Transformation of NMIMS – A Case Study on making of an Institution

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Institutions are an outcome of a leader's dream, vision and strategy. In the context of knowledge organizations like educational institutions, which involve talent management, its intangibility, values and culture define the institution. These characteristics differentiate it from all other forms of organization. For example, the culture of collegiality and consensus building helps in making a great institution. It is such institutions that contribute to growth of societies and civilizations. They also develop thought leaders who, in turn, influence geo-political developments, policies and contribute to value system. History is replete with examples of such linkages between institutions and society, and nation states where educational institutions have influenced the emergence of a nation as a superpower.

Institutional leaders therefore have the onerous task of growing and managing such institutions that have the potential to contribute to the development of many generations. It is the leader who has to uphold values and morality, and guide the development of students put under his or her charge.

This article is a leader's reflection on transformation of a management school into one of the best multidisciplinary universities in a span of 10 years. 2003 was the year of inflection in NMIMS history as Government of India conferred Deemed University status on it on January 13, 2003. Apprehensions on being a University were voiced in the institution and parent trust. But it also opened doors for disruptive thinking on NMIMS' future. The option at that time was to continue as a management school offering Management Programs only or to expand the horizon and scope of management education. Up to 2006, not much happened. NMIMS continued to remain a Management School. But the change in leadership at NMIMS Board level led to a new agenda. The institution now challenged the boundaries of management education and redefined its purpose as developing professionals who were technocrats and domain specialists with management capabilities. This led to the establishment of two schools - School of Engineering and School of Pharmacy, both of which now offer innovative 5-Year Integrated Tech Management Programs. Though industry had expressed the need for such domain specialists with management capabilities, it was NMIMS that took the lead. Beside these, three other schools were established - one in Sciences and other in Architecture and conventional Commerce education, which also offered a BBA program. This was the start of making NMIMS a multidisciplinary institution. The establishment of Shirpur and Bangalore Campuses by 2008 also announced the institution's intent to be a network of campuses within India that would strive to offer quality education and develop employable graduates.

The monsoons of 2007 introduced me to Shri Amrish Patel who has been the Chancellor of NMIMS and President of the Parent Trust SVKM since 2002. The first few meetings shaped our dream and the vision.

The Change in NMIMS Leadership – 2009

13th January 2009, the Chancellor asked me to take the reign of NMIMS as its Vice Chancellor. On taking over, my message to faculty and staff was that we had a lifetime opportunity of making NMIMS a premier multidisciplinary institution and a thought leader. It was also to make it an aspirational institution and one which was respected by the peer group. Our model of development was world-class universities especially those that were of recent origin in Asia-Pacific Region and India's best known institutions/universities. The opportunity for us was to educate India and deliver quality education which will enhance graduate employability. Hence, the need to develop customized programs for different student groups. A segmental approach to program design and delivery would make NMIMS relevant to different segments of the society in different geographies. Management school had to emerge as the leader in management education and continue to be the engine of change, growth and recognition for NMIMS in the world market. World over, top universities are known by their flagship disciplines. All other disciplines piggy ride these disciplines.

Based on the above understanding, a strategic planning exercise was undertaken in 2009, and later in 2015, leading to the formation of Strategic Plan 2030. The bedrock of this strategic plan was:

    a.   Institution relevance

    b.   Learning culture

    c.   Faculty competencies

    d.   Student Quality

    e.   Institution credibility/reputation

    f.   Technology integration

The purpose of university education is to help students improve their standard of living. It is also to enable them to transform society. Hence, it is often believed that universities are the gateway to an individual and society's future. Another purpose of the university is to develop a lifelong learner and hence, learning rather than teaching becomes fundamental. This learning should encourage acceptance of the diverse nature of the world and development of tolerance to an alternative view point. The university attempts to achieve this through its programs, student mix, learning and assessment models, etc.

