has matured.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She traces a real reversal in her own thinking, from believing early on that being taken seriously required toughness, to recognising that the leaders who influenced her most led with warmth, not dominance. **Why it matters.** "Kindness is what strength looks like when it has matured" reframes kindness not as strength's opposite that needs defending, but as its most developed form, a harder standard to meet than toughness alone. **Reflect.** *Is there a place in your own leadership or life where you've been performing toughness because you believed kindness would be mistaken for weakness?*

02 Niceness Avoids Conflict; Kindness Serves What Someone Actually Needs

Niceness is about avoiding conflict. Kindness is about caring enough to engage with it.

Being nice often means softening the truth so no one feels uncomfortable. Kindness means telling someone the truth because you respect them enough to trust them with it.

I have had to give feedback that was hard to hear. Being nice would have meant staying quiet, or wrapping the message in so much padding that the point got lost. Being kind meant being honest, direct and respectful, because I genuinely wanted the person to grow, not just to feel comfortable in the moment.

Kindness sometimes looks uncomfortable in the short term. Niceness almost always avoids that discomfort, and in doing so, it fails the person it claims to protect.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She draws the distinction precisely: niceness softens or withholds truth to avoid discomfort, while kindness trusts someone enough to give them the truth directly, even when it's harder to hear in the moment. **Why it matters.** "In doing so, it fails the person it claims to protect" is a direct challenge to the instinct that avoiding discomfort is the same as caring for someone. She argues the opposite: avoidance is often the less caring choice. **Reflect.** *The last time you softened or withheld a truth to keep things comfortable, were you being kind, or just being nice?*

03 A Constant, Self-Correcting Balance Between Effectiveness and Kindness

Balancing effectiveness with kindness is not something I solved once. It is something I keep recalibrating.

There are moments when a decision needs to be made quickly, and there isn't time to consult everyone or soften every edge. In those moments, I try to stay clear and decisive, but I remain conscious of how the decision lands on people, and I make space afterwards to acknowledge the impact.

There are other moments when slowing down, listening longer, and prioritising someone's wellbeing over speed is exactly what effectiveness actually requires, because a team that doesn't feel safe or respected will never perform at its best for long.

So the balance isn't a fixed formula. It's a constant, honest check: am I being effective at the expense of people, or am I being kind at the expense of the mission? Neither extreme works. The real skill is noticing when you've drifted too far in either direction and correcting course.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She refuses to offer a fixed formula for balancing effectiveness and kindness, describing instead an ongoing, honest check she runs continuously, sometimes prioritising speed and clarity, sometimes prioritising people, depending on what a given moment actually requires. **Why it matters.** Naming both failure modes explicitly, being effective at the expense of people, and being kind at the expense of the mission, treats them as equally real risks, not just kindness as the vulnerable side that needs protecting. **Reflect.** *Right now, in your own work, have you drifted too far toward effectiveness at the expense of people, or too far toward kindness at the expense of the mission?*

04 Genuinely Seen, Not Managed, Not Performed At

The moments people remember most are rarely the big, formal ones. They remember the small moments when they felt genuinely seen.

Someone once told me that what stayed with them was not a piece of feedback I gave in a formal review, but a short message I sent after noticing they seemed off during a meeting, just checking in, no agenda attached. That small act told them more about how much I cared than any formal recognition could have.

I have learned that people can tell the difference between being managed and being genuinely cared for. They can tell when kindness is performed for optics and when it is real. And when it is real, even the smallest gesture becomes something they carry with them for a long time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The example she chooses, a short check-in message with no agenda attached, deliberately isn't a dramatic gesture. She uses it to illustrate that the moments people remember most are rarely the formal, visible ones. **Why it matters.** "People can tell the difference between being managed and being genuinely cared for" names a distinction that's easy to blur in leadership language but instantly obvious to the person on the receiving end of it. **Reflect.** *Think of a moment someone made you feel genuinely seen. Was it a formal gesture, or something small and unplanned, the way she describes?*

05 Psychological Safety Is What I Would Measure First

If I could measure only one thing to understand whether an organisation was genuinely kind, I would measure psychological safety: do people feel safe enough to speak up, disagree, admit mistakes and ask for help without fear of punishment or ridicule?

Kindness in an organisation is not really visible in mission statements or wellness perks. It is visible in whether someone feels safe enough to say, "I don't know," or "I made a mistake," or "I disagree with this decision," without bracing themselves for consequences.

When psychological safety is present, kindness tends to follow naturally, because people feel secure enough to extend it to each other. When it is absent, no amount of stated values will make an organisation genuinely kind.

> *"No amount of stated values will make an organisation genuinely kind."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what single measure would reveal whether an organisation was genuinely kind, she doesn't reach for satisfaction surveys or stated values. She reaches for something more specific and harder to fake: whether people feel safe admitting "I don't know" or "I made a mistake." **Why it matters.** "No amount of stated values will make an organisation genuinely kind" without psychological safety underneath them is a direct challenge to organisations that treat mission statements as evidence of culture rather than as aspirations that still need to be earned. **Reflect.** *In your own organisation or team, could you say "I made a mistake" right now without bracing yourself for consequences?*

06 Avoiding a Hard Truth in the Name of Kindness Was Never Kindness at All

There was a period when I avoided a difficult conversation with someone because I told myself I was being kind by not adding to their stress.

In reality, I was avoiding my own discomfort, and by staying silent, I let a situation continue that eventually became much harder to address than if I had spoken up earlier.

That experience taught me something important: avoiding a hard truth in the name of kindness is not kindness. It is often self-protection disguised as consideration for someone else. Real kindness sometimes requires the courage to have the uncomfortable conversation sooner rather than later.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names her own past mistake directly, avoiding a conversation and calling it kindness, before revealing what it actually was: self-protection, which she only recognised once the delay made the eventual conversation harder than it needed to be. **Why it matters.** "Self-protection disguised as consideration for someone else" is an uncomfortable but precise diagnosis of a very common form of avoidance, one many people mistake for genuine care rather than recognising as fear. **Reflect.** *Is there a difficult conversation you're currently avoiding under the label of kindness, that might actually be self-protection?*

07 A Meaningful Human Experience Is Built From Small, Unglamorous Moments

A truly meaningful human experience is rarely built from one big gesture. It is built from a series of small, consistent moments: being listened to, being remembered, being treated with respect even when no one important is watching.

I try to remember details about people, not because I have to, but because those details matter to them, and remembering them is a way of saying, "You matter to me."

I try to be consistent, so that people know what to expect from me regardless of my mood or how busy I am. And I try to stay present in conversations instead of already thinking about the next thing on my list.

None of these things are glamorous. But together, they build the kind of trust that no single grand gesture ever could.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She explicitly rejects the idea that meaningful human experience comes from one big gesture, building her definition instead from small, unglamorous, repeated actions: being listened to, remembered, treated with respect when no one important is watching. **Why it matters.** "Being treated with respect even when no one important is watching" is a quiet but sharp test, distinguishing genuine consideration from performance aimed at an audience that happens to matter. **Reflect.** *Are you consistently kind and present in the small, unwitnessed moments, or does your consideration mostly show up when someone important is watching?*

08 Someone Believed in Me Before There Was Any Proof to Justify It

Early in my career, someone gave me a level of responsibility I did not feel ready for. When I hesitated, they told me, "I already see it in you. Now it's your turn to see it too."

That sentence changed something in me. Someone believed in my capability before I had the confidence to believe in it myself, and that belief became something I had to grow into.

It taught me the power of seeing potential in people before they see it in themselves, and I try to offer that same belief to others now, especially to the people who hesitate the way I once did.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The specific sentence she was told, "I already see it in you. Now it's your turn to see it too," placed the responsibility for belief on someone else first, before she had any confidence of her own to draw on. **Why it matters.** She names exactly who she now extends that same belief to: the people who hesitate the way she once did, treating it as a specific practice passed forward, not a general sentiment about mentorship. **Reflect.** *Who around you right now is hesitating the way you once did, and could you be the person who tells them what someone once told you?*

09 Kindness Is the Precondition for a Well-Run Organisation, Not the Soft Add-On

> Kindness is often treated as a nice-to-have, something separate from performance, strategy or results. I believe the opposite: kindness is a precondition for a well-run organisation, not an accessory to it.
>
> People do their best work when they feel safe, respected and genuinely cared for. Fear can produce short-term compliance, but it corrodes trust, creativity and long-term performance. Kindness, on the other hand, builds the conditions where people can take risks, admit mistakes, ask for help and grow.
>
> I don't see kindness and high performance as competing priorities. I see kindness as one of the most underrated drivers of high performance.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She refuses the common framing that positions kindness as a soft value competing against hard results, arguing instead that kindness creates the actual conditions, safety, trust, willingness to admit mistakes, that high performance depends on. **Why it matters.** Distinguishing fear's short-term compliance from kindness's long-term trust names a trade-off many organisations make without realising it: choosing something that works immediately over something that works sustainably. **Reflect.** *In your own organisation, is kindness currently treated as a precondition for good performance, or as a soft extra that gets cut when things get busy?*

10 Being Liked, Feared, and Respected Are Three Different Things

> Being liked, being feared and being respected are three very different things, and confusing them can lead leaders in the wrong direction.
>
> Being liked is about approval. Being feared is about control. Being respected is about trust, earned through consistency, fairness and genuine care, even when decisions are difficult.
>
> I would rather be respected than liked, because respect endures even through hard decisions, while being liked can evaporate the moment you have to say something someone doesn't want to hear. And I would rather be respected than feared, because fear only produces compliance, while respect produces genuine commitment.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She defines all three terms precisely rather than treating them as roughly interchangeable forms of influence: liked is approval, feared is control, respected is trust earned through consistency and fairness even under difficulty. **Why it matters.** Choosing respect over both being liked and being feared, for different specific reasons in each case, shows she's weighed the trade-offs deliberately rather than simply preferring the more flattering-sounding option. **Reflect.** *Honestly, which of the three, being liked, being feared, or being respected, are you currently optimising for in your own leadership or relationships?*

11 A Deliberate Morning Routine Rooted in Gratitude

My mornings are intentional. Before I check any messages, I take time for stillness, reflection and gratitude, even if it's only a few minutes. That grounding shapes the rest of my day.

I try to walk into every interaction with the same question: how can I add value to this person's day, even in a small way? Sometimes that means really listening. Sometimes it means offering encouragement. Sometimes it just means being fully present instead of distracted.

It isn't about grand gestures. It's about consistency, showing up the same way, with the same intention, day after day, regardless of how the day itself is going.

> *"Boundaries are not the opposite of kindness. They are what make kindness sustainable."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She's specific about the order: stillness and gratitude come before any messages are checked, not after, a deliberate sequencing that protects the grounding before the day's demands can interrupt it. **Why it matters.** Her daily question, "how can I add value to this person's day, even in a small way", operationalises kindness into something repeatable across every interaction, rather than leaving it as a general disposition she hopes shows up. **Reflect.** *What's the first thing you actually do each morning, and does it ground you the way you'd want, or does it immediately pull you into other people's demands?*

12 Respect for a Person's Dignity Is Never Negotiable

There are things I will never compromise on, no matter the circumstances. Honesty is one of them. Respect for a person's dignity is another.

I will adapt my approach, my tone, my pace, depending on the situation. But I will not sacrifice truthfulness for convenience, and I will not treat someone as less than human, regardless of their position, their mistake, or the pressure of the moment.

Those two things, honesty and dignity, are the foundation everything else is built on. If I ever had to choose between being effective in the short term and violating either of them, I would choose to stay true to them, even if it costs me something in the moment.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She separates what she'll flexibly adapt, approach, tone, pace, from what stays fixed regardless of circumstance: honesty and a person's dignity. The distinction is deliberate, not an accident of which values happened to hold under pressure. **Why it matters.** Stating she would accept a short-term cost rather than violate either principle makes this a tested commitment rather than an easy claim, since real non-negotiables only reveal themselves when something is actually at stake. **Reflect.** *What are your own genuine non-negotiables, the ones you'd hold even at a real cost, versus the ones you only think are non-negotiable until they're actually tested?*

13 Boundaries Are What Keep Kindness Sustainable

Kindness without boundaries eventually becomes self-erasure, and that helps no one, least of all the people you're trying to be kind to.

I have learned to say no without guilt, to protect my energy so I have something genuine left to give, and to recognise when someone is asking for more than is fair to expect.

Boundaries are not the opposite of kindness. They are what make kindness sustainable. A person who has nothing left to give cannot actually be kind to anyone, no matter how good their intentions are.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She treats boundaries not as a limitation on kindness but as its structural requirement, arguing that kindness without them eventually collapses into self-erasure, which ultimately fails the very people it was meant to help. **Why it matters.** "A person who has nothing left to give cannot actually be kind to anyone, no matter how good their intentions are" separates intention from capacity, good intentions alone don't produce kindness if there's nothing left to act on them with. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life has kindness without boundaries started tipping into self-erasure, leaving you with less to actually give?*

14 Kindness Is Active, Not Passive

Kindness is often mistaken for passivity, for simply being agreeable or avoiding upsetting anyone. But real kindness is active. It requires courage, honesty and sometimes real discomfort.

Speaking up for someone who isn't in the room takes courage. Giving honest feedback takes courage. Holding a boundary with someone you care about takes courage. None of that is passive.

I have come to see kindness as one of the most demanding things a person can practise consistently, precisely because it asks you to stay engaged and honest, even when disengaging or staying quiet would be far easier.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She lists three concrete acts of kindness, speaking up for someone absent, giving honest feedback, holding a boundary with someone you care about, each requiring courage rather than agreeableness, to make the case that kindness is active work, not passive niceness. **Why it matters.** Calling kindness "one of the most demanding things a person can practise consistently" reframes it from an easy default disposition into a discipline that requires real, ongoing effort to sustain. **Reflect.** *Of her three examples, speaking up for someone absent, giving honest feedback, holding a boundary with someone you care about, which one do you most often avoid because disengaging feels easier?*

15 Wherever You Go, Be a Blessing There

If I could leave the next generation with one thought, it would be this: wherever you go, be a blessing there.

You don't need power, wealth or a title to make someone's day better. A genuine smile, a kind word, real attention, these things cost nothing, and they can change someone's entire day, sometimes their entire trajectory.

The world doesn't need more people chasing success at any cost. It needs more people who leave every room, every conversation, every interaction a little better than they found it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for one thought to leave the next generation, she chooses something requiring no power, wealth, or title to act on, deliberately removing every excuse someone might have for believing they're not yet positioned to practise it. **Why it matters.** "Leave every room, every conversation, every interaction a little better than they found it" sets a standard measured entirely by what you leave behind for others, not by what you personally gained from being there. **Reflect.** *Think about the last few rooms or conversations you were part of. Did you leave them a little better than you found them?*

16 Kindness and Strength Were Never Opposites

If I could offer one final reflection, it would be this: kindness and strength were never opposites. They were always the same muscle.

For most of my early career, I believed I had to choose between being effective and being kind, between being respected and being warm. It took me years to understand that the strongest leaders I ever encountered were strong precisely because they were kind, not in spite of it.

Kindness takes more courage than toughness ever did. It requires you to stay open when it would be easier to close off, to stay honest when it would be easier to stay silent, and to keep caring about people even when it costs you something.

That is the principle I would want to leave behind: kindness and strength were never opposites. They were always the same muscle.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. This closing principle names the exact belief she held for most of her early career, that effectiveness and kindness, respect and warmth, required choosing between them, and states plainly that it took years to understand they didn't. **Why it matters.** "Kindness takes more courage than toughness ever did" inverts the assumption running underneath most leadership advice, that toughness is the harder, more demanding path, and kindness the easier, softer one. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life are you still operating as though kindness and strength are opposites, rather than the same muscle?*

17 Choose to Be Human, Always

Choose to be human, always. Choose to be kind, even when it isn't required of you. Choose to see the person in front of you, not just their role, their title or their usefulness to you.

Every interaction is an opportunity, either to make someone feel smaller, or to make someone feel seen. I hope, in the time I have, to choose the second option as often as I possibly can.

> *“Kindness and strength were always the same muscle.”*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her final principle collapses everything she's said across sixteen earlier answers into a single, repeated instruction: choose. Not a disposition someone either has or doesn't, but a decision made again, deliberately, in each interaction. **Why it matters.** Framing every interaction as a binary, either making someone feel smaller or making someone feel seen, removes the possibility of a neutral encounter. In her account, there's no such thing as an interaction that doesn't move someone in one direction or the other. **Reflect.** *In your very next interaction today, which will it be: making the other person feel smaller, or making them feel seen?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Kindness is what strength looks like when it has matured. The leaders who influence us most rarely dominate a room. They listen without needing to prove anything.

Niceness avoids conflict; kindness engages with it. Being nice softens the truth. Being kind trusts someone enough to give it to them directly.

Psychological safety is the real measure of a kind organisation. Whether people feel safe saying "I don't know" or "I made a mistake" matters more than any mission statement.

Avoiding a hard truth in the name of kindness is often self-protection. Real kindness sometimes requires the courage to have the uncomfortable conversation sooner rather than later.

Boundaries are what make kindness sustainable. A person with nothing left to give cannot actually be kind to anyone, no matter how good their intentions.

Kindness is active, not passive. It takes more courage than toughness ever did. Speaking up for someone absent, giving honest feedback, and holding a boundary all require real courage.

Kindness and strength were never opposites. They were always the same muscle. Choose to be human, always. Every interaction is a chance to make someone feel smaller, or to make them feel seen.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"The right people will have the right products and services, and not the reverse."

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Creating Platforms. Building Leaders. Changing Lives.

The right people will have the right products and services, and not the reverse. Sixteen principles on education, mentorship, and building trust before transactions.

> *The right people will have the right products and services, and not the reverse.*

01 I Always Thought My Ideas Should Benefit Me Too

In the corporate world, I was in the sales and marketing arena, working with national and international companies of repute. I was handling the dealer and distributor network across the locations I was entrusted with. I was designing schemes to enhance sales and market share.

Because of my schemes, dealers and distributors were benefiting, financially and otherwise. So I always thought my ideas should benefit me too, financially and otherwise. Therefore, I decided to get into something of my own.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces his move into entrepreneurship back to a straightforward observation: the schemes he designed were creating financial benefit for dealers and distributors, and he wanted the ideas he was generating to benefit him the same way. **Why it matters.** He doesn't dress up the decision as a grand calling. It's a plain, honest account of someone recognising the value of their own thinking and deciding it deserved to build something of his own, rather than only building value for others. **Reflect.** *Are there ideas you're currently generating for someone else's benefit that you've never seriously considered building for yourself?*

02 Everyone Was Entering Education, and I Saw My Opening

Being in field sales, I was observing different industries in the year 2002. Around that time, so many corporates were entering the education space. They were setting up schools or colleges, helping them directly or indirectly.

That's when I thought of getting into the education space.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His entry into education wasn't built on a lifelong passion for teaching; it came from watching the market in 2002 and noticing where corporates were moving. He treats that observation as a legitimate and sufficient reason to act. **Why it matters.** Being honest about a practical, market-driven entry point, rather than manufacturing a more inspirational origin story, is its own kind of transparency, especially in a field so often described in purely mission-driven terms. **Reflect.** *Is there a decision in your own path that you've quietly rewritten into a more inspiring story than the practical reason that actually drove it?*

03 My Journey Has Built Me as a Person

> My entire journey has built me as a person, personally and professionally. In both my roles, I was virtually meeting people across different geographies. That has changed me completely as a person, in terms of my thoughts, attitude, personality, thinking, planning, and more.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He credits the sheer breadth of people met across geographies, not a single mentor or event, as the actual mechanism of his own transformation, changing not just what he knows but how he thinks and plans. **Why it matters.** Naming thoughts, attitude, personality, thinking, and planning separately suggests this wasn't one shift but many small, compounding ones across years of exposure to different people and places. **Reflect.** *Which of your own roles has exposed you to the widest range of people, and how has that breadth actually changed the way you think, not just what you know?*

04 Education Finally Builds Character

> Education finally builds character in a person. It teaches life lessons to students. It creates personality and employability in a person. Finally, it prepares one for life and life's challenges.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He lists character, life lessons, personality, and employability as a sequence, not a list of equal alternatives, treating employability as the last and most practical output of a process that starts with something deeper. **Why it matters.** Placing character before employability pushes back against a purely transactional view of education as job preparation, while still taking employability seriously as a genuine and necessary outcome. **Reflect.** *In your own view of education, whether for yourself or someone you're raising or mentoring, which comes first in your actual priorities: character or employability?*

05 A Child Who Performs Academically Does Not Necessarily Perform in Real Life

> A child who performs academically does not necessarily perform well in real life. Therefore, I have always done skills and competencies assessments that actually check the life skills that eventually matter after school or college.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates academic performance from real-life performance as two genuinely different measures, and describes building his own assessment practice specifically to check for the second one, since the first doesn't reliably predict it. **Why it matters.** Choosing to measure life skills rather than relying on academic results alone is a practical response to a gap he clearly believes is real and consequential, not just a passing observation. **Reflect.** *If you were assessed only on life skills rather than academic or professional credentials, would the picture of your own readiness for real life look different?*

06 Prepare Children for Life, Not Just for Rank

> Ideally, the school system should prepare students with the life skills that help a child live life happily, cheerfully and joyfully.

If a child does not win, he learns one of life's biggest secrets, and that's accepting failure. He learns how to feel failure and move on. I often advise parents not to pressurise their child into doing certain things. Rather than chasing ranks, they should prepare their children for life, which comes after school or college.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats not winning as a genuine curriculum item, not an unfortunate outcome to be minimised, but a lesson in accepting failure and moving on that a child needs exposure to as much as any academic subject. **Why it matters.** His advice to parents, to stop chasing ranks and instead prepare children for the life that comes after school, is a direct, practical instruction rather than an abstract philosophy, aimed at changing what parents actually pressure their children to do. **Reflect.** *Are you currently preparing the young people in your life for ranks and results, or for the life that comes after the ranks stop mattering?*

07 Collaboration Is What Builds Nations

It is always collaborations, networks and communities that can build a nation. When equally competent people work as a team, they create incredible results. Countries also work collaboratively, and that benefits all nations, weak or strong.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He scales the same principle from a team of individuals up to nations, arguing that collaboration between equally competent parties produces results that benefit everyone involved, regardless of relative strength. **Why it matters.** Explicitly including "weak or strong" nations in the benefit of collaboration rejects a purely competitive, zero-sum view of how organisations or countries succeed relative to one another. **Reflect.** *In a partnership or team you're currently part of, are you working from a genuinely collaborative mindset, or a competitive one dressed up as collaboration?*

08 The Right People Will Have the Right Products, Not the Reverse

Any partnership hinges on trust, understanding and empathy. I have always focused more on people and less on products. The right people will have the right products and services, and not the reverse.

Being a connector is intelligent and diligent work. You get to know people as they are. In the process, you become a better version of yourself.

> *"Being a mentor means making the mentee a person better and bigger than you."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He inverts the usual order of business thinking, where you find the right product and then the right people to deliver it. In his account, getting the people right comes first, and the right products follow from that, not the other way around. **Why it matters.** Framing connecting people as "intelligent and diligent work" that changes the connector themselves treats matchmaking not as a passive service but as an active discipline with its own genuine skill and personal payoff. **Reflect.** *In your own work or partnerships, are you starting from the product and looking for people to fit it, or starting from the right people and letting the product follow?*

09 Making the Mentee Better and Bigger Than You

> In one simple line, being a mentor means making the mentee a person better and bigger than you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given the chance to define mentorship in full, he chooses a single sentence rather than an elaborated philosophy, with the explicit standard being that the mentee should surpass the mentor, not simply learn from them. **Why it matters.** Setting the bar at "bigger than you" rather than simply competent or independent is a more demanding definition of mentorship than most people would offer, one that treats being surpassed as success rather than a threat. **Reflect.** *By his standard, has anyone you've mentored actually become bigger than you, or have you quietly been satisfied with them staying smaller?*

10 Young Generations Teach Us New Ways to Live

> Young generations always teach us new lessons and methods of living life differently.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reverses the usual direction of the mentorship relationship implied elsewhere in his answers, stating plainly that younger generations are also teaching him, not simply receiving what he has to offer. **Why it matters.** This is a small but genuine admission of ongoing learning from people younger than himself, consistent with his earlier point that being a good mentor means wanting the mentee to eventually exceed you. **Reflect.** *What is something a younger person has taught you recently that changed how you actually live, not just what you know?*

11 Being Called a Wise Connector

> According to me, my biggest achievement is schools labelling me as a wise connector.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked about his biggest achievement, he doesn't point to a business milestone or a specific deal. He points to a reputation, a label other people gave him, which is a form of achievement measured entirely by how others came to see him. **Why it matters.** Choosing a reputation over a transaction as his defining achievement is consistent with everything else he's said about prioritising people and trust over products and results. **Reflect.** *If you had to name your own biggest achievement using only a label other people have given you, what would it be, and is it the one you'd want?*

12 Failures Made Me Wiser and More Cautious

> Many of my collaborations with companies have not worked well; rather, they failed miserably. That has made me wiser and more cautious.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He states his failures plainly, without minimising them as merely difficult or complicated, using the word "miserably" rather than softening the description, before naming exactly what he took from them: wisdom and caution. **Why it matters.** Naming caution as a direct outcome of failure, not just wisdom in the abstract, suggests these collaborations changed how he actually screens future partnerships, not only how he thinks about the past ones. **Reflect.** *What is a failure you've had that made you genuinely more cautious in a specific, practical way, rather than just wiser in the abstract?*

13 Every Relationship Evolves With Time

> There's nothing as such. Every business, network, partnership or relationship evolves with time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked whether a specific belief of his had changed over time, his answer reframes the question itself: change isn't the exception that needs explaining, it's the constant condition of every business relationship and partnership. **Why it matters.** Treating evolution as the default state, rather than something that only happens to beliefs that turn out to be wrong, removes any embarrassment from the fact that his own views have shifted over the years. **Reflect.** *Which of your own long-standing business or personal relationships have you assumed were static, when they've actually been quietly evolving the whole time?*

14 Value Education Should Be Free Across the Entire Chain

> Value education should not be charged to students. It should be free across the entire supply chain: the creators, publishers, distributors, schools, and so on.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what should never be reduced to a commercial transaction, he names value education specifically, and extends that principle across the entire chain that delivers it, not just the final point of contact with the student. **Why it matters.** Naming creators, publishers, distributors, and schools all together treats commercialisation as a risk at every link in the chain, not only at the point where a parent or student might be charged directly. **Reflect.** *Is there something in your own field that you believe should never be commercialised, and are you certain that belief holds at every point in the chain, not just the most visible one?*

15 Creating Platforms, Building Leaders, Changing Lives

> Creating platforms and communities builds more mentors and leaders, who eventually change the lives of the people connected. It's a spiral that always works.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He describes a specific mechanism, not just a hope, for how impact compounds: platforms produce mentors and leaders, who then change the lives of people connected to them, creating a spiral rather than a one-time effect. **Why it matters.** Calling it "a spiral that always works" is a strong, confident claim built from direct experience rather than theory, consistent with someone whose own achievement was other people's word of mouth rather than a personal title. **Reflect.** *Have you built or joined anything in your own life that functions as this kind of spiral, where the platform itself keeps producing new mentors and leaders beyond your direct involvement?*

16 What I Wish Someone Had Shown Me Then

> If there was someone, either at school or at college level, who could show me a career path based on my own SWOT analysis, things could have been better and different today.

> *"Creating platforms and communities builds more mentors and leaders."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what he wishes he'd understood earlier, he doesn't point to a specific skill or decision. He points to the absence of a person, someone who could have used a genuine assessment of his own strengths and weaknesses to help him choose a path. **Why it matters.** This closing reflection connects directly back to Principle 5, his belief in assessing real skills and competencies rather than relying on academic performance alone. His own career might have taken a different shape if that kind of assessment had been available to him personally. **Reflect.** *If you had access to a genuine SWOT analysis of yourself at school or college age, guided by someone who could act on it, what might you have done differently?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The right people will have the right products, not the reverse. Any partnership hinges on trust, understanding and empathy. Focus more on people, less on products.

A child who performs academically does not necessarily perform in real life. Assess the life skills that actually matter after school or college, not only academic results.

Prepare children for life, not just for rank. Learning to accept failure and move on is one of the most important lessons a child can learn.

Being a mentor means making the mentee better and bigger than you. That's the whole definition, in one line. Being surpassed by someone you mentored is success, not a threat.

Every relationship evolves with time. That's not a sign something went wrong. It's the default condition of every business, network, and partnership.

Failures made him wiser and more caution. Many collaborations failed miserably. He didn't minimise that, and he let it change how he screens future partnerships.

Creating platforms builds more mentors and leaders, in a spiral that always works. Impact compounds when you build the platform, not just the individual relationship.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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"Titles are rented. Character is owned."

18 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 019, September 2026

Build a Life That Outlives Your Designation

Titles are rented. Character is owned. Eighteen principles from a journey that moved from a sales bag in undivided Andhra Pradesh to the boardroom.

> *Titles are rented. Character is owned.*

01 Do Justice to Whatever Responsibility Is Placed in Your Hands

One of the earliest leadership lessons I received came from a boss who told me something that stayed with me throughout my career: "Whatever you do in your career, at whatever level, and however small it might be, make sure it has a huge positive impact that will be the legacy of your stint in the years to come."

That sentence changed the way I looked at work. A young person often thinks the important assignments are the ones with visibility. I learnt the opposite. The responsibility may be small. The geography may be small. The team may be small. The designation may be junior. But the quality of your work should never be small.

When I joined Bayer India Diagnostics in 1995, there were no smartphones, GPS systems, social media platforms or sophisticated online dashboards helping a salesperson navigate a territory. What I had was a product, a sales bag, relationships and the reputation I built through my own conduct.

I remember travelling through places such as Adilabad and working with customers whose scale could easily have been underestimated. In one instance, I persuaded a small laboratory to invest around ₹1.5 lakh in a diagnostic instrument. I realised that I was not really selling a machine. I was helping someone improve diagnosis, serve patients better and build confidence in healthcare delivery.

That experience taught me something I still believe: never judge the size of an opportunity by the size of its geography. The work in front of you deserves your best simply because it is in front of you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The lesson didn't arrive as an abstract principle, it arrived as a boss's sentence he carried for decades, and was tested immediately in a small lab in Adilabad where the machine mattered less than the patients it would eventually serve. **Why it matters.** "Never judge the size of an opportunity by the size of its geography" rejects the common early-career instinct to wait for visibility before giving full effort. The standard he sets is unconditional, regardless of scale. **Reflect.** *Is there a task in front of you right now that you've been giving less than your best because it feels too small to matter?*

02 The Higher You Rise, the Larger the Horizon of Your Responsibility

My career moved through very different worlds. Bayer taught me trust. VIP Industries taught me reputation. Reliance Communications taught me execution. Ogilvy taught me to understand people and India. Invictus taught me culture and institution building. The Boardroom taught me stewardship. I call these my six universities. Each transition required me to become a student again.

The lesson was simple: growth is not merely an increase in authority. It is an expansion of responsibility.

As a young professional, I was responsible for targets. Later, I became responsible for teams. Then for businesses. Then for people, culture and institutions. Eventually, the question changed from "What can I achieve?" to "What can I safeguard, strengthen and leave behind?" That is when leadership begins to mature.

The higher you rise, the less leadership becomes about yourself. And the more it becomes about the consequences of your decisions on others.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names six genuinely different organisations as six universities, each teaching a distinct subject, trust, reputation, execution, understanding people, culture, stewardship, treating every transition as a reason to become a student again rather than simply applying what he already knew. **Why it matters.** The shift from "What can I achieve?" to "What can I safeguard, strengthen and leave behind?" marks the exact point where he locates leadership maturity, not a specific title or years of experience, but a change in the question being asked. **Reflect.** *Which question are you currently asking yourself more often: what can I achieve, or what can I safeguard, strengthen and leave behind?*

03 Governance Is About Protecting the Future

For me, governance is not simply compliance. Compliance asks: "Have we followed the rules?" Governance asks: "Are we protecting the institution?" That distinction matters.

A Board has a responsibility not merely to review what management has done, but to protect the organisation's future capacity to create value. That means asking uncomfortable questions. It means balancing growth with resilience. It means thinking about succession before succession becomes urgent. It means considering culture, reputation, risk, stakeholders, technology and institutional continuity.

The Boardroom is therefore not simply a place of authority. It is a place of stewardship.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a precise line between two questions that sound similar but aren't: compliance asks whether rules were followed; governance asks whether the institution itself is being protected. The second question is harder and has no checklist. **Why it matters.** Naming succession as something to think about "before succession becomes urgent" treats stewardship as a continuous discipline rather than a response triggered only once a crisis forces the question. **Reflect.** *In your own area of responsibility, are you asking whether the rules were followed, or whether the thing you're responsible for is actually being protected for the future?*

04 The Most Important Board Question: "What Are We Not Seeing?"

Experience can become dangerous when it creates certainty. The longer we work in a particular industry, the easier it becomes to believe that we understand it completely. But markets change. Consumers change. Technology changes. People change. Regulation changes. And sometimes the biggest risk is not what we know. It is what we have stopped questioning.

This is why I believe one of the most important questions in a Boardroom is: "What are we not seeing?" It creates space for dissent. It encourages independent thought. It challenges assumptions. It protects the Board from collective overconfidence.

I learnt this much earlier in business. One of my most important lessons from failure was: never fall in love with your own assumptions. A strategy can look perfect on paper and still fail on the ground. A plan can be logical and still be wrong. Experience is valuable. But experience must remain curious.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He identifies a specific danger in expertise itself: the longer you work in an industry, the easier it becomes to believe you understand it completely, right as the industry keeps changing underneath that certainty. **Why it matters.** "Never fall in love with your own assumptions" is a discipline aimed squarely at the people most likely to need it, the experienced and successful, who have the most reason to trust their own judgment and the most to lose by not questioning it. **Reflect.** *In the area where you have the most experience, when did you last genuinely ask what you might not be seeing, rather than trusting what you already believe you know?*

05 Judge the Decision Before You Judge the Result

Failure has probably been my greatest teacher. Projects did not always go according to plan. There were clients I could not win. Strategies that looked right on paper did not work on the ground. There were decisions I wished I had taken earlier. There were moments of self-doubt.

But with time, I understood that failure is not always evidence of a bad decision. Sometimes a sound decision produces a bad outcome. Sometimes a poor decision gets lucky. Therefore, I learnt to examine the quality of the decision, not merely the result.

That distinction is extremely important for leaders. If we reward only outcomes, people eventually stop taking intelligent risks. If we examine reasoning, assumptions, information, alternatives and judgement, we create better decision-makers.

Failure removed a great deal of ego from my thinking. I stopped asking, "Who is responsible?" and started asking, "What is this experience trying to teach me?" Blame rarely solves problems. Learning does.

But another lesson failure taught me was this: never allow a difficult chapter to convince you that the story is over. Resilience is not pretending that failure does not hurt. It is refusing to allow failure to define you. It is getting up without becoming bitter. It is learning without losing faith in yourself. It is continuing without carrying resentment.

There is a sher by Jigar Moradabadi that captures this spirit with extraordinary force:

"हम को मिटा सके ये ज़माने में दम नहीं, हम से ज़माना ख़ुद है, ज़माने से हम नहीं।" — जिगर मुरादाबादी

English meaning: The world does not possess the power to erase us; we shape our relationship with the world rather than allowing the world to define us.

That, for me, is resilience. Not defiance for its own sake. Not ego. But the quiet conviction that a setback can interrupt your journey without determining its destination. I have had difficult phases. I would not erase them. They introduced me to a wiser version of myself.

And Faiz Ahmed Faiz expresses another dimension of resilience beautifully:

"दिल ना-उमीद तो नहीं, नाकाम ही तो है, लम्बी है ग़म की शाम, मगर शाम ही तो है।" — फ़ैज़ अहमद फ़ैज़

English meaning: The heart has not lost hope; it has only experienced failure. The evening may be long, but it is still only an evening.

That is how I now look at difficult phases. They are phases. Not identities.

> *"Never fall in love with your own assumptions."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates the quality of a decision from the quality of its outcome, a sound decision can still produce a bad result, and a poor one can get lucky, which means judging leaders only by outcomes teaches them the wrong lesson entirely. **Why it matters.** The two shers he reaches for, from Jigar Moradabadi and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, both make the same distinction in poetic form that he makes in plain language: a setback is a phase, not an identity, and difficulty is an evening, not a permanent night. **Reflect.** *Think of your last failure. Did you evaluate the quality of the decision that led to it, or only the outcome, the way most people default to doing?*

06 Never Navigate Tomorrow Using Yesterday's Assumptions

Every major transition in my career required me to unlearn something. Moving from diagnostics to consumer products required a new understanding of markets. Moving to telecom required understanding scale and execution differently. Moving to advertising required understanding human behaviour. Moving to entrepreneurship required understanding culture, P&L and institutional resilience. Moving into governance required understanding stewardship.

Today, artificial intelligence is again changing the landscape. The temptation is to ask, "How do we implement AI?" I believe Boards must increasingly ask, "How do we prepare our people for an AI-enabled world?"

Technology is rarely the biggest challenge. Mindset is. AI can analyse. Predict. Recommend. Automate. But leadership still requires responsibility, accountability, moral judgement and human understanding.

The future will not belong to people who compete against technology. It will belong to people who learn how to work intelligently with it without surrendering human judgement.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reframes the standard AI question, "how do we implement it", into a different and harder one, "how do we prepare our people for it", shifting the challenge from a technology rollout to a human readiness problem. **Why it matters.** "Technology is rarely the biggest challenge. Mindset is" applies to every transition he lists, not just AI, diagnostics to consumer products, telecom, advertising, entrepreneurship, governance all required unlearning before the new skill could take hold. **Reflect.** *In whatever major shift you're currently navigating, are you focused on implementing the new tool, or on preparing the mindset needed to actually use it well?*

07 Capital Is More Than Money

When we discuss business capital, we often think of financial capital. But institutions are built on several forms of capital. There is financial capital. There is human capital. There is intellectual capital. There is relationship capital. There is reputational capital. And there is trust capital.

A business can lose money and recover. It can lose market share and rebuild. But once trust is deeply damaged, rebuilding becomes far more difficult.

My own career taught me that relationships are not networking transactions. Many opportunities that came much later in my career were born from relationships built years earlier, without expecting an immediate return.

That is why I tell young professionals: do not ask only, "What can this relationship do for me?" Ask, "What value can I create in this relationship?" That is how relationship capital compounds.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names trust capital as uniquely fragile among the six forms he lists, money and market share can both be lost and rebuilt, but deeply damaged trust is far harder to recover, which is why he treats it as the one worth protecting most carefully. **Why it matters.** Building relationships years before they produced any opportunity, without expecting an immediate return, is a genuinely patient practice that runs against the instinct to network only for near-term value. **Reflect.** *In your own relationships, are you asking what they can do for you, or what value you can create within them, regardless of what comes back?*

08 When Growth Outruns Governance, Risk Scales With Revenue

Growth is exciting. But growth without governance can become dangerous. As businesses scale, informal systems that worked at ₹10 crore may fail at ₹100 crore. Founder-driven decisions may work in the early years but become bottlenecks later.

A small team can operate on relationships. A larger institution requires systems. A founder can remember everything. An institution needs processes. That is why governance should not be treated as something that arrives after growth. Governance must evolve with growth.

My own experience in building Invictus reinforced this strongly. We adopted a work-from-home model as early as 2010, long before the world was forced into remote working by the pandemic. When people asked how we could manage people without seeing them every day, my answer was: "If leadership depends on seeing people every day, perhaps we haven't built enough trust." The model worked because it was supported by accountability, trust and culture.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He identifies a specific structural failure point, informal systems that worked at ₹10 crore breaking at ₹100 crore, rather than treating growth problems as vague or unpredictable. The systems need to evolve ahead of the scale, not catch up after it. **Why it matters.** Adopting remote work in 2010, over a decade before the pandemic forced it globally, and defending it with "if leadership depends on seeing people every day, perhaps we haven't built enough trust", reframes a management concession as evidence of exactly the trust-based governance he's describing. **Reflect.** *Is there an informal system in your own work that functioned fine at a smaller scale but is now quietly becoming a bottleneck as things have grown?*

09 Don't Become Indispensable. Become Replaceable.

This may sound counterintuitive. But I believe it is one of the most important lessons for founders, CEOs and leaders. If everything depends on you, you have not built an institution. You have built dependence.

The objective of leadership should be to build people capable of carrying the responsibility forward. At Invictus, I have always believed that if our people grow, the organisation grows.

A leader's success is therefore not measured only by how much he or she can personally accomplish. It is measured by how much the organisation can accomplish without depending on that individual.

This is especially important in family businesses and founder-led enterprises. Succession is not an event. It is preparation. Institutional continuity is not about removing the founder. It is about ensuring that the institution becomes larger than the founder.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the exact failure that indispensability actually represents: not strength, but dependence, an institution that hasn't been built yet, just a person that everything currently relies on. **Why it matters.** Reframing succession as preparation rather than an event changes when the work is supposed to happen, continuously and in advance, not scrambled together once a departure becomes imminent. **Reflect.** *If you stepped away from your current role tomorrow, would what you've built continue, or would it reveal how much was actually just dependence on you?*

10 Transformation Is Complete Only When Behaviour Changes

Transformation is often discussed through technology, restructuring, new strategies or new operating models. But transformation is incomplete until behaviour changes.

You can introduce a new system. You can redesign an organisation. You can publish a new vision. But if people continue behaving exactly as they did before, very little has transformed.

I have seen this repeatedly across business and consulting. The deepest transformations happen when people begin to think differently, collaborate differently, make decisions differently and take ownership differently.

That is why I believe transformation is fundamentally human. Technology can enable transformation. Leadership must make it real.

> *"Don't become indispensable. Become replaceable."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates the visible signals of transformation, a new system, a redesigned org chart, a published vision, from the actual test of whether it happened: whether people's behaviour changed at all underneath those signals. **Why it matters.** "Technology can enable transformation. Leadership must make it real" assigns each party a distinct, non-interchangeable role. A tool can't do leadership's job, and leadership alone can't substitute for the tool. **Reflect.** *Think of a transformation effort you've been part of. Did people's actual day-to-day behaviour change, or just the systems and language around them?*

11 Authority Can Be Assigned. Trust Has to Be Earned.

Leadership without trust is merely authority. A designation can give you the right to instruct people. It cannot make them believe in you.

My own understanding of leadership has therefore always been closely connected to trust. I learnt it early at Bayer. I saw it reinforced across later roles. And I experienced its full meaning while building teams at Invictus.

People may work for a designation. But they follow character. That is why I have always believed in authentic leadership, remaining true to your personal and professional values even when circumstances become uncomfortable.

Integrity is not what you demonstrate when everyone agrees with you. Integrity is what you preserve when doing the right thing becomes inconvenient.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates working for someone from following them: a designation can command the former, but only character earns the latter, and the gap between the two is where most leadership actually fails or succeeds. **Why it matters.** Defining integrity specifically as what you preserve when the right thing becomes inconvenient, not what you display when everyone already agrees with you, sets a test that only shows up under real pressure, not in comfortable moments. **Reflect.** *The last time doing the right thing became inconvenient, did your integrity hold, or did convenience quietly win?*

12 Culture Is the Invisible Operating System of Governance

You can write policies. You can create committees. You can establish controls. But culture determines how people behave when nobody is watching. That makes culture a governance issue.

