

India Inc Wants Captains Who can Brave Storms

Candidate evaluation has become more rigorous and layered to find adaptable all-rounders amid rapid changes in biz landscape

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Bengaluru: As corporate India grapples with unprecedented volatility, from tariffs to supply chain disruptions and military conflicts that threaten to escalate into full-scale war, the ask from organisations while hiring leaders is becoming more layered and demanding than ever.

Where planning for the future is becoming increasingly challenging, companies want leaders who don't flinch when markets crash, crude prices rise, or geopolitical tensions expose supply chain vulnerabilities. Headhunters and leadership experts say companies are seeking top talent who have handled complexities on a large scale, can pivot quickly and manage ambiguity, have tech fluency, and who can rally together diverse teams and bring people-centric leadership to the table.

"Given life since the pandemic, even a term like VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) doesn't do justice, as the change velocity and disruption dimensions have been constantly increasing. In times like these, demand for CXO talent has moved beyond those who can handle this towards those who can use it as an opportunity to drive competitive advantage," says Pankaj Arora, managing director at leadership advisory firm Russell Reynolds Associates.

"More than quantitative factors (such as age/vintage, pedigree,

scale, etc.), qualitative factors (such as leadership style, entrepreneurial thinking, growth and challenger mindset, learning and change agility, etc) are playing a significant role in hiring decisions," he added.

The pace at which things are evolving calls for a very different kind of leadership mindset, say experts.

ET 
Insight

Black swan events are commonplace. The need for resilience, ability to stay calm, change direction and bounce back are now a must-have: Expert

"India, as is the world, is now in a time of constant disruption. In this situation, the strategy has to be very different from the past where there was much more stability," says business transformation advisor Manoj Kohli, chairman of

MK Knowledge, who has in previous stints been the SoftBank co-unit head in India and Bharti Airtel chief executive.

Leaders need to be able to build and nurture an entrepreneurial culture, he says. "They need to bring agility and speed in decision-making; they also need to be more global in outlook."

LEADERS WITH NEW THINKING

Top bosses have increasingly been under the pump amid lower tolerance by boards and shareholders. According to an ET report in

April based on Prime Database data, there were 41 CEO/MD exits at 2,590 NSE-listed companies in the January-March quarter of 2025 compared with 23 in the corresponding period of 2024.

Not surprisingly, the evaluation process is now becoming more rigorous: increasingly including simulations of crisis scenarios and evaluating whether candidates have led hands-on transformation themselves.

Companies are also looking at talent not just within their sectors but outside as well.

"Clients are saying: 'Where is the new thinking?'," says K Sudarshan, managing director at executive search firm EMA Partners India. He cites the example of a search EMA Partners is currently running for a CEO in the consumer discretionary sector. "The company is looking at someone not necessarily from the industry but who has managed disruption in any sector, including those who've managed tech disruption."

The focus has also shifted from just strategy, business development and marketing to the ability to control the supply and procurement side, financial understanding of aspects such as currency fluctuations, commodity pricing, interest rate movements, etc, says R Suresh, managing director, Resist Consulting. Sustained success, major emphasis on tech innovation and exposure to supply side efficiencies are among other attributes in demand.