Remaining Relevant

From the above purist perspective of university purpose, one can conclude that universities transcend times and generations in the society. Some of the leading universities in the world are more than a century old. For example, Cambridge and Oxford University in UK are more than 800 years old and Harvard University in US is more than 300 years old. These universities have shaped the value system of societies. Yet, many a time, the universities have also become obsolete. What created this obsolescence were their programs, pedagogy, faculty competencies and systems and processes. NMIMS' challenge in 2009 was to enhance its relevance to the changing world. Being a young 6-year-old university, it was easier to do so. Hence, we took on ourselves the task of understanding and assessing:

a.   Programs' fit with changing needs of industry and society;

b.   Pedagogy to enhance learning;

c.   New education needs in the country;

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d. Individualisation of learning;

e. Faculty competencies and enhancement.

To enhance the relevance, we organized Industry-Institution interactions and also established a dialogue with civil or community organizations and the government. A network of global thinkers in different disciplines, especially in management education, was also developed. The result of this exercise was a new program design. The focus of this exercise was on the development of cognitive, non-cognitive and meta-cognitive skills of the students. This exercise also led to streamlining of courses and creating a better focus. Subsequently, this conversation with industry and society became the hallmark of NMIMS' program design and schools. Whether it was Economics School or Design or Liberal Arts or even Performing Arts, this conversation has helped NMIMS immensely. This exercise ensured that we all understood the employability conundrum and thus help NMIMS gain industry and civil organizations' confidence. This also enhanced NMIMS students' placement opportunities in NGO and Industry.

The issue of relevance was also examined from the pedagogy perspective. It was found that there was high dependence on lecture methodology. The acid test of a good teacher at that time was how powerfully he delivered a lecture rather than student learning. Every faculty member knew experiential pedagogy tools, but not how to effectively use them. In some cases, there were serious concerns on faculty's knowledge level. I believe that only competent faculty can develop competent students.

NMIMS decided to invest significantly in faculty development. Today, it is an important item on the University's development agenda. We believe very strongly that the only way forward is to develop our existing faculty. This was not to exclude the recruitment of new and more competent faculty, perhaps at times, at a higher compensation level.

Through the lens of relevance, we also critically examined our assessment pattern and brought them in line with the evaluation pattern of global universities. It also helped in directing our attention to the gaps in learning processes and systems.

This exercise also made us revisit our relationship with industry and society. The new relationship with industry helped NMIMS understand the skill gaps leading to the establishment of co-funded labs, workshops and program designs. It also helped us to create joint certification for our graduates. For example, SAS or PMI Certifications enhanced the value of our degree in the eyes of the industry and, in turn, better employment and salary prospects.

The model adopted by NMIMS for making its programs relevant is shown in **Figure I.**

Program Development Model
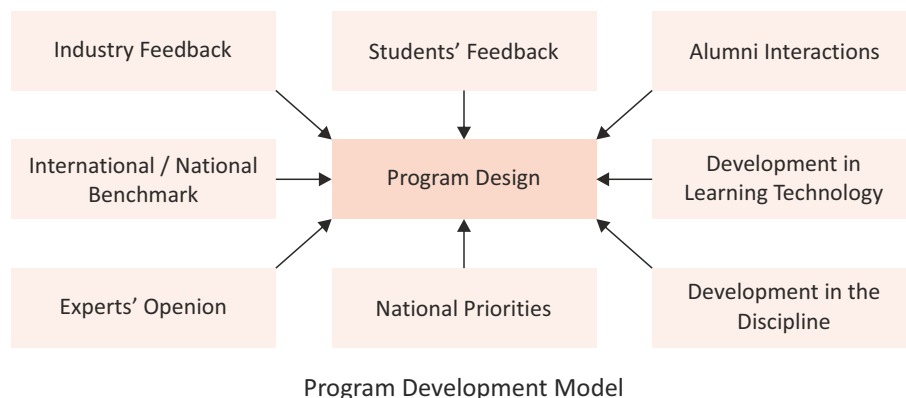
Relevance ensures that the university remains meaningful to the industry and the society. But making an institution relevant alone is not adequate. Rigour in learning is as important as relevance. It is often believed that relevance and rigour are the two ends in the academic system. My experience showed that one can remain relevant and also simultaneously enhance rigour in the academic system.