My four I's, Inclusivity, Integrity, Innovation and Impact, are connected. Inclusivity allows different voices to enter the room. Integrity gives those voices a trustworthy foundation. Innovation allows the organisation to challenge the existing way of doing things. Impact asks whether all of this is actually creating positive change.

This philosophy was shaped by experiences throughout my career, but perhaps its roots go back much further, to growing up among people from different parts of India and learning early that difference does not have to create distance.

The strongest institutions are not those where everyone thinks alike. They are those where people can think differently without losing trust in one another.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces his four I's back to their actual origin, not a leadership seminar but growing up in defence postings among people from different states, languages, and backgrounds, where he learned early that difference doesn't have to create distance. **Why it matters.** Defining the strongest institutions as places where people think differently "without losing trust in one another" rejects uniformity of thought as the marker of a healthy culture, replacing it with a much harder standard: real disagreement held together by real trust. **Reflect.** *In your own team or organisation, do people who think differently from each other still trust one another, or has disagreement quietly started eroding that trust?*

13 Experience Becomes Valuable When It Becomes Useful to Others

Over time, I began to think differently about success. At 25, success meant achieving targets. Later, it meant leading larger teams. As an entrepreneur, it meant building a sustainable business. Today, I ask a different question: "Will my work continue to create value when I am no longer there?"

That changed my definition of success. I have increasingly believed that the world does not need only successful people. It needs useful people. People who solve problems. People who build teams. People who strengthen institutions. People who help others become better. People who leave places stronger than they found them.

That is why mentoring has become important to me. Experience has little value if it ends with the person who acquired it. It becomes meaningful when it becomes useful to someone else.

At this stage of my life, I think less about accumulation and more about contribution. And this is where I often return to Iqbal:

"सितारों से आगे जहाँ और भी हैं, अभी इश्क़ के इम्तिहाँ और भी हैं।" — अल्लामा इक़बाल

English meaning: Beyond the stars there are still other worlds; beyond today's achievements, there are still greater tests and possibilities.

For me, that is what learning means. Every achievement should create the appetite for the next contribution.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He tracks his own changing definition of success across four distinct life stages, targets, teams, a sustainable business, and finally a single question about whether his work outlasts his presence, rather than claiming he always understood success the way he does now. **Why it matters.** "The world does not need only successful people. It needs useful people" makes usefulness to others the actual measure, treating experience that ends with the person who acquired it as, in his words, having little value at all. **Reflect.** *By his current measure, will your work continue to create value when you're no longer there to sustain it personally?*

14 Become Capable Before You Become Visible

We live in an age where visibility can arrive before capability. Social media can make someone appear successful very quickly. But visibility is not value.

I tell young professionals: build substance before building a personal brand. Learn. Read. Listen. Take difficult assignments. Work with people different from you. Make mistakes. Accept feedback. Keep your word. Become dependable.

My own journey was never planned as a straight path from Sales Officer to Board advisor. I simply kept taking the next responsibility seriously. Adilabad taught me not to underestimate small opportunities. Reliance taught me execution. Ogilvy taught me human behaviour. Entrepreneurship taught me resilience. Governance taught me stewardship. The Boardroom came much later. Capability came first.

There is perhaps no better expression of this philosophy than Iqbal's famous lines:

"ख़ुदी को कर बुलंद इतना कि हर तक़दीर से पहले, ख़ुदा बन्दे से ख़ुद पूछे, बता तेरी रज़ा क्या है।" — अल्लामा इक़बाल

English meaning: Raise your inner self to such strength and stature that, before destiny determines your path, you have developed the character and capability to shape your own direction.

For me, this is not a call to arrogance. It is a call to self-development. Become worthy. Become capable. Become dependable. And then let opportunity find you.

> *"Don't spend your life chasing success. Spend your life becoming worthy of it."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He identifies a specific modern inversion, visibility now often arriving before capability, and states plainly which one is real: visibility is not value, no matter how quickly social media can manufacture the appearance of success. **Why it matters.** Listing capability came first, before the Boardroom, and giving the specific credit to each stop along the way, Adilabad, Reliance, Ogilvy, entrepreneurship, governance, treats capability as something accumulated in sequence, not claimed all at once. **Reflect.** *Are you currently investing more in becoming visible, or in becoming capable? Which one would still be true of you if all your visibility disappeared tomorrow?*

15 Build Institutions That Outlive Leaders

This is perhaps the principle I value most today. When I was younger, I thought about career. Then achievement. Then entrepreneurship. Today, I think increasingly about legacy. Career is what you achieve. Legacy is what continues after you.

The first international Board appointment I received came from Toronto. What made that particularly meaningful was that it did not come because I had aggressively marketed myself. It came because people had observed the work over time. That taught me something profound: legacy often arrives through the trust other people place in you.

Today, my ambition is not simply to be remembered for the positions I held. I would rather be remembered for the people who became more confident because I believed in them. For organisations that became stronger. For institutions that became more resilient. For conversations that created more hope. For young professionals who found courage to take their next step. For businesses that became less dependent on individuals. For institutions that continued to create value after individual leaders moved on.

That, to me, is institution building. And perhaps this is where my entire journey comes together. The Sales Officer with the sales bag. The professional learning trust. The manager learning execution. The entrepreneur learning resilience. The consultant learning transformation. The Board advisor learning stewardship. They are not separate people. They are different chapters of the same education.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His international Board appointment from Toronto arrived because people had observed his work over time, not because he marketed himself for it, which he treats as proof that legacy arrives through trust others place in you, not trust you claim for yourself. **Why it matters.** Naming every version of himself, the Sales Officer, the manager, the entrepreneur, the consultant, the Board advisor, as "different chapters of the same education" rather than separate identities ties his entire career into one continuous act of learning rather than a series of reinventions. **Reflect.** *Looking at your own career so far, do the different roles you've held feel like separate identities, or chapters of the same ongoing education?*

16 The Lesson I Would Give My 25-Year-Old Self

If I could sit across the table from the 25-year-old version of myself, I would tell him: do not worry about having your entire life figured out. You don't need to know exactly where the journey will end.

Take the next honest step. Learn. Keep your word. Respect people. Stay curious. Do difficult things. Don't become bitter when something doesn't work. Don't become arrogant when something does. And never confuse position with significance.

There were many moments in my career when I could not have predicted what would come next. The young man travelling through villages in Andhra Pradesh with a sales bag could not have imagined that one day he would advise Boards, mentor entrepreneurs, write about governance or speak about institution building.

But life has a remarkable way of connecting the dots when you keep moving. That is why I tell young professionals: don't chase success. Become valuable. If you become genuinely valuable, success has a much better chance of finding you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than offering his 25-year-old self a roadmap, he offers permission to not have one, take the next honest step without needing to know where the journey ends, a lesson that only makes sense in hindsight, from someone who couldn't have predicted his own path either. **Why it matters.** "Never confuse position with significance" sits alongside two matched warnings, don't become bitter when something doesn't work, don't become arrogant when something does, treating both failure and success as equally capable of distorting judgment. **Reflect.** *If you wrote this same letter to your own younger self, what specific instruction would matter most, given what you couldn't have known then?*

17 What I Want to Leave Behind

I do not want my life to be remembered simply as a list of designations. Sales Officer. State Head. CEO. Board Advisor. Board Member. Those are chapters. They are not the story.

The story is what happened to people, organisations and institutions because I was part of them.

My greatest ambition today is therefore not to become indispensable. It is to become useful. Not to accumulate authority. But to create trust. Not merely to build businesses. But to build people and institutions. Not to be remembered for occupying a Board seat. But for helping make the institution stronger while I occupied it.

I want to believe that wherever I have worked, I left people a little more confident than I found them. Organisations a little stronger. Conversations a little more hopeful. And institutions a little more prepared for the future.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He lists his own designations, Sales Officer, State Head, CEO, Board Advisor, Board Member, only to explicitly reject them as the story, insisting the actual narrative is what happened to the people and institutions around each title, not the titles themselves. **Why it matters.** Each of his four paired contrasts, indispensable versus useful, authority versus trust, building businesses versus building people, occupying a seat versus strengthening the institution, chooses the harder, less self-centered option every time. **Reflect.** *If someone summarized your career only by your list of titles, how much of the actual story would be missing?*

18 Build a Life That Outlives Your Designation

If there is one thought I would leave with the next generation, it is this: build a life that outlives your designation.

One day, every title disappears. Every visiting card becomes irrelevant. Every office changes hands. Every organisation moves forward. But the way you treated people remains. The values you defended remain. The people you developed remain. The institutions you strengthened remain.

That is why I believe: titles are rented. Character is owned. We are all temporary custodians of permanent values.

And leadership is not ultimately about how many people worked for you. It is about how many people grew because of you. Perhaps that is the most honest measure of a life in leadership.

I did not begin with a Boardroom in sight. I began by learning how to live with difference. Then I learnt how to sell. Then how to listen. Then how to lead. Then how to build. And eventually, how to govern. Every chapter gave me a lesson. Every lesson gave me a responsibility. And every responsibility made me a little better, not merely as a leader, but as a human being.

If history remembers me at all, I hope it remembers that I tried to build people, strengthen institutions and leave things better than I found them. Because ultimately: success is what you achieve. Significance is what you contribute. Legacy is what continues after you. And character is what remains when everything else is gone.

A final sher for the journey:

"तू शाहीं है, परवाज़ है काम तेरा, तेरे सामने आसमाँ और भी हैं।" — अल्लामा इक़बाल

English meaning: You are a falcon; your purpose is to soar. There are still many skies ahead of you.

That, perhaps, is the message I would most like to leave with a young person reading these pages: do not allow your present position to define the limits of your future. There are always more skies. More learning. More responsibility. More people to serve. More institutions to strengthen. More value to create. And more of yourself still to discover.

> *"Titles are rented. Character is owned."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His closing principle distills every one of the previous seventeen into a single test that outlasts all of them: not how many people worked for you, but how many people grew because of you. **Why it matters.** The three-part distinction he draws, success is what you achieve, significance is what you contribute, legacy is what continues after you, gives each word a precise, non-overlapping meaning rather than treating them as interchangeable synonyms for a good career. **Reflect.** *By his own three measures, achievement, contribution, and what continues after you, which one has had the least of your actual attention so far?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Never judge the size of an opportunity by the size of its geography. The work in front of you deserves your best simply because it is in front of you.

Authority may open the door. Character determines how long you remain welcome inside. A designation gives you the right to instruct people. It cannot make them believe in you.

Don't become indispensable. Become replaceable. If everything depends on you, you have not built an institution. You have built dependence.

Scale the governance before you scale the risk. Informal systems that worked at ₹10 crore may fail at ₹100 crore. Governance must evolve with growth, not arrive after it.

Transformation is not what you install. It is what people start doing differently. A new system, a redesigned org chart, and a published vision mean little if behaviour underneath them stays the same.

Become capable before you become visible. Visibility is not value. Build substance, keep your word, and become dependable before building a personal brand.

Titles are rented. Character is owned. Leadership is not about how many people worked for you. It is about how many people grew because of you.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/adapa-sharath-kumar-ask



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Dr. Mariam Shaikh

Global 200 Women Power Leaders 2024 · Founder & CEO, MS Education Consultants

"Success is not only about how far you go. It is also about how many lives become better because you chose to move forward."

12 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 018, September 2026

How Many Lives Become Better Because You Chose to Move Forward

Success is not only about how far you go. It is also about how many lives become better because you chose to move forward. Twelve principles on education, mentorship, and women's empowerment.

> *Education gives women something incredibly powerful: choice.*

01 See the Person Before the Student

Over the years, I have realised that guiding a student is never just about academics; it is about understanding their fears, dreams and the pressure they silently carry.

One principle I return to again and again is this: see the person before the student. When you understand what truly drives someone, your guidance becomes far more meaningful.

I also believe in being honest, even when the truth is uncomfortable, because false reassurance helps no one in the long run.

And most importantly, I remind myself that every student's journey is different; there is no single formula for success. My role is not to direct their life, but to help them discover clarity so they can choose their own path with confidence.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names honesty even when uncomfortable as a deliberate counterweight to a natural instinct to reassure. False comfort, in her account, helps no one, even when it feels kinder in the moment. **Why it matters.** "My role is not to direct their life, but to help them discover clarity so they can choose their own path" draws a clear line between guiding someone and deciding for them, a distinction easy to blur when you genuinely want the best for someone. **Reflect.** *When advising someone younger than you, are you helping them find their own clarity, or quietly directing them toward the path you'd choose for them?*

02 Make Decisions Based on Fit, Not Comparison

Every family that walks into my office carries a mix of hope, anxiety and high expectations, and rightly so, because a child's education is one of the most important decisions a parent will ever make.

What I have learned is that families are not just looking for information; they are looking for reassurance that someone genuinely understands their child.

I always encourage parents and students to think beyond rankings and prestige, and instead focus on where the student will genuinely grow, both academically and personally.

I remind them that the right environment matters more than a famous name, and that success is not about choosing the most popular option, but the one that aligns with the student's strengths, personality and long-term goals.

When families understand this, the anxiety reduces significantly, because they begin to make decisions based on fit, not comparison.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She identifies what families are actually seeking beneath their questions about universities and options: not more information, but reassurance that someone genuinely understands their specific child, not a generic applicant. **Why it matters.** "The right environment matters more than a famous name" directly challenges the instinct to chase prestige, replacing it with a more specific and harder question: where will this particular student actually grow. **Reflect.** *In a major decision you're currently facing, are you evaluating options by their reputation, or by genuine fit with who you actually are?*

03 Meaningful Partnerships Are Built on Trust Before Transactions

Working with universities, schools and organisations across different countries has taught me that meaningful partnerships are built on trust, not transactions.

I have learned to listen more than I speak in the beginning of any collaboration, because understanding someone's goals, culture and constraints is essential before offering solutions.

I also believe strongly in transparency; if something is not going to work, I say so clearly rather than giving vague answers to keep a relationship comfortable.

Cross-border collaboration also taught me patience and cultural sensitivity, because what works in one country may not work the same way in another.

Ultimately, my guiding principle is simple: build relationships with integrity, and long-term success will follow naturally.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Listening more than speaking at the start of any collaboration, before offering solutions, is presented as a discipline rather than a personality trait, one she applies deliberately because it's necessary, not because it comes naturally to hold back. **Why it matters.** Choosing clear honesty over vague reassurance, even when it makes a relationship less comfortable in the short term, is the same principle from her first answer applied at the institutional level rather than the individual one. **Reflect.** *In your own professional relationships, do you tend to give vague answers to preserve comfort, or clear ones that might create short-term friction but protect long-term trust?*

04 A Degree Should Be a Beginning, Not the Destination

The biggest shift I try to instil in students is moving from a mindset of "getting a degree" to "building a future."

Many students focus only on grades and admissions, but true success comes from developing skills, adaptability and self-awareness alongside academic achievement.

I encourage students to see education as a foundation, not a finish line, and to constantly ask themselves how their learning connects to real-world impact.

I also emphasise resilience, because setbacks, whether academic or personal, are part of every meaningful journey.

When students internalise this mindset, they stop chasing shortcuts and start building genuine, long-term capability, which ultimately leads to real and lasting success.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names a specific mental shift, from "getting a degree" to "building a future", as the actual work of education, treating grades and admissions as necessary but insufficient markers of what the process is really for. **Why it matters.** "Stop chasing shortcuts and start building genuine, long-term capability" ties directly back to fit over prestige in Principle 2. Both reject the faster, more impressive-looking option in favor of the one that actually builds something durable. **Reflect.** *In your own current pursuit, whether education, career, or a project, are you chasing a credential or building an actual capability?*

05 Education Gives Women Something Powerful: Choice

Education gives women something incredibly powerful: choice.

When a woman is educated, she gains the confidence to make informed decisions about her career, her finances and her future, rather than depending entirely on circumstances or other people.

I have seen firsthand how education transforms not just individual women, but entire families and communities, because empowered mothers raise empowered children.

Education also breaks cycles of dependency and opens doors to leadership roles that were previously inaccessible.

My belief is simple: when you educate a woman, you are not just building her future, you are building a stronger, more equal society.

> *"When you educate a woman, you are building a stronger, more equal society."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She locates the core value of education for women not in credentials or career advancement alone, but in choice itself, the ability to decide rather than depend on circumstance or other people. **Why it matters.** "Empowered mothers raise empowered children" extends the impact of a single woman's education beyond her own life, treating it as a mechanism that compounds across generations rather than stopping with the person who received it. **Reflect.** *Think of a woman whose education changed the trajectory of her family, not just her own life. What specifically did that choice make possible for the people around her?*

06 Do Not Allow Doubt to Become a Permanent Address

There have been moments in my career when I doubted whether I was making the right choices, especially during times of major transition.

What kept me going was reminding myself of my "why", the deep purpose behind my work, which is helping people unlock opportunities they didn't think were possible.

I also leaned on mentors and peers who reminded me of my strengths when I could not see them myself.

I have learned that self-doubt is normal, but it should never be allowed to become a permanent address. It is simply a signal to pause, reflect and realign, not a reason to give up.

Every challenge I overcame added a layer of resilience that I now pass on to the people I mentor.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She doesn't claim to have been free of self-doubt during major transitions. She names two specific things that carried her through it: returning to her underlying purpose, and mentors who could see her strengths when she temporarily couldn't. **Why it matters.** "Self-doubt... is simply a signal to pause, reflect and realign, not a reason to give up" reframes doubt as useful information rather than a verdict on capability, a distinction that changes what doubt is actually for. **Reflect.** *The next time self-doubt shows up, will you treat it as a signal to pause and realign, or let it settle in as a permanent address?*

07 Perseverance and Reinvention Are Not Opposites

One thing I know for certain is that perseverance and reinvention are not opposites; they actually go hand in hand.

There were times I had to completely rethink my strategies, whether due to changing industry trends, global challenges or shifting client needs.

But the reason I never gave up was simple: I always believed in the impact of my work.

I also learned to view failures not as endpoints but as data points, information that helps refine the next step.

Staying adaptable while holding onto my core purpose is what allowed me to continue moving forward, even when circumstances required significant change.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She resists the common framing that persistence means staying the same course no matter what. In her account, perseverance sometimes requires completely rethinking strategy, while the actual constant is belief in the underlying purpose, not the method. **Why it matters.** Treating failures as "data points" rather than endpoints is a small reframe with a large practical effect: a data point demands you ask what it tells you, while an endpoint just demands you stop. **Reflect.** *Is there a strategy or method you're clinging to out of a sense of perseverance, when the actual perseverance you need is toward the purpose, not the method?*

08 Every Chapter Teaches You Something the Next Chapter Will Need

My career has moved through very different worlds, education consulting, entrepreneurship, mentorship and community leadership, and each one taught me something essential.

From education, I learned the importance of patience and personalised guidance. From entrepreneurship, I learned resilience, risk-taking and the courage to make bold decisions.

From mentorship, I learned the value of empathy and long-term relationship-building. And from community leadership, I learned that real impact comes from collaboration, not individual effort alone.

Each chapter of my journey added a new dimension to how I lead today, and I believe every experience, whether smooth or difficult, becomes a building block for future growth.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She assigns each distinct chapter of her career, education, entrepreneurship, mentorship, community leadership, a specific and different lesson, rather than describing her career as one continuous skill accumulating in a straight line. **Why it matters.** "Real impact comes from collaboration, not individual effort alone" is the lesson she credits specifically to community leadership, suggesting it's something the earlier, more individually-driven chapters of her career couldn't have taught her. **Reflect.** *Looking at the distinct chapters of your own path so far, what specific lesson did each one teach you that the others couldn't have?*

09 A Transformative Mentor Helps You See Possibilities in Yourself

Yes, absolutely. There was a mentor early in my career who believed in my potential even when I was unsure of my own path.

She taught me that leadership is not about having all the answers, but about asking the right questions and empowering others to find their own solutions.

That principle has stayed with me throughout my career and shapes how I mentor others today.

I try to give the people I guide the same gift I was given: belief, encouragement and the freedom to grow at their own pace.

A truly transformative mentor does not just guide you; they help you see possibilities in yourself that you hadn't recognised before.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The specific lesson she credits to her own mentor, that leadership means asking the right questions rather than having all the answers, is the same principle she applies as a mentor herself in Principle 1, helping students discover their own clarity rather than directing them. **Why it matters.** "I try to give the people I guide the same gift I was given" makes mentorship an act of passing something forward rather than an isolated skill she developed independently. The chain of influence is named explicitly, not left implicit. **Reflect.** *Who believed in your potential before you believed in it yourself, and are you currently passing that same gift to someone else?*

10 Growth and Purpose Should Strengthen Each Other, Not Compete

Balancing professional growth with a deeper purpose is something I think about often, but for me, they are not separate; they are intertwined.

Every business decision I make is guided by one question: how does this help someone move forward in life?

When your growth is aligned with impact, ambition and purpose stop competing with each other and start strengthening each other.

I also make it a priority to stay connected with the human side of my work, meeting students, hearing their stories and celebrating their achievements, because that keeps my purpose alive even as my responsibilities grow.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She rejects the premise that professional growth and deeper purpose are two competing priorities requiring balance. Her single guiding question, "how does this help someone move forward in life", makes them the same evaluation rather than a trade-off. **Why it matters.** Deliberately staying connected to individual students' stories even as her responsibilities and scale grow is a specific practice against a common failure mode, where leaders lose touch with the human-level impact of their work as their role expands. **Reflect.** *As your own responsibilities have grown, have you maintained deliberate contact with the human-level impact of your work, or has it become more abstract with scale?*

11 The Future Belongs to People Who Combine Technological Confidence With Human Wisdom

> The world is evolving rapidly, and today's students face pressures that previous generations never experienced, technology, social media, global competition and rapidly changing career landscapes.
>
> What I want them to understand is that success is not just about technical skills; it is equally about emotional intelligence, adaptability and ethical decision-making.
>
> The future belongs to those who can combine technological confidence with human wisdom, and who focus on creating value, not just chasing achievements.
>
> I also want the next generation to know that it is okay to take unconventional paths. There is no single formula for success, and their unique journey is exactly what will set them apart.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names the specific pressures facing today's students, technology, social media, global competition, rapidly changing career landscapes, as genuinely new rather than dismissing them as generational complaint, before offering guidance built for that actual environment. **Why it matters.** "Combine technological confidence with human wisdom" refuses to frame the future as a choice between technical skill and human judgment. Both are named as necessary, with neither substituting for the other. **Reflect.** *Are you currently developing technological confidence and human wisdom together, or has one gotten far more of your attention than the other?*

12 How Many Lives Become Better Because You Chose to Move Forward

> To a student, I would say: focus on learning, not just scoring. Your curiosity and character will take you further than your grades alone.
>
> To a young woman starting her career, I would say: believe in your capabilities, take up space, and never shrink yourself to make others comfortable.
>
> To an aspiring entrepreneur, I would say: build something meaningful, not just something profitable. Impact and income can absolutely go hand in hand.
>
> And to all of them, I would add this: success is not only about how far you go. It is also about how many lives become better because you chose to move forward.

> *"Success is not only about how far you go. It is also about how many lives become better."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She gives three genuinely distinct pieces of advice, to a student, a young woman starting her career, and an aspiring entrepreneur, rather than one generic message repeated three times, each tailored to the specific pressure that role actually faces. **Why it matters.** The closing line ties every earlier principle together: fit over prestige, capability over shortcuts, collaboration over individual effort, all converge on the same final measure, how many lives became better because you moved forward. **Reflect.** *By her closing measure, how many lives have become better specifically because you chose to move forward, not just because you achieved something for yourself?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

See the person before the student, or the role. Understanding what truly drives someone makes guidance far more meaningful than generic advice ever could.

Make decisions based on fit, not comparison. The right environment matters more than a famous name. Success comes from alignment with your own strengths and goals, not prestige.

Build relationships on trust before transactions. Listen more than you speak at the start of any collaboration. Choose clear honesty over vague reassurance, even when it costs short-term comfort.

Treat education, or any pursuit, as a foundation, not a finish line. Stop chasing shortcuts and start building genuine, long-term capability.

Self-doubt is a signal to pause and realign, not a permanent address. It's simply information, not a verdict on your capability or a reason to give up.

Perseverance and reinvention are not opposites. Stay adaptable in method while holding onto your core purpose. Treat failures as data points, not endpoints.

Success means how many lives become better because you moved forward. Not only how far you personally go, but what became possible for the people around you along the way.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/dr-mariam-shaikh



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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“Don't measure your life only by what you achieve, but by what you give.”

21 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 017, September 2026

Don't Measure Your Life Only by What You Achieve, but by What You Give

A designation may give us authority, but only trust, empathy and integrity give us influence. Twenty-one principles from four decades in pharma leadership, education, and mentorship.

> *A designation may give us authority, but only trust, empathy and integrity give us influence.*

01 Leadership Is Less About Managing Businesses and More About Understanding People

After more than four decades in the corporate world, I realised that leadership is less about managing businesses and more about understanding people.

My real lessons came from difficult decisions, failures, successes, conflicts and, most importantly, from the people I had the privilege to lead.

I learned that a designation may give us authority, but only trust, empathy and integrity give us influence. Business schools can teach frameworks, but experience teaches us when to listen, when to act and when to simply stand beside our people.

For me, leadership ultimately became a journey from managing performance to nurturing people, from achieving results to creating impact.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates authority, which a designation confers automatically, from influence, which only trust, empathy, and integrity can earn. Business schools can teach the frameworks for the first; only lived experience teaches the second. **Why it matters.** The shift he names, from managing performance to nurturing people, from achieving results to creating impact, isn't a rejection of results. It's an argument that results without impact on people are an incomplete version of leadership. **Reflect.** *In your own role, are you currently managing performance, or nurturing the people behind it? Be honest about which one gets more of your actual attention.*

02 Experience Gives Us Stories; Reflection Converts Them Into Wisdom

For me, experience is not about counting the years; it is about understanding what those years have taught you.

Over four decades, I have experienced successes, setbacks, people, pressures and moments of transformation. Experience becomes wisdom when we stop merely remembering what happened and start reflecting on why it happened and what we can learn from it.

Wisdom is the ability to use yesterday's lessons to make better decisions today and create better possibilities for tomorrow.

Experience gives us stories; reflection converts those stories into wisdom. But true wisdom begins when we stop asking, "What did I gain from my journey?" and start asking, "What can I give back because of it?"

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a precise line between accumulating years and accumulating wisdom: the first happens automatically, the second requires the deliberate, separate act of reflecting on why something happened, not just remembering that it did. **Why it matters.** The shift from "what did I gain" to "what can I give back" is the same movement that runs through his answers on mentorship and legacy. Wisdom, in his account, isn't complete until it's shared outward. **Reflect.** *Think of a significant experience from your own past. Have you actually reflected on why it happened, or have you only ever remembered that it did?*

03 Build Ladders for Others Who May Not Yet See Their Own Potential

To me, the ladder represents opportunity, growth and the courage to rise beyond where we are today.

But leadership is not about climbing the ladder alone; it is about creating ladders for others who may not yet see their own potential.

Over the years, I have learned that a leader owes people three things: direction to know where they are going, support when the climb becomes difficult and trust to let them climb in their own way.

And when someone reaches a higher rung because, as a person, you gave them an opportunity, that is not your loss; it is your greatest achievement as a leader.

A true leader does not measure success by how high they have climbed, but by how many people they have helped rise, and how many ladders they leave behind for others to climb.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Named after his own book, this principle turns a common leadership metaphor, climbing the ladder, into something with an explicit obligation attached: a leader owes the people around them direction, support, and trust, not just a good example to follow. **Why it matters.** "That is not your loss; it is your greatest achievement" directly confronts the instinct to feel threatened when someone you've developed surpasses you. He reframes that moment as the actual point of the work, not a cost of it. **Reflect.** *When was the last time someone you helped reach a higher rung than you occupy, and did it feel like your achievement or their competition?*

04 A Transformational Leader Changes Mindsets, Not Just Delivers Results

For me, transformational leadership is deeply personal; it is about what changes in people because you have led them.

A successful leader delivers results; an influential leader earns followers; but a transformational leader changes mindsets, builds confidence and creates new possibilities.

Throughout my journey, I have learned that people rarely remember every target you achieved, but they remember how you made them feel about their own potential.

I believe a transformational leader must have the courage to challenge the status quo, the humility to keep learning and the empathy to bring people along.

> Ultimately, I measure my leadership not by the success I created for myself, but by the transformation I enabled in others.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He ranks three kinds of leadership in ascending order, successful (delivers results), influential (earns followers), transformational (changes mindsets), treating them as genuinely different achievements rather than synonyms for the same thing at different scales. **Why it matters.** "People rarely remember every target you achieved, but they remember how you made them feel about their own potential" names the actual currency of transformational leadership: not the target itself, but what it did to someone's belief in themselves. **Reflect.** *Of the three, successful, influential, transformational, which one would the people you've led actually say you've been to them?*

05 When Someone No Longer Needs Your Guidance, That Is a Sign You Have Done Your Job Well

> The real test of a leader is not what happens while you are leading, but what happens to people after they have worked with you.
>
> I believe a leader should begin measuring success through the growth of people the moment they realise that their own journey is not the final destination.
>
> In my career, some of my proudest moments have not been the positions I held or the targets I achieved, but seeing people I mentored become confident leaders in their own right and become entrepreneurs and many job creators.
>
> When someone you have guided no longer needs your guidance, that is not a loss; it is a sign that you have done your job well.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He moves the actual test of leadership outside the time period when he was actually leading, into what happens to people afterward, when he's no longer there to take credit or observe the outcome directly. **Why it matters.** Naming his proudest moments as people he mentored becoming entrepreneurs and job creators, rather than positions he held, locates pride in outcomes he can't fully claim credit for, only having helped make possible. **Reflect.** *What's a measure of your own success that only becomes visible after you're no longer directly involved?*

06 A Great Mentor Builds Capability, Not Dependence

> I believe the highest form of leadership is when the person you mentored can eventually walk confidently without needing you to hold their hand.
>
> Throughout my journey, I have never wanted to create followers who depend on me; I have wanted to develop people who can think, decide and lead for themselves.
>
> A mentor's role is to provide the wisdom, confidence and perspective needed at the beginning, but gradually give the other person the freedom, while trusting them, to find their own path.
>
> When someone I have mentored becomes independent, makes decisions better than I would, or even surpasses me, I consider that one of my greatest successes.

A great mentor does not build dependence; they build capability, and when your guidance becomes unnecessary, your mentorship has truly succeeded.

> *"When someone you have guided no longer needs your guidance, that is a sign you have done your job well."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He states plainly that a mentee making decisions better than he would, or surpassing him outright, counts as one of his greatest successes, not a threat to his standing as the mentor. **Why it matters.** The paradox he names directly, that mentorship succeeds when it becomes unnecessary, is a genuinely uncomfortable standard for anyone who measures their value by being needed. He states it without softening it. **Reflect.** *Is there someone you mentor or guide whose growing independence you've quietly found threatening, rather than treating it as the actual goal?*

07 Influence Is Earned One Interaction at a Time

After spending decades in corporate leadership, I have learned that the designation on your visiting card may introduce you, but it is your character that makes people remember you.

I have held positions that gave me authority, but the relationships I built through trust, respect, mentoring and genuine human connection created something with a far more lasting influence.

Even after the designation is gone, I have been fortunate to see people continue to reach out, seek my perspective and value the lessons we shared.

That has taught me that influence is never demanded; it is earned one interaction, one commitment and one act of integrity at a time.

For me, the real measure of leadership is not how many people knew my designation, but how many people still value my presence after the designation is no longer there.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He offers his own life as the test case for this principle, people who still reach out to him after his formal titles are gone, treating that ongoing contact as the actual evidence for influence outlasting authority, not just a claim. **Why it matters.** "Influence is never demanded; it is earned one interaction, one commitment and one act of integrity at a time" makes influence granular and cumulative rather than something conferred all at once by a title or achievement. **Reflect.** *If your current professional title disappeared tomorrow, how many of your current relationships would remain exactly as they are?*

08 Put People Before Processes, Purpose Before Position

My journey in the pharmaceutical industry was far more than a corporate career; eventually, it was a continuous school of leadership, people and responsibility.

Working at the intersection of science, business and human lives taught me that every decision has consequences, and leadership therefore demands both competence and conscience.

I learned to lead diverse teams, perform under pressure, navigate change and uncertainty, and balance business objectives with the responsibility we carry towards patients and society.

These lessons go far beyond pharma: put people before processes, purpose before position, and responsibility before convenience.

After four decades, my greatest learning is simple: leadership is not about how much business you build, but how much value, trust and positive impact you create through the business you lead. When your work ultimately touches human lives, leadership can never be only about achieving results; it must be about creating results that are worth achieving.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Working where science, business, and human lives intersect taught him that leadership demands competence and conscience together, not competence alone. Every decision in that environment had a consequence for someone beyond the balance sheet. **Why it matters.** "Results that are worth achieving" is a higher bar than simply achieving results. It asks not just whether a target was hit, but whether hitting it created value, trust, and positive impact along the way. **Reflect.** *In your own work, are you currently optimizing for results, or for results that are actually worth achieving?*

09 Helping Others Learn Makes Your Knowledge Meaningful

After investing a couple of decades acquiring knowledge, the greatest lesson I have learned is that yesterday's knowledge can never guarantee tomorrow's relevance.

What matters today is not simply how much you know, but how curious you remain, how quickly you can unlearn and relearn and how willingly you share what you discover.

In my own journey, every transition, from corporate leadership to education, mentoring and writing, has required me to become a student again.

But I believe the highest level of learning is reached when your knowledge becomes useful to someone else, when you can inspire another person to learn, think and grow.

For me, knowing makes you knowledgeable, learning keeps you relevant, but helping others learn makes your knowledge meaningful. That's why I keep sharing my learning in various forums, starting from students to their teachers, to professionals and so on.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His three-part ladder, knowing makes you knowledgeable, learning keeps you relevant, helping others learn makes your knowledge meaningful, treats each stage as insufficient without the next. Knowledge that stays private, in his account, never reaches its highest use. **Why it matters.** Requiring himself to "become a student again" at every transition, corporate to education, education to mentoring, mentoring to writing, means he applies the same standard of continual relearning to himself that he asks of the young professionals he mentors. **Reflect.** *When did you last genuinely become a student again in your own field, rather than relying on what you already knew?*

10 Teaching Became One of My Greatest Teachers

From working in the field to corporate leadership taught me how to lead people; becoming a teacher taught me how to truly understand them.

In the corporate world, success was often measured by targets, performance and outcomes. In teaching, I discovered that the real outcome is what happens inside a person: the confidence they gain, the questions they begin to ask and the possibilities they start to see.

Standing before students and young professionals has also made me realise that a teacher can never stop being a learner; every question challenges you to rethink what you thought you knew.

It taught me to listen more deeply, communicate with greater empathy and measure success through transformation rather than achievement alone.

Perhaps the greatest paradox of my journey is this: I entered teaching to share what I had learned, but teaching became one of my greatest teachers.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He locates the real outcome of teaching not in what students produce externally, but in what happens inside them, confidence, new questions, possibilities they start to see, a measure that's harder to track than corporate targets but, in his account, more real. **Why it matters.** The paradox he names, entering teaching to give knowledge and discovering it taught him more than he gave, undercuts the assumption that mentorship flows in only one direction from expert to student. **Reflect.** *In a role where you consider yourself the one with knowledge to give, what has that role actually taught you in return?*

11 A Book Can Continue the Conversation Long After You Have Left the Room

I realised that conversations can inspire a few people, but a book can continue the conversation long after you have left the room.

After my corporate leadership, I felt a responsibility to capture the lessons, failures, reflections and insights that shaped my journey. Writing allowed me to move beyond mentoring individuals and create something that could reach people I may never meet personally.

For me, each book is not simply a collection of ideas; it is an invitation to pause, reflect and perhaps see leadership and oneself differently.

Mentoring allowed me to touch lives in the present; writing allowed my experiences to travel across time, generations and boundaries. That is why I chose to write.

> *"The greatest success is reaching the destination without losing yourself."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He distinguishes mentoring and writing not by which is more valuable, but by their reach across time: mentoring touches lives in the present, while writing lets the same experiences travel to people he'll never meet, in generations he won't see. **Why it matters.** Framing each book as "an invitation to pause, reflect" rather than a delivery of conclusions respects the reader's own process, positioning the writer as someone opening a conversation rather than closing one with a final answer. **Reflect.** *Is there something you've learned that currently only reaches people through direct conversation, that might reach further if you found a way to write it down?*

12 What Do I Want to Leave Behind, Not Just What Do I Want to Achieve

One of the biggest turning points in my life was realising that a successful career is not necessarily the same as a purposeful life.

After more than four decades in corporate leadership, I reached a stage where I began asking myself a deeper question: "What do I want to leave behind, not just what do I want to achieve?"

That question gave me the courage to move beyond the corporate world into academia, mentoring, speaking and writing.

It was not about walking away from my past; it was about giving everything I had learned a larger purpose by sharing it with others.

My journey taught me that changing direction is not abandoning your path; eventually, it is having the courage to choose a path that is more aligned with who you have become and the legacy I want to leave behind.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The turning point wasn't a crisis or a failure, it was a single question that separated a successful career from a purposeful life, two things he explicitly says are not automatically the same. **Why it matters.** "It was not about walking away from my past" is an important distinction. He frames his transition into academia and writing as an extension and larger purpose for his corporate experience, not a rejection of it. **Reflect.** *If you asked yourself his question honestly right now, what do you want to leave behind, not just what do you want to achieve, would the answer change anything about your current direction?*

13 The Greatest Success Is Reaching the Destination Without Losing Yourself

I learned the hardest lesson about success not when I achieved something, but when I realised that every achievement comes with a price, and sometimes we understand that price only much later.

Over my journey, I experienced the recognition, responsibilities and expectations that come with professional success. But I also learned that the pursuit of success can quietly consume time, relationships, personal space and moments that can never be recovered.

Success taught me that achieving more is not always the same as living better.

Today, I see success differently: it is not only about what one can accomplish, but whether one can remain fulfilled, grounded and connected to the people who matter while accomplishing it.

The greatest success, I believe, is reaching the destination without losing yourself, or the people and values that made the journey worthwhile.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He's specific about what success quietly costs, time, relationships, personal space, moments that can never be recovered, rather than leaving the cost of ambition as a vague warning. These are named, recoverable-or-not categories. **Why it matters.** "Achieving more is not always the same as living better" separates two things usually treated as automatically linked. The lesson only became visible in hindsight, which is why he frames it as something learned only much later. **Reflect.** *Of the things success can quietly consume, time, relationships, personal space, irrecoverable moments, which one is your own current pursuit costing you right now?*

14 Failure Is Rarely a Full Stop; It Is Feedback

Some of the most important lessons of my journey did not come from the moments when everything went right; they came from the moments when I had to look in the mirror and accept that I could have done better.

I learned that failure is rarely a full stop; actually, it is feedback, provided we have the humility to listen to it.

Those difficult experiences taught me to become less judgmental, be more patient and far more empathetic towards people who were struggling or making mistakes.

As I moved from corporate leadership into teaching and mentoring, I carried that lesson with me: people do not need a leader who has never failed; they need one who has learned from failure and gives them the courage to rise again.

It is true that success may give us confidence, but failure gives a clear perspective, and perspective is what ultimately makes us a wiser leader.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats failure as data rather than verdict, feedback that requires humility to actually hear, not simply survive. The lessons he names, becoming less judgmental, more patient, more empathetic, all came from having to look in the mirror rather than at someone else. **Why it matters.** "People do not need a leader who has never failed; they need one who has learned from failure" reframes what makes a leader credible to the people struggling under them. Perfection isn't the qualification; recovery is. **Reflect.** *Think of your most instructive failure. Did you actually listen to what it was telling you, or did you just survive it and move on?*

15 Your Attitude and Your Ability to Work With People Will Determine How Far You Travel

The biggest challenge I see today is not a lack of talent; it is a gap between being qualified to do a job and being prepared to lead people.

After interacting with Gen Z, students, young professionals and emerging leaders, I have seen that their technical competence can make them excellent at their work, but it does not automatically make them effective leaders.

Leadership requires self-awareness, emotional intelligence, communication, resilience, adaptability and, above all, the ability to bring out the best in others.

I often tell young professionals: your qualification may open the door and your expertise may get you noticed, but your attitude and your ability to work with people will determine how far you travel.

My responsibility as a mentor is not simply to prepare young people for the jobs of today, or start-ups to have fabulous growth or leaders to lead, but to develop their mindset, build towards a strong character enabled with true values for the future and the courage they need to lead the world of tomorrow.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He identifies the actual gap in young professionals as not a lack of talent but a gap between being qualified for a job and being prepared to lead people, two different kinds of readiness that technical competence alone doesn't bridge. **Why it matters.** Defining his responsibility as a mentor beyond preparing people "for the jobs of today" toward developing mindset, character, and values for a future he can't fully predict is a longer-horizon commitment than most mentorship offers. **Reflect.** *In your own development, are you currently investing more in your technical qualifications, or in the self-awareness and people skills that determine how far those qualifications actually take you?*

16 Corporate Leadership Taught Me to Manage Responsibility; Entrepreneurship Taught Me to Own It

Corporate leadership taught me how to build within a system; entrepreneurship taught me that I had to build the system itself.

After my corporate experience, moving into entrepreneurship and mentoring changed my thinking from "How do we achieve the organisation's goals?" to "What problem can I solve, what value can I create, and whose life can I make better?"

I also discovered that entrepreneurship demands a different kind of courage; you have greater freedom, but you also carry greater personal responsibility for every decision.

Mentoring entrepreneurs has further reinforced my belief that experience becomes truly valuable when it is converted into insight, and insight into action, with a vision and a mission for self, for your employees, for society and also towards the country.

Corporate leadership taught me to manage responsibility; entrepreneurship taught me to own it, and mentoring taught me that the greatest value I can create is helping others build something that may outlast me.

> *"Your Attitude decides The Altitude."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces a specific shift in the question he asked himself, from "how do we achieve the organisation's goals" to "what problem can I solve, what value can I create, whose life can I make better," as the actual mechanism of moving from corporate leadership into entrepreneurship. **Why it matters.** "The greatest value I can create is helping others build something that may outlast me" closes the loop between his corporate, entrepreneurial, and mentoring chapters, each one, in his account, building toward something bigger than his own tenure in it. **Reflect.** *If you reframed your current work using his question, not how do we achieve the goals, but what problem can I solve and whose life can I make better, would it change how you approach it?*

17 Your Attitude Decides the Altitude

After a couple of decades of leading people, I can say with conviction: talent may get you noticed, qualifications may get you selected and experience may earn you credibility; but attitude determines how far you ultimately go. That's why the old saying goes: "Your Attitude decides The Altitude."

I have seen equally talented and experienced people take very different paths simply because of how they responded to challenges, change, failure and opportunity.

That realisation became the foundation of my book "Attitude Matters", because attitude is not a soft quality; it is a powerful force that shapes how we think, learn, respond and lead.

For me, the right attitude means staying curious when you think you know enough, staying humble when you succeed, and staying resilient when things don't go your way.

If one wishes to understand why attitude can become the difference between potential and performance, between success and significance, I believe "Attitude Matters" is a book worth reading, not because I wrote it, but because life taught me every lesson in it.

(However, with the best wishes of all my readers, this book, "Attitude Matters", which is my 3rd book, has also attained bestseller status on Amazon India.)