Rigour is about being thorough and careful, and at the same time, being demanding. This rigour in the academic system commences from program planning. Many a time, small things get missed out in program planning, which then can lead to gaps in learning. For example, in designing a course, if there are some fundamentals that need to be included, then the faculty need to ensure it is done. In addition, few steps that were taken were development of student charter and specifying attendance and graduation norms. Another major initiative related to zero tolerance towards plagiarism. In one of my conversations with the faculty and students, I emphasized the significance of ethics, punctuality and discipline besides self-development. Policies for defaulters were also announced. These steps ensured punctuality, student attendance in the classroom and far more rigorous student assessment. Code of Conduct for both students and faculty was also developed.

But we did not stop at the academic system only. We looked at our other processes and systems like those relating to student admissions, faculty and employee selection and examination. The effect of all this was that NMIMS emerged in 10 years as an institution which understood and practiced the value of learning. This, along with relevance, made NMIMS graduates and academic systems contemporary and rigorous.

Development of learning culture is about the development of conventions, values and practices that will value continuous, collaborative and autonomous learning. The goal of any university has to be to create an environment which encourages transformational learning. Towards this end, conventions play an important role. For example, the convention of starting and ending the academic program on time regularly and graduating the students every year without failure ensures that everything is done in the university according to a preannounced Academic Calendar.

Collaborative learning also contributes to learning culture. Multiple initiatives can help institutions translate this into an actionable statement. Case method, simulation and group projects are just some pedagogic tools that help

collaborative learning. In a globally diverse classroom, the value of collaborative learning gets enhanced when the members in teams are from different geographies.

Development of learning communities across programs further enhanced learning culture. One such approach toward this was study group formations. Non-classroom groups' works contributed to the development of such groups. My communication to schools was that besides classroom, learning took place outside the classroom too as in study tours, immersion programs and outbound training.

Learning culture to me, defined the character and strength of NMIMS. It put the focus on the student and hence, from academic planning perspective, focus was on what it took to create a lifelong learning experience. Hence, both experiential learning and non-classroom learning became important to drive learning process. Library labs and databases assumed a high degree of importance in encouraging autonomous learning. Continuous assessment also enabled learning. No student could possibly graduate without scoring well in the internal continuous assessment. Students were also encouraged to go beyond the subscribed text and hence, library orientation shifted from being just a Textbook collection to Reference and rare books collections. From an assessment perspective, faculty was advised to use Bloomsburg taxonomy of learning. While conceptual understanding was important, equally important were the application and creative skills.

Technology was also a great enabler in creation of a learning culture. Blackboard Learning Management System, Video streaming and MOOCs helped us in creating a desired learning environment.

All this combined with faculty development and innovations made NMIMS one of the outstanding learning institutions in higher education. Various ranking surveys by print and online media confirmed it. NMIMS is often ranked among the top 20 universities with excellent academic culture.

Values and Culture

Whether an institution will survive and get transformed from good to great is dependent on its values, culture and governance. As mentioned earlier at the beginning of this article, the essence of an institution lies in its values and culture. The responsibility to permeate values lies with the leader. Unless the leader is willing to walk the talk, value statement remains merely holy expositions decorating the walls of an institution. Very early in my career, I learnt that no leader can earn respect if he or she is not willing to practice the values and the belief system that he propagates. In the course of discussion with the Deans in 2009, it was apparent that to earn reputation in Higher Education, one of the core values of NMIMS will have to be transparency. It was decided that decisions would no longer be taken in a closed room, known only to a few. Internet and intranet technologies also enabled us to walk the path of transparency, be it related to admissions, examination, student development, and faculty or staff recruitment. The social network, which was emerging as a powerful change agent, now got each one of us to look at what was needed to engage students and make the institution transparent.

Another value was quality. We did not want to compromise on our programs, neither were we willing to accept poor quality inputs, not just in academics, but also in administrative and technology resources. Even the infrastructure was envisaged to be world-class. The new campus of NMIMS at Mumbai is an example of world-

class quality in infrastructure design. National level accreditation by NAAC at A+ level, NBA Accreditation of programs in Engineering and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Tier I level and international accreditation by AACSB & AMBA testify NMIMS' premium quality at the global level. With AACSB Accreditation, NMIMS Business School is in elite company of 5% of global Business Schools with similar accreditation. To achieve this status, we followed zero tolerance towards poor performance and encouraged the faculty to upgrade their knowledge and skills, and also publish in selected journals. The process for assurance of learning was internalised in the School of Business Management at Mumbai.
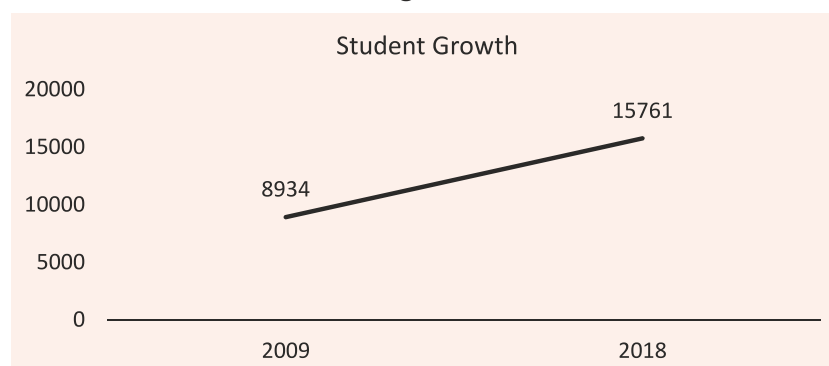
Respecting the individual for his or her contribution. This is particularly necessary because managing a university is nothing but managing talent. One of the fundamental assumptions of talent management is respecting the individual for his or her capabilities and hence, it became necessary to respect the individual.