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He ranks talent, qualifications, experience, and attitude by what each actually secures, noticed, selected, credible, and finally how far you go, arguing that the first three get you into the room while only the fourth determines what happens once you're in it. **Why it matters.** His three-part definition of the right attitude, curious when you think you know enough, humble when you succeed, resilient when things don't go your way, targets exactly the moments when attitude is hardest to maintain, not the easy ones. **Reflect.** *Of his three tests, staying curious past the point you feel you know enough, staying humble in success, staying resilient in setback, which one do you find hardest to hold onto?*

18 Positions Define My Role; Values Define Who I Am

I have learned that opportunities come and go, but once you compromise your values, you can never negotiate your way back to the person you were.

For me, the two non-negotiables are integrity and respect for people.

Integrity means doing the right thing even when nobody is watching, and especially when doing the right thing comes at a cost, which includes your growth as well.

Respect means never allowing position, pressure, or ambition to diminish another person's dignity.

I would rather lose an opportunity than lose my integrity, and I would rather walk away from success than achieve it at the cost of another person's dignity. Because positions may define my role, but values define who I am.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names exactly two non-negotiables, integrity and respect for people, rather than a longer list that would dilute the weight of each one. Both are defined precisely enough to actually test against: integrity even when it costs your own growth, respect even under pressure or ambition. **Why it matters.** "You can never negotiate your way back to the person you were" treats a compromised value as a one-way door, not a temporary lapse that can be corrected later. That's a harder, more serious framing than most people apply to small compromises. **Reflect.** *Is there a small compromise you've made recently that you've been telling yourself you can undo later? What would it mean if that door only opens one way?*

19 Because of Something I Learned From Him, I Became a Better Version of Myself

When I think about legacy, I don't think about what will be written after my name; I think about what will remain in the hearts and minds of the people whose lives I have touched.

I know that this recognition on various platforms will fade slowly, awards will gather dust, titles will eventually disappear and even books will become pages of history; but the confidence we give someone, the perspective we share, or the life we help transform can continue far beyond us.

After four decades of corporate leadership and my journey through academia, mentoring, speaking and writing, this has become increasingly important to me.

I would like people to carry forward the courage to believe in themselves, the humility to keep learning, the integrity to do what is right and the willingness to help someone else rise.

If, years from now, someone near or far in this beautiful world will say, "Because of something I learned from him, I became a better version of myself," that, to me, would be the legacy worth leaving behind.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He lists exactly what he expects to fade, recognition, awards, titles, books, becoming pages of history, before naming what he believes actually continues: confidence given, perspective shared, a life helped to transform. The contrast is deliberate. **Why it matters.** The specific sentence he hopes someone says someday, "because of something I learned from him, I became a better version of myself," is a concrete, checkable measure of legacy, not an abstract wish for being remembered well. **Reflect.** *If someone had to complete the sentence "because of something I learned from you, I became..." about their own experience of you, how would they finish it?*

20 Build a Life You Will Be Proud to Remember

If I could meet the young Pramod who was just beginning his journey four decades ago, I would not begin by giving him advice. I would simply tell him, "You have no idea how much life is going to teach you; hence, enjoy this journey; you will never get these years back."

I would tell him to work hard, but not so hard that he forgets to live; to chase excellence. However, some people will become lessons, some will become lifelong relationships and some will simply pass through; but never chase a title at the cost of his values or relationships, because every person will shape your journey in some way.

I would also tell him not to fear failure, rejection or changing direction. One day, he will understand that the moments that hurt him most often prepared him for the moments that mattered most.

I would tell him that there will be days when he will question himself, moments when people will disappoint him and times when success will demand sacrifices he never anticipated. Don't let those moments harden your heart.

I would tell him to keep learning, stay humble, forgive quickly, love his family deeply, and never postpone the things that truly matter while chasing the things that merely look important.

And finally, I would hold his hand and say: "You will spend years trying to build a successful life. One day, you will understand that the real success is the people who stood beside you, starting from your

parents, your wife, your gurus, mentors, peers, team members, seniors, and including all the people who helped raising you and rising you and the person you became along the way. So don't just build a career, Pramod; build a life you will be proud to remember."

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than giving his younger self a list of career advice, his first instinct is to tell him to enjoy years he'll never get back. Every piece of guidance that follows, work hard but don't forget to live, don't chase titles at the cost of relationships, is built around that same warning against trading the present for an imagined future. **Why it matters.** Naming his parents, wife, gurus, mentors, peers, team members, and seniors together as "the real success" reframes four decades of achievement as something that was never actually a solo undertaking, even though career narratives usually get told that way. **Reflect.** *If you wrote a letter to your own younger self today, would the first line be advice, or would it be his instruction to simply enjoy years you'll never get back?*

21 Don't Measure Your Life Only by What You Achieve, but by What You Give

If there is one principle I have lived by through my journey, it is this: don't measure your life only by what you achieve, but by what you give.

My journey has taught me that knowledge becomes meaningful when shared; success becomes meaningful when it lifts others; and experience becomes meaningful when it helps someone else grow.

Titles fade, achievements become memories, but the lives we touch and the difference we make can outlive us. For me, that is the true measure of a life well lived.

> *"Don't measure your life only by what you achieve, but by what you give."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given the chance to add one final, unprompted principle, he returns to the same throughline that runs through nearly every earlier answer: knowledge, success, and experience only become meaningful once they're given away, not simply accumulated. **Why it matters.** That this closing principle repeats, almost word for word, the logic of his answers on wisdom, legacy, and mentorship confirms it isn't a new idea added for effect. It's the actual foundation the other twenty answers were built on. **Reflect.** *By his measure, don't measure your life only by what you achieve but by what you give, how would you currently score, and is that the measure you've actually been using?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A designation gives authority; only trust, empathy and integrity give influence. Business schools teach the frameworks. Experience teaches when to listen, when to act, and when to simply stand beside your people.

Build ladders for others who may not yet see their own potential. A leader owes people direction, support, and trust. Someone rising past you isn't your loss, it's your greatest achievement.

A great mentor builds capability, not dependence. When your guidance becomes unnecessary, your mentorship has truly succeeded.

Success taught confidence; failure gave perspective. Failure is rarely a full stop. It is feedback, provided you have the humility to listen to it.

Your attitude decides the altitude. Talent gets you noticed, qualifications get you selected, experience earns credibility. Attitude determines how far you go.

Positions define your role; values define who you are. Once you compromise your values, you can never negotiate your way back to the person you were.

Don't measure your life only by what you achieve, but by what you give. Knowledge becomes meaningful when shared. Titles fade, but the lives you touch can outlive you.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Air Marshal Anil Khosla

Indian Air Force (Retd.) · Former Vice Chief of the Air Staff

"Self-discipline is doing the right things when nobody is watching."

9 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 016, September 2026

To Go Fast, Go Alone; to Go Far, Go With Your Team

Self-discipline is doing the right things when nobody is watching. Nine principles from four decades in the Indian Air Force, fighter cockpit to Vice Chief of the Air Staff.

> *Self-discipline is doing the right things when nobody is watching.*

01 Take the Initiative and Make the First Move

I consider myself highly privileged to have served in the Indian Air Force, where I had the opportunity to operate fighter aircraft, assume command positions, collaborate with various organisations, and hold senior appointments. My service also included overseeing operations such as Doklam and Balakot.

During my career, I observed that as one progresses, the scope of responsibilities and the challenges encountered also expand. It is essential to adopt appropriate guiding principles for these challenges. I divide my service career into three distinct phases.

The first phase, which I call the 'worker phase,' emphasises individual performance. During this period, the guiding principles I adhered to included "take the initiative and make the first move", as overcoming inertia is often challenging. By taking the first step, subsequent steps tend to become easier. My primary principle was to "set ambitious goals while taking incremental steps towards achieving them". Additionally, I believed in full involvement in every task, i.e. giving 100%. I also believed that failure is an inherent part of life; one should not get discouraged by setbacks, but instead learn from them and try again.

The second phase is termed the 'supervisory phase,' where the focus shifts to overseeing and ensuring others complete tasks. This includes leadership roles such as commanding squadrons and stations. I was fortunate to command two important Indian Air Force air bases (Ambala and Jaisalmer). From this experience, I learned the importance of adaptability, i.e. "playing with the cards you're dealt". A relevant maritime adage states, 'If you cannot change the wind, adjust your sails.' In this stage, careful planning and organisation are essential. Effective planning requires addressing all possible contingencies to make the plans adaptable, flexible, and resilient. To implement and monitor these plans successfully, you need appropriate mechanisms, including reviews and mid-course adjustments. Crisis management and problem-solving are essential leadership skills during this phase. My personal hobby is puzzle solving, and I follow a fundamental principle: break complex problems into smaller, manageable parts to identify solutions more easily. On the other hand, crises are unpredictable and can present numerous unexpected challenges. My approach aligns with aviation practices: immediate action, subsequent actions, and long-term preventive actions. By applying common sense and acting quickly, one can contain and manage crises effectively and prevent escalation. Subsequent actions involve controlling the situation and implementing corrective measures. Long-term, predictive actions focus on preventing recurrence, allowing thoughtful planning to avoid similar crises.

The third phase, known as the 'leadership phase,' involves decision-making and setting long-term objectives. Inspiring and motivating others is paramount. I firmly believe a leader should have a vision of the organisation's future, emphasising long-term gains over short-term objectives. As a leader, calculated risk-taking is essential, but impulsive decisions should be avoided. A vital guiding principle I

follow is delegation: entrust tasks to capable individuals. Trying to do everything oneself is counterproductive, like "keeping a dog but barking yourself". These guiding principles have been instrumental in fulfilling my duties across various stages of my service career.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He divides an entire career, fighter pilot to Vice Chief of the Air Staff, into three phases, worker, supervisory, leadership, each with its own guiding principle rather than one philosophy stretched to fit every stage. What worked at the first phase, individual initiative, isn't what carries a leader through the third, which is about vision and delegation. **Why it matters.** "Trying to do everything oneself is counterproductive, like keeping a dog but barking yourself" names a specific failure mode of leaders who never fully leave the worker phase behind, holding onto tasks that should have been delegated once responsibility scaled up. **Reflect.** *Which phase, worker, supervisory, or leadership, are you actually operating in right now, and are you still applying principles that belonged to an earlier one?*

02 Decision-Making Is Both an Art and a Science

This question has two aspects. One relates to decision-making, and the other to younger leaders' responsibility when outcomes are uncertain.

I believe that decision-making constitutes both an art and a science. This perspective stems from the understanding that the decision-making process is highly scientific, while its application requires artistry. Additionally, as one progresses to higher positions within an organisation or in life, the significance and impact of one's decisions become considerably greater. In other words, many people are affected by your decisions, and their effects can last a very long time.

It is essential to make deliberate, well-considered decisions rather than act impulsively. The art of decision-making can be refined through consistent practice and the effective utilisation of available tools. One such tool involves relying on one's common sense, intuitions, and instincts. As experience accrues, these intuitions and instincts are enhanced and can play a significant role in the decision-making process. Furthermore, seeking counsel from trusted advisors is advisable; however, the individual remains responsible for the final decision. Therefore, it is imperative to assess the potential outcomes of decisions against both personal core values and organisational principles to reduce the risk of errors. Additionally, consideration of the long-term consequences of decisions is crucial. It is also recommended that decisions should not be made under emotional duress, as this can increase the likelihood of errors. A useful method I have used is listing the advantages and disadvantages, which helps clarify the decision-making process. Documenting these factors can promote clearer and more objective thinking.

The second aspect of your inquiry concerns the responsibilities inherent to young leaders. In my view, it arises from adhering to and developing the principles of accountability, reliability, and dedication. These qualities are of paramount importance. Accountability is established when the fundamental principle is that "it is my job and my responsibility." Reliability means that when a task is assigned, the person assigning it can be confident it will be completed on time and to a high standard. Dedication, as discussed earlier, means committing fully (100%) to the task at hand. Perseverance is another important aspect: continuing until you complete the task successfully. Another important aspect for young leaders is the ability to deal with failure. Failure will happen, but in those cases, the person should have the broad shoulders to accept it and own it, rather than pass the buck and blame someone else.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats decision-making as two separate skills rather than one: a scientific process, refined by tools like listing advantages and disadvantages, and an art shaped by instinct that only sharpens with experience. Neither one alone is sufficient. **Why it matters.** "Seeking counsel from trusted advisors is advisable; however, the individual remains responsible for the final decision" places accountability in exactly one place, no matter how widely counsel was sought. Advice can be shared; responsibility for the outcome cannot. **Reflect.** *In your last difficult decision, did you have the broad shoulders to own the outcome fully, or did some part of you already have a story ready about who else was responsible?*

03 To Go Fast, Go Alone; to Go Far, Go With Your Team

Team spirit is an important part of life, not only in services but also in personal and professional life. The guiding principle is "To go fast, go alone; to go far, go with your team". At a young age and in junior ranks, one should learn to work with and be part of the team. In senior appointments, it is essential to build a team and keep it together, motivated, and focused on organisational goals.

For team building, I used to draw inspiration from the car. I drew an analogy that decision-makers are like drivers. They decide where the vehicle should move, which direction it should go, and at what speed. Middle-level supervisors function as the steering mechanism, facilitating the vehicle's response to the driver's commands, while employees are the other components that ensure the vehicle works. Any malfunction or misalignment of these components adversely affects the entire system. Effective management is required for the vehicle to operate smoothly. I employed a similar approach when managing an organisation.

Maintaining the Same Tyre Pressure Across All Wheels

Ensuring the car tyres are inflated to the correct, uniform level is extremely important for safety, longevity, and good vehicle handling. You need to check the tyres periodically and inflate or deflate them as needed to maintain the same optimum pressure in all tyres. Similarly, human resources in any group also need to behave in a conducive manner. At times, factors like overconfidence or underconfidence, excessive eagerness or callousness, and ego can make individuals behave irrationally, ignoring the important principles of teamwork. A team member may sometimes need a boost (encouragement). At the same time, there may be a requirement to control and regulate others. A good manager and leader should know when to do that. Take special care when regulating and controlling to avoid permanent damage to enthusiasm, praise loudly, blame softly. It is best to do so privately and by using a suitable leadership style, i.e., with a little explanation.

Wheel Alignment

Proper wheel alignment is essential for the vehicle to move steadily in the intended direction without pulling to one side. Similarly, all team members must work together toward the intended organisational goal. This is one of the leader's or manager's key tasks, and it requires constant effort to keep team members together and focused.

Wheel Rotation

Tyre wear and tear is never uniform across all four wheels of a vehicle. Hence, to ensure uniform wear of all four tyres, it is advisable to interchange tyre positions periodically. Tyre rotation is crucial for longer tyre life and better performance. Similarly, human beings also need periodic changes in tasks and challenges. Stuck in one type of job, they tend to stagnate, which adversely affects their

performance. However, introducing changes too often is also not good for the organisation. An effective leader knows when to introduce change to avoid stagnation among their members.

Wheel Balancing

Wheel balancing in the wheel and tyre combination is important for a smooth, stable drive, reduced tyre wear, and eliminating vibrations. In team functioning, maintaining a balance between the task and providing the wherewithal to execute it is very important. It is the job of the leader and the manager to provide the correct amount and quality of resources for the allotted task.

Spare Wheel

A vehicle has a spare wheel to cater for unforeseen circumstances. The spare wheel also needs to be maintained in good condition, like any other wheel. Similarly, in a team, it is good to have a standby person available for different tasks. The standby person needs to be aware of the task and its progress so that slotting in is easy if the need arises.

> *"Praise loudly, blame softly."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He builds an entire theory of team leadership around a single sustained car analogy, drivers, steering, and components, then five specific vehicle-maintenance practices, tyre pressure, alignment, rotation, balancing, and a spare. Each maps to a distinct, nameable leadership responsibility rather than a vague call to "build good teams." **Why it matters.** "Praise loudly, blame softly" and doing so privately gives the abstract idea of encouraging a team a specific, actionable shape, exactly the kind of concrete guidance that makes the whole analogy more than just a clever metaphor. **Reflect.** *Of his five, tyre pressure, alignment, rotation, balancing, spare wheel, which is your own team currently most neglecting?*

04 Excellence and Self-Discipline

Two aspects stand out: excellence and discipline. Not discipline, actually self-discipline.

Excellence

Two drivers shape a person's output level. One is the desire to succeed, and the other is the fear of failure. The desire to succeed is considered positive, and the fear of failure is considered negative. However, in my opinion, if you harness both, you move from average to excellent performance.

You should have a desire to leave a legacy wherever you go. People should remember you for something good. Many people think enough has already been done and there is no scope for further improvement, which I think is totally wrong. There is always scope to improve your standard of living, your processes, yourself, and your organisation. The principle you should follow is to make things better every day.

What I follow is very straightforward: "hard work". There is no shortcut in life. Some people ask me whether you should work smart or hard. I tell them there's no question of one or the other; it means you have to work smart and hard. Another principle I follow is "one step extra". It means that when you feel you have done enough for a task, take one or two extra steps. That is what makes the difference between average output and above-average or excellent output.

Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is doing the right things when nobody is watching. I came across a very good example or definition of self-discipline, i.e., "the ability to make yourself do the right thing at the right time, whether you like it or not". It means you should be able to control yourself. You should be able to overcome various temptations that come your way. So self-restraint and willpower are essential for self-discipline.

Another significant facet of self-discipline is its relevance not only in work culture but across all facets of life. Whether concerning professional conduct, health, dietary habits, civic responsibility, social etiquette, manners, behaviour, road discipline, time management, or financial discipline, these aspects should all be maintained with self-discipline.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He doesn't treat the desire to succeed and the fear of failure as a choice between a healthy motivator and an unhealthy one. He treats them as two forces to be harnessed together, arguing that using only one keeps performance merely average. **Why it matters.** Extending self-discipline explicitly beyond work, into diet, civic responsibility, manners, road discipline, and financial discipline, refuses to let it be a professional-only virtue people switch on for the office and off everywhere else. **Reflect.** *Is your own self-discipline consistent across work and the rest of your life, or does it noticeably weaken the moment nobody professional is watching?*

05 Adapt to Technology, Threats, and an Uncertain Future

Military leaders must constantly deal with new technologies, changing threats, and an uncertain future. They have to adapt to these changes constantly.

Technology

It's often said that "technology is a good gadget, but a bad weapon," highlighting its double-edged nature. In times of war, though, the lines blur, and there is no good or bad. Transforming technology into effective warfighting tools takes considerable time and effort. The Air Force, especially, is a technology-intensive service. Recently, technologies such as quantum, AI, robotics, hypersonic systems, and drones have rapidly transformed warfare.

To adapt to new technology, one needs to think and ideate constantly, i.e., how to use the new technology for military purposes and how to convert it into military capability. This process must occur concurrently, and development should proceed in parallel, ensuring capabilities are integrated into both civil and military domains at the same time. As far as possible, dual-use systems are better, as they can serve both purposes.

Changing Threats

Change is the only constant; resisting it can be exhausting, and adapting to it is a strength. Today's world is changing very fast, and so are the threats.

Therefore, it is essential to maintain a close watch on the adversary. Observing the adversary means evaluating both their capability development and their attitudes. However, our preparation should focus on the adversary's capabilities rather than their current attitude. The adversary's attitude may change at any time, whereas their capabilities may be used against us.

Uncertain Future

Decision-making in an uncertain environment is one of the most challenging tasks military leaders face. Therefore, military leaders must allow their imagination to explore all potential scenarios. This involves

rigorous thinking, considering every possible outcome and preparing accordingly for each contingency. This approach ensures plans incorporate essential qualities such as adaptability, flexibility, and resilience, which are critically required in a rapidly changing world. During capability enhancement, mid-course reviews and course corrections matter because conditions change quickly. This is how you deal with a changing world.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His distinction between an adversary's attitude and their capability is a precise strategic principle: attitudes can shift overnight, but capabilities, once developed, persist and can be used regardless of current intent. Preparation should track the harder, slower-changing variable. **Why it matters.** "Technology is a good gadget, but a bad weapon" until war blurs the line entirely, is an honest acknowledgment that the ethical clarity available in peacetime about a technology's purpose doesn't survive contact with actual conflict. **Reflect.** *In your own field, are you preparing for what a competitor or rival currently intends, or for what they're actually capable of regardless of their current intentions?*

06 Do as I Do, Not as I Say

Responsibility Towards the New Generation

In the military domain, leadership positions change constantly as individuals retire at their designated retirement age. Experienced leaders, at the time of their exit, possess extensive knowledge and wisdom which they are expected to pass on to the succeeding generation. This process resembles a relay race, where one hands over the baton to the next runner rather than starting afresh.

It is therefore essential to leave a legacy that is memorable and reflects established capability, while also allowing room for future enhancements based on forthcoming changes. Furthermore, alongside developing capabilities and strategic planning, it is crucial to provide a clear and effective roadmap for the future. This roadmap provides a foundation for subsequent generations to adapt and build. Equally important is mentoring and training the successors, ensuring they are well prepared to assume future roles and responsibilities. Additionally, cultivating a motivated and competent team is vital, as this enables incoming leaders to develop further and refine the established framework. In my view, these are the key actions experienced leaders should take to support the transition and ease the next generation's tasks.

Lessons for Young Professionals

Regarding lessons for young professionals and leaders, I have previously advocated several in my earlier response. Moreover, there are a few additional ones.

It is advisable to always adopt a balanced approach. This involves, firstly, maintaining equilibrium across professional, personal, and social settings. Secondly, it requires diligent effort while also acknowledging the importance of leisure; a guiding principle I have consistently upheld is "work hard and play harder". Furthermore, in professional pursuits, both substance and presentation are critical; however, it is essential to balance them. This philosophy embodies what I consider a balanced approach to life.

Second, the foremost priority should be being a good human being. It is essential to recognise that possessing professional excellence does not necessarily equate to being a good human being. To cultivate goodness, one must show tolerance towards others and respect their ideas and beliefs. It is important to show empathy towards subordinates, remain honest in all interactions, and uphold

fairness in dealings. I believe these qualities are fundamental to earning others' respect. Therefore, they are essential.

And lastly, and most importantly, it is essential to lead by example. Your motto should be 'Do as I do' rather than 'Do as I say'. This is because people tend to forget or doubt what you say, but they always observe and trust what you do. They pay close attention to your actions and look for consistency. Therefore, it is very crucial that you lead by example.

> *"Do as I do, rather than do as I say."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats passing on leadership as a relay race, handing over a baton rather than each generation starting from zero, which requires a leader to actively build a roadmap and mentor successors before they leave, not simply perform well and depart. **Why it matters.** "Possessing professional excellence does not necessarily equate to being a good human being" is a direct rejection of the assumption that competence and character are the same achievement. He names being a good human being as the foremost priority, ahead of professional excellence itself. **Reflect.** *If people around you could only observe your actions, never hear your words, what would they conclude your actual priorities are?*

07 Ikigai: A Reason for Being

Retirement Transition

The transition from forty years of military service to retirement has, I must admit, been somewhat challenging, mainly because it requires an adjustment period. One day, you are in a very high-ranking position, addressing numerous crises and constantly taking calls. The next day, however, your phone goes completely silent, and you're totally out of the loop. It takes time to adjust to the new way of life.

In my case, the process has been instructive, offering numerous insights into purpose and ongoing contribution. One such realisation is that the skills and knowledge acquired through service are equally applicable to everyday life, which has proven highly beneficial. Furthermore, it is evident that the extensive experiences gained over a span of forty years should not be squandered; rather, they ought to be shared with others so they too can benefit from these lessons.

Additionally, I have recognised that there remains much to learn. During active service, the focus is predominantly on one's profession, often leaving less attention for other areas. However, later reflections reveal that one can acquire much more knowledge and develop many additional skills. Moreover, it became clear that life encompasses much more than the monetary wealth, rank, and power people often pursue during their careers. Understanding that health and relationships matter more than material gains underscores the importance of purpose and meaningful contribution.

Purpose in Life

Retirement does not imply that one merely ceases all activity; rather, it is essential to remain both physically and mentally engaged. This engagement is not necessarily to earn additional income, but it is essential for one's physical and intellectual well-being.

In my case, a peculiar situation arose following my retirement. During the COVID period, I experienced considerable idle time. Consequently, I began documenting and discussing the knowledge I had

accumulated over forty years. This endeavour gradually evolved into my life's purpose: to read, learn more, and share my insights with others. I established a blog, which now hosts about 850 posts, and I also manage a YouTube channel. Both platforms are self-operated. Additionally, I participate in seminars, discussions, and lectures at various colleges, universities, and think tanks. This involvement keeps me actively engaged.

Furthermore, I value continuous learning, meeting new people, and sharing knowledge through my blog and YouTube channels. These activities benefit one's well-being and also contribute to society. It is mutually advantageous.

Having a clear purpose is a Japanese concept called "Ikigai", which means "a reason for being" (it combines iki, to live, and gai, reason). Ikigai is a significant factor contributing to the longevity of Japanese people. Therefore, having a purpose in life post-retirement is exceedingly important.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He's honest that the transition itself was somewhat challenging, from a phone ringing constantly with crises to complete silence overnight, rather than presenting retirement as a smooth, dignified next chapter from the start. **Why it matters.** Building an 850-post blog and a self-operated YouTube channel during COVID idle time turned reflection into an actual practice, not just a stated value. Ikigai, in his account, isn't a concept he read about, it's the structure he built for himself once he needed one. **Reflect.** *If a major role or identity in your own life ended overnight, do you have a reason for being ready that doesn't depend on that role?*

08 LIVE: Learning, Ideation, Value Creation, Exchange

One principle I want everyone to remember is captured in the acronym "LIVE."

L Stands for Learning

Learning is an ongoing process that continues throughout one's life. In my view, the day you cease to learn, you also cease to truly live. Learning keeps us curious, adaptable, and open to new possibilities.

I Stands for Ideation

Learning must lead to thoughtful reflection, questioning, and brainstorming. In today's world, we need thinkers, individuals who can generate new and innovative ideas. But an idea, unless acted upon, remains only an idea.

V Stands for Value Creation

The true value of learning and ideas lies in their implementation. We must translate our ideas into action, create meaningful outcomes, and continuously improve upon what we do. Implementation turns ideas into practice and creates value for ourselves and others.

E Stands for Exchange

Knowledge, experiences, and innovations gain greater meaning when they are shared. We have a responsibility to pass on what we have learned, including our successes and failures, to the next generation and to others who can benefit from our experiences.

Thus, LIVE represents a continuous cycle: Learning, Ideation, Value Creation, and Exchange. It is a simple but fundamental principle: keep learning, keep thinking, turn ideas into value, and share what you learn with others. That is what it means to truly LIVE.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for the one principle he'd most want future generations to remember, he compresses his answer into a four-letter cycle, learning that leads to ideation, ideation that must become value, and value that only means something once exchanged with others. **Why it matters.** "An idea, unless acted upon, remains only an idea" is the hinge of the whole cycle. Without it, learning and ideation alone would just be intellectual accumulation, LIVE insists each stage has to convert into the next or the cycle stalls. **Reflect.** *Where in your own LIVE cycle, learning, ideation, value creation, exchange, are you currently stuck, accumulating at one stage without moving to the next?*

09 Doing What You Love and Loving What You Do

I want to share a personal experience with you. It is not merely a story, but an actual event that occurred in my life. During my school years, particularly in class nine for the higher secondary board, my father wanted me to take up biology and become a doctor. At that time, opportunities were quite limited. His reasoning was simple: my elder brother had become an engineer, so I should pursue a career in medicine. Consequently, I enrolled in biology alongside physics and chemistry, among other subjects. After a year of study, I realised my interest in biology was limited, while I strongly liked mathematics.

I approached my mathematics teacher to ask whether I could include mathematics alongside the other three science subjects. He expressed concerns about my ability to cope, given that I had not studied mathematics for a year. I asked for a chance to try, promising to drop the subject if I could not manage it. He agreed and convinced the principal to allow me to take mathematics as a fourth subject in Class 10. In the board exams, mathematics was the only subject in which I obtained a distinction. Subsequently, mathematics became a mandatory requirement for joining the Air Force.

When I applied and cleared the selection process for the National Defence Academy, a second issue arose. My father questioned my desire to join the services. After I convinced him, he suggested I consider joining the Navy, arguing that his background in the Air Force and my brother's service in the Army meant all three services would be represented if I joined the Navy. However, my heart was set on the Air Force, so I chose that path. Later, my mother raised concerns about the risks of flying and advised me against it. I explained that if I joined the Air Force, I wanted to become a pilot. Subsequently, I began flying in the Air Force, and my aviation career grew from there.

I share this story not to portray myself as a rebel against my parents. On the contrary, they understood and supported my feelings and aspirations. The key takeaway from this narrative is the importance of self-awareness, i.e. understanding your strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. Once you understand yourself clearly, you should follow your dreams. Everyone has aspirations; pursuing them is crucial. By doing so, the guiding principle of "doing what you love and loving what you do" naturally emerges. This approach lets you give your best effort to your pursuits and ultimately succeed. This is the core message I wish to convey through this story.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Three separate moments in his youth, choosing mathematics over biology, choosing the Air Force over medicine or the Navy, choosing to fly despite his mother's worry, each required him to advocate for himself against a reasonable, well-intentioned expectation from someone he respected. **Why it matters.** He's careful to frame this as self-awareness rather than rebellion, and to note his parents ultimately understood and supported him. The lesson isn't about defying family, it's about knowing yourself clearly enough to make the case for what you actually want. **Reflect.** *Is there a well-intentioned expectation from someone you respect that you've never actually made the case against, the way he did with his mathematics teacher and his father?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Take the initiative and make the first move. Overcoming inertia is often the hardest part. Set ambitious goals while taking incremental steps toward them.

Decision-making is both an art and a science. Seek counsel from trusted advisors, but the individual remains responsible for the final decision, regardless of how widely that counsel was sought.

To go fast, go alone; to go far, go with your team. Maintain equal tyre pressure, keep alignment toward the shared goal, rotate tasks to prevent stagnation, balance resources against responsibility, and always have a spare wheel ready.

Self-discipline is doing the right things when nobody is watching. It should hold across professional conduct, health, civic responsibility, manners, and financial discipline, not just at work.

Prepare for an adversary's capability, not their current attitude. Attitudes can change overnight. Capabilities, once developed, persist and can be used regardless of intent.

Do as I do, not as I say. People forget or doubt what you say. They always observe and trust what you do.

LIVE: Learning, Ideation, Value Creation, Exchange. An idea, unless acted upon, remains only an idea. Value only means something once it's exchanged with others.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Sushil Rao Chilkuri

38 Years in Journalism · Former Editor, Special Reports, The Times of India

"You are the voice of the people."

20 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 015, September 2026

You Are the Voice of the People

Only print is final. You cannot undo print. Twenty principles from 38 years in journalism, from cub reporter to Editor, Special Reports, The Times of India.

> *Only print is final. You cannot undo print. It is for the record. It is the record.*

01 Deadlines. Accuracy. Relevance. Truthful. Unbiased.

I was in Class VI when I developed an interest in becoming a journalist. That is the profession I consciously chose. Had I even met a journalist when I was just 10 years old and made up my mind? No. Did I happen to go to any newspaper office? No. Perhaps the fact that I read the newspaper every day could have been one reason. I loved the profession because it presented me with the opportunity to write reality. Not fiction. When I realised my dream, I was 20 years old. And in 2026, I completed 38 years in journalism. I did nothing else but journalism.

The real challenge began in 1988 when I joined an evening newspaper called Citizen's Evening. The hard reality was that it was working against time. Gathering information from the right sources. Developing credible sources. Speed was the name of the game. And there could be no compromise on accuracy.

Deadlines. Accuracy. Deadlines. Accuracy. Relevance. Deadlines. Accuracy. Relevance. Truthful. Deadlines. Accuracy. Relevance. Truthful. Unbiased. These words were part of everyday life. They have always been. They always will be. They have to be. Whether it was journalism in 1988, when I started off as a cub reporter, or my stint as Editor, Special Reports, The Times of India, Hyderabad, from where I retired in January 2026, there was no compromise on the principles and ethics of journalism.

To me, professional ethics and personal principles were both one and the same. I did not have to lead a double life.

That picture of a well-meaning journalist, reporting facts, engaging in healthy criticism and questioning wrongdoings must remain. That breed cannot be wished away. When I joined journalism in 1988, I knew the very basic purpose of journalism was to inform. Be unbiased. Today, in 2026, after having been in journalism for 38 years, the reason why journalism should exist is the same: to inform; to be unbiased; and to educate.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces a single, unbroken definition of journalism from a Class VI ambition through 38 years and a retirement as Editor, Special Reports at The Times of India. The list of words he repeats, deadlines, accuracy, relevance, truthful, unbiased, isn't decoration. It's the same standard applied without variation across four decades. **Why it matters.** "Professional ethics and personal principles were both one and the same. I did not have to lead a double life" is a rare thing to be able to say honestly about a long career. The absence of a gap between the two is presented as something earned, not assumed. **Reflect.** *Is there a gap between your professional conduct and your personal principles that you've stopped noticing because you've lived with it so long?*

02 A Story Is Not Complete Without All Versions in It

Studying journalism at university opened up my mind to one big and most important thing: a story is not complete without having all versions in it. In the first lesson on Reporting, the basics are introduced, the "5Ws and one H": What, When, Who, Where, Why and How. Getting information is easy. Understanding that not all information is necessary or useful to the reader is difficult. We are accountable to the readers. Their time is precious. Valuable.

I remember one day the telephone rang. The caller started abusing me and threatening me. I understood why. I had written a news report about a school functioning from dilapidated premises. I had checked out all the rooms. This was during the monsoon. I noticed that the old structure could most certainly give way, endangering the lives of students. My report was based on facts. It was written so that remedial measures would be taken. Working on a news report, reporting facts with good intention, attracted something I had not expected. Verbal abuse. I knew that it was this brand of journalism that mattered, something that mattered to the public, even if it put off some people.

Not long after, I worked on another report about how drugs were being palmed off as samosas near educational institutions. The intent was not just about gathering information. It was about gathering the right information for something to be set right in society. The purpose mattered.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His first lesson in journalism school wasn't about writing style, it was about completeness: a story isn't finished until every version of events is in it. The harder skill he names isn't gathering information, which is easy, but knowing what's actually useful to the reader. **Why it matters.** The two stories he chose, the dilapidated school and the samosa-drugs report, share the same underlying test: he wasn't reporting information for its own sake, he was reporting it so something would be acted on before harm occurred. The verbal abuse that followed was proof the reporting had landed where it needed to. **Reflect.** *In your own work, do you gather information because it's easy to find, or because it's genuinely useful to the person who needs it?*

03 The Purpose Mattered, Not Just the Information

Imagine a 16-year-old girl living in a mud house with no door except a small window. I could not imagine this. I went to the village in Mahbubnagar district on this story in 1996. No one directed me to. No one asked me to. Yet it was the calling of journalism that beckoned me.

I reached the village. The parents said it was the girl's wish. I asked to be allowed to speak to the girl through the small opening in the wall. "We cannot allow that," they said. I insisted. They did not give in. What I really wanted to confirm was whether the girl was indeed inside that room. They agreed to an arrangement: they would call out to her by name, she would come near the opening and respond, and I would not ask her anything. I heard the girl's voice. A feeble voice.

Someone hinted at a possible angle. The needle of suspicion pointed to a relative, her brother-in-law, who lived in Bombay. His plan was to make the girl a living deity. The room that was built was to be the temple, and she was to be the presiding deity. Visitors would have to make an offering, and a box had been arranged for that purpose.

My eyes were opened to this exploitation only because I spent more time there, trying to understand why this unusual thing was happening. I returned to Hyderabad. I wrote a news report based exactly on

what I heard and saw for myself. The administration quickly swung into action when they saw my report. They went to the village. The girl was set free from what had become a bondage and a crime perpetrated on her by a relative.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. No one assigned him this story. He went because something didn't add up, and stayed long enough at the scene to move past the family's version to the actual explanation underneath. The girl's freedom followed directly from that persistence. **Why it matters.** The one condition he accepted, that he could confirm her presence but not question her directly, shows a journalist working within real constraints rather than forcing his way to a story. Restraint and persistence operated together, not against each other. **Reflect.** *What's a situation you've walked past because the explanation you were given, even an unsatisfying one, was easier to accept than staying to find out more?*

04 The Clatter of the Typewriter Was Music to My Ears

The clatter of the typewriter. It is music to my ears. Always was. During the early 1980s, I had learnt typewriting. So, in 1988, when I started working as a journalist, you can understand why the sound was music to my ears. I would describe my use of the typewriter as an affair with the typewriter. It was not just a machine. It was a means by which I was communicating.

There were telephones, but not everyone could own a phone. Reporters in the districts would write their copies on a sheet of paper and hand them over to RTC bus drivers at the depot. The drivers, after reaching Hyderabad, would drop them in boxes that each newspaper had put up at the bus stations. An office boy would go and collect the 'despatches' at least twice a day. Then came fax. Then landlines and dictation. Then mobile phones, a revolution. And then the internet and smartphones and the many apps. Communication now happens in a second.

The 'dark room' was my favourite haunt. I would see the images emerge on the photo paper as the photographers 'developed' the roll. Sometimes we would stare at a blank sheet of paper as the roll would have got overexposed. "Do not waste the film roll. Use it judiciously," was the advice given to photographers.

Technology has turned everyone into an unofficial reporter. They see something. Film it. Spread it on social media. What is circulated may or may not be a fact, but technology facilitates such a transfer of information in real time. The professional reporter, however, retains his place in the world of journalism. He cannot go wrong. Should not go wrong with the information that he publishes because he is a professional journalist.

Everything has changed for the better. The core values and principles of professional journalism will have to remain the same: to give authentic news.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His account of the transition from typewriter to bus-driver despatches to fax to mobile phones to smartphones isn't nostalgia for its own sake. Each stage he lists changed how fast information could travel, while the standard for what counted as reliable information stayed exactly where it started. **Why it matters.** "Technology has turned everyone into an unofficial reporter" and "the professional reporter, however, retains his place" hold two things at once: democratized information tools are a genuine change, but they don't remove the specific responsibility that comes with the title of journalist. **Reflect.** *As the tools in your own field have gotten faster and more accessible to everyone, has your personal standard for accuracy kept pace, or quietly loosened along with the ease of publishing?*

05 Only Print Is Final. You Cannot Undo Print.

During the early years of the internet in India, 1997 to 1998, I wrote for a news website. I myself had no access to the internet, but the office did. The people I interviewed had never heard of the internet and could not imagine how an interview could be accessed there. There was hardly any access to the internet. And then the bubble burst. They poked fun at websites. They described dot-coms as "dot-cons". That was for a while, until websites staged a comeback and stayed forever.

When private television was introduced, I was one of the first ones to do some reports for TV. But I could not watch myself on TV because there was no cable connection yet in the area where I lived. Around 1996 to 1997, TV became accessible and they called it the "idiot box". Now there are hundreds of channels which are accessible.

There is a competition between television channels over breaking news. Sometimes this gives rise to misreporting. Corrections are done when the picture becomes clearer. Despite all its advantages, digital cannot be said to be completely reliable, for the very simple reason that the same "I was first" competition arises there too.

Only print is final. When a news report is published in print, it means that much effort went into verifying anything that is published. You can delete or remove something from the internet. You can stop a news report from being telecast on TV. In print, what is published is final and stays. You cannot undo print. It is for the record. It is the record.

If any media, any type of media, can shed its "me first", "me too first", "only me" or "only me first" mentality and take enough time to see that due diligence is done when publishing a news item, there will not be a situation where the organisation or individual has to cut a sorry figure. Let media be what it should be. Trustworthy. Reliable.

> "A *journalist who has a nose for news should keep sniffing.*"

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Having personally worked through the mockery of early websites ("dot-cons"), the novelty of the "idiot box", and the arrival of digital speed, he identifies the one discipline that outlasts every format: print's permanence forced a level of verification that faster media never had to earn. **Why it matters.** "You cannot undo print" isn't nostalgia for a slower medium. It's an argument that irreversibility itself is what disciplined the verification process, and that digital's ability to quietly correct or delete has removed a check that used to be structural, not optional. **Reflect.** *If everything you published or said today were as permanent and unretractable as print once was, would you check it more carefully before putting it out?*

06 Finding the Interesting in What Matters Is What Matters

A rooster was put in a police lock-up. This happened in 2021 in Jagtial district, Telangana. During the Sankranti festival, cockfights are organised. For one cockfight, the owner of a rooster tied a sharp, three-inch knife to its legs. An onlooker was severely injured and died. The rooster was caught and put in the lock-up as evidence. On the face of it, this is an amusing piece of information. But for the police, it was a job to be done. A case had to be investigated the way it had to be.

All stories that matter make it into the news columns. What matters need not be interesting. It can simply be dry. Or informative. That serves the purpose it is meant to.

Let me mention another case. During the lockdown in 2020, a woman from Kamareddy went on her two-wheeler to Ongole to bring back her son, who had gone there to visit the place. She travelled 1,400 kilometres on the journey there and back so that her son could return home. This revealed several aspects of her personality. She was not scared to drive alone during the day and night. It was the lockdown period, but she had to get her son back.

Did this story matter simply as information? It should not matter to the general public or readers. It is the interesting part that matters. Her resolve. And her determination. Finding the interesting in what matters, or should matter, is what matters.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He places two very different stories side by side, a rooster in a police lock-up and a mother's 1,400-kilometre motorcycle journey, to make the same point from opposite directions: raw information alone rarely matters, but the human resolve or absurdity underneath it does. **Why it matters.** "Finding the interesting in what matters, or should matter, is what matters" is a genuinely useful editorial principle stated plainly: it's not about choosing between important and interesting stories, it's about locating what's interesting inside the ones that matter. **Reflect.** *In your own work or writing, are you presenting information as merely important, or have you found the interesting thread inside it that would actually make someone care?*

07 A Journalist Who Has a Nose for News Should Keep Sniffing

Russia invaded Ukraine. Two countries distant from India were at war. Why then would Russia and Ukraine even appear on my radar? Curiosity got the better of me when I came to understand that some Indian youth were among those fighting in Ukraine, on behalf of Russia. Why would this happen? I felt there was more to it than met the eye.

Initially, I assumed the Indian youth were part of a private army. I investigated further. Probed deep. This is when I found that these youth were actually drafted into the Russian army officially, recruited through private persons publicising online the opportunity, with the promise of many benefits. Those acting as recruiters took money from the applicants to facilitate their recruitment. All such recruited persons were sent to the border to fight Ukraine. Their lives were at risk. Some died.

Eventually, the Government of India had talks with the Russian government, and many such Indians recruited into the Russian army were relieved of their duties and sent back home. This is not to say that this was a result of the news reports that only I wrote. But substantial evidence of how it was all happening appeared in my news reports.

I followed an instinct that told me something was going wrong. The sniffing continued. A journalist who has a nose for news should be able to pick up a scent and continue sniffing to unearth a hidden truth. Sometimes it may be a false alarm, but the important thing is to pick up a scent.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. A story about a distant war became a local story about Hyderabad youth because he refused to accept the first, simpler explanation, a private army, and kept investigating until he found the actual recruitment pipeline putting lives at risk. **Why it matters.** He's careful to attribute the eventual government intervention only partially to his reporting, "not to say that this was a result of the news reports that only I wrote," a small but real act of not overclaiming impact. **Reflect.** *Is there an instinct you've had recently that something didn't add up, that you let go rather than kept sniffing?*

08 Peace Was a Priority

As much as it is a professional duty to give readers a complete picture of news developments, sometimes the decision may be not to publish something. I will not call it suppressing any information, but a decision has to be taken on what purpose that information, if given, would serve. These judgements mainly have to be made when dealing with news reports where there are communal clashes.