I am a firm believer that institutions never grow through regimented thinking. It is the job of the leader to encourage an alternate view point and hence, be tolerant to dissent. Diversity in talent is bound to lead to different viewpoints. Hence, as a leader, I never shunned dissent. Even when it led to delay in decision making or when the decision was different from what was originally planned. I had often been accused of being soft and not asserting myself. We built NMIMS by respecting individuals, encouraging dissent and collaborative working. The culture of collegiality made NMIMS one of the most sought after academic communities in the country. In an environment where talent attrition has been in excess of 30%, NMIMS has been the lowest at about 10 to 15%. Many individuals who left NMIMS returned in less than a year's time. What brought them back was the work culture and the environment of collegiality. Autonomous functioning also brought them back. A "leadership that did not breathe down the neck" was a statement made by one of the faculty who left to return in a year`s time.
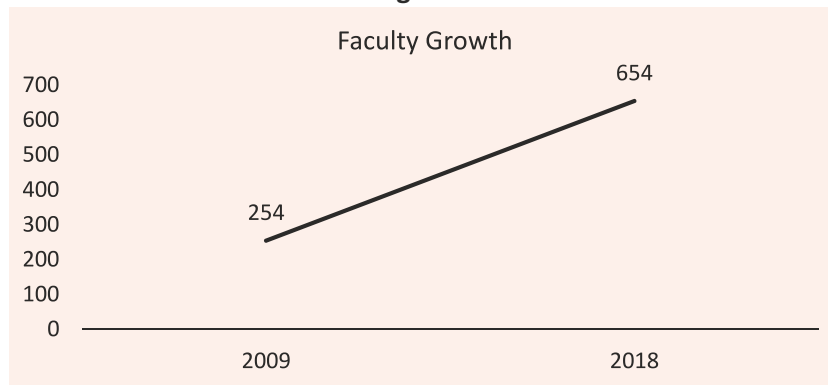
Scale and Quality go together
NMIMS story post 2009 debunks the proposition that one cannot have scale and quality together in higher education. NMIMS grew from 6 schools in 2009 to 13 schools in 2018; from 8,934 students in 2009 to 15,761 students in 2018 and from one campus to 6 campuses including the main campus. In this growth, we never lost sight of quality.
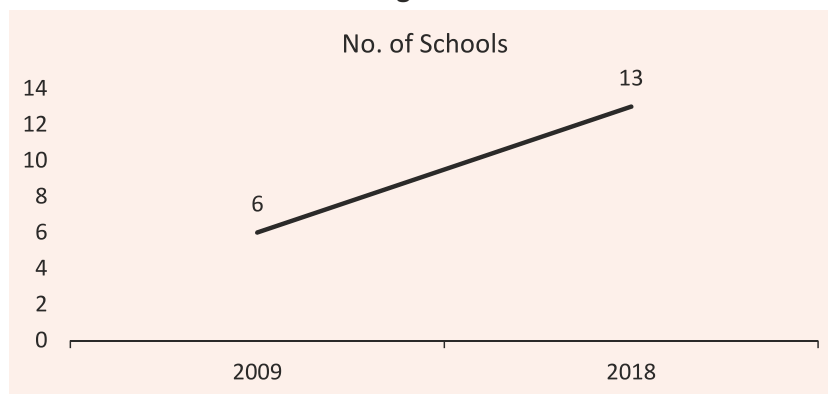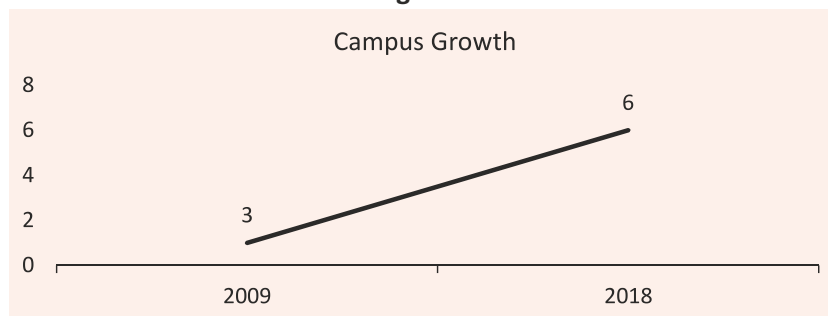
Graphs on Growth
Figure 1

Student Growth

20000	
15000	15761
10000	8934
5000	
0	
	2009 2018

Figure 2

Faculty Growth

Figure 3

No. of Schools

Figure 4

Campus Growth

As we grew, we kept adding good and competent faculty to our team such that the number of faculty grew from 254 in 2009 to 654 as of November 2018. We also focussed on their development. We started small and selected the best students and faculty in a program. We ensured that there was zero tolerance to academic indiscipline. Also our view was that outcomes, as assessed by student learning and placements, were an important yardstick to understand how well we have done. For us, acceptance by our stakeholders, particularly industry and society, was more important than the regulator's acceptance. Accreditation at the national and global level was important in our growth strategy. So were third party assessments like the ones by CRISIL and CARE. The feedback from international partners and the acceptance of our graduates by other premier global institutions in Masters and Ph.D. programs was important to us, particularly when it came to our undergraduate programs. I am a firm

believer that scale and quality can go together only when the purpose of the university is not compromised and it is not to profiteer, but to develop socially relevant employable graduates.

Processes

No institution can ever grow if the processes are not clearly defined. For at the end of the day, it is the processes that help in instutionalization. The purpose of process definition is to clarify to the community how a function is to be performed and what does it take to achieve outstanding results. Processes also help in clarifying the roles and the linkages of one role with another. It also helps in defining the boundaries of each and every function. It helps in making decisions transparent, objective and merit driven. My focus in the last ten years in defining these processes relating to governance, admissions, academics, examinations, placements, Human Resources or any other aspect of university functioning was to make the institution process driven rather than being individual focussed.