I understood this myself during the early years of the 1990s. Former Prime Minister V. P. Singh, before he became Prime Minister, visited Hyderabad to visit some areas where a curfew had been imposed. Accompanying him, I learnt much about what had been happening there. When writing the news report, I asked myself: if I write this, even though it is only quoting people as having said that, will it contribute to restoring peace or create an even more disturbing situation?

I left unwritten many of the things that I had learnt. Peace was a priority. Feeling and being responsible was what was needed. The decision not to write anything that would aggravate the situation was taken. So no one got to know what I had got to know and what I was not writing.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He distinguishes carefully between suppressing information and exercising judgement about what publishing it would actually accomplish. The question he asked himself, would this restore peace or worsen the situation, was the actual editorial standard, not simply whether the information was true. **Why it matters.** Choosing to leave things unwritten during active communal tension, and never revealing what those things were, shows restraint that never gets public credit. No one but him knows what wasn't published, which is precisely the point. **Reflect.** *Has there been a time you had true information that, if shared, would have served your own credibility more than it would have served the people around you? What did you do with it?*

09 Having Something to Publish Is Not, by Itself, a Reason to Publish It

This was in the early 2000s. A man had got into the tiger enclosure in the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad. In the morning, the zoo staff found the carcass of the tiger, its skin removed. It was a mysterious case.

The editorial decision that had to be taken was whether a photograph of the carcass, with its skin removed, should be published. All the other newspapers too had access to the same photograph. If we did not have it, it would be considered a "miss".

My viewpoint was that we should publish it. I did not want my newspaper to look like we had missed something the others had. I understood the reasoning behind the editorial decision not to publish it.

The photograph would only serve the purpose of putting off the reader. There was no need to convince the reader that the act had taken place. The officials said it. There was no denying the fact.

Having something to publish is not, by itself, a reason to publish it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He states his own disagreement plainly, he wanted to publish the photograph, and lost that argument, then explains exactly why the decision that overruled him was right: the image would have served shock value alone, since the facts were already established without needing visual proof. **Why it matters.** Including his own losing position, rather than presenting the final call as obviously his own wisdom from the start, is a more honest account of how editorial judgement actually develops, through disagreement, not certainty. **Reflect.** *Have you ever pushed for something you had every right to say or publish, and later come to agree that the restraint someone else argued for was the better call?*

10 Listening to a Person, Not Just Hearing an Answer

A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and I were at a reception hosted by the visiting President of India at Rashtrapati Nilayam in Secunderabad in 1989. Hardly anyone knew who Kalam was then. I recognised the well-known defence scientist he was, but that was not the time or occasion for an interview.

Years later, after he had stepped down as Chief Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister, I got to sit down with him for a chat. In 2002, at a school in Hyderabad, he told me why he asked children the same question wherever he went: "What do you want to become?" "I ask them that question so that they start thinking," he told me. So I asked him the same question. His dream, he told me, was to reach and talk to children across the country. Within a couple of weeks of our conversation, he was called for a higher national duty. He became the President of India.

Interviewing someone means you have to hear him without interrupting him. It also means listening to him by paying attention to what he may actually be wanting to convey, and asking whether they would like to say something if I had not asked a question they were expecting.

At Raj Bhavan during the Dalai Lama's visit to Hyderabad in the early 1990s, I did an interview just standing with him in the corridor. If a little time is what you get, you make the best use of it by going prepared.

I once interviewed former Union Minister George Fernandes. "It is my nap time. You have come late," he told me. "You can still take a nap, sir," I told him. "You can close your eyes and give me the answers," I said. That interview was done with George Fernandes with his eyes shut!

Interviewing a person also means really understanding a person rather than merely going by his words. For all you know, he may not have found the right word to express himself, but when publishing the interview, the person's views and opinions have to be conveyed in the right context, even if they had not used the right word to express themselves.

“Having something to publish is not, by itself, a reason to publish it.”

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The Kalam interview shows the value of restraint, waiting years for the right moment rather than forcing an interview at a reception, while the George Fernandes story shows the opposite instinct, adapting instantly to interview a minister with his eyes closed rather than losing the opportunity entirely. **Why it matters.** Understanding a person rather than merely going by his words, and conveying their meaning accurately even when they didn't find the exact right word, is a higher and more difficult standard of accuracy than simple transcription. It requires genuine listening, not just recording. **Reflect.** *In your last real conversation with someone, were you listening for what they meant, or just waiting to record what they literally said?*

11 I Had to Respect That

A heroine from Mumbai got assaulted by a Telugu film producer and actor in Hyderabad, in broad daylight, in front of everyone. She was pulled by the hair and dragged in a film studio. The next day, no publication had the news report. Only I wrote it.

I waited until evening. When she landed in Mumbai, I called her. She gave me a blow-by-blow account. I asked why she did not lodge a police complaint. She said the producer was "powerful" in the film industry and had threatened her career. She had a request: "You seem to know everything and I have also confirmed the incident to you. But please do not write it in the newspaper."

I called the producer. "We are not interested in giving our version. You write whatever you want to. We will then decide what we want to do," the person who answered told me.

Neither the victim nor the alleged culprit wanted to talk about the incident publicly. A journalist does not take sides. Every effort is made to take the versions of everyone involved, if that is possible.

I went ahead and wrote the news report. Caution had to be exercised. I did not take the name of the victim or the alleged culprit. I reported just the incident. No names were mentioned. The place where it happened was not mentioned. I believed to some extent that it served a purpose. Even if names were not mentioned, this was on record that this had happened.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Faced with a victim who confirmed the incident but explicitly asked him not to write it, and an alleged perpetrator who declined to engage at all, he found a third path that neither party had offered him: reporting that the incident occurred, in full, without naming anyone. **Why it matters.** "I had to respect that" is a small phrase carrying real professional cost, he had a confirmed, exclusive account and chose not to use the details that would have made it a bigger story, because the source had asked him directly not to. **Reflect.** *Have you ever had information you were technically free to use, but chose not to because someone directly asked you not to, even though it would have cost you something?*

12 I Should Not Have Been Rash With Manmohan Singh

I should not have been rash with Manmohan Singh. I regretted it. I told him as much. He was kind to understand.

In the early 1990s, when Manmohan Singh was Union Finance Minister, I learnt he was visiting Hyderabad and staying at the Lake View Guest House. I made several calls to the staff to speak to him before he left for a meeting, but they politely informed me he had not yet come. When I called again, the person at the other end appeared to disconnect the phone, but had not.

"Put me to Manmohan Singh," I asked. "Who is speaking?" the person asked. I repeated myself, my voice becoming more impatient, rash and brash, because I thought the staff were not facilitating the call at just the right time. It happened a third time.

"I am Manmohan Singh speaking," the person at the other end said.

I felt bad that my voice had been harsh. The staff had actually immediately connected me because they knew it was I who was calling. Manmohan Singh explained he had come to attend a meeting and would not be able to meet me, and regretted it. Manmohan Singh later went on to serve as India's Prime Minister for two terms. The politeness with which he spoke made me realise that, despite the pressure I was subjecting myself to, I should not lose control of myself in the way I spoke.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He offers a story where he was in the wrong, not a colleague or a source, and tells it without softening his own impatience. The person on the other end of a frustrating phone call turned out to be the Finance Minister himself, and his brashness became something he had to own directly. **Why it matters.** That he told Manmohan Singh he regretted it, and that Singh's grace in response is what stayed with him, shows the lesson wasn't really about journalism at all. It was about how pressure can make a person lose control of their own conduct, regardless of profession. **Reflect.** *When was the last time pressure made you lose control of how you spoke to someone, and did you actually go back and acknowledge it the way he did?*

13 My Most Embarrassing Mistake

"Aashiqui", starring Rahul Roy and Anu Agarwal, was released in 1990. I was impressed with Kumar Sanu's voice. A few years later, Kumar Sanu came to perform in Hyderabad. I planned to interview him, found out which hotel they were staying in, and went there in the morning. The receptionist called up a room and told me I could see him in half an hour.

I was called in. I began my questions. He looked a bit lost. I followed up. He did not seem to understand. I asked a third question: "Why did you sing only a few songs last night? Most of the songs were sung by Sudesh Bhosle."

"Do you know who you are speaking with?" he asked me. "It is you. And I have come to meet you," I answered. "My name is not Kumar Sanu. My name is Sudesh Bhosle," he said. "Kumar Sanu is in the next room."

How could I not have recognised that I was not speaking with Kumar Sanu? It was embarrassing. Very embarrassing. I do not know how the receptionist got the room number wrong, but even if it was her mistake, I should have at least been able to recognise the person I went to interview.

Eventually, I did interview Kumar Sanu. But I should not have been so blinded as not to recognise Sudesh Bhosle and take it for granted that I was talking to Kumar Sanu.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He tells a genuinely embarrassing story on himself without any attempt to make it flattering, spending twenty minutes interviewing the wrong singer entirely, and doesn't blame the receptionist's error as the real cause. He owns the failure to verify who was actually in front of him. **Why it matters.** This is the plainest possible illustration of a principle that runs through the whole feature, verification before assumption, applied here to something as basic as recognizing the person you're actually speaking with. **Reflect.** *What's a small assumption you've recently taken for granted without verifying, the way he assumed the man in the hotel room was who the receptionist said he was?*

14 If I Could Not Trust Him, I Should Not Rely on Him

I sat in front of Central Prison, Chanchalguda, and made a note of the names of all visitors paying a visit to a VVIP prisoner. In the previous days, I would call up one official I trusted and ask who had come to meet the VVIP. He would always say no one.

On this occasion, I trusted him again. To my shock, the other newspapers reported who all had been allowed into the jail. The official I had believed, I felt, had let me down. For this reason, I went and sat in front of the jail building. From morning till evening, I counted the number of people being allowed to visit. I even went and spoke to some of them. I did not contact the official on whom I had relied. I wrote in the newspaper what I saw.

I got a call from him. "I did not expect you to do that," he said. "I expected you to give me information and I trusted you," I told him. "You should not have done that," he said. "It was my duty," I replied.

Let us say that he simply did not give me the correct information. I relied not on him but verified my information on the ground. There was never a time that I spoke with the official again. If I could not trust him, I should not rely on him. The hot sun took a toll on me, and I continued to sit in front of the jail for several days to get my facts right. I fell sick. I was even hospitalised.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. When a trusted source's information turned out to be wrong, whether by design or not, his response wasn't to complain louder or find a new source to trust blindly. It was to go verify the facts himself, in person, for as many days as it took, at real physical cost to his own health. **Why it matters.** He deliberately declines to accuse the official of deceiving him, "misled would not be an appropriate word, as that would mean I was attributing motives", holding back from a conclusion the facts didn't fully support, even while ending the working relationship entirely. **Reflect.** *When a source of information let you down, did you go verify things yourself at real cost, or did you just find a different source to trust just as blindly?*

15 It Is Enough If One Is a Responsible Journalist

It is not necessary to have courage. Are we going to battle? There is no need to sound courageous or fearless. In simple words, journalism is about highlighting people's issues. Everything one wants to say can be said using temperate language.

One of my reports was interpreted as mudslinging. I had written a series of reports on an issue, and for one report, the aggrieved party went to court. I admitted to the court that I had indeed written the news report. The court took a view that the evidence I had put forth was not substantial. The headline, especially, was objectionable. As a matter of fact, even I felt so, but there was no point telling the court that a headline is not given by the reporter but by a sub-editor. I approached a higher court, challenging the judgment. The court upheld the judgment and still found me guilty, but said there was no need for the jail punishment imposed by the lower court.

I would not describe myself as a 'fearless journalist' or a 'fearless writer'. It is enough if one is a responsible journalist. The words 'fearless' and 'brave' are best suited for soldiers who go to war.

In another instance, I just had to make up my mind to report a news development, even though someone I knew very well would be upset about it. It is not being fearless; it is doing a job, a duty, and being responsible as a journalist.

> *"You are answerable to your conscience."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He includes a real court case he lost, admitting the headline was objectionable even in his own view, rather than only telling stories where his judgement was vindicated. Courage, in his account, doesn't require every decision to have been the right one. **Why it matters.** Rejecting the labels "fearless" and "brave" for journalism, and reserving those words for soldiers, is a deliberate act of proportion. It refuses to inflate the risk of his own profession by borrowing language that belongs to people risking their lives. **Reflect.** *Is there language you use to describe your own work that actually belongs to a much higher-stakes profession than yours?*

16 Accuracy Should Determine the Pace of Journalism, Not the Competition

A journalist who is accountable to his organisation and who professes to be a professional should go about his job following all the principles of journalism. Publish news that is properly verified. It takes time to verify information, and it should be understood that a journalist is taking that time to get his facts right.

The question really is: when others seem to have got those facts and have already made them public, does one still need to take time until a complete and thorough verification is done? In the digital age, one may be pushed to first publish the information, even if it is half-baked. Somebody else's speed should not determine your own pace.

Something can be understood as misinformation when someone shares it in the public domain, feeling or believing that it is true, without taking responsibility for it. Well-established news organisations largely adhere to verification, and these should be trusted rather than information shared by outlets that would rather be 'me first' in the game and later retract their report. Accuracy should determine the pace of journalism, not the competition.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He directly names the exact pressure that erodes verification standards, watching competitors publish first, and states plainly that this pressure should have no bearing on your own process. The standard is internal, not relative to what everyone else is doing. **Why it matters.** "Somebody else's speed should not determine your own pace" applies well beyond journalism, to any field where competitive urgency tempts people to cut the verification step that actually protects their credibility. **Reflect.** *Where in your own work have you let someone else's speed set your pace, at the cost of the verification or care you'd normally apply?*

17 AI Should Help Me Get My Journalism Right, Not Take Responsibility for Getting It Right

AI can produce false information. It cooks up information, gets things out of context, imagines things and conjures up so-called facts. Everything that AI can do reliably and to the fullest satisfaction should be something we make use of. It saves a lot of time.

AI cannot go out there as a person to have conversations with people to gather ground truth and facts. The reporter will still need to go out there in the field, be on the spot, and do the reporting. AI is still

not fully reliable in providing context. Relying completely on AI even for preparing background material, at this stage, is not advisable.

I particularly like the fact that AI presenters can be used for news presentation. It is getting better and better. I have noticed that even for translation, we have not arrived at a point where we can say that AI can translate a news report as it is meant to.

By all means, for every purpose possible, making use of AI is good, but it should be used as an assistant to deliver what exactly one wants. A journalist or the media should capture reality as it is. And only the media person can do that.

The one good thing about AI, like ChatGPT, is that it does not hesitate to apologise if it is pointed out that it has made a mistake. But then, the human or the journalist should know what the mistake is and point it out. AI should help me get my journalism right, not take responsibility for getting it right.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Speaking from actual experimentation rather than assumption, he draws a precise line: AI is genuinely useful for grammar correction, presentation, and saving time, but cannot replace the reporter's physical presence needed to gather ground truth from actual people. **Why it matters.** "AI should help me get my journalism right, not take responsibility for getting it right" is a clean division of labor that keeps accountability exactly where it belongs, with the human who knows enough to recognize a mistake when AI makes one. **Reflect.** *In your own use of AI tools, are you still the one who catches the mistakes, or have you started trusting the output enough that you might not notice if it were wrong?*

18 You Are Answerable to Your Conscience

In the biblical book of Exodus, the first verse of chapter 23 says: "You shall not spread a false report; you shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." In other words, stick to the truth. Stay with the facts. If you do not know, do not jump to false conclusions. And most importantly, do not allow yourself to be used by someone who has malicious intentions in getting some news published.

My first and only choice was journalism. Some who may stray into journalism as a means to an end may not quite understand why the basic principle is important. You are answerable to your conscience.

Leviticus 19:16 reads: "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people; and you are not to jeopardize the life of your neighbor." Proverbs 20:19 reads: "He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with a gossip."

It is ultimately not your writing skills. Not your ability to be adept at gathering information. Every skill and talent is needed, but there can be no compromise on the genuine calling to be a journalist.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what a 20-year-old entering journalism today should learn that he didn't need to, he reaches past technique entirely and into scripture, because the thing he wants to protect isn't a skill that changes with the times. It's a conscience-level commitment that doesn't. **Why it matters.** Placing "you are answerable to your conscience" above writing skill and information-gathering ability reorders what actually matters most in the profession, character before craft, in a field where craft is usually what gets taught first. **Reflect.** *If you strip away the technical skills of your own profession, what's the conscience-level commitment underneath that no amount of skill could substitute for?*

19 Do Nothing by Which You Will Be Taken for Granted

Presidents, prime ministers, chief ministers, royalty, film stars, sports heroes, business tycoons, Nobel laureates, scientists, judges, police officers, ambassadors, and everyone whom we know to be a celebrity or an esteemed person in society, I have met them all.

At every such meeting, I told myself over and over again that it is because of the job that I do that I happen to be meeting them. I made sure that, at every interaction, it played out in the back of my mind that we are all interacting at a professional level. Yes, sometimes one could breach the professional barrier and have interactions on a personal level, but remember always not to succumb to the temptation that information shared at a personal level should be used for professional purposes.

People should trust you enough to talk about certain things "off the record" and be comfortable that you will not write what they said and that you will not talk about these things elsewhere. This is building credibility. Do not take a professional relationship for granted and, as a journalist, do nothing by which you will be taken for granted.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Meeting presidents, prime ministers, and celebrities across decades didn't lead him to treat access as a personal privilege. He held onto a clear line between the professional relationship that gave him that access and the personal trust some of those relationships eventually earned. **Why it matters.** The specific discipline he names, never using something shared off the record or at a personal level for professional gain, is the actual mechanism by which credibility gets built over a career, not a single dramatic scoop but a long pattern of restraint. **Reflect.** *Has access or trust ever been extended to you personally that you were tempted to use professionally? What did you do with that temptation?*

20 You Are the Voice of the People

A journalist should never forget that... you are the voice of the people.

> *"A journalist should never forget that you are the voice of the people."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked to complete the sentence in his own words, after nineteen answers full of specific stories, court cases, mistakes, and decisions, he closes with the shortest possible statement of the entire feature's throughline. **Why it matters.** Every story he told, the girl in the mud house, the tiger photograph, the heroine who asked him not to publish, the source he stopped trusting, only makes sense in light of this closing line. None of it was really about him. It was about whose voice he was carrying the whole time. **Reflect.** *Whoever or whatever you speak for in your own work, would the way you've handled your hardest decisions hold up if the people whose voice you carry could see exactly how you made them?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Professional ethics and personal principles should be one and the same. Deadlines, accuracy, relevance, truthful, unbiased, applied without exception across 38 years, from cub reporter to Editor, Special Reports.

The purpose mattered, not just the information. A story is not complete without all versions in it. Gather information because it's useful to the reader, not because it's easy to find.

Only print is final. You cannot undo print. Permanence forces verification. Speed without that discipline is what makes misinformation travel faster than the truth.

Having something to publish is not, by itself, a reason to publish it. Peace was a priority. Some of the most responsible journalism is the story that was deliberately left unwritten.

Listen to a person, not just to their answer. Understand what someone actually means, even when they haven't found the right words, and convey it faithfully.

Accuracy should determine the pace of journalism, not the competition. Somebody else's speed should not determine your own pace. AI should help you get it right, not take responsibility for getting it right.

You are the voice of the people. Every hard decision, what to publish, what to leave out, who to trust, ultimately answers to that one fact.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Maj Gen Ranjan Mahajan

Indian Army (Retd.) · Five Tenures in Kashmir · Author, Kashmir in the Line of Fire

"Leadership is not primarily about authority. It is about responsibility for people."

10 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 013, September 2026

Leadership Is Not Primarily About Authority. It Is About Responsibility for People

Consultation is a strength, but accountability cannot be delegated. Ten principles from five tenures in Kashmir and the author of Kashmir in the Line of Fire.

> *Consultation is a strength, but accountability cannot be delegated.*

01 Leadership Is Earned Through Competence, Character, Courage and Trust

Looking back, I believe I was shaped less by any single appointment or achievement than by the cumulative influence of people, places and experiences throughout my military journey. The Army taught me that leadership is not conferred by rank alone; it is earned through competence, character, courage and the trust of those one is privileged to command.

As a young officer, I learned the importance of leading from the front and by setting personal example. In difficult situations, soldiers looked to their officers not merely for instructions, but for confidence, clarity and reassurance. This taught me to accept responsibility, remain composed under pressure and never ask my men to undertake a task that I was unwilling to undertake myself. Over time, I understood that courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to act correctly despite fear, uncertainty and personal risk, as there were issues more important than fear.

My multiple tenures in Kashmir profoundly influenced me. The operational environment demanded alertness, resilience and decisive action, but it also taught me that military success cannot be measured only by operational outcomes. Every decision affects human lives, families and communities. I therefore came to appreciate the importance of restraint, compassion, empathy, dignity and respect for the people among whom we operate. Humanity is not separate from professional military conduct; it is one of its essential foundations.

The soldiers I commanded were actually the biggest source of learning. Their courage, loyalty, humour and capacity to endure hardship continually humbled and inspired me. Their families also reminded me that behind every soldier stands a network of sacrifice and silent strength. I learned that comradeship is built through shared hardship, mutual trust and the conviction that no one will be abandoned.

My progression from a young officer to Major General was therefore a journey of continuous learning, perseverance and determination. It taught me to listen and understand before deciding, to distinguish firmness from harshness, and to combine mission accomplishment with genuine concern for people, with empathy. I carry forward the belief that the finest leaders create confidence, develop others and leave behind institutions and individuals stronger than they found them.

If I were to identify the central lesson of my life, it would be this: leadership is ultimately a moral responsibility. It is about using authority with humility, making difficult decisions with humanity and remaining accountable for their consequences. That is the perspective I hope to share with members of the Armed Forces, young people and future generations.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what most fundamentally shaped him, he doesn't point to a single defining moment but to a cumulative influence, people, places, and experiences across an entire career, with rank explicitly named as the wrong place to look for the source of real leadership. **Why it matters.** "The soldiers I commanded were actually the biggest source of learning" reverses the usual direction of a leadership narrative. He credits the people below him in rank with teaching him the most, not the other way around. **Reflect.** *Who in your own life, below you in title or seniority, has actually taught you the most about how to lead?*

02 Consultation Is a Strength, But Accountability Cannot Be Delegated

This question or aspect is absolutely close to my heart. Leading in operational environments taught me that difficult decisions rarely arrive with complete information, unlimited time or ideal choices. In many situations, the responsibility is to make the best possible decision with the facts available, while remaining conscious that delay can itself carry serious consequences.

The first lesson I learned was the importance of preparing thoroughly before a crisis occurs. Training, professional knowledge, disciplined procedures and an understanding of the situation create the foundation for sound judgment. When pressure rises, a leader cannot suddenly acquire calmness or clarity; one falls back on the habits developed beforehand.

The second lesson was to separate facts from assumptions. Even under time constraints, it is important to identify what is known, what is uncertain and what must be verified. I learned to seek advice from those closest to the situation, listen to different viewpoints and then accept responsibility for the final decision. Consultation is a strength, but accountability cannot be delegated.

I also learned that courage in leadership includes the willingness to revise a decision when circumstances change. Changing course on the basis of new and reliable information is not weakness; it is professional judgment. At the same time, once a decision is taken, the leader must communicate it clearly, explain the purpose behind it and stand by the people responsible for implementing it. And remember, the entire responsibility and onus of the outcome rests with the leader.

Above all, pressure must never be allowed to erode values. A leader must never lose sight of the mission, the law, the dignity of human life and the welfare of the people entrusted to his or her care. Results matter, but the manner in which they are achieved matters equally. Success obtained by abandoning integrity, fairness or humanity is not true leadership.

The greatest responsibility of a leader is therefore to remain calm without becoming detached, decisive without becoming reckless, firm without becoming insensitive and humble enough to learn from others. In the final analysis, leadership is not about always being certain; it is about accepting responsibility, making principled choices and protecting the trust placed in you.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates two things often confused under pressure: consultation, which strengthens a decision by drawing on people closest to the situation, and accountability, which stays entirely with the leader regardless of how many people were consulted. **Why it matters.** His four-part balance, calm without detachment, decisive without recklessness, firm without insensitivity, humble enough to learn, names the exact failure mode on either side of each virtue, not just the virtue itself. **Reflect.** *Under your own pressure, which of his four pairs do you tend to overcorrect toward, detachment, recklessness, insensitivity, or refusing to learn from others?*

03 Conflict Enters Homes; It Unsettles Communities

Kashmir taught me that no place can be understood through a single narrative. Beyond its mountains, beauty and strategic significance, it is a land of people, families, memories, aspirations and pain. My five tenures in the Valley showed me that conflict is never merely a contest between forces; it enters homes, unsettles communities and leaves impressions that may endure long after an operation is over.

Personally, Kashmir taught me to look beyond the immediate task and understand the human context in which every decision is made. Duty required firmness, vigilance and courage, but it also required restraint, patience and respect for human dignity. I learned that the strength of an organisation is not measured only by its ability to confront danger, but also by its ability to protect the innocent and preserve trust.

Kashmir also changed my understanding of courage. Courage is certainly displayed by those who face danger, but it is equally visible in the ordinary people who continue to work, educate their children, care for their families and hope for a better future despite uncertainty. I saw courage in soldiers who stood by one another in difficult circumstances, and in civilians who retained their humanity amid fear and disruption.

Kashmir made me more reflective, patient and conscious of the value of life. It taught me that humanity is not a soft alternative to strength; it is what gives strength its legitimacy. The deepest lesson I carry from the Valley is that duty must be performed with courage, but never without compassion.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Across five separate tenures, the lesson that stayed with him wasn't operational or tactical, it was that conflict is never only a contest between forces. It reaches into homes and communities and leaves impressions that outlast the operation itself. **Why it matters.** "Humanity is not a soft alternative to strength; it is what gives strength its legitimacy" rejects the idea that compassion and military effectiveness sit in tension. In his account, one is what justifies the other. **Reflect.** *In whatever conflict or difficult situation you're navigating, are you measuring your own strength only by your ability to confront the immediate problem, or also by your ability to protect what's fragile around it?*

04 True Courage Is a Moral Choice

In my view, true courage is not the absence of fear. It is the strength to recognise fear, uncertainty or personal risk and still choose to do what is right. On the battlefield, courage may be visible in an act of valour, a difficult decision or the willingness to place oneself in danger for others. But courage is not confined to moments of combat, nor does it always announce itself dramatically.

During my experiences in Kashmir, I saw that courage also consisted in showing restraint when anger could easily have prevailed, in holding fire and protecting lives amid danger and in making humane decisions under immense pressure. I saw it in soldiers who continued to perform their duties despite exhaustion and personal fear, and in ordinary people who preserved their dignity, cared for their families and kept hope alive in circumstances they had not chosen. It is also the courage to admit a mistake, seek help, stand up for someone who is vulnerable and speak the truth when silence would be easier.

Leadership requires another form of courage: the courage to listen, to accept criticism, to take responsibility and to make an unpopular decision when conscience and duty demand it. It also requires the courage to show compassion. Compassion is sometimes mistaken for weakness, but I have found that it often requires greater strength than confrontation. It means recognising the humanity of others, even in situations marked by conflict or disagreement.

True courage, therefore, is a moral choice. It fills us with deep pride that, as soldiers, we remain willing to enter situations where death is certain, acting not only on the orders of our commanders but often on the suggestions of those we lead.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He locates courage in places most people wouldn't think to look: restraint when anger would have been easier, holding fire rather than using it, admitting a mistake, and staying quietly hopeful in circumstances you didn't choose, alongside the more obvious courage of combat. **Why it matters.** "Acting not only on the orders of our commanders but often on the suggestions of those we lead" is a striking detail about how decisions to enter mortal danger actually get made, courage flowing upward through the ranks, not only downward as orders. **Reflect.** *Of the quieter forms of courage he names, restraint, admitting a mistake, speaking the truth when silence is easier, which one have you avoided practicing recently because it felt less like courage and more like just discomfort?*

05 The Finest Leadership Creates Confidence, Capability, and Leaders in Others

I have learned that ordinary people often possess extraordinary reserves of courage, resilience and ability. What appears ordinary in calm circumstances can become remarkable when responsibility, adversity or the needs of others demand it. In the Army, I saw men from modest backgrounds endure hardship, overcome fear and perform tasks of great difficulty not because they considered themselves exceptional, but because they believed in their comrades, their mission and the responsibility entrusted to them.

Adversity can reveal qualities that remain hidden in comfortable circumstances. It can strengthen self-belief, develop ingenuity and teach people that they are capable of far more than they had imagined. I have also learned that resilience is not simply the ability to withstand hardship. It is the capacity to recover, learn, adapt and continue moving forward without losing one's values.

Leaders have a crucial role in bringing this potential to the surface. First, they must create trust. People perform at their best when they know that their leader is competent, fair and willing to stand by them. Second, leaders must give responsibility, not merely instructions. Meaningful ownership encourages initiative and develops confidence.

A leader must also set high standards while providing the training, resources and guidance necessary to meet them. Expectations without preparation produce frustration; preparation combined with high expectations produces growth. It is equally important to recognise effort, give honest feedback and treat failure as an opportunity to learn and perform better, provided that the individual has acted with sincerity and integrity.

Above all, leaders must see potential before it becomes visible. They must look beyond background, rank or present performance and give people the opportunity to prove themselves. The finest leadership does not create dependence on the leader; it creates confidence, capability and leaders in

others. When people are trusted, trained, respected and held to meaningful standards, ordinary individuals can achieve extraordinary things and create unordinary tales.

> *"Humanity is not a soft alternative to strength; it is what gives strength its legitimacy."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His formula for growth is precise: expectations without preparation produce frustration, but preparation combined with high expectations produces growth. The high standard alone isn't the problem or the solution, it's whether it comes paired with the training to meet it. **Why it matters.** "The finest leadership does not create dependence on the leader; it creates confidence, capability and leaders in others" is a direct definition of success that has nothing to do with how needed the leader remains, and everything to do with what the people around them become. **Reflect.** *Are you currently setting high expectations for someone without giving them the preparation to meet them, or the other way around?*

06 Every Uniform Concealed a Human Story

Military leadership is ultimately a responsibility for people, not merely the management of tasks. The principles that guided me in developing and motivating those I led were trust, personal example, fairness, empathy, high standards and genuine concern for their welfare.

I believe that people respond best when they know that their leader understands their circumstances and will stand by them. This meant being present, listening carefully and making time for individuals, particularly when operational pressures were greatest. An army officer will always get a salute from his team, but what matters the most is whether it is willing or just a part of duty. The respect earned is irreplaceable.

To say one is never afraid is simply untrue. When individuals faced fear or uncertainty, my aim was to provide clarity and confidence while acknowledging the real risks. Fear is a natural response; it becomes controllable when people are well trained, honestly briefed, and assured that their team stands with them. In my experience, calm leadership and clear communication rebuilt confidence more effectively than rank or forceful words. I must confess that there were times under fire when I, too, felt shades of fear and found strength and confidence through my team.

I also believed in setting demanding but realistic standards. Compassion should never mean lowering standards, and discipline should never mean abandoning compassion. People need to know what is expected of them, receive the preparation to meet those expectations and be given constructive feedback when they fall short.

Failure was treated as an opportunity for reflection and improvement, provided it arose from an honest effort and not from negligence or lack of integrity. I encouraged those I led to acknowledge mistakes, learn from them and return stronger. At the same time, accountability remained essential. Believe me, an avoidable failure in the face of terrorists, when a group of six broke away and escaped, invited intense criticism and raised questions about our performance. But it also gave us a chance to strike back. In the following three weeks, across three different operations, we neutralised five of those six. So, after one dressing-down, we earned applause three times over.

Above all, I tried to remember that every uniform concealed a human story. Personal difficulties, family concerns and emotional burdens could affect performance and morale. A humane leader notices these realities, responds with dignity and seeks practical support where possible. The strongest teams are built when people feel trusted, respected, protected and inspired to give their best.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His admission that he, too, felt fear under fire and found strength through his team, rather than despite needing one, undercuts the idea that a leader's job is to be unafraid. The job is to be honest about fear while still providing clarity for others. **Why it matters.** The story of the escaped group of six is a real, specific account of accountability followed by recovery, not a tidy lesson but an actual sequence: criticism, then three operations over three weeks, then five of six neutralised. He lets the failure and the redemption both stand, in full, rather than skipping to the moral. **Reflect.** *After a setback you were held accountable for, did you get the chance, or make the chance, to answer it the way his team did, with sustained effort rather than a single redemptive moment?*

07 Consequential Leadership Leaves Behind Stronger People, Sounder Institutions

Good leadership enables an organisation to function effectively; consequential leadership leaves it stronger, more capable and more purposeful than it was before. Good leaders achieve objectives and manage responsibilities well. Consequential leaders do this while also shaping people, institutions and values in ways that endure beyond their own tenure.

The difference lies partly in the breadth of responsibility a leader is willing to accept. Operational leadership requires timely decisions, discipline and execution. Strategic leadership requires seeing beyond the immediate task, anticipating consequences, understanding the wider environment and preparing the organisation for challenges that may not yet be visible. Consequential leadership brings both dimensions together: it delivers today while building capacity for tomorrow.

In the final analysis, consequential leadership is measured not only by what a leader accomplishes, but by what remains after the leader has gone: stronger people, sounder institutions, higher standards and a deeper sense of collective purpose. A leader's true legacy is not the power once exercised, but the trust earned and the future made better for others.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a clean distinction between good leadership, which achieves objectives well, and consequential leadership, which does that while also shaping people and institutions in ways that outlast the leader's own tenure entirely. **Why it matters.** "A leader's true legacy is not the power once exercised, but the trust earned and the future made better for others" reframes legacy away from the leader's own record and toward what continues functioning well after they've left the room. **Reflect.** *If you left your current role tomorrow, would what remains be measured by what you accomplished while there, or by what continues to function well without you?*

08 What Value Can I Continue to Create?

Life after the Army taught me that identity is deeper than designation, rank or uniform. For many years, military service provides a clear structure: one has a defined role, a mission, responsibilities and a close-knit community. When that chapter ends, one must learn to distinguish between the position

one held and the person one has become. The uniform may be put away, but the values of discipline, duty, courage, comradeship and service remain part of one's character.

The transition also taught me that purpose does not end with retirement; it changes form. Earlier, purpose was expressed through command, duty and the protection of the nation. In a new phase of life, it may be expressed through mentoring, writing, public service, institution-building, teaching or helping others learn from one's experiences. The essential question is not, "What authority do I still possess?" but, "What value can I continue to create?" How can I give back to society?

I became more conscious that time is finite and cannot be recovered. This encourages more deliberate choices: spending time with family, nurturing meaningful relationships, caring for one's health and giving attention to work that has lasting value. Not every opportunity deserves acceptance, and not every battle deserves to be fought.

Letting go is not surrender, and it is certainly not easy, particularly when you have already weathered far rougher times and situations, many of which involved unfair treatment. It is the wisdom to release roles, habits and expectations that belonged to an earlier stage, while retaining the principles that remain important. Reinvention requires humility because it means becoming a learner again, entering unfamiliar spaces and accepting that past achievements do not automatically confer relevance in the present. Experience becomes truly valuable when it is shared constructively and adapted to serve new purposes.

> *"A career gives you a position; purpose gives that position meaning."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He replaces "what authority do I still possess?", the question that would keep someone anchored to a role that's ended, with "what value can I continue to create?", a question that has an answer regardless of title. **Why it matters.** "Not every battle deserves to be fought" and "past achievements do not automatically confer relevance in the present" are both quiet admissions that reinvention requires giving something up, not just adding something new. He names that cost rather than skipping past it. **Reflect.** *Is there a role, habit, or expectation from an earlier stage of your life that you're still holding onto, past the point where it's actually serving you?*

09 Five Principles to Carry Through Life

1. Choose integrity before convenience. Your reputation is built through the decisions you make when no one is watching. Do what is right, even when it is difficult, unpopular or personally costly. Competence may open doors, but integrity determines whether people continue to trust you after you enter them.

2. Be courageous, but remain humane. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the willingness to act responsibly despite fear and uncertainty. However, courage should never become recklessness or insensitivity. The strongest person is often the one who can remain firm while preserving compassion, restraint and respect for the dignity of others.

3. Accept responsibility completely. Do not claim credit for every success and blame others for every failure. Accept responsibility for your decisions, your conduct and the people entrusted to your care.

Responsibility also means preparing thoroughly, keeping your word and having the humility to ask for help when it is needed.

4. Treat failure as a teacher, not a verdict. Failure can be painful, but it need not define you. Examine it honestly, learn from it, correct what must be corrected and begin again. Do not fear failure so much that you avoid responsibility or stop attempting difficult things. The important question is not whether you have fallen, but whether you rise wiser and stronger.

5. Invest in people and serve a purpose larger than yourself. No meaningful achievement is entirely individual. Respect your family, value your comrades and mentors, listen to those who serve alongside you and help others grow. At the same time, identify a purpose that extends beyond status, wealth or recognition. A career gives you a position; purpose gives that position meaning.

I would also tell them that character is paramount. Build your own character with strength, and the rest will follow; at the same time, commit to fostering the highest standards of character in all those under your responsibility and influence. People remember how you made them feel, whether you stood by them when things were hard, and whether your success opened doors for others to succeed.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for five principles to carry through life, he gives five distinct, standalone instructions rather than variations on a theme, integrity, courageous humanity, complete responsibility, failure as teacher, and investing in others, then adds character as the thread underneath all five. **Why it matters.** "A career gives you a position; purpose gives that position meaning" is the sharpest line in the set. It names the difference between having reached somewhere and having a reason for being there. **Reflect.** *Of his five, integrity, courageous humanity, complete responsibility, failure as teacher, investing in others, which one would the people who know you best say you actually practice, and which would they say you only believe in?*

10 Leadership Is Not Primarily About Authority. It Is About Responsibility for People

If there is one lesson I wish I had understood earlier, it is that leadership is not primarily about authority; it is about responsibility for people.

When one is young, it is natural to focus on performance, achievement, rank and the successful completion of the task. These are important, particularly in a demanding profession such as the Army. But with experience, I came to understand that the deepest measure of leadership is not simply what one accomplishes, but how one treats people while accomplishing it and what one leaves behind in them and in the institution.

I would also want future generations to remember that success is rarely achieved alone. We are shaped by our parents, teachers, mentors, comrades, colleagues and even by those who challenge us. We should therefore remain grateful, listen generously and make time to develop those who come after us.

Finally, I would say that one must not postpone what truly matters. Careers, titles and circumstances change, but character, relationships and service endure. Use every position to strengthen people, uphold values and leave the world around you better than you found it.

> *"Leadership is not primarily about authority. It is about responsibility for people."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what he wishes he'd understood earlier, he names the belief that shaped his entire youth, that performance, achievement, and rank were the measure of leadership, as something experience eventually corrected rather than confirmed. **Why it matters.** Naming even those who challenge us alongside parents, teachers, mentors, comrades, and colleagues as people who shaped his success is a more complete account of influence than most people are willing to give credit for, including the friction, not only the support. **Reflect.** *What truly matters that you've been postponing, on the belief that careers, titles, or circumstances would eventually make more room for it?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Leadership is earned through competence, character, courage and trust, not conferred by rank. The soldiers he commanded were his biggest source of learning, not the other way around.

Consultation is a strength, but accountability cannot be delegated. Seek advice from those closest to the situation, then accept sole responsibility for the final decision.

Humanity is what gives strength its legitimacy. Conflict enters homes and unsettles communities. The strength of an organisation is measured by its ability to protect the innocent, not only to confront danger.

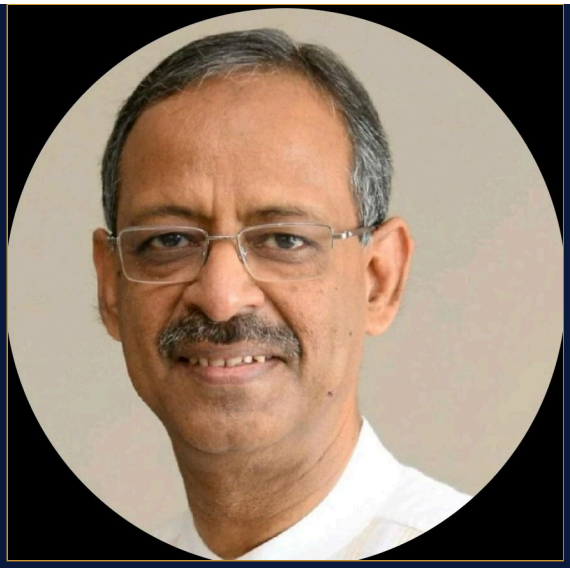
True courage is a moral choice, not the absence of fear. It shows up in restraint, in admitting a mistake, and in compassion, as often as it shows up on a battlefield.

The finest leadership creates confidence, capability, and leaders in others. Expectations without preparation produce frustration. Preparation combined with high expectations produces growth.

A career gives you a position; purpose gives that position meaning. Choose integrity before convenience, remain courageous but humane, accept responsibility completely, treat failure as a teacher, and invest in people.

Leadership is not primarily about authority. It is about responsibility for people. The deepest measure of leadership is not what you accomplish, but how you treat people while accomplishing it, and what you leave behind.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/maj-gen-ranjan-mahajan



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Shri Anil Swarup

Founder Chairman, Nexus of Good · Former Secretary, School Education & Coal, Govt. of India

"Good can happen because good is happening."

8 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 012, August 2026

Work for What You Need, Not for Your Greed

Good can happen because good is happening. Eight principles from a career spanning the Coal and School Education secretaryships, and the Nexus of Good.

> *Good can happen because good is happening.*

01 Leadership Always Reduces to Managing People

Though the situations were different, the fundamental principles of administration and leadership remained the same, because ultimately it boils down to managing men and women. That is a principle applicable whichever assignment you are in, especially if you are occupying leadership positions, which I incidentally did as Secretary, School Education and Secretary, Coal.

Trust: first was to gain the confidence of the people that you are working with, and demonstrating to them that you are there to protect them, especially in the coal sector, if there was any bona fide mistake. The context was that, on account of the CAG report, there were officers who were not willing to take decisions on files or even recommend allocations that were supposed to be done. So that was a principle that I cherished during my career: working with a team, trying to convey to them this mutual trust, which was very important.

Delegation: second was to delegate whatever I could to these people, and that was an extension of the trust that I had in them. Such delegation of decision-making left me with a lot of time to plan, and that is another aspect that came in handy, to plan for a variety of activities that were to be taken in the organization, whether as Secretary, Coal or Secretary, Education.

Empowerment: your team had to be empowered so that they could take decisions.

Leading by example: apart from these three, trust, delegation, empowerment, I always believed in leading by example. If I couldn't do something, I could not expect my team members to do that. These are principles that are applicable across the board in whichever assignment that you do.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He collapses two very different jobs, running Coal and running School Education, into a single underlying discipline: leadership is always about managing people, regardless of the domain. His four pillars build on each other in order, trust makes delegation possible, delegation requires empowerment, and none of it holds if he isn't willing to do himself what he asks of his team. **Why it matters.** The coal sector detail is specific and telling: after the CAG report, officers had become afraid to even sign off on routine allocations. His response wasn't a new procedure first, it was restoring the belief that a bona fide mistake would be protected. Trust came before process. **Reflect.** *In your own team or organization, has fear of blame quietly made people stop making ordinary decisions, the way it did with coal allocations after the CAG report?*

02 Eight Things an Idea Needs to Survive Contact With Reality

One is implementing an idea, and the other is sustaining that implementation. They are two different parts, but interrelated. For implementation, as I have mentioned in the book, you have to make that idea

politically acceptable, meaning thereby that the decision-maker has to accept the idea that you have. Socially desirable, meaning thereby that the people for whom you are trying to implement that idea find it beneficial to them. Technologically feasible: any idea cannot work on the ground unless there is appropriate technology available to make it happen.

Financially viable, meaning thereby that there has to be a sufficient amount of money to back the idea that you have. If you don't have it immediately, you should be able to demonstrate the efficacy of the idea so that money comes in and it happens. If you can demonstrate the efficacy, money follows it. Administratively doable: you must have the human resources to make that idea happen and to sustain it. Judicially tenable, meaning thereby that it should not violate any rule or law, because if it does, then it won't last for long.

Emotionally relatable: this is a very important aspect, you have to make your idea acceptable to the people with whom you are implementing, that is, the stakeholders. They should buy into the idea that you're doing. Finally, the idea has to be environmentally sustainable.

Now, this is what is required to make the idea happen. For the idea to sustain, all these eight factors are important, but more important is to create a value around the idea that you have, so that all the stakeholders start believing in your idea. Then, they manage to sustain the idea. You don't have to do much; they take over and they do it because they deem it beneficial to them, and hence they sustain it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He splits turning an idea into lasting change into two distinct problems most people treat as one: implementing it, which requires satisfying all eight criteria at once, political, social, technological, financial, administrative, judicial, emotional, and environmental, and sustaining it, which depends on something different entirely, stakeholders coming to believe the idea is theirs. **Why it matters.** The sequencing at the end is the real insight: once stakeholders believe an idea benefits them, "you don't have to do much; they take over." Sustainability isn't a ninth criterion added to the list. It's what happens when the other eight actually land. **Reflect.** *Think of an idea you're currently trying to implement. Which of his eight criteria, political, social, technological, financial, administrative, judicial, emotional, environmental, have you not yet honestly tested it against?*

03 Stakeholders Sustain What They Believe Is Fair

The coal system had totally crashed consequent to the report of the CAG. So it had to be built from scratch, in the context of putting in place an auction process that was transparent through the use of technology, so that people had faith in the process that was put in place. They didn't question the allocation of coal blocks, which was done on a very objective basis using technology. So that was important, and that was done.

Sustaining it, as I had mentioned earlier, was necessary, and it could be done by making the stakeholders believe that what one had put in place was good and useful to them. There would be no bias against anybody, and there would be no favor given to anybody else. The decision-making was totally objective in nature. That helped, because stakeholders started believing that what was put in place was not in favor of anybody, the bidder who deserved to get the bid got it. That belief enabled the system not only to work, but to sustain over a period of time. It's been more than a decade since this system was put in place, and it's doing very well.

> *"The bidder who deserved to get the bid, got it."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rebuilding the coal allocation system from a total collapse wasn't primarily a technology project, in his account, though technology was the tool. The actual fix was removing bias from the decision entirely, so objectively that stakeholders stopped questioning the outcome, even when they didn't win a particular bid. **Why it matters.** "It's been more than a decade since this system was put in place, and it's doing very well" is his own evidence for Principle 2's claim about sustainability. A system stakeholders believe is fair keeps working long after the person who built it has moved on. **Reflect.** *Is there a process in your own organization that people still question the fairness of, even when the outcome is technically correct?*

04 You Cannot Talk of Ethics on an Empty Stomach

There are two parts to it. Employability: making education in a manner that people who get educated get employed. That's very important, because you can't talk of morality or ethics if you don't have your stomach to feed. So it's important to see that the children who are getting educated are employable, and to that extent, I think the National Education Policy that has come about addresses some of these issues.

Equally important, or perhaps more important, is making the child ethically sound, meaning thereby that he or she conducts herself or himself in a manner that they contribute to society ethically as well as materially. Now, this is a very difficult part, because, given the consumer culture that has evolved over a period of time, children of the day are primarily concerned about material comforts. There's nothing wrong in aspiring for material comforts, but totally overlooking the ethical part is a dangerous development that can impact us adversely.

This can be done not by teaching morality in the class, but by demonstrating that ethical conduct pays. This is important because usually children are told to behave in a particular manner which is considered to be correct, but the children don't perceive it as beneficial to them. All around them, people who are adopting dishonest means are thriving; if they get to believe that, then they would have no incentive to remain ethical. Hence, it is important for those who are teaching them or around them to demonstrate that ethical conduct works and pays, because there are many people who have succeeded in life, are doing very well, and had ethical conduct.

This needs to be demonstrated through people now, how people who have been honest and efficient have thrived and are happy in life. Once the child starts seeing it for himself, seeing is believing. If the role models they have in mind are people who were ethical in nature and have succeeded in life, they will also start believing that ethics pays, and hence they will start adopting those means. Telling them or making them understand morality, maybe they'll agree, but to adopt it, they must find value in that adoption.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He refuses to separate employability from ethics, arguing plainly that you can't talk of morality to someone who doesn't have their stomach to feed. But he's equally clear that skills alone aren't the goal, ethical grounding matters just as much, or more. **Why it matters.** His method for building that ethical grounding isn't classroom instruction. It's visible proof, real role models children can see who were both honest and successful, because "seeing is believing" does what moral instruction alone can't. **Reflect.** *Who is a role model in your own life, or in the life of someone younger than you, who demonstrates that ethical conduct actually pays, rather than just being told it should?*

05 Demonstrate That Ethical Conduct Pays

Ethical conduct can be sustained over a period of time if there is a belief that such a conduct will be helpful to the person who has that conduct. This can be demonstrated, as I said earlier, by people who have been ethical and successful in life. That's very important.

People do ask me: you talk about ethics, but despite the fact that most people agree with you, they don't follow an ethical conduct. Why? The reason is very simple: because of the consumer culture that has evolved, most of us believe in immediate gratification and are not worried about the consequences of such indulgences. For example, if you have sugar sitting in front of you, you would like to consume that sugar immediately and be oblivious to the consequences of having too much sugar and developing diabetes. You don't want to sacrifice the present for a better future, and that's what happens. You have an option, you can give up sugar and remain healthy, but then you are giving up something available for immediate gratification.

That's the issue here, and that needs to be conveyed to youngsters: that you can consume sugar at this point in time, but there could be a cost to it subsequently. That does not get conveyed effectively to these children, and they start consuming now, oblivious of the consequence of the consumption that they undertake at this point in time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked why people agree with ethical conduct in principle but don't practise it, he reaches for a deliberately ordinary example, sugar, rather than a grand moral failing. The problem isn't that people disagree with ethics; it's that immediate gratification always feels more real than a distant consequence. **Why it matters.** The sugar analogy makes an abstract ethical dilemma concrete and personal. Nearly everyone recognizes the pull of choosing present comfort over future cost, which makes his point land as observation rather than lecture. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life are you currently choosing the sugar, immediate comfort, over a cost you know is coming later?*

06 Good Can Happen Because Good Is Happening

That's the whole objective of Nexus of Good: to identify, understand, appreciate, replicate, and scale good work. Our usual tendency is for masala, so we enjoy negative news; we don't relish positive news. That needs to change, and this will happen if we continue to demonstrate good work that is happening around us, roadshow them, and provide platforms, which Nexus of Good does, for them to display the good work and the consequences thereof.

It's very important if people start believing that good work also pays and it is happening around them. So one of the principles of Nexus of Good is: good can happen because good is happening. It is not

merely people saying that good should happen, in any case it should happen, but if we demonstrate that good is already happening and those that are performing good work are also being appreciated by society, then everyone yearns for appreciation and they would also try and do some good work. It may entail a bit of sacrifice in the present, but in the future, they would come to perceive that good work will be appreciated over a period of time. That appreciation helps, and that's what Nexus of Good is all about: creating platforms for appreciating good work.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names our collective appetite for negative news, "masala", as the actual obstacle to social change, not a lack of good work happening. The Nexus of Good's method is to make existing good work visible enough that appreciation itself becomes the incentive for more of it. **Why it matters.** "Good can happen because good is happening" reframes moral exhortation, people saying good should happen, as far weaker than demonstration. Showing people that good work is already real and already rewarded does more than telling them it ought to be. **Reflect.** *When did you last actively look for and share a piece of good news, rather than let negative news claim your attention by default?*

07 Work for What You Need, Not for Your Greed

First of all, they should believe that good work is possible. They should also believe that good work or ethical conduct pays. If they believe in that, then they will work out a strategy through which they can perform, sustain good work, and continue to perform ethically. If they start believing in this, they will find a way to do that.

To do that, the first thing they should do is to discipline their lives. Given the environment in which they work, there is a lot of yearning for acquiring materialistic comfort. This has been there all through the centuries, but now it is more so because it is visible on social media and on television. The acquisitive nature gets the better of a human being, so he wants to acquire more and more things, little realizing that over a period of time, what really matters is not these materialistic things, which are necessary in the sense of basic comforts. If you get into this rat race of acquiring more and more, there is no end to it, and it leads to an unhappy existence.

If they work for what they need, not for their greed, then they would be contented in life. Contentment is a great virtue that they should develop over a period of time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His advice to young professionals starts with belief, that good work is possible and that it pays, before it gets to discipline. Belief comes first because, without it, there's no reason to build the strategy that follows. **Why it matters.** He's careful not to condemn material comfort itself, calling basic comforts necessary. The danger he names is specific: the rat race that has no natural end, driven by visibility on social media and television, rather than material need itself. **Reflect.** *Honestly, is what you're currently chasing something you need, or something the rat race has convinced you to want?*

08 Enjoy Every Moment That You Are In

Enjoy every moment that you are in.

> *"If they work for what they need, not for their greed, they would be contented in life."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given the chance to leave one single principle behind, after seven answers about trust, systems, ethics, and discipline, he chooses something disarmingly simple rather than a summary of everything that came before it. **Why it matters.** Paired with Principle 7, work for what you need, not your greed, this closing line completes the thought: contentment isn't only about resisting the rat race, it's about actually being present for the life that discipline makes possible. **Reflect.** *When did you last genuinely enjoy the moment you were in, rather than already thinking about the next thing you needed to acquire or achieve?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Leadership always reduces to managing people. Trust, delegation, empowerment, and leading by example, in that order. Trust makes delegation possible; delegation requires empowerment; none of it holds without leading by example.

An idea needs eight things to survive contact with reality. Politically acceptable, socially desirable, technologically feasible, financially viable, administratively doable, judicially tenable, emotionally relatable, environmentally sustainable.

Stakeholders sustain what they believe is fair. A system stakeholders trust keeps working long after the person who built it has moved on. More than a decade later, the coal auction system he rebuilt is still doing well.

You cannot talk of ethics on an empty stomach. Employability and ethical grounding both matter, but skills without ethics, or ethics preached to someone without a livelihood, both fall short.

Demonstrate that ethical conduct pays; don't just teach it. Seeing is believing. Role models who were honest and successful teach more than moral instruction alone.

Good can happen because good is happening. Demonstrating that good work is real and appreciated does more to spread it than simply saying good should happen.

Work for what you need, not for your greed. The rat race has no natural end. Contentment comes from discipline, not from winning a race that was never going to finish.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/anil-swarup



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

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Indian Army (Retd.) · UN Peace Operations Scholar

"Trust is not given upfront; it is earned through credibility, and credibility comes only with proof."

20 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 011, August 2026

Stand By the Truth, No Matter How Bitter It Is

Trust is not given upfront; it is earned through credibility, and credibility comes only with proof. Twenty principles from decades of military command, UN peacekeeping, and research.

> *Trust is not given upfront; it is earned through credibility, and credibility comes only with proof.*

01 There Is a Trust Deficit, and More Leaders Are Self-Serving

> Trust in leadership is fundamental. I had complete faith in my leader and felt secure under their command, much like a child's trust in its parents. Leaders were always ready to sacrifice their career for the sake of the men they led.
>
> There is a trust deficit, and more leaders are self-serving.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what belief about leadership he held early in his career but no longer holds, he answers with a comparison many people would hesitate to make in public: the trust he once placed in his leaders was like a child's trust in a parent, complete and unquestioning. **Why it matters.** He doesn't soften the contrast with what he sees now. Naming a trust deficit and self-serving leadership directly, without qualification, is itself an act of the honesty he returns to throughout this feature. **Reflect.** *Has your own trust in the people who lead you, at work or elsewhere, grown or eroded over the years, and what changed it?*

02 Trust Is Not Given Upfront. It Is Earned Through Credibility

> You get the authority to command from your rank. But to lead men to war, you need something more than rank, you need trust. Trust is not given upfront; it is earned through credibility, and credibility comes only with proof.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a hard line between the authority rank confers and the trust leadership actually requires. One is granted the moment you're commissioned. The other has to be proven, repeatedly, before it exists at all. **Why it matters.** "Credibility comes only with proof" is a compact formula that recurs throughout this feature in different forms, later applied to peacekeeping missions and local legitimacy just as much as to individual command. **Reflect.** *Where in your own role are you currently relying on the authority of your position, rather than on credibility you've actually proven?*

03 There Is Nowhere to Hide From Your Own Men

> The moment your honesty and integrity are called into question, you realise your life is transparent; there is nowhere to hide from your own men. First-time young leaders experience this when they command troops. He or she is being watched constantly.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He locates a specific moment every young leader eventually hits, not a gradual realization, but a sudden one, when integrity is questioned and the leader discovers there was never any real privacy to begin with. **Why it matters.** Being "watched constantly" is presented here not as pressure to perform, but as a structural fact of leadership: the people you lead are always forming a judgement about your honesty, whether or not you're aware of it. **Reflect.** *If the people you lead were asked right now whether your private conduct matches your public standard, what would they say?*

04 I Regret the Decisions I Took With Complete Information

All of us have moments in our lives when we must make difficult decisions. When we make such decisions with incomplete information, we often regret them later. I was fortunate not to have had to make difficult decisions with incomplete information. I, however, regret a few incidents where I had taken harsh decisions even though I had complete information. I wish I hadn't had to do that.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked about a difficult decision made with incomplete information, he redirects to something more uncomfortable: his real regrets came from decisions made with complete information, where the facts were clear and the harshness was still his own choice. **Why it matters.** This is a harder admission than the question actually asked for. Regretting a decision made blind is common; regretting one made with full clarity leaves no excuse of missing information to hide behind. **Reflect.** *Is there a decision you've made with complete information, not incomplete, that you still regret, and have you been honest with yourself about why you made it anyway?*

05 The Three Cardinal Principles Are Not as Simple as They Seem

Peacekeeping (also referred to as peace operations) always requires restraint. Adherence to the three cardinal principles of peacekeeping, i.e., consent, impartiality, and minimum use of force, is a must for success in peacekeeping.

Well, these are not as simple as they seem. Ambiguity in how these principles are interpreted directly affects peacekeeping performance. It is difficult to explain the inconsistency in a few words. I thought it would be helpful if readers could find time to read about it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He corrects the framing of the question itself before answering it: restraint isn't the occasional requirement of peacekeeping; it's the constant one. But he's equally clear that the three cardinal principles meant to guide that restraint, consent, impartiality, minimum force, are interpreted inconsistently in practice, with real consequences for how missions perform. **Why it matters.** Rather than compress a genuinely complex institutional problem into a soundbite, he points directly to his own published writing on it, treating the reader as capable of engaging with the real complexity rather than a simplified version of it. **Reflect.** *Where in your own field do you rely on a set of principles that sound simple in a handbook but turn out to be inconsistently applied in practice?*

06 The UN Is What Member States Make of It

There is no short answer. The UN, created to replace the League of Nations, is what member states make of it. The League failed to prevent World War II, and President Roosevelt and Prime Minister

Churchill conceived the idea of a replacement in 1941. However, Western Supremacy, the core idea underpinning the structural frameworks of the League of Nations and the UN, largely inherited the West's colonial-era system of global management conceptualised at the Berlin Conference of 1884. This legacy heavily influenced the drafting of the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1919 and thereafter the UN.

The framework for the new World Order, led by the UN, was based on dualism, because the architects sought to pursue peace while maintaining their geopolitical manoeuvres. The main reasons that can be cited are: the five permanent members of the UNSC drive its effectiveness, or lack thereof, by exercising the rights given to them in the UN Charter; the UN system remains hostage to the member state, or states, that control the purse strings; since there is no peacekeeping force directly under the command of the UN, operationalisation of peace operations is hostage to the whims and fancies of the member states; most UN policies and guidelines are driven by selected research institutes funded by western nations and expected to be implemented by the Troop Contributing Countries, who have little say in their formulation; and powerful states often obstruct the creation of a favourable political environment for managing conflicts, which is why many UN Security Council resolutions remain unimplemented.

While powerful nations decide where and when peacekeeping operations are deployed, operationalisation is left to member states of the Global South, who field their soldiers in the most complex missions. The challenges to the operationalisation of peacekeeping are largely limited to systemic problems. Yet, since there is no alternative to the UN, the member states make every effort to contribute to the return of peace in the conflict zones. Despite these limitations, evidence shows peacekeeping missions effectively reduce bloodshed and prevent the spread of conflict wherever they are deployed.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces the UN's structural limitations back to their historical origin, the same colonial-era system of global management conceptualised at the 1884 Berlin Conference that shaped the League of Nations before it. In his account, today's Security Council dynamics aren't a recent flaw; they're an inherited one. **Why it matters.** He closes on a genuinely difficult balance: the system is structurally uneven, with the Global South fielding soldiers in the most complex missions while decisions are made elsewhere, and yet the evidence still shows peacekeeping reduces bloodshed. He holds both facts at once rather than resolving them into a simpler verdict. **Reflect.** *Where in your own field do you work within a system you can name real structural flaws in, while still believing the work it makes possible is worth doing?*

07 Humility Is a Powerful Advantage, When Practised Collectively

The challenge you mention is interoperability. The UN and its Member States have made steady progress on this front, with mission training playing a central role. The harder task, however, is winning acceptance from local populations. In conflict settings, civilians suffer most, so protection of civilians has become the key metric of a successful peacekeeping mission.

The UN Protection of Civilians approach rests on three concurrently applied pillars: protection through dialogue and engagement, provision of physical protection, and creation of a protective environment. The effectiveness of this approach hinges on trust between peacekeepers and the community. Trust is not automatic; it must be earned through consistent mandate implementation and adherence to UN

norms. Humility supports trust-building and is especially valuable when force is required to protect civilians at immediate risk.

Indian peacekeepers are widely regarded as humane and culturally sensitive. Their humility reflects both cultural norms and operational experience, especially from counter-insurgency deployments where respectful engagement with civilians is essential. Over time, humility has become ingrained in the behaviour and professional culture of Indian soldiers, and their conduct in the field is often cited as a distinctive operational asset.

When practised collectively, humility is a powerful advantage. For it to matter, humility must be authentic and demonstrated directly by personnel engaging communities, not delegated solely to specialist teams. Member States that do not share this cultural inclination can and should cultivate the habit through training and changes in engagement practices. Troop-contributing countries from developed states could benefit by adopting this approach, learning from Indian and Southeast Asian peacekeepers to strengthen their own contributions to peacekeeping.

Humility and gratitude are two cultural values that must be embraced not only at the international level but also in our daily lives.

> *"The camel never sees the hump on its own back."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The biggest challenge in getting different militaries to function as one team, in his account, isn't interoperability between forces, that's steady, trainable progress. It's winning acceptance from the civilians the mission is meant to protect. Humility is the specific quality he identifies as what makes that acceptance possible. **Why it matters.** He's careful to specify that humility only matters if it's authentic and practised directly by personnel on the ground, not delegated to specialist teams. That distinction is what separates a genuine operational asset from a policy that looks good on paper. **Reflect.** *Is there a value you claim as part of your own professional culture that's genuinely practised by everyone day to day, or mostly delegated to a specialist team while the rest carry on differently?*

08 Leaders Must Aim to Create Conditions That Lead Toward Negative Peace

As rightly said, success cannot be measured by victory in peacekeeping, because there is no standard framework to judge whether a mission has been able to prevent violence, protect people and create conditions for peace.

Absolute peace is difficult. Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung defined 'positive peace' as the active presence of social justice, equality and cooperation, while 'negative peace' is the mere absence of direct physical violence or war. Positive peace is nearly impossible to achieve, or is rarely present in any country. Therefore, leaders must aim to create conditions that lead toward negative peace.

In this regard, I will go with the indicators formulated by Walter, Howard, and Fortna, reducing and preventing violence from recurrence, containing its spread within and across borders, reducing civilian and military deaths, and making post-conflict settlement easier, as the measure of effectiveness for the return of peace to the conflict zone.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He deliberately sets a lower, more honest bar for success than the question implies. Rather than measuring peacekeeping against an almost unreachable ideal, positive peace, he defines success as measurable progress toward negative peace: fewer deaths, less spread, easier settlement. **Why it matters.** Grounding his answer in a named academic framework, Galtung's distinction and a specific set of measurable indicators, rather than a personal impression, reflects the researcher's discipline he brought to a question most people would answer only in the abstract. **Reflect.** *In your own work, are you quietly holding yourself to an impossible standard of success, when a more honest, measurable one would actually let you recognize real progress?*

09 When Peacekeepers Fail, They Are No Longer Seen as Impartial

When deployed, peacekeepers are seen as angels of peace. Civilians expect peacekeepers not only to protect them from danger but also to serve as the first point of contact for all the challenges facing a conflict-affected state as it recovers. The reality, however, is quite different. A peacekeeper's ability to meet these expectations is constrained by how the organisation empowers them, including its mandate, the number of peacekeepers authorised and deployed, and budgetary support to sustain the mission.

And when peacekeepers fail, they are no longer perceived as impartial brokers of peace. Since peacekeeping has evolved significantly over the years, it must be continuously reviewed and reformed, including through organisational changes, to remain effective. Besides, unless the root cause of the problem is addressed, conflict will continue, and civilians will continue to suffer. Peacekeeping missions don't address the root cause of the conflict.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He names the gap between how peacekeepers are perceived on arrival, as "angels of peace" expected to solve everything, and what they're actually resourced to do, constrained by mandate, troop numbers, and budget they don't control. **Why it matters.** His closing line, that peacekeeping missions don't address the root cause of conflict, is a genuinely uncomfortable truth for someone who spent a career inside the institution to state plainly, without hedging it into something softer. **Reflect.** *Is there a role you or your institution plays where the expectations placed on you exceed what you're actually resourced to deliver, and has that gap been named honestly?*

10 Peacekeepers Also Fail Because of a Lack of Will

As I mentioned earlier, protecting civilians is by far the most difficult challenge, especially when peacekeepers hesitate to use force to protect civilians who are in danger, even when they are legally authorised. While there are instances of peacekeepers not using force to protect civilians, citing various reasons, there are also examples of peacekeepers going the extra mile to protect civilians, putting their personal safety in the line of fire.

The answer to why peacekeepers fail is not simple. Limitations beyond the peacekeepers' control exist. However, peacekeepers also do fail because of a lack of will.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He holds two explanations for peacekeeper failure at once, without letting either one excuse the other: real structural limitations beyond their control, and, separately, a lack of will that structural limitations don't fully explain. **Why it matters.** Naming "lack of will" as a real factor, alongside systemic constraints, is a harder thing to say about your own profession than attributing every failure to circumstances beyond anyone's control. **Reflect.** *In a situation where you or your team fell short, how much of that was genuinely beyond your control, and how much, if you're honest, was a lack of will?*

11 Credibility Is Not Available Upfront. It Must Be Earned

> Consent, impartiality, and the minimum use of force are three cardinal principles of peacekeeping, and adherence to them helps achieve success. Another crucial factor is legitimacy. When arriving in the conflict zone, peacekeepers, including the organisation, are expected to adhere to certain norms, which are not exhaustive. A mission gains legitimacy when the parties to the conflict agree to the deployment of the peacekeeping mission through a peace agreement, and the UN Security Council authorises it.
>
> However, strategic-level legitimacy differs from local legitimacy. Local legitimacy is about credibility. Credibility is not available upfront. It must be earned by presenting daily evidence and implementing the mandate. Once the mission and the peacekeepers gain local legitimacy, they gain cooperation and better acceptance in local society. Civilians then make a conscious effort to differentiate, within the constraints, between what is possible for the peacekeepers to do and what is not. Then they come forward willingly to help the peacekeepers implement the mandate despite the organisational constraints and the dynamics of the conflict.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He splits legitimacy into two distinct kinds that don't automatically transfer to each other: strategic-level legitimacy, granted on paper through a peace agreement and Security Council authorisation, and local legitimacy, which is credibility, earned daily on the ground. **Why it matters.** The same principle from Principle 2, that trust and credibility come only through proof, reappears here at the institutional level. Authorization from above doesn't buy acceptance from the people a mission is meant to serve. **Reflect.** *Is there somewhere you hold formal authority or approval on paper, that hasn't yet translated into actual credibility with the people you're meant to serve?*

12 The One-Line Answer Is: Humility

> The one-line answer is: Humility.

> *"It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what the world can learn from India's contribution to UN peacekeeping, and what India can learn from others, he answers with a single word rather than an elaborated argument, having already built the case for it fully in Principle 7. **Why it matters.** The brevity is itself the point. After a detailed explanation earlier of why humility functions as an operational asset, he trusts the reader to carry that reasoning forward rather than repeating it. **Reflect.** *If you had to reduce what your own field or culture does best to one word, would it hold up as well under scrutiny as his does?*

13 Have I Introduced Something New, or Am I Merely Repeating Existing Theories?

> We need a mirror to show us what we lack. Only when we learn to accept our weaknesses does scope for improvement emerge. Research provides a perspective beyond our own, enabling us to draw logical conclusions based on available inputs.
>
> Another lesson I have learned from research is the importance of contributing something new to the research community, whether in terms of content or methodology. When Prof. Dr. S.J. Soeters, who was my supervisor for my doctoral thesis, asked me this question, it took me a few days to find the answer. For instance, while addressing questions on leadership in this forum, I must ask myself: have I introduced something new, or am I merely repeating existing theories?

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He credits research with something command couldn't give him: a genuine outside perspective on his own experience, one that only becomes useful once he's willing to accept what it reveals about his own weaknesses. **Why it matters.** Turning his supervisor's question back on this very interview, asking himself in real time whether he's saying something new or just repeating existing theories, is a small but telling demonstration of the discipline he's describing, applied to the act of answering itself. **Reflect.** *The next time you're asked to share your expertise, will you ask yourself his question, whether you're contributing something new, or repeating what's already been said?*

14 I Have Been Learning Ever Since I Learned to Stand on My Feet

> I have been learning ever since I learned to stand on my feet. The lessons that I have learned will lead me to write a book. Hence, I will rest here.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked whether a lesson from his military career only became clear years later, he declines to isolate a single one, choosing instead to point toward a need to write another book rather than compress a lifetime of learning into a soundbite for this feature. **Why it matters.** This restraint is consistent with everything else he's shown here, elsewhere pointing readers to fuller published writing rather than oversimplifying, he treats his own hardest-won lessons the same way, as something that deserves its own space rather than a shortcut. **Reflect.** *Is there a lesson in your own life you've been carrying for years without yet finding, or making, the space to properly work through it?*

15 The Camel Never Sees the Hump on Its Own Back

How can I say one mistake? Any mistake, if repeated, might affect different people and institutions in different ways. This will probably be the biggest mistake. Hence, we must constantly look inward and ask what we have done wrong when something goes wrong, instead of looking for someone else to blame.

In this regard, it will be worth reflecting on the famous Moroccan proverb: 'The camel never sees the hump on its own back but has its eyes on its brother's hump.'

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked to name one mistake future leaders should be spared from repeating, he refuses the premise of the question itself, arguing that any repeated mistake, in whatever form, is the real danger, not any single specific one. **Why it matters.** The proverb he chooses names a very specific, common failure: seeing others' flaws clearly while remaining blind to your own. It's a fitting close to an answer that insists the real discipline is constant self-inquiry, not a single lesson learned once. **Reflect.** *Whose "hump" have you noticed clearly this week, and when did you last turn that same scrutiny on your own back?*

16 Courage Is Knowing You're Licked Before You Begin, and Beginning Anyway

The definition of courage can mean different things to different people, so it's hard to give an exact definition. In my opinion, the best explanation is what Atticus explained to his son in the famous book To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. It goes like this: "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what."

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than offer his own definition of courage, a Major General with decades of combat and peacekeeping experience reaches for a civilian novel to make his point: that courage has nothing to do with weapons or physical power, and everything to do with persisting when you already expect to lose. **Why it matters.** Choosing someone else's words, deliberately and by name, to explain the concept he's spent a career embodying, is itself an example of the humility he keeps returning to throughout this feature. **Reflect.** *What's something you're currently avoiding because you already suspect you're "licked before you begin," rather than beginning anyway and seeing it through?*

17 Three Things to Remember When the Situation Becomes Overwhelming

One. Have humility to respect others' point of view.

Two. Be grateful to others who probably would have contributed to what you are doing or intend to do now.

Three. Stand by your principles and make a considerate decision. Thereafter, don't regret it, because, firstly, your decision is based on the truth, and secondly, the result is not in your hands.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what he'd want a young leader to remember in an overwhelming moment, he gives three concrete instructions rather than an abstract sentiment, humility, gratitude, and principled decisiveness followed by acceptance of what you can't control. **Why it matters.** His reasoning for not regretting a considered decision is precise: the decision is based on truth, and the outcome was never fully in your hands to begin with. That separates the quality of a decision from the quality of its result. **Reflect.** *Of his three, humility, gratitude, or making a considered decision and releasing the outcome, which do you find hardest to hold onto when a situation actually becomes overwhelming?*

18 The Courage to Tell the Truth and Accept My Own Mistakes in Public

> Courage to tell the truth and accept my own mistakes in public.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what principle has remained constant across decades of service, research, and a changing world, he answers with a single, unadorned sentence rather than an elaborated philosophy. **Why it matters.** "In public" is the operative phrase. Accepting a mistake privately is one thing; committing, as a lasting principle, to accept it publicly is a far higher and more exposed standard. **Reflect.** *When did you last accept a mistake of yours publicly, rather than only acknowledging it privately or not at all?*

19 Stand By the Truth, No Matter How Bitter It Is

> Pray to God to give courage to always stand by the truth, no matter how bitter it is. When we stand by the truth, God will always be on our side.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for the one principle he'd want the next generation to remember from his life, he returns to truth for the third time in three consecutive answers, this time framed explicitly through his own faith, as something he prays for the courage to sustain. **Why it matters.** The same truth, and the courage to hold it, appears as his answer to three different, independently asked questions, on constancy, on legacy, and on this closing one. That tells you it isn't a rehearsed talking point. It's the actual throughline of everything he's said. **Reflect.** *Is there a bitter truth in your own life right now that you know, but haven't yet found the courage to stand by?*

20 There Are a Few Incidents I Wish I Had the Power to Undo

> Discussion on this subject can continue. It is largely subjective and philosophical. It is a challenge to look back and pinpoint something that I was advised earlier. I have made many mistakes in life. But there are a few incidents I wish I had the power to undo. The narration of these will be part of a chapter of a book, which will take some time to be published. When that happens, I will remember to share that with you.

> *"Stand by the truth, no matter how bitter it is."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Given the chance to add anything the questionnaire didn't ask, he doesn't reach for a tidy closing thought. He names, plainly, that he's made many mistakes and that a few of them he wishes he could undo, without elaborating further here. **Why it matters.** Choosing to hold this back, rather than compress it into a soundbite for this feature, is the same restraint he showed in Principle 14. Some things, in his account, deserve their own space rather than a summary. **Reflect.** *What's something you've made peace with sharing only partially for now, trusting that the fuller telling will come when it's ready?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Trust is not given upfront. It is earned through credibility. Rank gives you authority. Only proof, repeated and consistent, gives you trust, whether commanding troops or running a peacekeeping mission.

There is nowhere to hide from the people you lead. The moment your honesty is questioned, you discover you were being watched constantly all along.

Regret decisions made with complete information more than those made blind. Missing information is an explanation. Harshness chosen with full clarity has nowhere to hide.

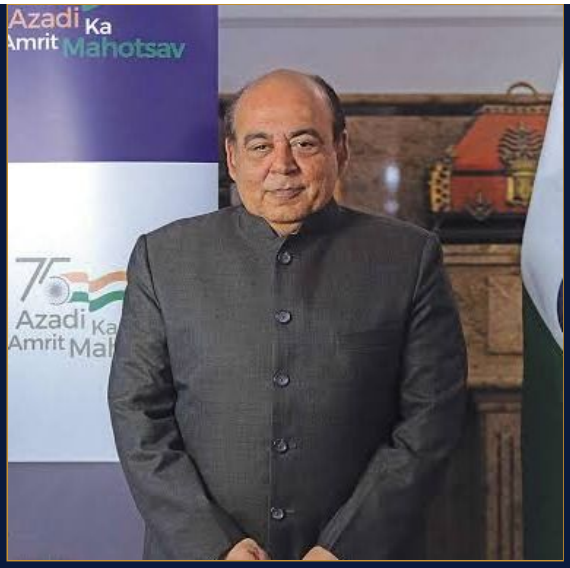
Humility, practised collectively and authentically, is a real operational advantage. It only counts when demonstrated directly by people on the ground, not delegated to a specialist team.

Aim for measurable progress, not an impossible ideal. Positive peace is nearly unreachable. Leaders should aim for negative peace instead, less violence, less spread, fewer deaths, easier settlement.

Ask whether you're contributing something new, or repeating existing theories. A question borrowed from his research supervisor, turned into a standing discipline for everything he says.

Stand by the truth, no matter how bitter it is. The same principle, truth and the courage to hold it publicly, answers three separate questions about constancy, mistakes, and legacy.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Amb Sanjiv Kohli

Indian Foreign Service, IFS · Former High Commissioner & Ambassador

"Leadership is not about possessing authority. It will be tested around how that authority is exercised."

8 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 010, August 2026

The Capacity to Listen Is One of the Most Potent Tools of Diplomacy

Leadership is not about possessing authority. It will be tested around how that authority is exercised. Eight principles from nearly four decades in the Indian Foreign Service.

> *Leadership is not about possessing authority. It will be tested around how that authority is exercised.*

Amb Sanjiv Kohli, IFS, began his diplomatic career about 38 years ago and has represented India in roles including High Commissioner and Ambassador, across regions and circumstances ranging from routine bilateral relationship-building to a pandemic that left tens of thousands of Indian nationals stranded with no direct way home.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Value Systems Are Never Frozen

I believe that our value systems are not frozen at any point of time. These are being continuously shaped by our experiences and learnings. There is, hence, continuous reshaping, reinforcing, and expansion of our basic personality traits. As for me, each of my assignments helped me to broaden my worldview through exposure to new environments and ideas.

As an Indian diplomat, you are also representative of the idea and image of India, as perceived by the outside world. We, as Indians, are most admired when seen as a true representative of our country's cultural heritage that has always nurtured the concept of unity in diversity, as also of our civilizational values such as compassion, empathy, tolerance and human dignity.

This belief has always stayed with me as a guiding principle. It is important that the conduct of every Indian reinforces the very positive perception of India.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He starts from a premise many people resist admitting: that values aren't fixed early in life and then simply carried forward. Each posting, each new environment, kept reshaping and expanding his own worldview, not just adding to it. **Why it matters.** His non-negotiable isn't a personal rule so much as a shared responsibility: he ties individual conduct directly to how India itself is perceived abroad, unity in diversity, compassion, tolerance, human dignity, treating every Indian representing the country, formally or not, as part of that same reputation. **Reflect.** *Which of your own values have genuinely been reshaped by experience, rather than simply reinforced by it?*

02 The Capacity to Listen Is One of the Most Potent Tools of Diplomacy

In my view, which can sound contrarian to many, the capacity to listen to others with patience and a constructive mindset is one of the most potent tools of diplomacy. And when it comes to dealing with diverse governments and people, our capacity to listen to them not only underlines our basic humility but also respect for their point of view, which may not be fully aligned to our own.

Arrogance or indifference to the other side's sensitivities only leads to breakdown of negotiations, or at best to outcomes that will not sustain. Relationships are built through decades of hard work and incremental accumulation of goodwill. Listening to each other helps to build trust and strengthen mutual respect and understanding.

In fact, all public servants need to listen more to provide the necessary level of comfort and reassurance to those who approach them for finding solutions to their grievances.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He calls this view contrarian, which is itself worth noticing: in a field often associated with negotiating leverage and firm positions, he places patient listening, not persuasion, as the more potent tool. Respect for a viewpoint that doesn't align with your own is treated as a form of humility, not concession. **Why it matters.** "Relationships are built through decades of hard work and incremental accumulation of goodwill" is a deliberately slow, unglamorous account of how trust actually forms between nations, and by extension between people, a position that resists the pull toward quick wins. **Reflect.** *In your own dealings with people who see things differently than you do, are you listening to understand their position, or listening for the gap where you can make your own case?*

03 We Take Full Ownership of the Consequences

We must realize that the practice of diplomacy is always confronted with challenges of all sorts, such as sovereignty and national interests, domestic political compulsions, geopolitical rivalries, shifts in alliances, ideological differences, and more. Modern media and a turbulent world order add further complexity to the tasks of diplomats.

An ambassador also carries the responsibility to find a balance between the positions of the country he represents and the country he is posted in. His statements and conduct are, in a sense, under double scrutiny by the stakeholders and interest groups on both sides.

India has the largest diaspora globally. The well-being and expectations of our nationals, particularly that of the most vulnerable category of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, have always been the most important part of our work. It usually is also one of the most sensitive aspects of our mandate. The embassy has no legal jurisdiction over the employer. The embassy is also generally constrained in approaching authorities other than the host foreign ministry directly.

Given the multiplicity of challenges and the uncertainty that is integral to the environment in which a diplomat operates, we can all recall several instances where we had to take decisions based on our best judgement, knowing fully that we would also need to take full ownership of its consequences.

Let me recall a rather recent instance. I was the High Commissioner to Tanzania during the COVID time. Tanzania was one of the many countries where a vaccination facility was not available, and there

was mounting panic in the Indian diaspora. There was no direct flight to India, and transits were difficult due to different COVID-related restrictions.

Our government subsequently decided to run special flights to some of these countries. However, Tanzania was not on that list, though we had over 50,000 registrations of people desperate to travel. Having been left with no official option, we decided to take upon ourselves the responsibility to negotiate sending chartered flights. We had to organize the community into groups, where the group leader would collect money directly, and the embassy would negotiate rates for booking chartered flights.

We were finally able to facilitate the travel of all the registered people, at rates lower than what the government had charged for flights arranged by them directly.

> *"We decided to take upon ourselves the responsibility to negotiate."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than describe a single dramatic decision, he describes the structural condition every diplomat operates under: incomplete information, competing loyalties, no legal authority over the actual problem, and full ownership of whatever happens next regardless. **Why it matters.** The Tanzania story is the clearest possible illustration of that condition. With no official pathway and 50,000 people registered, he and his team built one, organizing the diaspora into groups and negotiating charter rates directly, and it worked out cheaper than the government's own arranged flights. **Reflect.** *When you've been left with no official option for something that genuinely mattered, did you build an unofficial one, or wait for permission that wasn't coming?*

04 The Letter of Credence Is a Privilege and an Enormous Responsibility

There can certainly be no honour greater than representing the country in a foreign capital. The letter of credence that an ambassador carries is an official communication from the Hon'ble President to the Head of State of the receiving country, requesting the receiving government to trust everything the Ambassador says on behalf of his country, and confirming that the Ambassador has full power to speak for his home country.

This document not only confers huge privilege but also entrusts you with the enormous responsibility to be the chief interlocutor for the national interests of your country. This sense of responsibility only grows with time.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He explains the letter of credence not as a ceremonial formality but as a literal transfer of trust, a foreign government agrees, on paper, to believe whatever the ambassador says on India's behalf. That's the privilege and the weight in the same document. **Why it matters.** "This sense of responsibility only grows with time" is a quiet but telling detail. He doesn't describe the weight of representing a nation as something that becomes routine with experience. It becomes heavier. **Reflect.** *Is there a form of trust placed in you that you've come to treat as routine, rather than as something that should still feel weighty?*

05 Navigating These Challenges Requires Agility, Composure, Patience

I touched upon the nature of challenges a diplomat needs to grapple with. I also spoke about the balance one needs to find between expectations from both sides, some of which can be competing in nature. The Ambassador needs to develop local constituencies of support in different circles, such as media, business, and think tanks.

The nature and scope of these challenges also depend upon the state of bilateral relationships. Building and nurturing relationships always remains a work in progress. It is important to ensure that minor irritants are not allowed to get magnified into the possibility of a rupture of the relationship. At the same time, one cannot let noise or headlines become a distraction.

Navigating these challenges requires agility, composure, patience, and laser-sharp focus on the body of shared interests and values that bind the two countries and their people. It also needs building a stake in each other's well-being, and a continuing effort to add more substance and ambition into bilateral engagement.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Answering two questions together, on staying composed under pressure and on building trust across differences, he treats them as the same underlying skill: the discipline of not letting minor irritants become ruptures, and not letting headlines dictate the relationship's direction. **Why it matters.** "Building a stake in each other's well-being" reframes bilateral relationships as something more durable than aligned interests. Interests shift with circumstance; a stake in the other side's well-being is a steadier foundation to build on. **Reflect.** *In a relationship, professional or personal, that matters to you, are you letting a minor irritant get magnified past its actual size right now?*

06 We Are No Longer Part of the Problem. We Are Part of the Solution

I started my diplomatic career about 38 years ago. Our country has made remarkable progress. Our increased strength and capabilities have obviously led to a qualitative change in the breadth and depth of our international engagement. Our interests extend much beyond our region.

We are no longer considered as part of a problem. We are now seen as a part of the solution. The world pays attention to us because they see us as an economic powerhouse, a rising middle power with a significant military and technological muscle. This rise obviously gets reflected in the aspirations of our youth.

At the same time, there are multiple headwinds and challenges that we need to overcome to achieve the goal of being a developed country. The increasing threat to world order posed by the coercive and transactional foreign policy approach of the Trump administration, the undermining of multilateralism, and the rise of China, among other factors, could seriously impact our national interests.

While at the foreign policy level we are trying to safeguard our strategic autonomy by following a policy of issue-based multi-alignment, we need to build our national strength in areas of vulnerability and in sectors where we have critical dependency on other countries, particularly in areas of technology and critical inputs for our industry.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Looking back across 38 years, he traces a shift in how the world positions India, from being treated as part of a problem to being treated as part of the solution, driven by economic weight, military and technological capability, and rising global attention. **Why it matters.** He doesn't stop at the achievement. He names specific present-day headwinds, a more transactional and coercive global order, strained multilateralism, rising dependency in technology and critical industrial inputs, as the real work still ahead, rather than treating India's rise as a settled story. **Reflect.** *Where in your own field has real progress made you assume the hardest part is behind you, when the harder part may actually be what comes next?*

07 Leadership Will Be Tested Around How Authority Is Exercised

A leader needs to lead from the front. A good leader must be a team builder and an inspirational figure. Impactful leaders communicate clearly and openly. Accountability and integrity need to be their defining traits.