Schools

A strategic choice in diversification of NMIMS was whether to categorize programs under a department or a school. For example, should NMIMS classify all its engineering programs under the department of Engineering or Technology, or should they be grouped together as a school. It was decided to name each department as a school. The vision in doing so was to enable each school to create an individual identity within the overall umbrella of the university. At the same time, it would also help identify competition and collaboration opportunities both within the country and outside. Each school was named as per the request of the donor, or was given the name of one of the Trustees of SVKM who would have contributed significantly to the activities of the Trust. For example, the Engineering College was named Mukesh Patel School of Technology Management and Engineering primarily to recognize the contributions of Shri Mukesh Patel, the Late President of SVKM, to the growth of SVKM and NMIMS. Likewise, the Architecture School bears the name of SVKM's late Vice President Shri Balwant Sheth, and School of Science, the name of our Honorary Secretary Shri Sunandan Divatia. As one can understand, the philosophy of the Trust has been to recognize individuals who would have made significant contribution to the growth of the institution. This is in contrast to other organizations which do not wish to name any of their assets with those of individuals who have contributed to their growth. They do this only when they receive donations. In the words of the President, it was the least that they could do to recognize the contribution of individuals to the growth of the institution.

Another thought in adopting the school structure was to enable long term strategic planning in the discipline. For example, the long term perspective in the School of Science was to contribute to knowledge creation in the field of Life Sciences. Accordingly, investments were directed to establishment of Tissue Culture Lab and other labs in biological and chemical sciences. Likewise, the long term dream of the Economics School was to make it India's best Economics Institution in the city of Mumbai. The vision of the School of Liberal Arts was to develop critical thinkers and creative individuals who could take responsibility for their own behaviour. It was also to encourage right brain thinking and develop potential leaders.

As I said earlier, the purpose of adopting a school structure was to assist in establishing relationships with identical

institutions, both within and outside India. Today, the Architecture School has a range of relationships with schools in Spain, US and Sri Lanka. Similarly, NMIMS Business School has relationships with Business Schools in US, Europe and Asia Pacific. Each School is autonomous and works under the overall guidance of the Vice Chancellor. Today as mentioned above, there are 13 schools, each of which has emerged as a dominant player in its own field.

Leadership

A leader plays a vital role in the growth and transformation of any institution. It is the power of his vision and ability to translate it into an actionable plan that makes a great institution. When I took over as Vice Chancellor of NMIMS, my vision was to have the business school globally accredited by AACSB/EQUIS. It was also to create a multidisciplinary institution recognized nationally as one among the most credible institutions in the country. Given the negativity surrounding Deemed Universities and private education in India, it was necessary to make stakeholders believe in NMIMS, especially when the government and society had a significant stake in higher education. The Business School did get accredited by AACSB and the Management program at Bangalore and Hyderabad by AMBA. As mentioned earlier, the Tier I status accorded by Government of India under the UGC Graded Autonomy Regulations 2018 and rankings by media and government have only served to establish the fact that the plan developed in 2009 and 2015 had been delivered. What has been mentioned earlier in this article was a part of the action plan put in place since 2009.

A powerful Vision acts like an elixir that peps up and motivates the team to achieve even the most seemingly impossible agenda. It provides a purpose to the team. When the vision is shared with the team, a new force, of a magnitude of 10x gets created. This happened in NMIMS post the first Leadership Retreat in 2009 and subsequently in 2014. The subsequent developments in each school of NMIMS reflected such energy. I remember in one of the MHRD meetings in 2010-11, justifying our University status and our claim to fame, my view was to compare performance of NMIMS as a university with similar universities in terms of age. I was confident that NMIMS would achieve much greater success in the decade leading up to 2022. We achieved this position in 2018 itself. A distinguished academic leader called me to compliment and accepted the fact that they failed to see the potential in the institution. The FICCI Award of 'University of the Year' in the category of universities in existence for more than 5 years and less than 15 years, and for 'Faculty Excellence' further confirmed our leadership position.