Leadership is not about possessing authority. It will be tested around how that authority is exercised. Having said that, it is also true that leadership is a process of continuous learning and growth.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates having authority from being a leader entirely. The first is a position; the second, in his account, is only proven by what someone actually does with the authority they've been given. **Why it matters.** Ending on leadership as "a process of continuous learning and growth," rather than a fixed set of traits someone either has or doesn't, keeps the definition open rather than treating leadership as something achieved once and then simply held. **Reflect.** *Think of the authority you currently hold, in whatever form. Would people around you say it's being tested well, based on how you're exercising it, not just on the fact that you have it?*

08 Equipping India's Youth With the Knowledge, Skills and Character

We are the most youthful nation in the world. The youth of India will have the global stage as their playfield. They will therefore be ideally placed to fulfil the unfinished agenda of securing for the country its rightful place.

As a country, we need to introspect on whether we are creating the right conditions to equip them with the knowledge, skills and character to take up the responsibility that awaits them.

> *"We are no longer considered as part of a problem. We are now seen as a part of the solution."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked both for a principle to leave with young people and for a lesson he wishes he'd understood earlier, he answers with the same thought turned outward: the responsibility isn't only on the next generation to rise to the moment, it's on the current generation to ask honestly whether it's actually equipping them to. **Why it matters.** "Fulfil the unfinished agenda" ties directly back to Principle 6, India seen as part of the solution rather than the problem, framing that shift as work still in progress, carried forward by the youth who inherit it rather than completed by the generation before them. **Reflect.** *If you're in any position to shape what the next generation inherits, whether at home, at work, or in your community, are you asking honestly whether you're equipping them, or simply expecting them to manage?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Value systems are never frozen. Experience continuously reshapes, reinforces, and expands who you are. Every new environment is a chance to broaden your worldview, not just confirm it.

Listening is one of the most potent tools of diplomacy. Respecting a viewpoint that doesn't align with your own is humility, not concession. Trust is built through decades of incremental goodwill, not single wins.

Take full ownership of the consequences. When left with no official option, build one. With 50,000 people registered and no pathway home, that's exactly what happened.

Responsibility should grow heavier with time, not lighter. The weight of representing something larger than yourself shouldn't become routine just because you've carried it for years.

Leadership is tested by how authority is exercised, not by whether you have it. Possessing authority is a position. What you do with it is the actual test, repeated continuously, never finished.

Ask whether you're equipping the next generation, not just expecting them to rise. The unfinished agenda belongs to those who inherit it, but the conditions that prepare them for it belong to those who came before.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Dr. Snigdhaa Majumder

Business Strategy, Customer Experience & Leadership Advisor

“Do not abandon yourself while becoming successful.”

20 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 009, August 2026

Do Not Abandon Yourself While Becoming Successful

Achievement means very little if, by the time you reach it, you have become someone you no longer recognize. Twenty principles on business, leadership, and staying yourself.

> *You can lose certainty and still not lose yourself.*

Dr. Snigdhaa Majumder's work sits at the intersection of business strategy, customer experience, leadership, startups, design thinking, mentoring, branding, and communication. Across large organizations, high-growth startups, boardrooms, classrooms, and entrepreneurship, she now works closely with founders and emerging leaders on the thinking behind their decisions, not just the decisions themselves.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what she stands for, stated publicly, in her own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Experience Quietly Rearranges You

The experiences that shaped me most were not the ones that went according to plan.

They were the moments when I had to walk into rooms where I was not the obvious choice. The times I had to make decisions before I felt ready. The businesses I helped build. The teams I had to lead through ambiguity. The dreams that worked and the ones that broke apart in my hands.

I have lived in very different worlds: large organizations, high-growth startups, boardrooms, classrooms, entrepreneurship and mentoring. Each world changed me differently.

Corporate life taught me scale. Startups taught me speed. Entrepreneurship taught me loneliness. Leadership taught me that people are far more complicated than spreadsheets. Teaching taught me that influence is not about authority. And life itself taught me something no business school could:

Earlier, I thought experience was something you accumulated. Today, I think experience is something that quietly rearranges you. The person who began my career and the woman writing this today may share the same name, but they do not hold the same beliefs. And perhaps that is what a meaningful life should do to us.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She locates her own transformation not in one dramatic turning point, but across five very different worlds, corporate, startup, entrepreneurship, teaching, mentoring, each teaching her something the others couldn't. **Why it matters.** Her distinction between accumulating experience and being rearranged by it is precise: the first assumes you stay the same person collecting more. The second admits the person doing the collecting keeps changing. **Reflect.** *Which of your beliefs from five years ago would the person you are today no longer hold?*

02 What an Organization Says, Rewards, and Delivers Must Be the Same Thing

I have seen strategy fail in companies full of intelligent people. I have seen organizations with extraordinary processes produce ordinary outcomes. And I have seen small teams with limited resources achieve remarkable things simply because everyone understood what mattered.

Different worlds taught me that organizations do not fail only because they lack strategy. They often fail because strategy, people and reality are each having a different conversation.

A strategy may be brilliant. But if the people executing it do not understand it, trust it or feel responsible for it, it remains a presentation.

A culture may have beautiful values written on walls. But culture is revealed in who gets heard, who gets promoted, what gets tolerated and what happens when someone makes a mistake.

So, what makes an organization genuinely effective? Clarity. Trust. Ownership. And the courage to confront reality before reality becomes expensive.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Strategy failing isn't usually about the strategy itself, in her account, it's about strategy, people, and reality operating as three separate, disconnected conversations instead of one. **Why it matters.** "Culture is revealed in who gets heard, who gets promoted, what gets tolerated" is a sharper, more checkable definition than most stated-values language, because it points at what actually happens rather than what's written on a wall. **Reflect.** *In your own organization, do the words on the wall, what gets rewarded, and what people actually experience day to day tell the same story?*

03 Listen Beyond What People Say

The biggest mistake organizations make is believing that customers exist to validate the organisation's ideas. They do not.

Customers do not wake up thinking about our strategy, our product roadmap or our internal challenges. They wake up with their own problems, frustrations, fears and aspirations. We often listen for answers when we should be listening for meaning.

A customer may say, "Your service is slow." But perhaps what they really mean is: "I feel unimportant."

They may say, "Your app is complicated." But perhaps they mean: "I am anxious about making a mistake."

The words are not always the problem. The experience behind the words is.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her two examples, "your service is slow" possibly meaning "I feel unimportant," "your app is complicated" possibly meaning "I am anxious about making a mistake," show exactly what listening for meaning instead of answers looks like in practice, not as an abstract principle. **Why it matters.** This reframes customer complaints as translation problems, not just information problems. Fixing the literal words of a complaint can still miss the feeling underneath it entirely. **Reflect.** *The last time someone gave you direct feedback, did you respond to the words, or to what you sensed underneath them?*

04 What Are We Not Seeing?

Design thinking gave me permission to stop being impressed by quick answers.

Earlier in my career, like many ambitious professionals, I took pride in solving problems quickly. If someone brought me a challenge, I wanted to move towards a solution. Experience taught me that speed is not intelligence when you are solving the wrong problem.

I have seen organizations invest in technology when the real issue was human behavior. I have seen leaders redesign processes when the actual problem was lack of accountability. I have seen businesses ask how to acquire more customers when they should have been asking why existing customers were quietly leaving. The visible problem is often only the symptom.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Three parallel examples, technology bought to fix human behavior, processes redesigned to fix accountability, customer acquisition chased to fix quiet churn, all point at the same failure: solving the visible symptom instead of the real problem underneath it. **Why it matters.** "Sometimes the problem behind the problem is not outside us. Sometimes it is us" is the harder half of this principle. It's one thing to ask what an organization isn't seeing. It's another to ask whether the answer is you. **Reflect.** *What's a problem you've recently tried to move fast on, that might actually be a symptom of something you haven't looked at yet?*

05 Your Own Inner Intelligence Deserves a Seat at the Table

One of the most humbling things I have learned is that listening does not come naturally to people who are good at solving. When you have spent years making decisions, fixing problems and being rewarded for having answers, you can begin listening with an answer already forming in your mind. That is not listening. That is waiting.

Real listening changed me because it forced me to give up the temporary comfort of certainty. I began to notice that the quietest person in the room sometimes understood the problem best. That frontline employees often knew what senior leaders were debating from a distance. That customers revealed things data could not.

And eventually, I learned to listen to myself. That may have been the hardest lesson of all.

There are times when the world around you tells you to continue, stay, accept or compromise and something inside you quietly says, "This is not right."

Do not silence that voice too quickly. Data is important. Advice is useful. But your own inner intelligence also deserves a seat at the table.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She distinguishes listening from waiting, listening with an answer already forming isn't listening at all. That distinction, learned from years of being rewarded for having answers, is what made her notice the quietest person in the room often understood the problem best. **Why it matters.** Turning that same listening back on herself, rather than only on customers and teams, is presented as the hardest version of the lesson. The instinct to override an inner "this is not right" with data and advice is exactly what she's warning against. **Reflect.** *Is there a quiet "this is not right" you've been talking yourself out of lately, in favor of data or advice that sounds more defensible?*

06 Move Like a Startup When Learning; Think Like an Institution When Building

> Corporates and entrepreneurs often believe they have little to learn from each other. I think that is unfortunate.
>
> Corporates can teach entrepreneurs that chaos is not the same as innovation. You cannot build everything through passion alone. At some point, scale demands systems, discipline and accountability.
>
> Entrepreneurs can teach corporates something equally valuable: not every decision deserves a committee. The entrepreneurial world taught me the power of moving before certainty arrives. Corporate life taught me the consequences of moving without considering scale. One gives you courage. The other gives you architecture. The strongest organisations need both.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Rather than picking a side in the classic corporate-versus-startup debate, she assigns each world a distinct gift, courage from the entrepreneurial instinct to move before certainty, architecture from the corporate discipline of building for scale. **Why it matters.** "Chaos is not the same as innovation" cuts against a romanticized view of startup culture, just as "not every decision deserves a committee" cuts against an equally romanticized view of corporate process. Neither world gets to claim the moral high ground. **Reflect.** *In whatever you're currently building, are you borrowing courage from one world and architecture from the other, or defaulting entirely to just one?*

07 Your Intention Is Not Your Impact

> The most important leadership lesson I learned could never have come from a book:
>
> You may believe you are being direct. Someone may experience you as dismissive. You may believe you are empowering someone. They may experience you as absent. You may believe everyone understands your vision because you have explained it ten times. They may still have no idea what you mean.
>
> Leadership becomes dangerous when we judge ourselves only by our intentions. The people around us live with our impact. This lesson made me more conscious of the gap between who I believed I was as a leader and what people experienced. It is an uncomfortable gap to look at.
>
> But leadership begins there. Not when you discover that you are perfect. When you discover that you are not, and remain willing to learn.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her three paired examples, direct versus dismissive, empowering versus absent, explained versus understood, all illustrate the same gap: what a leader believes they're doing and what the people around them are actually experiencing can diverge completely, even with good intentions on both counts. **Why it matters.** She places the start of real leadership not at self-discovery of strength, but at the uncomfortable discovery of the gap between intention and impact, and the willingness to keep looking at it rather than looking away. **Reflect.** *Where might your intention and your actual impact on someone currently be further apart than you'd like to believe?*

08 Committed to the Purpose, or Merely Attached to the Form?

I have learned that persistence is a virtue only until ego takes over. Sometimes we call it resilience when we are actually refusing to accept reality. Sometimes we call it "giving up" when what we are really doing is freeing ourselves from an idea that no longer belongs to us. The question I ask myself is:

If the purpose still matters, I adapt. If the evidence is asking me to change my assumptions, I listen. If the only reason I am continuing is because I have already invested too much, I let go. Sunk costs are not a reason to spend more of your life. I wish I had learned that earlier.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names the exact language trick that keeps people stuck: calling stubbornness "resilience," and calling a legitimate release "giving up." Her test cuts through both by asking what's actually being protected, the purpose, or just the familiar shape of it. **Why it matters.** "Sunk costs are not a reason to spend more of your life" applies the sunk-cost fallacy, usually discussed as a business concept, directly to personal time and identity, which is a harder and more personal application than the textbook version. **Reflect.** *Is there something you're currently persisting with because the purpose still matters, or only because you've already invested too much to admit otherwise?*

09 Never Grow So Fast That You Become Unrecognisable to Yourself

I have seen organisations grow faster than their culture can absorb. The numbers look impressive. Revenue rises. Teams expand. Investors celebrate. Meanwhile, something quieter begins to break. People stop speaking honestly. Customers become metrics. Leaders become exhausted. Values become inconvenient.

And eventually, the organisation discovers that growth has amplified everything, including what was already broken. Sustainable growth, to me, is not growth you can report. It is growth you can survive.

Leaders must protect the things that do not always appear in quarterly results: trust, judgement, culture, relationships, curiosity and the psychological safety to tell the truth.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her list of what quietly breaks during ungoverned growth, honesty, customers-as-people, leader energy, values, isn't presented as a cost of growth. It's presented as evidence that growth amplifies whatever was already broken, rather than fixing it. **Why it matters.** "This is true for companies. And for people" extends a growth principle usually reserved for business strategy into something personal, the same warning applies to a life expanding faster than the person living it can absorb. **Reflect.** *Is there an area of your own life growing fast enough right now that you're starting to become someone you don't quite recognize?*

10 Build a Career, But Do Not Hand Your Identity Over to It

I find myself telling young professionals and founders something that is not always popular: stop waiting to feel ready. You may never feel ready.

Confidence is often misunderstood. We imagine confident people wake up believing they can do everything. In my experience, confidence is usually evidence collected after courage. You take the role

before you feel completely prepared. You speak before your voice stops shaking. You begin before the plan is perfect. And somewhere along the way, you discover you survived.

I also tell them not to build their entire identity around professional success. A career is important. But if your entire sense of worth depends on your next designation, your next salary or someone else's approval, you will never feel successful for long.

> *"Your intention is not your impact."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. "Confidence is usually evidence collected after courage" reverses the common assumption that confidence comes first and action follows. In her account, the order runs the other way, you act before you feel ready, and confidence is what you find afterward. **Why it matters.** Tying self-worth to the next designation or salary guarantees the feeling of success never lands permanently, because there's always a next milestone to chase. The fix isn't ambition, it's where identity is anchored. **Reflect.** *If your next promotion, raise, or milestone disappeared tomorrow, how much of your sense of worth would go with it?*

11 When the Future Is Unclear, Return to Who You Are

There have been periods when I did not know what would happen next. I have learned that uncertainty becomes frightening when we believe we need the entire future to be visible before we can move.

We do not. We only need enough light for the next step. When everything feels uncertain, I ask myself:

What do I know to be true? What is within my control? What am I afraid of? And who do I want to be while this is happening?

That last question matters most. Because uncertainty does not only test our strategy. It reveals our character.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her four-question framework moves from the practical, what's true, what's controllable, what's feared, to the one she says matters most: who do I want to be while this is happening. That's the only one of the four not about the situation at all. **Why it matters.** "We only need enough light for the next step" directly answers the specific fear that makes uncertainty frightening, needing the whole future visible before moving, rather than offering generic reassurance about staying calm. **Reflect.** *In whatever uncertainty you're currently facing, have you been asking what will happen, or who you want to be while it's happening?*

12 Know When to Work Harder, and When to Walk Away

One lesson I wish people did not have to learn painfully is this:

For a long time, I believed competence, hard work and integrity would speak for themselves. They do not always.

People are complicated. Organizations are political. Relationships are not always reciprocal. Some people will appreciate what you bring. Others will only notice when you stop bringing it. This does not mean we should become cynical. But it does mean we need discernment.

Do not confuse access with loyalty. Do not confuse praise with trust. Do not confuse being needed with being valued. And most importantly, do not keep proving your worth in places that have already decided not to see it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her three paired distinctions, access versus loyalty, praise versus trust, being needed versus being valued, each name a specific way competence gets mistaken for security. All three can be present without the fourth thing, actually being valued, ever showing up. **Why it matters.** "Do not keep proving your worth in places that have already decided not to see it" names a trap that discipline and hard work alone can't escape, because the problem isn't the effort, it's the place. **Reflect.** *Is there a place in your own life right now where you're still proving your worth, even though it may have already decided not to see it?*

13 What Is All This Success Asking Me to Become?

There was a period in my life when I realized that achievement and fulfilment were not the same thing. That sounds obvious when written as a sentence. It is much harder to understand when you have spent years climbing. Ambitious people are trained to keep asking, "What next?"

The next role. The next business. The next milestone. The next proof.

But eventually, I began asking a different question:

That question changed me. I stopped seeing success only as arrival. I began seeing it as alignment. Are my achievements and my values moving in the same direction?

Is the life I am building one I want to live? Am I becoming more myself, or merely becoming more successful?

Those questions have no permanent answers. I still return to them.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her shift from seeing success as arrival to seeing it as alignment replaces a finish-line model of achievement with an ongoing check: are the things you're achieving and the values you hold actually still moving in the same direction. **Why it matters.** "Those questions have no permanent answers. I still return to them" is an honest admission that this isn't a lesson she learned once and resolved, it's a question she keeps having to ask again. **Reflect.** *Right now, are your current achievements and your values moving in the same direction, or have they quietly started to diverge?*

14 Success Is Freedom

Earlier in my life, success looked visible.

Growth. Recognition. Titles. Achievement. The ability to say, "I made it."

Today, success has become quieter. Success is freedom. The freedom to choose meaningful work. The freedom to say no. The freedom to begin again. The freedom to walk away from what no longer aligns with who I am.

Success is also peace, but not the kind that comes from having no ambition.

I am still ambitious. I simply no longer want to sacrifice myself at the altar of ambition. Today, success means this:

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her four freedoms, to choose meaningful work, to say no, to begin again, to walk away, replace the visible markers of success (titles, recognition) with the ability to act according to her own values at any given moment. **Why it matters.** She's careful to clarify that this isn't a retreat from ambition, "success is also peace, but not the kind that comes from having no ambition" rejects the easy reading that her definition of success means wanting less. **Reflect.** *Which of her four freedoms, meaningful work, saying no, beginning again, walking away, do you currently have the least of?*

15 Do Not Betray Yourself to Belong

Every career presents moments when fitting in appears easier than standing apart. Stay silent. Accept what you know is wrong. Be less ambitious. Be less emotional. Be more convenient. Become whatever the room rewards.

I have learned that external acceptance is an expensive bargain if it requires internal abandonment. There are compromises we all make in life. But there are some prices that are too high. For me, one of them is self-respect. You can rebuild a career. You can change industries. You can begin again. But if you repeatedly abandon your own values, eventually you may not recognize the person who remains.

> *"Never grow so fast that you become unrecognisable to yourself."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her list, stay silent, be less ambitious, be less emotional, become whatever the room rewards, names the specific small concessions that add up to belonging at a cost. None of them look dramatic individually; the danger is in their repetition. **Why it matters.** "You can rebuild a career. You can change industries. You can begin again" establishes what's actually recoverable, so that the one thing she names as not easily recoverable, self-respect eroded by repeated self-abandonment, stands out clearly by contrast. **Reflect.** *What's a small concession you've made recently to fit into a room, that you'd call a compromise rather than a betrayal, if you're honest about the difference?*

16 Five Principles for the Next Generation

1. Do not confuse movement with progress. A busy life can still be a directionless one.

2. Learn to sit with uncertainty. Not every important decision comes with enough information.

3. Let people earn your trust more than once. Trust is beautiful. Blind trust is expensive.

4. Become difficult to manipulate by becoming deeply aware of yourself. Know your fears, your patterns, your need for approval and your vulnerabilities.

5. Keep becoming. Do not become so attached to who you were that you cannot meet who you are capable of becoming.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for five principles rather than one, she gives five distinct, standalone instructions rather than five versions of the same idea, each addressing a different failure mode: mistaking busyness for direction, needing certainty before deciding, trusting too easily, staying unaware of your own patterns, and clinging to an outdated self. **Why it matters.** "Become difficult to manipulate by becoming deeply aware of yourself" reframes self-awareness as a defensive skill, not just a reflective one, knowing your own fears and need for approval is what makes you harder for others to exploit. **Reflect.** *Of her five, which one names a pattern you actually recognize in yourself right now, rather than one that's easy to agree with in the abstract?*

17 "I See This Differently Now"

I once believed that successful leaders were people who had figured themselves out. I no longer believe that. The older I get, the more I respect people who remain unfinished. People who can say, "I was wrong." People who can change their mind. People who can outgrow an identity that once made them successful.

I think certainty is often overrated. Certainty can make us feel safe, but it can also stop us from seeing. Today, I believe one of the most powerful sentences a leader can say is:

It requires humility. And humility, in my experience, is not weakness. It is intellectual and emotional maturity.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. She names the specific belief she abandoned, that successful leaders are people who've figured themselves out, and replaces it with respect for people who remain unfinished and willing to outgrow the very identity that made them successful in the first place. **Why it matters.** Naming "I see this differently now" as one of the most powerful sentences a leader can say sets a concrete, sayable bar for humility, rather than leaving humility as an abstract virtue no one quite knows how to practice. **Reflect.** *What is a belief about your own field or work that you now see differently than you used to, and have you actually said so out loud to anyone?*

18 Because of Her, I Believed I Could Begin Again

I do not particularly want to be remembered only for the businesses I helped grow, the roles I held or the numbers attached to my career. Those things matter. But they are not what I hope remains.

I would like to be remembered as someone who helped people see more of themselves. Someone who could look at a person in transition, confusion or self-doubt and remind them that their current identity was not their final identity.

As a leader, teacher, mentor and entrepreneur, that has increasingly become the work I care about. Helping people think differently. Feel more courageously. Choose more consciously. And perhaps become more of who they already are.

If someone years from now says:

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her hoped-for legacy isn't tied to the businesses she built or the titles she held, it's tied to a single sentence she imagines someone saying about her years from now, which is a far more specific and personal measure than most legacy answers offer. **Why it matters.** "Their current identity was not their final identity" is the same idea running through Principle 16's "keep becoming" and Principle 1's "experience quietly rearranges you," applied outward, to what she hopes to help other people see in themselves. **Reflect.** *If someone had to summarize what you helped them believe about themselves in one sentence, what would you want that sentence to be?*

19 Do Not Abandon Yourself While Becoming Successful

> Because achievement means very little if, by the time you reach it, you have become someone you no longer recognize.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for the single principle she'd give every reader of this series, she chooses the same warning that runs through nearly every earlier answer, growth, success, ambition, identity, distilled into one sentence. **Why it matters.** That this is the one principle she'd want every reader to carry, out of twenty answers covering strategy, listening, leadership, and legacy, tells you which thread she considers the actual throughline of everything else she's said. **Reflect.** *If achievement meant very little unless you still recognized yourself at the end of it, would anything about how you're currently pursuing success change?*

20 Who Am I Becoming, and Is She Someone I Want to Meet?

Perhaps the most important thing my journey has taught me is that life is not asking us to become one final, perfected version of ourselves. It is asking us to keep becoming. For a long time, I thought growth meant adding. More knowledge. More experience. More achievement. More confidence.

Today, I think some of the deepest growth comes from subtraction. Removing borrowed beliefs. Letting go of identities that have expired. Outgrowing relationships, roles and ambitions that once defined us. Releasing the need to explain every decision. Forgiving ourselves for not knowing earlier what we know now.

I have learned that reinvention is not always about becoming someone new. Sometimes it is simply the courageous act of returning to someone you had to leave behind in order to survive. So if there is one thing I would like this record of my journey to hold, it is this:

I have not always known where I was going. I have changed my mind. I have failed. I have rebuilt. I have trusted too much. I have learned to trust differently. I have achieved things I once dreamed of, and discovered that dreams, once achieved, are not always enough.

But through all of it, I have tried to remain a student of my own life. Because perhaps wisdom is not finally having all the answers. Perhaps wisdom is having the courage to keep asking:

> *"Do not abandon yourself while becoming successful."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Her closing reframes growth as subtraction as much as addition, removing borrowed beliefs, expired identities, and the need to explain every decision, rather than only accumulating more knowledge, achievement, and confidence. **Why it matters.** "Reinvention is not always about becoming someone new. Sometimes it is simply the courageous act of returning to someone you had to leave behind in order to survive" closes the loop on Principle 1's claim that experience rearranges rather than accumulates, growth can mean going back, not just forward. **Reflect.** *Ask yourself her final question honestly: who are you becoming right now, and is she or he someone you'd actually want to meet?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Experience rearranges you; it doesn't just accumulate. The person who began your career and the person you are today may share a name but not the same beliefs. That's not a flaw. It may be the point.

Listen for meaning, not just answers. "Your service is slow" may really mean "I feel unimportant." Most of the truth lives underneath the sentence.

Your intention is not your impact. The people around you live with what they experience from you, not with what you meant. Leadership begins at that uncomfortable gap.

Ask whether you're committed to the purpose, or just attached to the form. Sunk costs are not a reason to spend more of your life. Sometimes what looks like giving up is actually freedom.

Never grow so fast you become unrecognisable to yourself. True of companies. True of people. Growth amplifies whatever was already broken, not just what was working.

Build a career. Do not hand your identity over to it. Confidence is usually evidence collected after courage, not a feeling you wait to have before you begin.

Do not abandon yourself while becoming successful. Achievement means very little if, by the time you reach it, you no longer recognize who you've become.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Peter Toutain-Dorbec

Artist · Photographer · Author · Poet · Publisher

“What unites human beings is far greater than what separates us.”

9 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 008, August 2026

Look Deeply. Remain Free. Do Not Waste Your Time.

What unites human beings is far greater than what separates us. Nine principles from six decades of photography, painting, and travel across 120 countries.

> *What unites human beings is far greater than what separates us.*

Peter Toutain-Dorbec, born Pierre Toutain-Dorbec, has spent more than five decades travelling, photographing, painting, and writing across more than 120 countries, from conflict zones to sacred spaces, publishing more than 40 books along the way. His relationship with India in particular, from Varanasi and Kolkata to Mumbai, Chennai, and Delhi, runs across six decades and shaped much of how he came to see contradiction, spirituality, and identity.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words, presented here in full. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 What Unites Us Is Far Greater Than What Separates Us

After nearly six decades of travelling, photographing and living among people in more than 120 countries, I have come to believe that what unites human beings is far greater than what separates us.

Cultures are different. Religions are different. Languages, customs, political systems and ways of understanding the world can be profoundly different. But beneath these differences, I have encountered the same fundamental human needs again: to love and to be loved, to protect one's children, to belong, to be respected, to live with dignity, and to find some meaning in our existence.

I have witnessed humanity at its most generous and at its most cruel. I have been in places affected by war, oppression, extreme poverty and displacement, but also in sacred places and communities where people possessed very little materially and yet demonstrated an extraordinary generosity toward a stranger. These experiences taught me very early not to confuse wealth with richness, education with wisdom, power with strength, or poverty with an absence of dignity.

Photography played an essential role in teaching me this. A camera can create distance between you and another human being, but it can also force you to look, really look, and to see. For me, photography was never simply about taking pictures. It was a way of entering another person's world, however briefly. Before photographing someone, I had to observe, listen and, whenever possible, establish trust. I learned that you cannot understand people if you arrive believing that you already know who they are.

Perhaps one of the strongest lessons of my life has been that human beings are full of contradictions. We are capable of extraordinary compassion and extraordinary brutality, sometimes within the same society and even within the same individual. I have seen people retain their humanity under circumstances designed to destroy it. I have also seen comfortable and educated societies become indifferent to the suffering of others.

This is why I have become suspicious of labels. Nationality, religion, race, social class, political ideology, these may tell us something about a person's circumstances, but they never tell us the whole person.

The moment we reduce someone to a category, we stop seeing them.

After all these years, I don't think travelling has given me definitive answers about humanity. If anything, it has made me less certain of easy answers. But it has given me one conviction: wherever we come from, human dignity is not something granted by governments, religions, institutions or social status. It belongs to every human being.

And perhaps the responsibility of an artist, or simply of a witness, is to recognize that dignity, particularly where the world has learned not to see it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Six decades and 120 countries taught him not to trust easy answers about humanity, only one conviction: that beneath every difference of culture, religion, and circumstance, the same fundamental needs recur, to love, to belong, to live with dignity. **Why it matters.** "The moment we reduce someone to a category, we stop seeing them" is the thesis his entire body of work argues against. He names the exact mechanism by which labels replace people, and locates the artist's responsibility precisely there: to keep seeing the dignity that categories erase. **Reflect.** *What category, label, or first impression have you recently let stand in for actually seeing someone?*

02 Would I Feel That This Photograph Had Respected My Humanity?

I believe the photographer carries an enormous responsibility, because the moment you photograph another person, particularly someone who is suffering or vulnerable, you are taking something from an encounter and carrying it into another world. You may have the power to determine how that person will be seen by people who will never meet them. That power should never be taken lightly.

For me, the first responsibility is respect. The person in front of my camera is never simply a subject. He or she is a human being with a life, a history, a family, fears, hopes and dignity. Poverty does not remove dignity. Suffering does not remove dignity. War does not transform a human being into an illustration of war.

This becomes particularly important in situations of conflict, displacement or extreme poverty. There is always a danger that photography can turn suffering into spectacle. A dramatic photograph may be powerful, but we must ask ourselves: powerful for whom? At whose expense? Am I making this photograph because it reveals something important about the human condition, or because suffering produces an extraordinary image?

I have asked myself these questions throughout my life, and I don't believe there is a simple answer that applies to every situation. Sometimes the responsibility is to photograph. Sometimes it is to lower the camera. It is crucial to know when not to take a picture.

There are moments when witnessing becomes necessary. If injustice, violence or oppression are taking place, silence can also become a form of complicity. A photograph can preserve evidence. It can contradict propaganda. It can force people far away to confront a reality they would prefer not to see. In that sense, photography can carry a moral responsibility to memory.

But being a witness does not give the photographer permission to take everything.

I have always felt that there is an invisible line between witnessing someone's vulnerability and violating it. You must feel where that line is. No professional rule can entirely define it. It comes from empathy,

experience and your relationship with the person standing in front of you.

The camera also creates an imbalance of power. I am the one deciding where to stand, when to press the shutter, what to include in the frame and what to exclude. Later, I may decide which image is published or exhibited. The person photographed often has none of those choices. Recognizing that imbalance is essential.

This is also why context matters. A photograph can tell the truth about one fraction of a second and still create a false understanding of a person's life. An image of despair does not mean that a person's entire existence is despair. A photograph of poverty does not tell us who that person loves, what makes them laugh, what they believe, or what dreams they have for their children.

After so many years, I think the photographer's responsibility is not simply to show what happened. It is to try to remain faithful to the humanity of the people who allowed us, even for an instant, into their lives.

We are witnesses, but we are also interpreters. We should never confuse the privilege of witnessing with ownership of someone else's story.

Ultimately, the question I try to carry with me is very simple: If I were the person in front of the camera, would I feel that this photograph had respected my humanity?

If the answer is no, perhaps the photograph should not be made.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He treats the camera as an instrument of real power imbalance, not a neutral recording device. He alone decides what's in the frame, what's excluded, and what gets published, while the person photographed usually has none of those choices, which is why he insists recognizing that imbalance is essential rather than incidental. **Why it matters.** His closing test, would I feel this photograph had respected my humanity if I were the one in front of the lens, turns an abstract ethical question into something checkable in the moment, before the shutter, not after. **Reflect.** *In your own work, whatever form it takes, do you have a version of his test, a question you actually ask yourself before acting, or only after?*

03 Seeing Is Not the Same as Understanding

Very early, I understood that photography is not reality. It is a fragment of reality, a fraction of a second selected by the photographer from an infinitely larger and more complex world.

What is outside the frame is often as important as what is inside it.

When we look at a photograph, we have a natural tendency to believe it. We say, "This is what happened." But the photograph only tells us: this is what the camera saw, from this position, at this instant. Move two meters to the left, turn around, wait thirty seconds, and you may have an entirely different truth.

This has fascinated me throughout my life because it is not only a lesson about photography; it is a lesson about how we see the world.

We constantly mistake perception for reality. We see a person and immediately begin constructing a story: poor, wealthy, happy, unhappy, religious, dangerous, powerful, insignificant. But most of what makes that person who they are remains invisible to us. We cannot photograph memory. We cannot

photograph the years that brought someone to that moment. We cannot photograph what a person has lost, whom they love, what they fear, what they remember, or what they are thinking while looking back at us.

I have photographed people in circumstances that, from the outside, appeared desperate, yet I discovered laughter, generosity, tenderness and an extraordinary appetite for life. I have also entered beautiful and privileged environments where, beneath the surface, there was loneliness, fear or profound unhappiness. Appearances tell us something, but never everything.

This is particularly important when photographing other cultures. The greatest danger is to arrive with our own assumptions and then photograph evidence that confirms them. If I go somewhere expecting exoticism, poverty, spirituality or violence, I will probably find it. The camera is remarkably obedient to the prejudices of the person holding it.

So I learned to distrust my first impression.

I learned to stay longer, to look again, to listen, and sometimes simply to put the camera down. Often what I learned without photographing changed the photographs I eventually made.

There is another dimension that the camera cannot fully capture: presence. The smell of a place, the temperature, the dust, the silence, the noise of a crowd, the fear in a room, the sound of prayer, the tension before violence, the way someone touches another person's hand, these things belong to the experience of being there. A photograph may suggest them, but it cannot contain them.

And yet this limitation is also part of photography's extraordinary power. Because a photograph cannot tell us everything, it leaves space for imagination, memory and questioning. A strong photograph should not necessarily provide an answer. Sometimes its purpose is to make us stop and ask: What am I really looking at? What happened before this moment? What happened afterward? What am I not seeing?

Perhaps after all these years, this is what photography has taught me most profoundly: seeing is not the same as understanding.

The camera can help us look.

Understanding requires something more.

> *“The camera is remarkably obedient to the prejudices of the person holding it.”*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. "The camera is remarkably obedient to the prejudices of the person holding it" is his sharpest observation here, if you go somewhere expecting to find exoticism or violence, you generally will, not because it's uniquely true but because you were only looking for confirmation. **Why it matters.** His discipline against that trap is concrete, not aspirational: stay longer, look again, and sometimes put the camera down entirely. What he learns without photographing changes what he eventually photographs. **Reflect.** *Where in your own life are you currently collecting evidence for a conclusion you already reached before you started looking?*

04 Human Dignity Is Remarkably Difficult to Destroy

One of the most profound things I have learned is that resilience rarely looks heroic when you are standing close to it.

From a distance, we speak about courage, survival and the strength of the human spirit. But in places shaped by war, displacement, oppression or extreme poverty, resilience is usually something much quieter. It is a mother finding food for her children. It is someone rebuilding a home that has been destroyed. It is preparing a meal, washing clothes, going to school, praying, making a joke, falling in love, or simply getting up in the morning when almost everything that gave life stability has disappeared.

I have witnessed people living through circumstances that I could photograph but could never fully understand because I was not the one who had to remain after I left.

That distinction has always been important to me.

The photographer can enter a difficult situation, witness it, record it and eventually leave. The people we photograph often cannot leave. It is their country, their village, their family, their tragedy. Remembering this has kept me from romanticizing suffering or speaking too easily about the nobility of endurance.

There is nothing noble about forcing people to endure what should never have happened to them. And yet, within these circumstances, I have repeatedly witnessed an extraordinary determination to remain human.

Perhaps that is what dignity means to me. Dignity is not pride, and it is not something associated with social position or material circumstances. It is something much deeper. I have seen tremendous dignity among people who had lost almost everything, and I have seen very little dignity among people who possessed enormous wealth and power.

Conflict strips away many of the structures we normally depend upon. Suddenly, things that seemed permanent, home, profession, possessions, social position, even one's country, can disappear. What remains are very fundamental things: relationships, memory, identity, love, fear, loyalty, and the need to preserve some control over one's own existence.

I have also learned that courage is often accompanied by fear. We sometimes imagine courageous people as people who are not afraid. My experience has shown me almost the opposite. Courage is frequently the decision to continue despite fear, the ability to control fear.

But there is another lesson that is more difficult.

Human beings can endure an astonishing amount, but we should be careful not to turn that capacity into an excuse for accepting their suffering. I sometimes hear people described as extraordinarily resilient, as though resilience somehow makes injustice less terrible. It does not. The fact that people survive war, persecution, displacement or hunger does not absolve those who created those conditions, or those who chose to ignore them.

Resilience should inspire us, but it should also disturb us.

And I have learned that small acts can become enormous under extreme circumstances. Sharing food when there is almost none. Protecting a stranger. Maintaining a ritual. Continuing to teach children. Making music. Creating beauty. Laughing. Especially laughing.

Humor has surprised me in some of the darkest places I have known. It is one of the ways human beings refuse to surrender completely to circumstances. To laugh when the world has become absurd or terrifying can itself be an affirmation: I am still here. You have not taken everything from me.

Perhaps this is what I have carried with me most strongly from people I encountered in difficult places.

Human dignity is remarkably difficult to destroy.

You can take someone's possessions, home, freedom, even their country. You can surround them with violence and uncertainty. But there remains within many human beings a territory that is extraordinarily difficult to conquer.

I have seen it many times.

And each time, it has humbled me.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He deliberately refuses to let resilience become an excuse. Admiring how people endure war, persecution, or hunger can quietly slide into believing the suffering itself was survivable, and therefore less urgent to end. He insists resilience should inspire us and disturb us at the same time. **Why it matters.** Naming humor, specifically, as a form of defiance in the darkest places he has known, is a detail most accounts of resilience skip past. Laughing when the world has become absurd or terrifying is, in his account, itself an act of refusing to surrender. **Reflect.** *Where have you let someone's resilience quietly become a reason not to ask harder questions about what made that resilience necessary in the first place?*

05 India Began Looking Back at Me

India has been one of the great teachers of my life, probably the greatest.

I first came to India six decades ago, and from the beginning I understood that it was impossible to approach this country with simple explanations. India constantly resists simplification. Every time you believe you have understood something, another reality appears beside it, sometimes contradicting the first, yet somehow equally true.

Perhaps this was one of the first things India taught me: contradiction does not necessarily mean incoherence.

In India, I encountered ancient traditions existing beside an intensely modern society; extraordinary wealth beside extreme poverty; silence beside overwhelming noise; spirituality beside commerce; beauty beside decay; life beside death. In Varanasi, particularly, these things were not separated from one another in the way I had been accustomed to seeing them in the West. They existed together.

Varanasi profoundly affected me. Along the Ganges, I encountered a relationship with life and death that challenged many of my European assumptions. Death was not hidden away. It was present, visible, part of the rhythm of existence. People bathed, prayed, talked, worked and laughed while, not far away, bodies were being cremated. At first this can be difficult for a Westerner to comprehend. Over time, I began to understand that what appeared to me as contradiction was part of a much larger continuity.

India taught me that spirituality does not necessarily exist apart from ordinary life. It can be found in the street, in a gesture, in food, in music, in the way someone touches the feet of an elder, in the lighting of a small lamp, in the colors of a temple, in the movement of a crowd, or in a person sitting silently beside a river.

I also discovered that spirituality and religion are not necessarily the same thing.

Religion can become an institution, with its rules, hierarchies and divisions. Spirituality, as I came to understand it through many encounters in India, can be something much more intimate: a person's relationship with existence, with consciousness, with nature, with death, with animals, with the unknown.

India also changed my understanding of time.

Coming from Europe, I inherited a relatively linear conception of history: past, present, future. In India, I became increasingly aware of another perception, one in which the past is not necessarily behind us. Ancient ideas, rituals, myths and philosophical traditions remain alive within contemporary existence. Centuries can seem to coexist in the same street.

This affected the way I photographed.

India is extraordinarily seductive for a photographer. Everywhere there is color, movement, gesture, architecture, faces, rituals, extraordinary light. It would be very easy to photograph only the spectacular India, the India that satisfies the Western imagination.

I became increasingly wary of that.

The picturesque can become another form of blindness.

If you photograph only what appears exotic to you, you may create beautiful images while understanding very little about the people you are photographing. India reinforced something that became fundamental to my work elsewhere: I had to try to see beyond my own fascination.

Kolkata taught me something different from Varanasi. Mumbai taught me something different again, as did Madras, Delhi and the many smaller places I encountered. There is not one India. There are countless Indias, languages, religions, castes, communities, histories, cuisines, landscapes and ways of thinking. Even the idea of a single Indian identity contains an extraordinary multiplicity.

That realization stayed with me everywhere I subsequently travelled.

I became increasingly reluctant to speak of Africans, Asians, Arabs, Europeans, or any people as though an entire civilization could be contained within a single identity. India taught me that identity is never singular; it is layered, complex, and often overlapping. A person may belong simultaneously to a family, a village, a language, a religion, a profession, a region, a nation, and a philosophical tradition. They may also be born into social categories historically identified as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, or Dalit. Yet no single one of these affiliations, inherited or chosen, can fully explain who that person is.

But perhaps India's deepest influence on me was more personal.

It taught me to become more comfortable with questions that have no definitive answers.

What is consciousness? What is the self? What survives us? What does it mean to live a meaningful life? What is our relationship to other living beings? What is the relationship between the material and the

spiritual?

India did not give me answers to these questions. It did something more valuable: it made the questions themselves part of my life.

Over the decades, I have returned to them through photography, painting, writing and simply through living.

India also taught me patience, the importance of remaining somewhere long enough for the first impression to disappear. When the first impression disappears, something much more interesting can begin.

You stop looking only at India.

India begins looking back at you.

And in that encounter, you inevitably discover something about yourself.

I have carried that lesson with me throughout the rest of my journey: travel is not simply the discovery of other cultures. At its best, it is the gradual dismantling of our certainty about our own.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. India taught him, more than anywhere else, that contradiction does not necessarily mean incoherence, that ancient and modern, wealth and poverty, life and death can coexist without one cancelling the other out, and that his own linear, Western sense of time was only one way of experiencing it, not the correct one. **Why it matters.** "Travel is not simply the discovery of other cultures. At its best, it is the gradual dismantling of our certainty about our own" reframes what travel is actually for, not collecting places, but losing a little of your own certainty each time. **Reflect.** *What is one certainty about your own culture, background, or way of seeing time that you've never actually had dismantled by encountering somewhere genuinely different?*

06 We Are Made From What We Have Been Unable to Forget

Photography and painting have always occupied two different territories in my life, although over the years those territories have increasingly overlapped.

Photography begins with something that existed in front of me. I was there. The person was there. The place, the light, the event existed at that moment. I can choose the frame, the instant, the point of view, but I need the world to give me something first.

In that sense, photography has been my dialogue with reality.

Painting is different. Painting does not need reality to remain in front of me. It allows me to return to something years, even decades, after it happened. A face, a landscape, a war, a gesture, a color or an emotion can disappear from conscious thought and then suddenly return with extraordinary force.

This is why I have said that photography records what history allows me to see, while painting explores what memory refuses to forget.

Memory is not an archive. It does not preserve everything faithfully. It selects, transforms, exaggerates, erases and sometimes invents. Two people can live through the same event and remember it completely differently. Even our own memories change as we change.

For an artist, I find this fascinating.

A photograph may remain physically unchanged for fifty years, but I do not remain unchanged. When I look at one of my photographs decades later, I am no longer the man who made it. I bring to that image everything that happened afterward. Sometimes I see things in my own photographs that I did not understand when I took them.

Time has changed the photograph because time has changed me.

Painting gives me another possibility. I can enter that memory rather than simply revisit the image. I can remove what no longer matters, intensify what does, combine different moments, change scale, distort color, simplify a face or allow something almost forgotten to become central. I am no longer obligated to describe what happened. I can explore what remains.

And what remains is sometimes very different from what happened.

There are experiences that I photographed and believed I had left behind, only to discover many years later that I had not left them at all. They had simply gone somewhere deeper. Certain faces return. Certain landscapes return. Certain moments of violence return. But so do moments of extraordinary tenderness and beauty.

This is where painting becomes, for me, a form of archaeology. I am excavating my own memory.

I don't always know what I am looking for when I begin. Sometimes the meaning of a painting reveals itself only during the process. Something that I witnessed thirty or forty years ago can suddenly connect with something happening in the world today, or with something I have only recently understood about myself.

The passage of time therefore does not necessarily weaken an experience. Sometimes it concentrates it.

Photography also has a peculiar relationship with time because every photograph immediately becomes the past. The instant I press the shutter, that moment no longer exists. The child grows old. A building disappears. A landscape changes. Someone dies. A political system collapses. A country changes its name. And the photograph remains.

When I was younger, I don't think I fully understood this. I was photographing the present. Today, looking back across six decades of images, I realize that I was also unknowingly constructing an enormous conversation with time.

This is one reason I have never thought of my different practices, photography, painting, sculpture and writing, as separate. They are different languages for approaching many of the same questions.

Photography says: I saw this.

Memory says: This is what remained.

Painting asks: Why has it remained?

And time continually changes the answer.

Perhaps this is ultimately what my creative life has become: not an attempt to preserve the past exactly as it was, that is impossible, but an attempt to understand what experience leaves behind in us.

We do not simply remember the past.

We are made, in part, from what we have been unable to forget.

> *"Human dignity is remarkably difficult to destroy."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He assigns each medium a distinct relationship to time, photography as dialogue with reality in the instant it happens, painting as archaeology, a way of re-entering memory years or decades later and finding what's actually still there beneath what he originally photographed. **Why it matters.** The three-line sequence, photography says I saw this, memory says this is what remained, painting asks why has it remained, is the clearest articulation anywhere in this feature of how his different disciplines aren't separate pursuits but different questions asked of the same experience. **Reflect.** *What experience from your own past has changed meaning for you over time, not because the facts changed, but because you did?*

07 The Work Must Come First

Creative independence has always been essential to me, perhaps because I never believed that an artist should wait for permission to create.

Permission can come in many forms: from galleries, publishers, critics, magazines, institutions, the market, fashion, or simply from the expectations of other people. Recognition can be gratifying and sometimes important because it allows the work to travel and reach others. But if recognition becomes the reason for creating, then something fundamental has been lost.

I have always tried to make the work I felt I had to make.

That does not mean I have been indifferent to criticism or to the opinions of others. On the contrary, criticism can be extremely valuable. But there is a difference between listening and obeying. An artist must develop an internal compass strong enough to hear the world without becoming directed by it.

My movement between photography, painting, sculpture, poetry and writing comes from the same principle. I never felt that I had to choose one language simply because other people needed to define me. There are things I can say with a photograph that I cannot say with words. There are things I can explore through painting that photography cannot reach. Sometimes a poem can approach an experience more closely than either.

The medium is not the identity. It is the instrument.

What matters is what you are trying to understand, express or question.

This freedom has sometimes come at a price. Creative independence can mean uncertainty. It can mean working without knowing whether the work will be exhibited, published, understood or even noticed. There are periods when the world seems interested in what you are doing and periods when it is looking somewhere else entirely.

You must continue in both circumstances.

Over time, I learned that discipline is as important as inspiration. Inspiration is unpredictable. If you wait for it, you may spend much of your life waiting. The practice of returning to the work, looking, experimenting, failing, starting again, is what keeps a creative life alive.

Failure has also been important. Not every photograph succeeds. Not every painting works. Not everything one writes deserves to survive. I have destroyed work, abandoned projects and changed direction many times. This is not separate from the creative process; it is the creative process.

You must be willing to disappoint yourself.

Curiosity may be the principle that has sustained me most. At 75 years old, I still want to know what happens if I try something differently. The danger for an artist who has worked for a long time is to become the curator of his own past, to repeat what has already succeeded because it has become recognizable.

I have never wanted to do that. The moment you begin imitating yourself, something is finished.

Travel helped protect me from this. Encountering different cultures, histories, landscapes and ways of thinking repeatedly disrupted my assumptions. It reminded me that my way of seeing was only one possibility among many. Painting did the same thing to my photography; writing challenged both. Moving between disciplines kept me uncomfortable, and I think a certain amount of discomfort is necessary for creation.

I have also tried not to confuse an artistic career with an artistic life. A career is affected by exhibitions, publications, sales, reviews, institutions and recognition. These things have their place, but they are partly controlled by circumstances and by other people.

An artistic life is different. It is the decision to keep looking, thinking and making.

That belongs to you.

As I have grown older, this distinction has become increasingly important. Time becomes more precious, and the desire to satisfy expectations becomes less interesting. You begin to understand that the real privilege is not recognition. The privilege is having spent a life remaining curious enough to continue creating.

If I had to reduce creative independence to a few principles, they would be these: remain curious; work even when inspiration is absent; learn from criticism without becoming governed by it; do not be afraid to fail; change when the work demands change; and never allow success to imprison you in what you have already done.

Above all, create because something within you still needs to be discovered.

The world may recognize it or it may not.

The work must come first.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a firm line between an artistic career, which is shaped by exhibitions, sales, and other people's decisions, and an artistic life, the simple decision to keep looking, thinking, and making, which belongs entirely to him regardless of what recognition does or doesn't arrive. **Why it matters.** At 75, his stated danger isn't running out of ideas, it's becoming the curator of his own past, repeating what already succeeded because it's recognizable. That's a specific, late-career risk most advice about creativity never names directly. **Reflect.** *Are you currently protecting your own artistic life, in whatever form your work takes, from becoming just a career shaped by what other people expect of you?*

08 What Deserves to Outlive Us Is Our Humanity

What I hope will outlive us is not simply the record of what happened, but the memory of how people lived, endured, loved, suffered, resisted, and remained human.

I have photographed, painted, written about, and lived among people whose worlds were often changing or disappearing. I have witnessed war and political oppression, but also ordinary life: families, villages, rituals, landscapes, gestures, faces, and traditions that history can too easily overlook. With time, I have come to understand that these seemingly ordinary things are often the most precious.

We tend to preserve the history of nations, governments, wars, monuments, and powerful people. But humanity also resides in much smaller things: the expression on a face, the hands of a craftsman, the dignity of someone living in poverty, the memory of an elder, the knowledge passed from one generation to another, a language, a ceremony, a way of understanding nature and our place within it.

These are fragile forms of knowledge. Once they disappear, they cannot truly be reconstructed.

I also believe we must preserve complexity. During my travels and years of working in different cultures, I learned to distrust simple definitions of people. No civilization, religion, country, or community can be reduced to a single identity. Human beings are infinitely more complicated than the categories we create for them. Future generations deserve to inherit that understanding, especially in a world increasingly tempted by simplification and division.

Photography taught me something else: a photograph may survive the photographer, but its real importance is not that it preserves the photographer. It preserves the person who stood before the camera. It says: this person existed; this place existed; this moment happened.

Perhaps that is what I have been trying to do throughout my life, not to create memorials, but to leave traces.

If some part of my work survives, I hope it will carry forward the dignity of the people I encountered and something of the extraordinary diversity of human experience. I hope future generations will look at these images and works not simply as documents of a vanished past, but as encounters with people who were once as alive, complicated, hopeful, frightened, loving, and uncertain as they are.

But I cannot take that survival for granted. I live today in the United States, where I have found remarkably little interest in my work or in preserving it. After a lifetime of creating photographs, paintings, writings, and documents, I still do not know whether I will find a place for them, or a way to ensure that they survive me. There is a certain irony in having spent so much of my life preserving the memory of others while now wondering who, if anyone, will preserve what I have tried to leave behind.

What deserves to outlive us, finally, is our humanity, and the memory that, despite all our differences, we belonged to one another.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His answer about legacy shifts the question from what should be preserved to what kind of understanding should be preserved, not just facts and images, but the complexity of people, resisting the simplification and division that flattens a person into a single identity. **Why it matters.** He includes, without softening it, that he currently has no assurance his own work will survive him, and finds it ironic to have spent a life preserving others' memory while uncertain who will preserve his. That honesty about his own uncertain legacy makes the principle land harder, not softer. **Reflect.** *Setting aside what you'd like to be remembered for, what understanding, rather than what record, do you hope outlives you?*

09 Look Deeply. Remain Free. Do Not Waste Your Time.

If I could share only three principles with a young photographer, artist, writer or traveller beginning today, they would be these:

First: learn to look before you try to be seen.

We live in a time when there is enormous pressure to be visible, to publish, post, accumulate followers, establish an identity and constantly announce what we are doing. But an artist's first responsibility is not to be seen. It is to see.

Pay attention. Listen. Stay somewhere longer than is comfortable. Look beyond your first impression. Be curious about people who do not think as you do. Travel, if you can, not simply to collect destinations or images, but to allow other cultures to challenge what you believe to be normal.

And when you photograph or write about another person's life, remember that they do not exist to provide material for your work. Approach them with humility. You may carry their image with you for the rest of your life; they may remember your presence as well.

Second: protect your curiosity and your independence.

Learn your craft seriously. Study those who came before you. Read. Look at paintings. Listen to music. Learn history. Study cultures beyond your own. But do not spend your life trying to become someone else.

Influence is necessary. Imitation can be useful while learning. Eventually, however, you must discover your own language.

Do not allow fashion, algorithms, markets, critics, institutions, or even success, to decide what deserves your attention. Recognition is unpredictable and temporary. Curiosity can sustain an entire life.

Be willing to fail. Make work that embarrasses you occasionally because you attempted something you did not yet know how to do. If everything you create is safe, recognizable and successful, you may no longer be exploring.

And never become too comfortable with your own reputation. The most dangerous imitation for an artist may eventually be the imitation of oneself.

Third: remember that you have less time than you think.

When you are young, life appears almost unlimited. There will always be another journey, another photograph, another book, another painting, another opportunity to say what you wanted to say.

Then, very quickly, decades have passed.

So go.

Do the work. Take the difficult journey. Ask the question. Learn the language. Read the book. Make the photograph. Paint the painting. Write the poem. Tell people you love them. Change direction when you discover that you are travelling toward something that no longer matters to you.

But do not confuse urgency with speed. Some things require years to understand. A meaningful creative life is not a race to produce as much as possible. It is an attempt to remain awake during the time you have been given.

After these decades of working and travelling, I am less interested in telling a younger generation what to believe than encouraging them to remain capable of questioning what they believe.

So perhaps my three principles are ultimately very simple:

Look deeply.

Remain free.

Do not waste your time.

And throughout all three, never lose your humanity.

> *"Look deeply. Remain free. Do not waste your time."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked to reduce a lifetime to three principles for the next generation, he chooses looking before being seen, protecting curiosity and independence, and remembering time is shorter than it feels, then compresses all three again into six words: look deeply, remain free, do not waste your time. **Why it matters.** "The most dangerous imitation for an artist may eventually be the imitation of oneself" closes the loop on everything in Principle 7 about not becoming the curator of his own past. The final warning isn't about copying others. It's about copying who you already were. **Reflect.** *Of his three, looking before being seen, protecting your curiosity, or remembering your time is shorter than it feels, which one would change something about how you're spending this year if you actually practiced it?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What unites us is far greater than what separates us. Beneath every difference of culture, religion, and circumstance, the same fundamental human needs recur: to love, to belong, to live with dignity.

Before you photograph, or act on, someone, ask if it respects their humanity. A simple test applied before the moment, not after: if the answer is no, perhaps it shouldn't be made.

The camera is obedient to the prejudices of the person holding it. If you go looking for confirmation of what you already believe, you'll usually find it. Distrust your first impression; stay longer than is comfortable.

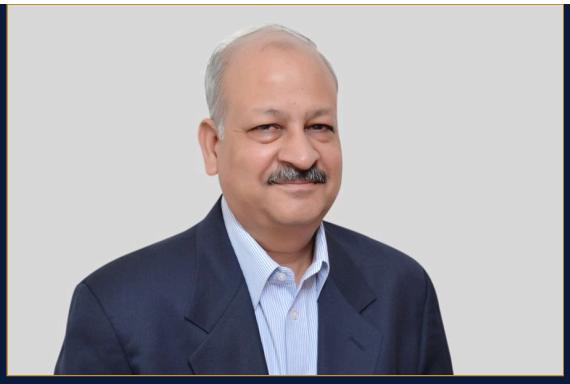
Resilience should inspire us, but it should also disturb us. Admiring how people endure suffering can quietly become an excuse not to ask who created the conditions that made endurance necessary.

Travel dismantles certainty about your own culture, not just theirs. The deepest journeys aren't about collecting other places. They're about losing a little of what you were sure of at home.

Protect your artistic life from becoming just a career. A career is shaped by other people's decisions. An artistic life, the decision to keep looking, thinking, and making, belongs entirely to you.

Look deeply. Remain free. Do not waste your time. Three principles, reduced from a lifetime, and one warning beneath all three: never lose your humanity.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/peter-toutain-dorbec



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

PoP Sudhir Aggarwal

CHRO and Director, Digital Transformation, Orbit Techsol India

“One and only one can work upon and build one's own attitude.”

6 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 007, July 2026

Success Lies in Making Yourself Dispensable

One and only one can work upon and build one's own attitude. Six principles from a CHRO whose career has spanned Sales, ERP, government business, and Deloitte.

> *One and only one can work upon and build one's own attitude.*

PoP Sudhir Aggarwal is CHRO and Director, Digital Transformation at Orbit Techsol India. His career has moved through HCL, IBM, Oracle, Sify Technologies, Thomson Reuters, Microsoft, Deloitte, and Wadhwani Foundation, across roles as varied as Resource Manager, ERP Practice Head, Head of Government business, faculty member teaching emerging technologies with the Wadhwani Foundation, and finally CHRO, a shift he took on at 62. He holds copyrights on the terms WANG@ (What Am I Not Good At), Insecurity Management, Soft Skills Leads to Wisdom, and A Manager – Always a CEO.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 One and Only One Can Build One's Own Attitude

Let me start with a disclaimer. Principles, values, and leadership are never available in the market for anyone to simply go and buy. The best and greatest institution on earth doesn't necessarily deliver people with good principles, values, and leadership. None of it has anything to do with a person's socio-economic or geo-political status.

There is a saying that it is the environment in which one is born and brought up. That describes, sufficiently and elaborately, how principles, values, and leadership are built and extensively influenced by the many things happening around and across the various facets of one's life and situations.

To me, a good combination of being honest to yourself, holding a positive attitude, building mutual trust and mutual respect, and being aspirational without carrying unrealistic or unreasonable expectations, is a good mantra for a successful career as a natural evolution. Still, if I need to define it in one word, I will say attitude.

With a good, positive, and forward-looking attitude, one can achieve the world and make a real impact. I can work on building the skill of the people around me, not their attitude. One and only one can work upon and build one's own attitude.

In my own context, trust in my leadership helped me embrace altogether out of the box, newer opportunities in my life, where every time I experienced and stepped into newer career choices to shape my journey.

Likewise, trusting and mentoring the people around me, and I am deliberately avoiding the term reportee or team member, and giving them the opportunity to make decisions, has helped me build teams and organizations with a focus on continuing to work and grow irrespective of me. Success lies in making oneself dispensable rather than remaining a power center artificially.

This can be seen visibly in my professional and personal life, across every facet of it.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He locates attitude as the one thing a person builds entirely alone. You can help someone build a skill, but no one else can build your attitude for you. This distinction runs quietly under everything else he says about leadership. **Why it matters.** "Success lies in making oneself dispensable rather than remaining a power center artificially" is a genuinely unusual definition of career success from someone who reached CHRO. Most people spend a career trying to become indispensable. He built his around the opposite goal. **Reflect.** *Are you currently building your team's skill, your own attitude, or quietly trying to make yourself indispensable instead of dispensable?*

02 The Three I's: Inclusive, Informed, and Independent

To me, it is more of a notion than a burden. Senior leadership does often require making difficult choices, but it can be a relatively simple phenomenon. The three I's, an inclusive, informed, and independent mindset, is the mantra. No rocket science.

More often than not, one will find one or more of those elements missing in the thought process behind a given situation. Sometimes the missing piece isn't visible at all; it can be deep rooted in one's thinking, quietly steering a situation in a particular direction. Each of the three I's is powerful and insightful in its own right. Unlearn, learn, relearn, as a continuous process, is a must, more so in these times of disruption and transformation. People who do not change with the situation they are in really struggle and suffer.

It may be worth sharing two situations to make the point.

One: let me share a personal experience of what leadership means. Very early in my career, going to the USA was every IT professional's dream. I had a friend there who wanted me to join him, and I would get almost daily calls urging me to send my papers for migration. I was getting restless to be in the USA as of yesterday.

Somehow, my father was not getting convinced and remained uncomfortable about supporting me. Frankly, he didn't know much about the IT industry or these migration matters, despite being a fine government official. We went through this struggle daily with no end in sight.

Then he found his answer. He had me meet a cousin, an uncle figure to me, who had lived in the USA and understood migration. He simply advised me to ask my friend to process my H1 visa. I followed that advice on the very next call, and the matter was resolved.

My point is this: my father had the vision and the thought process to work through the situation by identifying and connecting me to a knowledgeable person whom we both trusted completely.

Two: this was when I was with an Indian multinational, tasked with building the government business from negative, not zero. I was hired as Head of Government. My good luck was that we got an early window into a large, pan India opportunity. Within a few months we had come up to speed and needed to build Sales, Pre Sales, and System Integration Delivery teams for the government business.

Given my background and position at the time, it would have been relatively easy for me to grab any of these roles to lead myself. But here is where it got interesting: I chose to be an individual contributor instead, and the three roles were performed by the three best people for the job.

That did not mean I became hands off. I stayed very integral to everything happening with the government business, with a shared vision and shared purpose.

Most of the time, it is extremely tough to stay quiet in a government business review with the Chairman of the company, but it came naturally to me, for two key reasons: I trusted my colleagues, and I trusted myself.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Both stories he chooses to illustrate this principle are, at their core, about trust in someone else's judgement, first his father's, then his own team's. The three I's aren't a solo mental checklist; they're tested in moments where the harder choice is to step back and let someone else lead. **Why it matters.** Choosing to be an individual contributor rather than leading the roles himself, in a high visibility, pan India government opportunity, is a genuinely counterintuitive career move. He explains exactly why it worked: staying integral to the outcome without needing to be the one holding the title. **Reflect.** *Think of a role or decision you're currently holding onto because it would be "relatively easy" for you to lead it yourself. Would someone else actually do it better if you stepped back?*

03 A Change With a Difference Has Always Excited Me

Let me respond to the second part of the question first. The future worries me the least, and that is precisely how I have never been anxious about it. I have never allowed myself to sit in a comfort zone. I have always challenged myself and thrown myself open to newer opportunities and possibilities, including the unconventional and the diverse. Let me share some of my career shifts.

I accepted a Resource Manager role focused on hiring to serve global body-shopping opportunities in the mid 1990s. Almost all my peers discouraged me, and that move turned out to be among the best of my professional career, giving me a very different visibility and flavor of career options.

I stepped into the role of ERP Practice Head, having never seen an ERP screen with my own eyes. Identifying and trusting the people around me, with empathy in spirit, helped me and my teams grow. We had some genuinely unconventional experiences and engagements.

I worked on and successfully delivered the recovery of company money from bleeding projects, with zero background in those projects, and did this multiple times across the organization over years. It simply required my aligned heart and soul, in service of the company's purpose.

At 58, I joined Deloitte, a consulting firm, in India.

At 59, I became a faculty member teaching emerging technologies such as AI, GenAI, IoT, drones, and other emerging technologies to government officers, with the Wadhwani Foundation.

At 62, I became a CHRO, a 360-degree shift from the business side to HR, with a purpose.

Has it ever been difficult? Never. Some of these I chose, and a few came my way.

A change with a difference has always excited me. It gives me a kick. More than competing with others, challenging myself and working through that challenge is positive, progressive, and growth oriented. It has broadened my skillset, experience, expertise, perspectives, and my ability to work with people of varied profiles and personalities.

Let me make an acknowledgement here, in the spirit of gratitude. HCL, and the HCL Sales organization in particular, has been instrumental in making me whatever I am today. Working with multinationals

like IBM and Oracle helped shape my career and personality, with a level of professional fine tuning and maturity I am grateful for.

I have also developed a formula for myself that I believe applies to anyone: 10:20:70. In today's times especially, there is so much happening around us, at a pace never imagined before. This causes anxiety and discomfort. My belief, held with conviction, is that 70 percent of the innovations and developments happening around me simply don't concern me. 20 percent, I keep myself appropriately appraised of. 10 percent is what actually matters to me, and that is what I focus on and invest in. This simple approach helps me manage my insecurities and anxieties, and keeps me focused on my purpose to stay relevant.

> *"A change with a difference has always excited me."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His six unconventional career shifts, listed one after another, aren't a resume flex; they're evidence for his central claim that comfort is the actual risk, not change. Joining Deloitte at 58 and becoming a CHRO at 62 are not late career slowdowns in his account; they're the same pattern he started in the mid 1990s. **Why it matters.** The 10:20:70 formula turns "don't worry about everything" into an actual allocation you can use: 70 percent of what's happening around you genuinely doesn't need your attention, 20 percent needs awareness, and only 10 percent deserves your real investment. **Reflect.** *Honestly estimate your own split right now. How much of your attention goes to the 70 percent that doesn't concern you, versus the 10 percent that actually matters to your purpose?*

04 Make Yourself Dispensable, Not a Control Freak

A positive and forward-looking attitude makes the difference in every facet of life.

Know yourself, with a focus on what you are not good at, and leverage PPT, people, process, and technology, to complement and supplement that in creating the big, complete, and comprehensive picture. I hold a copyright on the term WANG@, which stands for What Am I Not Good At.

Learn to know and manage your insecurities. The more you know about and manage your insecurities, the deeper you get into what I call insecurity management, a term I also hold a copyright on. This can certainly make you a different person. I am not saying a better person, simply a person with a difference.

Trust yourself. People don't delegate because they believe the people around them are incompetent. An honest, deeper self-introspection can produce a fairly scary outcome: it is often a lack of conviction, confidence, or belief in oneself that holds a person back from delegating. In a larger sense, insecurities may be the root cause. This is the let-go phenomenon, easier said than done.

Make yourself dispensable rather than being a control freak. This is among the truest growth mantras there is, because it produces results and outcomes on multiple fronts. It creates growth for yourself, and it creates an environment where the people around you can grow too.

Focus on horizontal and vertical growth for all round maturity. Horizontal growth orientation becomes a natural evolution as people grow. As people grow, with some exceptions, their soft and behavioral side plays an increasingly larger role. Look deeper, and you'll see that leadership is really about soft skills and behavior. A Manager – Always a CEO is another one of my copyrighted lines.

Have the courage to own your mistakes, acknowledging them sooner rather than later, and give credit to your team. Never delay or shy away from acknowledging good work, because it helps build togetherness and a relationship built on trust. Never compete with your own team members in any manner; that can be among the biggest foul plays there is.

Mutual trust, and mutual respect.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. This is the most concrete, almost checklist-like of his six answers, and deliberately so: know your own gaps (WANG@), manage your own insecurities, trust yourself enough to delegate, and make yourself dispensable rather than a control freak. Each step depends on the one before it. **Why it matters.** His observation about delegation is sharp: people rarely fail to delegate because their team is incompetent. They fail to delegate because of their own lack of conviction or confidence, which he traces straight back to unmanaged insecurity. That reframes a common management complaint as a personal one. **Reflect.** *The next time you catch yourself not delegating something, ask honestly: is it really about your team's competence, or your own insecurity about letting go?*

05 Find Your Guru and God in Your Parents

My personal belief, one I have lived by throughout my life with zero exception, is this: find your guru and your god in your parents.

Do what you like, love what you do, do what suits you, and be expressive without living under the influence of other people's opinions or points of view.

Very humbly, and feeling even more humbled saying this, I am a family values person. All my life, I have tried working with the people around me, offering my two bits selflessly, whatever I could, in whatever manner I had to offer it. Any response otherwise has never discouraged me or diverted me from my fundamentals.

Have gratitude in life towards anyone, everyone, and anything. Give credit to the people who have been kind to you, or who have done or delivered something for you in whichever way. It matters to name them when sharing their contribution, even if they are no longer around.

Zero expectations. Lately in my life, I have been practicing, on a best effort basis. Engaging with zero expectations, meaning I don't expect that things will happen my way, or that people will follow my advice or suggestions. Life is not about my way or the highway. There may be many reasons behind people's actions and reactions in any given situation; I leave that to their own self-introspection and their own actions.

I have always tried to give space to people, whether younger, elder, or peer, in various situations, by not struggling to be seen or visible, believing instead that your efforts speak louder than being seen.

I have learned to extend my relationships to the people around me, as required or as I have wished to. This has helped me build a long-lasting legacy in an institutionalized way.

More than a few people have told me that I am a blessed person, that nothing wrong happens to people like me who have not wronged anyone in their personal life. This despite having gone through professional redundancies twice, survived a brain stroke, and even delivered some genuinely tough decisions as part of my professional responsibilities.

Be honest to yourself.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked about legacy, he answers first with parents, not career. The line "find your guru and your god in your parents" is presented as something lived with zero exception, and everything else in this answer, gratitude, zero expectations, giving people space, flows from that same root. **Why it matters.** He names his hardest chapters plainly, two redundancies and a brain stroke, immediately after describing himself as blessed. That's not a contradiction in his account; the resilience others noticed in him came alongside the hardship, not instead of it. **Reflect.** *Whose credit have you meant to name publicly but haven't gotten around to yet, especially someone who may no longer be around to hear it?*

06 Be Yourself

Be yourself.

It is crucial and significant to know yourself and love yourself in an ever evolving, fast changing world like never before. It is good to be inspired by the people and events around you, but contextualise that inspiration for yourself, within your own abilities, capabilities, and competencies.

Knowing yourself is among the biggest challenges there is, because people do not connect with themselves, do not speak with themselves, do not analyse themselves, and most of the time are not honest with themselves. Most times, people live in denial mode.

Beware: don't be mad about yourself, and don't be self-obsessed.

Those who know me, even a little, will vouch for everything I have articulated and narrated above.

> *"Find your guru and your god, in your parents."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His one guiding principle for the world closes the loop on everything before it: attitude, the three I's, dispensability, gratitude, all of it depends on actually knowing yourself first, which he calls one of the hardest things a person can do. **Why it matters.** He draws a careful line between self-knowledge and self-obsession. Knowing and loving yourself is the goal; being mad about yourself is the failure mode. The two are easy to confuse, and he names the difference explicitly rather than leaving it implied. **Reflect.** *When did you last actually speak honestly with yourself, rather than simply going along with your own assumptions about who you are?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You can build someone's skill. Only they can build their own attitude. Attitude is the one thing that has to be self-authored. Everything else can be taught, mentored, or delegated.

The three I's: inclusive, informed, independent. Difficult choices become simpler when you check whether your thinking is inclusive, informed, and independent, rather than missing one or more of the three without realizing it.

Comfort is the real risk, not change. Six career shifts across four decades, including joining Deloitte at 58 and becoming a CHRO at 62, all came from the same instinct: never sit in the comfort zone.

Make yourself dispensable, not a control freak. Failing to delegate is rarely about your team's competence. It's usually about your own unmanaged insecurity.

Find your guru and your god in your parents. Legacy starts at home. Gratitude, zero expectations, and giving people space all flow from that same root.

Know yourself without becoming obsessed with yourself. Self-knowledge and self-obsession look similar from a distance. He treats them as opposites, not neighbours.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/pop-sudhir-aggarwal



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Eric Anthony Jones

Founder, The Peacemakers Movement™ · Former Attorney & ABA Commissioner

"Context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion."

5 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 005, July 2026

Peace Must Become a Practice Before It Can Become a Promise

Context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion. Five principles from the Founder of The Peacemakers Movement.

> *The institution's description of me was not the same as the truth about me.*

Eric Anthony Jones is the founder of The Peacemakers Movement™ and the creator of The Peacemaker's Code™. A former attorney and American Bar Association Commissioner, he now builds Morning Fire™, Beyond Agreement™, The Peacemaker's Passage™, and the developing Architecture of Human Discernment — work grounded in a lifetime of learning the difference between how institutions label a person and who that person actually is.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words, presented here in full. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 The Institution's Description of Me Was Not the Truth About Me

My principles did not begin as abstract ideas. They developed through a lifetime of discovering that what people, institutions, and authorities say about a human being is not necessarily the truth about that human being.

As a child, school records described me with terms such as slow, mentally retarded, and emotionally disturbed. I never believed those labels. One memory from elementary school affirmed what I already knew.

At the time, I was in a regular classroom, but I had been placed in the lowest academic tier. The school also had a classroom for gifted students. During lunch and recess, I regularly went there because it was the most interesting room in the school. The students launched model rockets, conducted science experiments, built things, and even had a ping-pong table inside the classroom. I wasn't part of the class. I wasn't allowed to participate in their lessons, experiments, or activities. The teacher simply allowed me to sit quietly on the counter at the back of the room and watch.

One day, while the students were playing ping-pong, the ball flew across the room, bounced onto the counter where I was sitting, rolled into the sink, and became lodged in the drain with part of it still visible. One student tried to pry it out, but the ball began to crack. As I watched, two possible solutions immediately came to mind: attach something sticky to the ball or simply turn on the water and allow it to float upward.

I turned on the faucet.

The ball rose.

The students retrieved it, resumed their game, and I quietly returned to watching.

The moment did not convince me that I was intelligent. It confirmed something I had sensed all along: the institution's description of me was not the same as the truth about me.

That lesson extended far beyond academics.

I was one of relatively few Black children at Heatherbrae Elementary School in Phoenix. Other children subjected me to racial insults and degrading comparisons. When I reported what was happening, I was sometimes punished for tattling rather than protected. Even ordinary behavior could be interpreted through the story adults had already formed about me. I had a naturally loud sneeze, for example, but it was treated as an attempt to attract attention.

Eventually, after enduring another racial insult and believing no adult was going to protect me, I threw a chair.

The action was dangerous, and I accept that.

What troubled me then — and still stays with me today — was that the label placed upon me afterward ignored everything that had led to that moment. I was described as emotionally disturbed. My experience was different: I was disturbed by what was being done to me, and I had reached the point where I decided that if the adults would not protect me, I would try to protect myself.

I was transferred to another school with a special program. After observing me, educators there concluded that I did not belong in that placement and moved me into regular classes.

That experience taught me one of the earliest principles that continues to shape my life: people can possess authority, credentials, and sincere intentions, and still perceive another human being inaccurately.

My parents loved me and did the best they knew how to do. They were African Americans shaped by their generation, their Southern upbringing, military life, and a deep respect for authority. When the school described me in a particular way, they believed the school. My father even declined possible military relocations because he was told that disrupting my supposedly stable educational environment would be harmful.

He believed he was protecting me.

He could not have known that the environment being preserved was also one in which I was experiencing racial, emotional, and other forms of abuse.

That taught me another difficult truth: love and good intentions are indispensable, but they do not guarantee accurate perception or wise judgment.

Years later, another lesson emerged. While reading my military medical records in high school, I discovered by accident that I had been adopted as an infant. The information explained genetic differences I had already noticed, but it did not create an identity crisis.

My parents had raised me. They were my parents. Biology explained where I came from. Relationship explained who had loved me.

That understanding continued throughout my life. At different moments, other families gave me refuge, belonging, and support. Some of those relationships endured. Others later revealed painful limits.

Together they taught me that family cannot be defined by blood, legal status, or affectionate titles alone. It is ultimately revealed through presence, responsibility, protection, and whether people continue honoring the bonds they have invited others to trust.

Law school added another layer. At Gonzaga University School of Law, I was, by my recollection, the only Black man in my entering class. While receiving a legal education, I was also trying to understand my own identity and history. By my third year, I often found myself reading Black history and biographies in the back of class because understanding who I was had become as important to me as understanding the law.

I later learned that other minority students had received scholarship assistance for which I was ineligible because I had entered through a conditional summer program rather than in the fall. Faculty members reportedly tried to secure the scholarship for me, but the rule prevented it.

Once again, I encountered a lesson that would remain with me: a system can have worthy intentions. Good people within that system can sincerely try to help. Yet the structure itself can still produce an unequal outcome.

Over time, these experiences formed something larger than isolated memories. They taught me not to confuse authority with truth, labels with identity, rules with justice, intentions with impact, or reactions with the full history that produced them.

They also taught me the necessary counterbalance. Understanding context must never become a substitute for personal responsibility. In my own professional life, I would eventually have failures for which I alone was responsible. I could acknowledge the forces that shaped me without allowing them to erase my agency.

That balance remains central to my principles. Context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion.

Everything I am building today — including The Peacemakers Movement™, The Peacemaker's Code™, Morning Fire™, The Peacemaker's Passage™, and the developing Architecture of Human Discernment — grew from these lived experiences.

I have come to believe that peace requires more than agreement or good intentions. It requires people who can regulate themselves, perceive reality more faithfully, remain humble before evidence, preserve human dignity, accept moral responsibility, and allow reality to correct them.

My principles developed because I learned early that people can be profoundly harmed when an interpretation is mistaken for the truth. They matured when I realized I must apply that same standard to myself by examining my own perceptions and conduct with the same honesty I expect from others.

At the center of my work is therefore a continuing question: how do we learn to see human beings — including ourselves — more truthfully than the labels, fears, histories, and assumptions placed upon them?

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces every principle he holds back to one recurring discovery — that authority, credentials, and even sincere love are not the same thing as accurate perception. A school, a system, or a parent can be well-intentioned and still get a human being wrong. **Why it matters.** The turning point isn't the ping-pong ball moment itself — it's what he does with it: he doesn't conclude "I was actually gifted." He concludes something more durable: an institution's description of you is not the truth about you. That distinction became the foundation for how he now separates context from excuse, and label from identity. **Reflect.** *What label — from a school, a workplace, a diagnosis, or a family story — have you quietly accepted as the truth about you, rather than one person's or one system's account of you?*

02 Could I See Myself Accurately?

My principles have been tested many times, but the most consequential test did not come when I was misunderstood by others. It came when I had to examine myself with the same honesty I expected from everyone else.

As a child, I learned what it felt like to be judged before being understood. I was labeled, misperceived, and often punished for my reactions while the circumstances producing those reactions remained largely unseen. Those experiences shaped my commitment to human dignity, truthful perception, and the importance of understanding context before reaching conclusions.

It would have been easy to spend the rest of my life believing that my greatest challenge was convincing others to see me accurately.

Life eventually presented me with a far more difficult question: could I see myself accurately?

After graduating from Gonzaga University School of Law, I spent thirteen years practicing law. It was meaningful work. I had the privilege of helping people navigate some of the most difficult moments of their lives, and I remain grateful for the opportunity to have served them.

One conviction guided much of my legal practice. I often told clients there is an important difference between having a legal right and doing what is right. The law can determine what we are permitted to do. It cannot answer every moral question.

In family law, there were times when I needed to function less as a traditional advocate and more as a mediator. I wanted my clients to understand that winning every legal advantage did not necessarily produce the wisest or most humane outcome. A person could possess a legal right and still exercise that right in ways that unnecessarily damaged relationships, families, or children.

Looking back, I recognize that this principle would eventually be tested in my own life.

Over time, I became complacent. I never stopped wanting to help people, but good intentions are not enough. My discipline weakened. My execution became inconsistent. I allowed habits to develop that fell short of the professional standards my clients deserved and that I expected of myself.

The consequences were significant. I lost my license to practice law.

That experience forced me to confront a question every leader eventually faces: would I use context to understand my failures, or would I use it to excuse them?

Context mattered. My childhood experiences mattered. Financial pressures mattered. Professional stress mattered. All of those things formed part of the story. They were never the whole story.

Throughout my life, I had come to believe that understanding human behavior requires seeing the full context in which it develops. But I also knew that this principle becomes dangerous the moment it is used to erase personal responsibility.

So I chose the more difficult path.

I acknowledged the context without allowing it to erase my agency. I accepted that there were decisions I should have made differently. I accepted that I had become less disciplined than I believed myself to be. I accepted that my execution had not consistently reflected either my intentions or my standards.

That process changed me. It deepened my humility because I learned how easily any of us can drift from the principles we sincerely believe. It deepened my compassion because I came to understand that human failure is rarely explained by a single cause. It deepened my commitment to truth because I experienced firsthand how tempting it is to construct stories that protect our identity instead of revealing reality.

Most importantly, it confirmed something I had long believed but now had to live: compassion and accountability are not opposites. Compassion without accountability can become permission. Accountability without compassion can become condemnation. Neither produces lasting transformation. Real growth requires both.

Looking back, I no longer see that chapter simply as the end of a legal career. I see it as one of the most demanding classrooms of my life. It required me to apply inwardly the same principles I had spent years encouraging in others.

Everything I have built since — including The Peacemakers Movement™, Morning Fire™, The Peacemaker's Passage™, Beyond Agreement™, The Peacemaker's Code™, and the developing Architecture of Human Discernment — has been shaped by that experience.

None of this work is built upon the claim that I have lived a flawless life. It is built upon the conviction that human beings become wiser when they are willing to face reality honestly, accept responsibility without surrendering hope, and continue developing the capacities that make integrity, dignity, and peace possible.

If these principles have earned any credibility, it is not because they protected me from failure. It is because they first required something of me before I ever asked them of anyone else.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The hardest test of his principles wasn't being misjudged by a school or a system — it was losing his law license after his own discipline slipped, and having to decide whether to use his childhood context to explain that failure or to excuse it. **Why it matters.** He names the exact trap most people fall into on either side: using compassion to excuse accountability away, or using accountability to crush compassion. His answer — that real growth requires holding both — only carries weight because he lived the failure that tested it, rather than arriving at it in theory. **Reflect.** *Think of a time you failed at something that mattered. Did you use the context around that failure to understand it — or to excuse it? Be honest about which one it actually was.*

03 Peace Is a Human Capacity Before It Is a Social Condition

My principles shape my work through a simple conviction: many of the crises we describe as political, social, institutional, or interpersonal are also crises of human capacity.

People are often told to communicate better, disagree respectfully, make wiser choices, act with integrity, resist manipulation, or choose peace. Yet those expectations depend upon capacities that cannot simply be assumed.

A person must be able to regulate emotion without becoming numb. They must perceive reality without allowing fear, memory, identity, ideology, or group loyalty to distort what they see. They must be humble enough to let evidence correct them. They must preserve another person's dignity without pretending all ideas are equally sound. They must remain present in discomfort rather than immediately becoming defensive, hostile, avoidant, or reactive. They must also retain moral agency — the capacity to choose what is right even when pressure, pain, appetite, or belonging pull them in another direction.

This is why I do not understand peace merely as the absence of conflict. Conflict is inevitable. Difference is inevitable. Pressure is inevitable. The deeper question is whether human beings possess the capacities necessary to remain truthful, dignified, and morally responsible when those realities arise.

That conviction shapes The Peacemakers Movement™. The Movement is not built upon the assumption that peace emerges because people are told to be kinder or because opposing groups are placed in the same room.

Dialogue matters. But dialogue without regulation can become performance, combat, or withdrawal. Agreement matters when it is possible. Human dignity must never depend upon agreement.

For that reason, the work focuses on formation. Morning Fire™ cultivates regulation, attention, discipline, and intentionality before the pressures of the day take control. The Peacemaker's Code™ identifies principles that must become lived practice rather than inspirational language. Beyond Agreement™ explores the human capacities that allow people to remain in truthful encounter when consensus is unavailable. The Peacemaker's Passage™ carries that inquiry into everyday life across cultures, asking what actually helps human beings move from fear and division toward dignity, dialogue, and peace. The developing Architecture of Human Discernment investigates how people interpret reality, why perception becomes distorted, and what practices help judgment become more faithful.

These are not separate initiatives. They are different expressions of the same commitment: peace must become a human capacity before it can become a durable social condition.

That conviction also shapes how I think about institutions. Every institution forms people, whether it intends to or not. Schools teach more than academic content. Businesses shape attention and behavior. Social media trains habits of reaction. Artificial intelligence can strengthen inquiry, but it can also weaken authorship, judgment, and human agency when used without discernment. Universities shape identity as much as they confer credentials. Fashion influences how beauty, labor, and human worth are perceived. Financial institutions influence how people understand security, aspiration, debt, and choice.

For that reason, I believe every institution should ask a deeper question: are we strengthening the human capacities upon which wise and free choice depends, or are we quietly depending upon human weakness for our success?

That question is not limited to one industry. It applies wherever human beings are being formed.

This does not relieve individuals of responsibility for their own choices. Nor does it excuse institutions from examining the environments they create. People are not powerless products of systems. Systems are not neutral containers untouched by human consequences.

The Peacemakers Movement™ stands between those two distortions. It refuses to reduce social harm to individual weakness alone. It also refuses to treat human beings as though they have no agency. Its work is to strengthen both people and the environments that shape them.

I do not believe society changes only through large declarations. It changes when people develop the capacity to pause before reacting, examine what they think they see, remain open to correction, tell the truth without dehumanizing, and choose responsibility even when blame would be easier.

It also changes when institutions recognize that every classroom, workplace, platform, policy, and commercial system is helping to form the people who pass through it.

The Peacemakers Movement™ exists to make those formative processes visible and to help translate peace from an aspiration into a disciplined way of perceiving, relating, deciding, designing, and living.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He reframes conflicts we usually call political or social as, underneath, crises of human capacity — the ability to regulate emotion, perceive reality without distortion, and stay morally responsible under pressure. Peace, in his framing, isn't the absence of conflict; it's whether people have the internal capacity to stay truthful and dignified when conflict inevitably arrives. **Why it matters.** This is what separates his work from a typical dialogue-and-goodwill approach to peacebuilding. Every institution — schools, platforms, financial systems — is already forming people's capacities, for better or worse, whether it intends to or not. His question for every institution is blunt: are you strengthening people's judgment, or quietly profiting from its absence? **Reflect.** *Think about the institutions that shape your own daily life — your workplace, the platforms you use, the systems you depend on. Are they building your capacity for calm, truthful judgment, or quietly depending on your reactivity?*

04 Nine Principles for the Next Generation

I would not want the next generation merely to inherit my conclusions. I would want them to develop the capacities to examine reality, test what they have been taught, preserve human dignity, and make responsible choices for themselves.

The first principle I would pass on is this: do not surrender your identity to another person's limited measurement of you. Authority can be useful. Education can be valuable. Expertise matters. But no teacher, institution, diagnosis, title, social category, or public opinion should be allowed to replace careful attention to the actual human being. Most people will see only a fragment of you. They may interpret you through fear, bias, habit, limited information, or an inherited story. Listen carefully enough to learn from correction, but do not mistake another person's interpretation for the total truth of who you are.

The second principle is equally important: do not reduce other people to the labels once used against you. It is not enough to resist being misjudged. We must also resist becoming careless judges of others.

A person is more than a race, religion, nationality, diagnosis, political position, mistake, profession, social class, or moment of failure. Categories can help us recognize patterns, but they become dangerous when they replace curiosity about the person standing before us. I would teach the next generation to ask: what do I actually know? What am I assuming? What part of this person's history can I not yet see? What evidence might correct me?