Sharing the vision and involving the team in the development of the plan was critical for the transformation agenda. This led to a retreat every three years which gave us an opportunity to introspect and make corrections in our plans. It also helped to share the best practices with the team. It also led to empowering people and giving them a feeling of centrality. One of the important tools in people management is listening. Many a time as a leader, I did not have a solution to the employees' problems other than empathic listening. It did help in reducing employees' anxiety or stress levels.

Successes and failures go hand in hand. These are moments that come in everyone's life. I never got carried away by success and took failure in my stride. Maintaining equanimity and being resilient always helped to move to a higher level of performance.

No management program teaches students how to manage stakeholders especially when they have different objectives, expectations and perceptions. This issue becomes far more critical when one realises that each of the stakeholders like the sponsoring trust, regulator and faculty have conflicting demands from the institution and the leader. Not to be left too far behind are the expectations of the recruiters and the society. In an interconnected environment where almost everyone is chatting on social networks and mobile internet, I realized that adverse news travelled much faster and in some cases, even before I knew. The Trustees for example, would get to know certain things even before I did. This led to criticism that the University administration was not at the top of things. Today, I don't think it is humanly possible for any individual to know of developments 24x7 especially in a large multidisciplinary and multi-campus institution. The sheer size and the complexity created by the number of people and students in the system makes it near impossible for the leader to remain at the top of things. Nonetheless, once the leader gets to know, he or she must act. There cannot be a delay thereafter in responding to the situation. It also required us to develop a system by which the administration, particularly the Registrar, would get to know of any development in the system even if it meant late at night or early in the day. What it taught me was the need for communication and urgency of response. To respond in a University environment, it is necessary that one must have an understanding of the entire situation. Invariably, all situations have multiple shades. Responding on the basis of only one, say for example, a feedback from one party like student or the Dean is not the right way. It will never lead to problem resolution. The decision so arrived at will only be perceived as arbitrary and prejudiced. Hence, I learnt that I needed to talk to all players in a situation and understand their perspective.

I also learnt not to get carried away by compliments or get depressed in the face of humiliation. We all know the room at the top is always lonely. Except for a few, nobody is interested in the leader's feelings. So most important is to maintain equanimity.

Managing growth required innovative thinking. It forced me to look at alternatives outside the institution and at times, even from higher education domain. It also motivated me to consider international examples. The diffusion of blackboard technology in NMIMS, making programs interdisciplinary or creating integrated programs like the Five Year integrated program in Family Business or joint degree program in Business and Law (MBA Law) are just some such examples of innovations at program and process levels. Many such innovations have contributed to the growth and making of NMIMS. There is no denying that the leader needs to be passionate about the institution and his assignment. Only passionate leaders develop passionate teams.

Further, the leader has to have confidence in his team. He has to accept the fact that not all are identically efficient and not all have the same strengths. I learnt early in my leadership journey that an effective leader is one who can get extraordinary results from ordinary individuals. It was this faith in the Business School faculty which many found lagging in competencies made me pursue the agenda of AACSB international accreditation. It was also my faith and confidence in my team that got NMIMS the Tier I status among universities in India and a rapid growth in the university's reputation.

Today, NMIMS stands apart among private institutions in India on the strengths of these programs, processes and systems. Its categorization as a Tier-I University by Government of India under the UGC Graded Autonomy Regulations 2018 is a testimony to NMIMS philosophy, values, strategies and processes.

The future of NMIMS

NMIMS has a long way to go. Having established itself as a credible name in Higher Education in India, it is time that the institution focuses on putting its footprint in the world market. Global appreciation of the institution by the peer group and the stakeholder is required. Hence, it is time for NMIMS to once again disrupt and develop an innovative path that will help the institution acquire global pre-eminence in the next decade. Believing that one can acquire global leadership position within two decades is essential and everybody has to commit to it. Every player including the Trust, Board and Faculty will have to make it their agenda. The institution has phenomenal potential. Over the last decade, NMIMS has acquired competencies and strengths that should help it to pivot in the global orbit.

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