The third principle is: learn to regulate before you react. Regulation does not mean becoming passive, emotionally numb, or agreeable. It does not mean quietly accepting abuse or injustice. It means developing enough inner steadiness to decide what the moment requires rather than allowing fear, anger, appetite, humiliation, or group pressure to decide for you. There are moments when resistance is necessary. There are moments when leaving is wise. There are moments when speaking forcefully is morally required. Regulation helps us distinguish moral courage from emotional reaction.

The fourth principle is: hold context and accountability together. Human behavior should not be judged without examining the conditions surrounding it. Pain, trauma, poverty, discrimination, family history, institutional pressure, exclusion, and fear all matter. But explanation must not become automatic exoneration. We remain moral agents. One of the most important balances I have learned is: context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion. The next generation will need both compassion and responsibility. Without compassion, accountability becomes condemnation. Without accountability, compassion can become permission for harm to continue.

The fifth principle is: preserve dignity without abandoning truth. Human dignity does not require agreement. You can reject an idea without degrading the person who holds it. You can establish a boundary without denying another person's humanity. You can tell the truth about harm without making hatred your identity. This is especially important in a time when disagreement is often treated as evidence of moral corruption and public humiliation is confused with justice. I would teach young people that ridicule is not the same as courage, certainty is not the same as wisdom, and destroying an opponent is not the same as defending what is right.

The sixth principle is: allow reality to correct you. We all develop stories about ourselves, other people, and the world. Some of those stories protect us. Some give us belonging. Some preserve our sense of innocence or superiority. No identity is strengthened by resisting reality. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is refusing to make yourself, your group, your ideology, or your memory more authoritative than reality. A person who cannot be corrected cannot continue to grow.

The seventh principle is: understand that relationships create responsibilities. Do not casually invite people — especially children — to trust you as family, mentor, protector, or parent if you intend to treat that bond as disposable when circumstances change. Legal status and biology matter, but they do not exhaust the meaning of responsibility. When people allow us into their emotional lives, our conduct leaves consequences. Love is not merely something we feel. It is something we become accountable for practicing.

The eighth principle is: do not confuse a delayed beginning with a wasted life. Human beings do not develop on identical timelines. Some people receive confidence, education, resources, mentorship, and social acceptance early. Others spend decades surviving, recovering, discovering their identity, or learning what was never taught to them. Another person's head start is not proof of your inferiority. Age does not automatically mean your meaningful contribution is behind you. What matters is whether you are willing to use what you have learned, accept the tools now available, and begin the work that is yours to do.

Finally, I would teach this: peace must become a practice before it can become a promise. Peace is not merely a feeling, slogan, ceremony, or absence of disagreement. It depends upon capacities developed over time: regulation; discernment; humility; moral courage; truthful perception; compassion; boundaries; responsibility; and the preservation of dignity.

I would want the next generation to inherit more than my language. I would want them to surpass me in their ability to embody these capacities. The goal is not to create people who repeat my answers. It is to help form people who can discover truth with greater humility, love with greater responsibility, exercise greater discernment, and build a more peaceful world than the one they inherited.

That is the inheritance I hope to leave behind.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked what he'd pass to the next generation, he doesn't offer a single motto — he offers nine distinct, ordered principles: from not surrendering your identity to another's limited view of you, through regulating before reacting, holding context and accountability together, and ending with peace as a practice, not a promise. **Why it matters.** These nine build directly on each other — the same balance he learned from his own childhood labeling (principles one and two) and his own professional failure (principle four) becomes something he's now handing forward, tested rather than theoretical. **Reflect.** *Of his nine principles, which one is currently the hardest for you to actually practice — not agree with, but practice — in your own life right now?*

05 Help Human Beings See Reality — and One Another — Truthfully

When people hear the word legacy, they often think about being remembered. I think first about what continues to shape the lives of others after we are gone.

If my name is remembered but my work contributes little to the flourishing of humanity, I would consider that a poor legacy. If, however, the ideas, practices, and capacities I have spent my life developing continue helping people become more truthful, more discerning, more responsible, more compassionate, and more capable of peace, then I would consider that a life well lived.

The legacy I hope to leave is not centered on me. It is centered on what human beings become.

Throughout my life, I have seen how easily people can be reduced to labels, stereotypes, diagnoses, political identities, professions, successes, failures, races, religions, or the worst moment of their lives. I have also seen the damage that occurs when institutions confuse authority with wisdom, when good intentions replace careful perception, or when accountability becomes separated from compassion.

Those experiences convinced me that one of humanity's greatest needs is not simply more information. It is greater human capacity.

I hope to leave behind practical ways for people to strengthen the capacities that make freedom, dignity, responsibility, and peace more possible. That hope is reflected throughout the work I am building.

Morning Fire™ seeks to cultivate regulation and intentionality before the demands of the day take over. The Peacemaker's Code™ explores principles that become lived habits rather than inspirational slogans. Beyond Agreement™ examines how people preserve dignity and truthful dialogue when consensus cannot be reached. The Peacemaker's Passage™ is my attempt to test these ideas through ordinary human relationships across cultures rather than keeping them safely inside theory. The

developing Architecture of Human Discernment asks one of the deepest questions I know: how do human beings become more capable of perceiving reality faithfully enough to choose wisely and relate peacefully?

I do not expect these efforts to answer every question. I hope they encourage better questions.

If someone reads my work decades from now, I do not hope they conclude that I had all the answers. I hope they become more curious, more humble, and more willing to examine their own assumptions than they were before encountering my work.

I also hope my life demonstrates something that has become deeply important to me. Human beings are not finished products. A difficult childhood does not have to determine the rest of a life. Failure does not have to become identity. Success does not eliminate the need for humility. Correction is not the enemy of dignity. Growth remains possible for those willing to face reality honestly.

That is one reason I have chosen not to hide the more difficult chapters of my own life. If I ask others to pursue truth, I must be willing to let the truth be told about me as well. I hope that encourages others to live with less performance and greater integrity.

If there is one sentence that captures the legacy I hope to leave, it is this: help human beings become more capable of seeing reality — and one another — truthfully, and then choosing to act in ways that preserve dignity while accepting responsibility.

Everything I have built ultimately serves that purpose. Whether I am writing, teaching, speaking, practicing law, engaging in dialogue, traveling through The Peacemaker's Passage™, developing Morning Fire™, or studying the Architecture of Human Discernment, I am pursuing the same underlying question: how do we cultivate the kinds of human beings who are capable of sustaining peace rather than merely talking about it?

If future generations improve upon my work, correct my mistakes, refine my ideas, and discover better ways to strengthen those capacities, I will consider that success rather than failure.

No meaningful legacy should require permanent agreement with its author. The greatest legacy is not that people continue quoting us. It is that they continue pursuing truth with greater wisdom, courage, humility, and love because, in some small way, our lives helped make that pursuit more possible.

> *"Context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His definition of legacy deliberately isn't about being remembered — it's about what continues shaping other people's lives after he's gone. He'd rather be corrected and surpassed than quoted and agreed with forever. **Why it matters.** The line "I have chosen not to hide the more difficult chapters of my own life" connects every principle he's stated back to Question One and Two — his credibility isn't built on having gotten everything right, but on being willing to let the same truth he asks of others be told about himself. **Reflect.** *If your own legacy had to be measured by what it continues to make possible in other people's lives — rather than by how you're remembered — would you be building it differently than you are right now?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

An institution's description of you is not the truth about you. Authority, credentials, and even love do not guarantee accurate perception. Labels can be wrong even when the people applying them are sincere.

Context without accountability becomes excuse. Accountability without context becomes distortion. Real growth requires holding both — understanding what shaped a failure, without letting that understanding erase responsibility for it.

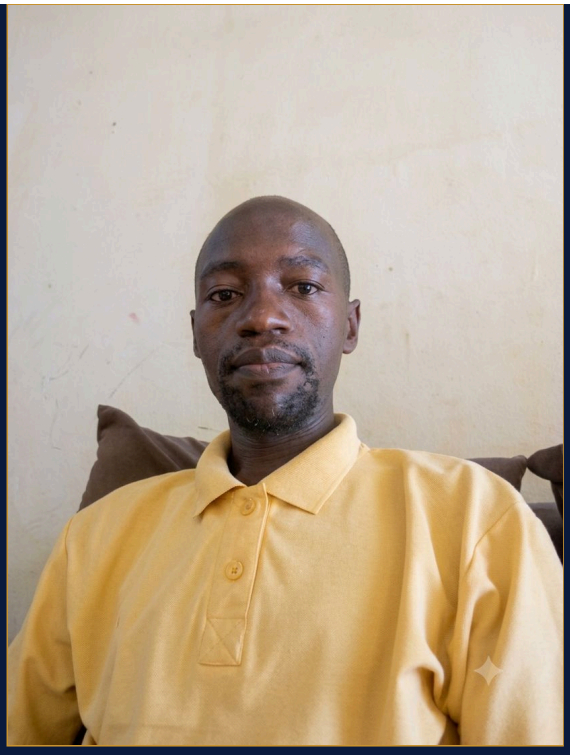
Peace is a human capacity before it's a social condition. Regulation, discernment, humility, and moral courage aren't automatic. They have to be built — in people, and in the institutions that form them.

Do not surrender your identity to another person's limited measurement of you. Most people will only ever see a fragment of you. Learn from correction — but don't mistake someone's interpretation for the whole truth.

Preserve dignity without abandoning truth. You can reject an idea without degrading the person who holds it. Ridicule is not courage; certainty is not wisdom.

A legacy worth building is one you'd want others to surpass. The goal isn't to be remembered or agreed with forever — it's that people keep pursuing truth more capably because your life made that pursuit a little more possible.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/eric-anthony-jones



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Deacon Kennedy Sserugo

Founder, Kennedy Development Foundation & Pad Aid Uganda

"Everything spoken of being wrong should be formalized for the masses to learn."

6 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 004, July 2026

Ending Period Poverty, One Girl at a Time

Everything spoken of being wrong should be formalized for the masses to learn. Six principles from the founder of Kennedy Development Foundation and Pad Aid Uganda.

> *Everything spoken of being wrong should be formalized for the masses to learn.*

Deacon Kennedy Sserugo founded the Kennedy Development Foundation (KDF) in 2016, and in 2024 launched Pad Aid Uganda (PAU) to focus on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) programs. His work spans rescuing trafficking survivors, ending period poverty across Uganda's primary schools, reaching female inmates with menstrual health support, and running a Skilling Center offering TVET courses to out-of-school youth. His End Period Poverty/Shame initiative was named Best Action of the Month for January 2025 by the Swiss-based One Million Youth Action Challenge (1MYAC).

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Stand With the One in Need

> The fact that the world is full of conflicts, life imbalances, and a few concerned persons made me stand out. And yet, looking at all this, everything targets the woman and child, more so the girl child.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces his life's work back to a simple observation: in a world full of conflict and imbalance, it's women and children — especially the girl child — who bear the weight of it. That observation became a calling. **Why it matters.** Most missions start with a grievance or an ambition. His started with noticing who was left carrying the imbalance, and deciding to stand there instead of looking away. **Reflect.** *Where have you noticed an imbalance that everyone accepts as normal, simply because no one is standing there to challenge it?*

02 Understand Life, Then Empathize, Then Serve

> Stephen King's principle — get busy living, or get busy dying — has always given me sleepless nights. Along with that, I've always observed: first, understanding the reality of life. After understanding life deeply, then empathy comes in. Then, serving with integrity. And lastly, adaptability.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He lays out a deliberate sequence, not a list to pick from — understanding comes before empathy, empathy before service, and adaptability holds the whole thing together when circumstances change. Skip a step, and the ones after it don't hold. **Why it matters.** It's easy to lead with good intentions and skip straight to "serving." His order insists that real service is built on first understanding the reality someone is actually living in — not the reality you assume they're living in. **Reflect.** *The next time you want to help someone, which step are you tempted to skip — understanding their reality, or genuine empathy — on the way to just doing something?*

03 From Teaching ABCs to Breaking the Silence on Menstruation

My work spans from teaching ABC to the most feared subject: menstruation. Kennedy Development Foundation (KDF) was birthed in 2016. In 2024, KDF birthed Pad Aid Uganda (PAU), specifically for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) programs.

In 2022, KDF rescued two teenage girls from child traffickers.

In 2024, KDF with PAU launched efforts to end period poverty in Uganda's primary schools. Ten primary schools and two NGOs were reached with sanitary pads and menstrual health education (MHE). A total of over 1,000 girls and boys were impacted. As a result, the efforts were recognized by a Swiss organization, One Million Youth Action Challenge (1MYAC) — our End Period Poverty/Shame initiative was named the Best Action of the Month for January 2025 by 1MYAC, and a blog about it was published on the 1MYAC website.

In 2025, PAU, through its project Mitigation of Period Poverty Among Female Inmates, reached 50 female inmates in Sembabule District Central Prison with its services.

Also in 2025, KDF opened a Skilling Center as part of its youth development work, offering TVET courses to youth who are out of school.

My community service has also opened international doors for me. I am happy — though not proud — to be affiliated with sound international organizations, and it's still going on.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He deliberately calls menstruation "the most feared subject" — naming, directly, the silence his work has had to push against. From that starting point, KDF and PAU grew into rescue work, WASH and SRHR programs, prison outreach, and vocational skilling — each one a response to a gap he saw. **Why it matters.** The phrase "happy, though not proud" is worth sitting with. He separates satisfaction in the work from ego about it — recognition became a byproduct of the mission, not the point of it. **Reflect.** *Is there a subject in your own community that's treated as too awkward or too feared to talk about openly — one that's quietly costing people because of the silence around it?*

04 Naming What's Wrongly Called Wrong, and What's Wrongly Called Right

First: stereotypes — things believed to be wrong, bad, or disgusting, yet in reality they are not. A good example is menstruation.

Second is the opposite of the first: things taken to be right, yet in reality they're wrong. A good example is war — a common game played by superpowers.

Third: climate change. Millions of people around the world practice agriculture, but because of unbalanced weather, almost all their hard work ends up in outcries.

Fourth: food insecurity. My grandparents never rode or drove — they were simple, ordinary people. But because they had enough food, they lived a good life, beyond everyone's expectations.

Fifth: disease.

On how individuals can contribute to lasting positive change: like the ancient writers, everyone should stand with the one in need. Everything spoken of as wrong should be formalized for the masses to learn. Everyone must engage in the food production process. And regarding war — like the ancient writers, everyone should make peace with their neighbor.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He splits the world's biggest problems into two uncomfortable categories: things we've wrongly stigmatized (like menstruation), and things we've wrongly normalized (like war) — alongside climate change, food insecurity, and disease as the practical crises layered on top. **Why it matters.** His answer for what to do about it stays grounded rather than abstract: stand with whoever needs it, teach openly instead of staying silent, grow food instead of just consuming it, and make peace with the neighbor in front of you rather than waiting for peace at a global scale. **Reflect.** *Which of his five — stereotypes, normalized wrongs, climate change, food insecurity, or disease — shows up most directly in your own community, and what's one honest thing you could do about it this year?*

05 Love, Confidence, Character

Love: love does everything, and it also avoids everything. "Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two, my life flows." — Nisargadatta Maharaj

Confidence: for purposes of self-expression and facing new challenges, a youth must embrace confidence.

Character: this shapes one's actions and choices. It also helps one live a peaceful life.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked for three guiding principles he'd give every young person, he chose love, confidence, and character — one about how you relate to others, one about how you carry yourself, and one about who you are when no one's watching. **Why it matters.** None of the three are achievements — they're daily practices. That's consistent with everything else he's stated: the work is in the doing, repeated, not in arriving somewhere and being done. **Reflect.** *Of the three — love, confidence, character — which one do you most need to practice deliberately right now, rather than assume you already have?*

06 Building the Infrastructure of Dignity

We target infrastructure development. We shall put in place schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and safe spaces for children, women and youths. The efforts will eradicate poverty, illiteracy, gender-based violence, mental health illnesses, premature deaths, school dropout, unemployment, uninformed

choices, malnutrition, gender discrimination, teenage motherhood, juvenile crime, child trafficking, economic disparity, and period poverty and shame.

> *"Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Asked about legacy, he answers in concrete structures, not abstractions — schools, hospitals, rehab centers, safe spaces. The long list of what those structures are meant to address is the honest scale of what he's taken on. **Why it matters.** A legacy stated as buildings and services, rather than as a name or an award, is a legacy that can be checked — did the school get built, did the girls stay in school, did the shame around periods lift. That's accountability built into the vision itself. **Reflect.** *If your own legacy had to be measured in something concrete — a place, a service, a structure that outlasts you — what would you want it to be?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Notice who's carrying the imbalance, then stand there. His mission began with noticing that the world's conflicts land hardest on women and the girl child — and choosing not to look away.

Understand before you empathize; empathize before you serve. Service without first understanding someone's actual reality is service aimed at the wrong problem.

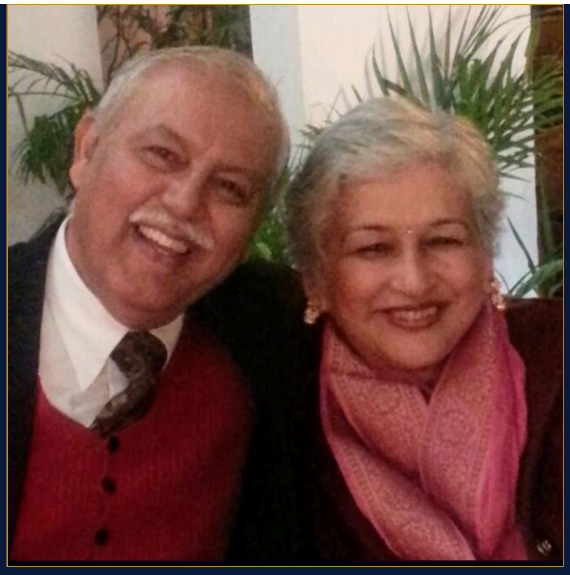
Name the silence, then break it. Calling menstruation "the most feared subject" was the first step to building programs that address it directly.

Separate what's wrongly stigmatized from what's wrongly normalized. Some things treated as shameful aren't. Some things treated as acceptable — like war — are. Telling the two apart is the starting point for change.

Love, confidence, and character are daily practices, not destinations. The three things he'd hand to every young person are things you keep choosing, not things you eventually finish acquiring.

Measure legacy in structures you can point to. Schools, hospitals, rehab centers, safe spaces — a legacy stated concretely is a legacy that can be held accountable.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/deacon-kennedy-sserugo



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Colonel Mandhir Singh

Indian Army (Retd.) · Commando Instructor · Independent Director, MDI Gurgaon

"Army was never a career for me. It was a way of life."

6 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 003, July 2026

Soldier. Patriot. Nation First.

Army was never a career for me. It was a way of life. Six principles from a 35-year Indian Army veteran on duty, patriotism, accountability, and putting the nation above all.

> *Army was NEVER a career for me. It was a Way of Life.*

A second-generation Army officer and alumnus of a Rashtriya Military School, Colonel Mandhir Singh served as a frontline infantry soldier in the Madras Regiment for over 35 years — commanding troops in operational areas across the North East and Jammu & Kashmir, and later qualifying as a Commando Instructor in Counter Terrorist and Counter Insurgency Operations. A National-level cricketer in his youth, he is today also a Qualified Independent Director from MDI, Gurgaon.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Duty Was Never a 9-to-5

Army was NEVER a career for me. It was a Way of Life; it was Patriotism; it was Love for my Nation and all my Indian Brethren, it was providing Natural Justice to my countrymen, it was the safety and well being of our Nation and its inhabitants, who were all my Brother & Sisters. Every Act, every Operation or Activity I carried out so long as I was in the Army, I felt I was contributing to making my Nation more secure and conducive for growth in some way.

"Duty" meant doing what was required to be done and expected out of you, sincerely, honestly and with the sole view of achieving the objective in whatever we did; it was never an eight-hour, 9-to-5 concept. It was the fulfilment of the task entrusted to you and taking it to its logical conclusion; it was clearing my desk before I left office; it was doing the task allocated to me within the time period allotted to me.

Duty to me was Commitment; to me it was Life or Death; to me it was the well being of my Nation and its citizens and the troops under my Command. To that extent, an order was only a mission; how I had to execute it was for me to decide, the sole aim was to achieve the objective, whatever it may be — Administrative or Operational. I was a Committed and Serious Soldier and I always took my task very seriously and to the best of my abilities, keeping in view the tenets of the Chetwodian Motto.

People, seniors, bosses NEVER mattered to me, because to me none was more important than the Nation and the men I commanded. The fulfilment and proper planned execution of the task at hand was always paramount. It was Nation above all, always and every time. Honour, integrity and setting the right examples for my subordinates to follow was always paramount. I always focused on training my men, because loss of lives of my men was not acceptable to me, and I always believed in leading by example from the front.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. For Colonel Singh, duty was never about the clock or the chain of command — it was a personal commitment that outlasted any single order. An order gave him the mission; how to execute it, and how seriously to take it, was his own to decide. **Why it matters.** This is a definition of duty built on ownership, not obedience. Finishing what's entrusted to you, training the people under you so they come home safe, and closing the loop before you walk away — that standard translates far beyond a uniform. **Reflect.** *Where in your own work do you treat a task as "finished" the moment it's handed off, rather than seeing it through to its logical conclusion?*

02 A Patriot Acts, Doesn't Show

Patriotism is a FEELING. It is something which is beyond slogans, symbolism or political allegiance; these have nothing to do with it. In fact a patriot will ACT, not SHOW.

You get goosebumps when the National Anthem is sung and you spring to attention. You get agitated when anyone talks ill about your Nation. You get irritated by illegal, immoral or unethical activities. When you see injustice in any form and stand with the RIGHT rather than the STRONG — a true patriot will stand with the underdog, if the underdog is right.

Patriotism is not being a conformist but having the courage of conviction to stand for what is right. It is having the ability to think out of the box for the growth, progress and prosperity of the nation.

A true patriot will work towards uniting the nation rather than dividing it on any lines, because he understands that united we stand, divided we fall. A true patriot will consider all his countrymen to be equal and will work to help the poor, needy and the weaker sections of society, so as to enable them to get their legitimate rights. Be a SERVER, not a RULER.

A true patriot will be a disciplined, law-abiding citizen who respects the law of the land, and should be prepared to contest wrong wherever it is found. Genuine love for the Nation is when you place Nation above all and are prepared to stand for what is right for the Nation.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He draws a hard line between patriotism as a public performance and patriotism as a private, daily discipline. The test he offers isn't what you say on a particular day — it's what irritates you, what you're willing to stand up for, and who you're willing to stand beside. **Why it matters.** "Be a server, not a ruler" and the choice to stand with the right rather than the strong are the same idea from two directions — patriotism, in his account, is measured by how you treat the people with the least power, not by how loudly you display loyalty to the nation. **Reflect.** *By his test — reacting to injustice, standing with the underdog when they're right, refusing to just conform — where does your own patriotism show up in action rather than symbolism?*

03 Conscience Over Convenience

My upbringing, prioritization, ideology and outlook towards life was so aligned that my priorities were clear and my family understood it; so I did not really have to face a major conflict of that kind. I always followed the dictum that "Right is Right & Wrong is Wrong, and one must have the courage of conviction to stand for what is right and true, whatever be the consequences."

Yes, there were situations when I did rub seniors the wrong way. But I have no regrets, for my conscience was clear, and I always ignored the implications and moved on. It became my reputation in

the units and places I served. I always followed the principles of hard work, sincerity and doing what is right rather than making compromises that would be against my conscience.

I was goal-oriented, and the focus was always towards the attainment of the task entrusted to me. Conscientiousness was my trademark, and I follow it till date. I always gave the advice I felt was right and once the matter was thrashed out, I let the Commander on the spot take the decision at his peril — but I always gave the advice my conscience told me was right, whether someone liked it or accepted it or not, because that was not my prerogative. My prerogative was to always give unbiased, true, conscientious advice that I could justify.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He separates two things many leaders blur together: giving the right advice, and being obeyed. His job, as he saw it, was to say what his conscience told him was true — not to control what happened after. That distinction let him speak plainly to seniors without needing to win the argument. **Why it matters.** Reputation built on conscientiousness rather than compliance is slower to build and harder to shake. He describes carrying no regrets from the moments that cost him standing with a senior — because the measure he used wasn't whether he was liked, but whether he was honest. **Reflect.** *Is there advice you're currently holding back because you're focused on whether it will be accepted, rather than whether it's true?*

04 Worried for the Next Generation, Hopeful in Them Too

What concerns me is that my generation has faltered and failed in passing the right set of values and principles to the younger generation. We failed in setting the right standards and examples for them. Our generation came up the hard way, and in our quest to save them the torture of that hard life, we gave them softer options — and in doing so, we left many of them directionless.

I sometimes wonder where we are headed. Even the smallest daily transactions today run purely on demand and supply, with little regard for anything beyond self-interest. So where does this lead us? Where is the ray of hope?

It is the student community — Gen Next. The future belongs to them. Episodes like the NEET examination controversy have put their futures at risk, but they are also the only hope of the Nation, if they genuinely organize themselves, demand accountability from those who have failed them, and refuse to accept corruption as normal.

If that happens, we can have a totally new perspective — a new hope. We have to undo, to redo. A system this deeply entrenched does not change gradually on its own; it needs the current generation to decide, collectively and decisively, that they will no longer accept it, and to build a new, cleaner standard of governance in its place.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He holds two things at once without contradiction: real concern that his own generation softened the next one by shielding them from hardship, and genuine hope that the same generation has the conviction to build something better. **Why it matters.** This is a rare kind of humility from someone of his rank and generation — the willingness to say "we failed to pass this on" rather than simply criticizing the young. The hope he places in them is earned by that honesty, not despite it. **Reflect.** *Where have you, without meaning to, made things easier for someone in a way that left them less prepared rather than more?*

05 A Nation Weakened From Within, and How to Rebuild It

To answer what ordinary citizens can do to strengthen morality and love for the nation, you first have to ask: what ails India? And to answer that, you have to go back to the roots of our history.

India's recorded history spans over 5,000 years — from the Indus Valley Civilization, through the Vedic period, the Mauryan and Gupta empires, into the medieval era of regional kingdoms, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Mughal Empire, through nearly two centuries of British colonial rule, to Independence in 1947. Through much of that history, especially after the Gupta Empire — India's Golden Age — the subcontinent came under repeated invasion.

What stands out, if you study that history honestly, is a recurring pattern: at several points where a foreign power gained a real foothold in India, it was assisted by an Indian acting out of personal or regional rivalry rather than loyalty to the wider nation — King Ambhi of Taxila submitting to Alexander, Jaichand's rivalry with Prithviraj Chauhan, Mir Jafar at Plassey, Mir Sadiq at Srirangapatna, Omichund's dealings with Robert Clive. This is not ancient history alone; the pattern of placing personal gain above national interest has continued in different forms into the modern era.

I say this not to dwell on the past, but because I believe unless the current generation honestly confronts this weakness in our national character, we will keep being self-defeating, no matter how blessed our land is. Slavery, treason and corruption cannot be undone by pretending they were never part of our story.

So what can ordinary citizens actually do? I believe the answer lies substantially in three priority areas: education, agriculture, and governance reform. On education — it must be treated as a true national priority, with the highest standards and the most respected, highest-integrity teachers a society can produce, so that no child's future depends only on their family's ability to pay for quality. On agriculture — India's roots are agrarian, and the farmer who feeds the nation deserves real support: the highest standards of farming, and proper cooperative systems so produce reaches customers fairly, from village to city, without the farmer being exploited along the way. This alone could resolve much of the nation's unemployment problem.

On governance — the biggest change needed is making every institution answerable to the people it exists to serve, within a fixed, transparent timeframe, rather than people having to wait indefinitely on the goodwill of officials. That means political reform, so that money and individual clout matter less than public debate and merit. It means administrative reform, so that bureaucrats see their loyalty as being to the public, not only to the politicians they advise. It means judicial reform, with time-bound disposal of cases and transparent appointment of judges. And it means police reform — moving from a system built around protecting VIPs to a system built around protecting ordinary citizens, with FIRs citizens can file online rather than having to plead with a station to register their complaint.

On accountability specifically: I believe even a serious accusation against someone holding public office should trigger an immediate, impartial inquiry, completed within a fixed period — no more than fifteen days — to establish whether there is a genuine case to answer. If the person is found guilty, they should be barred for life from holding public office again. But if they are found innocent, the person who made a false accusation should equally face serious consequences for the damage done to that person's character and reputation. Accountability has to run in both directions, or it isn't accountability at all — it's just a weapon.

Alongside this, I believe every citizen has a role in instilling morality at a personal level — teaching children from a young age to treat every fellow Indian as family, being genuinely intolerant of corruption and adulteration in the food and essentials we all depend on, and favouring reform over pure punishment when someone does go wrong, so that a person who has erred can still return to society as a productive, contributing member rather than being written off.

None of this is a quick fix. There is no set-piece solution to something as complex as nationhood. But if we are honest about where our weaknesses actually come from, and if ordinary citizens — starting with how we raise our own children, and extending to how seriously we hold our institutions to their word — decide that morality and accountability matter more than convenience, that is how a nation rebuilds its character.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He traces India's historical vulnerability not to the strength of its invaders alone, but to a recurring pattern of individuals choosing personal or regional gain over national interest — and argues that same pattern, in modern form, is still the country's central weakness. **Why it matters.** His proposed remedy is deliberately unglamorous: prioritise education and agriculture properly, and make every institution genuinely answerable to the people within a fixed timeframe — with accountability that protects the innocent as seriously as it punishes the guilty. No shortcuts, no single villain to blame. **Reflect.** *Where in your own community or workplace does the wait for accountability have no real end date? What would change if it did?*

06 Serve the People, Don't Rule Them

Every leader in any field needs to actually understand that in a democratic set-up, there is nothing known as "a leader" above the people. Everything starts and ends with the Nation and its Constitution.

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution starts with "We the People of India" — which means it is the People of India who have come together to form our social set-up, and it is the People of India who are the actual owners of this Nation. It is the People who elect and select others to serve them and fulfil their aspirations. That is why every candidate and every party puts forward a manifesto — it carries the aspirations of the people they are meant to serve.

The greatest tragedy is that people who are elected or selected to serve the People of India, and then empowered by the Constitution to do so, too often end up ruling the same people instead. That single reversal — service turning into rule — is, to my mind, the deepest flaw in our system, and the one most in need of correction.

The lesson every civilian leader — in business, government or society — should take from military life is this: the moment you are elected or selected to serve, your duty is to the people and the mission, not to your own position or your own aspirations. Beyond a manifesto, anyone who seeks to serve the public should be willing to be held to a time-bound roadmap for what they promised, reviewed honestly and regularly by the people they serve — with real consequence if that promise is abandoned, and real credit if it's kept.

NATION FIRST — ALWAYS AND EVERY TIME. No politician, no political party, no ideology and no religion matters more than that. Anything that divides the Nation must be put aside. Honesty, integrity and character should be the foundation, the bedrock, of any strong society, any nation. We must keep the highest level of integrity and treat every Indian as our parent, brother, sister or our own child, and deal with them accordingly. Corruption and the misuse of public trust should be treated with the

utmost seriousness the law allows. Everyone must take their job seriously and contribute towards the growth of Indian society.

Make education, healthcare and social security for citizens beyond 65 years of age a genuine national priority. Jai Hind.

> “NATION FIRST — ALWAYS & EVERY TIME.”

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. His central lesson for civilian leadership is a redefinition of the word "leader" itself — in a democracy, he argues, there is no one above the people; there are only those selected to serve them. The Constitution's opening words, "We the People," are the whole argument. **Why it matters.** This is the same thread running through every principle he's stated — duty as service, patriotism as action, conscience over convenience, accountability that runs both ways — brought to a single closing line: Nation First, always and every time, with honesty and integrity as its foundation. **Reflect.** *In whatever you lead — a team, a family, a community — do the people you're responsible for experience you as someone who serves them, or someone who rules over them?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Duty outlasts the clock. Finish what's entrusted to you and take it to its logical conclusion — that standard doesn't end at 5 p.m.

Patriotism is measured in action, not display. Slogans and symbolism are easy. Standing with the right rather than the strong, especially when it costs you, is the real test.

Give honest advice; let go of whether it's accepted. Your prerogative is to speak the truth your conscience tells you. What happens after that isn't yours to control.

Name your generation's failures honestly — then hope anyway. Real hope in the next generation is only credible alongside honesty about what wasn't passed down to them.

Accountability has to run in both directions. Punish real wrongdoing swiftly — but protect the innocent from false accusations just as seriously. One without the other isn't accountability.

Serve the people you lead; never rule them. "We the People" is the whole argument. Anyone entrusted with responsibility over others is there to serve them, not command them.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/col-mandhir-singh



ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Dr. Lenin Raghuvanshi

Founder, People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR) · Author

"Human dignity is not a reward to be earned -- it is a birthright that must be protected for everyone."

5 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 002, July 2026

5 Principles, Stated

Human dignity is not a reward to be earned; it is a birthright that must be protected for everyone. Five principles from the Founder of PVCHR.

> *On what he stands for — five principles stated publicly, in his own words.*

Instead of a conventional interview, Dr. Lenin Raghuvanshi responded with the principles that have guided a lifetime of human rights work — from confronting caste discrimination and bonded labour in eastern Uttar Pradesh, to founding the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), to writing about Kashi as a shared civilizational space.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what he stands for, stated publicly, in his own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Human Dignity Before Identity

The principle that has guided my life is simple: every human being deserves dignity before any social, religious, caste, gender, or political identity. A society is not judged by how it treats the powerful, but by how it treats those whose voices are least heard.

Working with survivors of caste discrimination, bonded labour, torture, violence against women, and marginalized communities has taught me that lasting change does not begin with laws alone. It begins when we choose to listen with empathy, challenge injustice without hatred, and create spaces where people can reclaim their voice and agency. Social transformation is not about defeating opponents; it is about transforming relationships built on fear into relationships built on trust and justice.

I have also learned that democracy is more than elections and institutions. It is a daily practice of respecting diversity, protecting dissent, and ensuring that every person feels they belong. Whether I write about Kashi as a shared civilizational space or advocate for Dalit rights and human dignity, the underlying principle remains the same: our shared humanity is greater than the identities that divide us.

In an increasingly polarized world, I believe courage lies not in speaking louder than others, but in listening more deeply, building bridges across differences, and standing with those who have been pushed to the margins. Human dignity is not a reward to be earned; it is a birthright that must be protected for everyone.

When dignity becomes the foundation of our decisions, justice is no longer an aspiration — it becomes a way of life.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Dr. Raghuvanshi is drawing a line before every other line: identity — caste, religion, gender, politics — comes after dignity, never before it. He measures a society not by how it treats power, but by how it treats the people with the least of it. **Why it matters.** Decades of working with survivors of caste discrimination and torture led him to a conclusion that shapes every part of his work: laws alone don't create lasting change. Change begins in the daily, unglamorous practice of listening, and in treating democracy as something rebuilt every day — not something that ends at the ballot box. **Reflect.** *Where in your own decisions does identity quietly get weighed before dignity? What would change if dignity came first, every time?*

02 Dignity Has to Be Named Before It Can Be Restored

The principle emerged from my early work with bonded labourers, Dalit communities, and survivors of torture in eastern Uttar Pradesh. As a young activist, I realized that poverty alone could not explain why some communities remained trapped in generations of exclusion. Caste, discrimination, and the denial of dignity were at the heart of the problem.

One experience has remained with me throughout my life. I met families who had accepted humiliation as their destiny because no one had ever told them that they had rights. Their greatest suffering was not only exploitation but the feeling that their lives had no value. That changed my understanding of justice forever.

I learned that before people need legal remedies, they need someone who listens without prejudice and recognizes their humanity. This conviction inspired the founding of the People's Vigilance Committee on Human Rights (PVCHR), where we placed dignity, active listening, and non-violent dialogue at the centre of our work. Since then, every decision I make begins with one question: Does this restore human dignity?

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. The defining moment wasn't a single event but a realization: entire families had accepted humiliation as destiny simply because no one had ever told them they had rights. The deepest injury was not the exploitation itself, but the feeling that their lives had no value. **Why it matters.** This is why PVCHR was built around listening and non-violent dialogue before legal remedy, not instead of it. A right you don't know you have cannot be claimed. Recognition has to come first. **Reflect.** *Who in your own circle has stopped asking for something because they've quietly stopped believing they deserve it? What would it take for you to notice, before they have to say it?*

03 Courage Without Hatred

Yes, many times. Speaking against caste discrimination, torture, bonded labour, communal hatred, and violence has often meant facing threats, intimidation, false accusations, social isolation, and even physical attacks. There were moments when remaining silent would have been easier and safer.

Yet those experiences strengthened rather than weakened my conviction. I realized that principles have value only when they are upheld during difficult times. Leadership is not about choosing the comfortable path; it is about choosing the ethical one.

At the same time, I learned that courage should never become hatred. Our struggle has always been rooted in non-violence, dialogue, and reconciliation. Real change is not achieved by humiliating opponents but by transforming systems and relationships so that justice and peace can coexist.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. This principle has cost him directly — threats, false accusations, social isolation, physical attacks. He names the cost plainly, and names just as plainly that it deepened his conviction rather than eroding it: a principle only proves itself in the moment it becomes inconvenient. **Why it matters.** The harder discipline here isn't speaking up — it's speaking up without letting courage curdle into hatred. He ties his life's work to non-violence and reconciliation even under attack, on the belief that transforming a system beats humiliating an opponent. **Reflect.** *Where have you gone quiet because speaking up felt costly? And separately — where has your own frustration started to sound like hatred instead of conviction?*

04 Principles Over Popularity

Never allow success to redefine your values. Today's world rewards speed, visibility, and popularity, but meaningful leadership is built through patience, integrity, and trust. Do not measure your life by the number of followers you have; measure it by the number of lives you help improve.

Stay curious. Listen to people whose experiences are different from your own. Read widely, question your own assumptions, and never stop learning. The strongest leaders are those who remain humble enough to change their minds when confronted with truth.

Most importantly, remember that disagreement is not the enemy of democracy; dehumanization is. Build bridges rather than walls. Protect your integrity even when it is inconvenient. Your principles should guide your ambition — not the other way around.

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. Advice to young leaders and changemakers, aimed squarely at a culture that rewards speed and visibility. His counter-metric: not followers, but lives improved. Not certainty, but the humility to change your mind when confronted with truth. **Why it matters.** The sharpest line he draws is between disagreement and dehumanization — the first is healthy for democracy, the second destroys it. That distinction is also the difference between ambition guided by principle and principle bent to serve ambition. **Reflect.** *Are your principles currently guiding your ambition — or has your ambition quietly started guiding your principles?*

05 Choose to Build a Humane Future

Every generation inherits two choices: to preserve the injustices of the past or to create a more humane future.

The future of our societies will not be determined by technology alone or by economic growth alone. It will be determined by whether we can recognize the equal dignity of every human being, regardless of caste, religion, gender, ethnicity, or social status.

I believe that human dignity is the foundation of democracy, justice, and lasting peace. When we listen before judging, include before excluding, and serve before seeking power, we create societies where everyone can flourish.

My hope is that each of us asks one simple question every day: "Does my decision today increase another person's dignity?"

If the answer is yes, then we are already helping to build a better world.

> *"Human dignity is not a reward to be earned; it is a birthright that must be protected for everyone."*

Editorial context (from Stated). What this means. He closes by naming the choice every generation actually faces: preserve the injustices inherited, or build something more humane. Neither technology nor economic growth decides this — recognition of equal dignity does. **Why it matters.** This is the same principle from Issue 01, now handed to the reader as a daily practice: one question, asked every day, small enough to actually use — does my decision today increase another person's dignity? **Reflect.** *Ask yourself his question at the end of today: did your decisions increase another person's dignity? What would you do differently tomorrow if you asked it each morning instead?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Dignity comes before identity. Caste, religion, gender, and politics are identities. Dignity is the birthright underneath all of them — and it isn't earned.

People need to be heard before they can be represented. Legal remedies matter, but they only reach people who already believe they have rights worth claiming.

Principles are proven under pressure, not in comfort. Threats, isolation, and false accusations tested this conviction — and it held. Courage that turns to hatred isn't courage anymore.

Measure your life in lives improved, not followers gained. Popularity and meaningful leadership are not the same metric. Disagreement strengthens democracy; dehumanization destroys it.

Ask one question daily. "Does my decision today increase another person's dignity?" A simple test, repeatable every day, for anyone.

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ORIVANA KALA · PRINCIPLES ISSUE

Shilpa S

CMD, SheRocks India · Startup Ecosystem Enabler · Investor for MSMEs

"We finish what we start. Not for the applause -- but for the integrity of the promise."

5 principles · Stated Principles Series, issue 001, June 2026

5 Principles, Stated

We finish what we start. Not for the applause — but for the integrity of the promise. Five principles from CMD of SheRocks India.

> *We asked Shilpa five questions. She gave us something better — five principles she lives by.*

Instead of a conventional interview, Shilpa S responded with the principles that have guided her across decades of work — from building startup ecosystems and advising MSMEs, to navigating the intersections of politics and international relations.

What follows is not a Q&A. It is a record of what she stands for, stated publicly, in her own words. This is how *Stated Principles* works: the person states their beliefs. We make them visible. You decide what to carry forward.

01 Decide, even imperfectly

> No matter what your education, degree or skill — if you cannot take a calculative decision at the right time, you will be stuck always at the wrong point.

Editorial context (from Stated). Reflect. *Where in your professional life are you gathering more information when what you actually need is a decision? What is the real cost of your current hesitation?*

02 Build character, not just contacts

> You don't leave an impact with networking. No matter what you do, if you don't carry character with high standards, firm principles, ethics, dignity and integrity — you can never build a meaningful impact in today's world.

Editorial context (from Stated). Reflect. *When you walk out of a room, what do people say about you? Is it about your network or your character? Which of these are you actively investing in?*

03 Ideas without risk are imagination

> If you cannot take risks in life, you can never build anything. An idea is just a pattern of creative imagination. Virtual reality can create an illusion — but that is not the real world.

Editorial context (from Stated). Reflect. *What is the one risk you keep deferring? What would you build or become if you took it seriously this month?*

04 Finish what you started

> Be a warrior. We finish what we start. Not for the applause — but for the integrity of the promise. That is the standard.

Editorial context (from Stated). Reflect. *Which commitments have you made that you have not yet completed? Are you still in the game — or have you quietly moved on?*

05 Execute without excuses

> Operate like a silent assassin: no distractions, no excuses, no mercy. This is where legends are built. You are either the hunter or the meal.

Editorial context (from Stated). Reflect. *What is your single most important execution priority right now? Are you hunting it — or waiting for conditions to improve?*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Decide, even imperfectly. Delayed decisions compound into missed opportunities. The cost of waiting is rarely calculated honestly.

Build character, not just contacts. In a connected world, the scarcest resource is integrity. Your reputation is built in private decisions, not public ones.

Ideas without risk are imagination. The bridge from concept to reality is always a calculated bet. Avoiding all risk is itself a risk.

Finish what you started. Authenticity is measured by completion, not intention. The promise you made deserves follow-through — regardless of applause.

Execute without excuses. Silent, disciplined execution is where real value is built. Most people talk about it. The ones who do it have the advantage.

Source: published in the Stated Principles Series. Original: https://app.stated.in/principles/shilpa-s