

dasra

# Leading *through* Dilemmas

A D A S R A L E A D E R S H I P C O L L E C T I O N

Reflections  
*from* India's  
Social Sector

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CH 01

# Foreword

Leadership in the social sector develops in moments of doubt as much as confidence, in decisions made with imperfect information, and in contexts shaped by inequality, limited resources, and constant change.

Over the years, at Dasra, we have had the privilege of walking alongside social sector leaders as they navigate these realities—building organizations, influencing systems, and holding themselves accountable not only for outcomes, but for how those outcomes are achieved. What has consistently stood out is that leadership growth rarely comes from answers alone. It comes from grappling with dilemmas.

The leaders featured in this collection come from diverse contexts and work across different issues, organizations, and stages of growth. What connects them is not a single leadership style or pathway, but a shared willingness to reflect honestly on moments of uncertainty. Many have been part of Dasra's leadership programs over the years, and through these engagements, we have had the opportunity to learn alongside them.

This collection brings together reflections from these leaders as they navigate such moments—decisions about people, scale, systems, fairness, care, and the future. Each piece captures a leadership crossroads: what was at stake, how the leader responded, and what they learned along the way. These are not prescriptions or success stories. They are honest accounts of judgment calls made under pressure.

We hope these reflections resonate with you—whether you are leading a team, an organization, or simply reflecting on your own leadership journey. You may not face the same dilemmas, but you will recognize the tensions beneath them.

**At Dasra, we believe that leadership can be strengthened through reflection, dialogue, and learning from peers. This collection is offered in that spirit as a companion to pause with, return to, and carry forward as you continue your own work of leading change.**

*Neera Nundy*

CO-FOUNDER & PARTNER | DASRA

# *How to use this collection*

**There is no single way to read this book. You might choose to read it cover to cover, or to open it at a page that reflects a question you are currently grappling with.**

Each reflection stands on its own, rooted in a specific dilemma, but significant beyond its context. They are leadership moments, shared not to offer solutions but to invite reflection and discernment. As you read, you may find yourself agreeing or disagreeing based on your own experience. That is the point.

Leadership in the social sector is rarely about choosing between right and wrong. More often, it involves holding tensions between competing goods, acting without certainty, and growing through reflection rather than resolution. The reflection framework that follows, offers one way to make sense of such dilemmas- both the ones explored in this collection, and the ones you are navigating in your own leadership journey.

*We invite you to pause when something stays with you.*

*Return to these reflections over time. If this collection sparks conversation with peers, teams, or within yourself, it has served its purpose.*

# Reflection FRAMEWORK

*Leadership growth happens not by resolving dilemmas, but by learning to hold them with judgment, courage, and care.*

## 01 Name the Tension

Every dilemma holds two truths that matter.

- What are the competing values?
- What makes this decision hard?

## 02 Locate Yourself

Leadership begins with inner clarity.

- What fear, belief, or identity is being triggered?
- What am I protecting or avoiding?

## 03 Choose a principled experiment

Leadership rarely offers certainty - only direction.

- What action best aligns with our values right now?
- What am I willing to test and learn from?

## 04 Read the system

Dilemmas live inside systems, not just people.

- Who holds power and influence?
- What incentives or norms are at play?

### Footnote

The ideas reflected in this framework echo themes widely discussed in leadership writing and case-based learning, including work published in the Harvard Business Review.

# Mission alignment & scaling up



## Safeena Husain

### EDUCATE GIRLS

- **A social impact leader, Safeena Husain is the Founder of Educate Girls, an Indian non-profit that partners with communities to mobilise volunteers and government resources for girls' education in some of India's most underserved and remote regions.** In 2023, she became the first Indian woman to be honoured with the WISE Prize for Education for her transformative work in advancing gender equity through education. In 2024, she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). In 2025, she led Educate Girls to a historic milestone, becoming the first Indian non-profit to receive the Ramon Magsaysay Award, widely regarded as Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize, thereby cementing her place as one of the world's most impactful social entrepreneurs. Under Safeena's leadership, Educate Girls has pioneered innovative models that harness the power of community volunteering, most notably through its Team Balika network of over 55,000 community champions who have helped enrol over 2 million out-of-school girls and improve learning outcomes for more than 2.4 million children since its inception. She also spearheaded the world's first Development Impact Bond in education and led the organisation to become Asia's first TED Audacious Project. Drawing on her lived experience, Safeena brings a deep understanding of the challenges faced by marginalised communities. Her vision for the next decade is to empower 10 million learners through scalable, community-driven solutions grounded in volunteerism, participation, and equity.

## About Educate Girls

- Educate Girls is an award-winning non-profit working to ensure that every girl in India's rural and educationally marginalised communities has access to quality education. Since 2007, the organisation has partnered with state governments and local communities to identify out-of-school girls, support their enrolment and retention, and strengthen foundational learning for all children. Their second-chance program also helps adolescent girls and young women complete their Grade 10 and 12 education while building life skills and agency.

### *Dilemma*

- As a leader, one of the biggest challenges I faced was managing the **transition from a small-scale initiative to a large, scaled-up program**. Scaling up brings an entirely new level of complexity—managing people, finances, and external relationships becomes far more intricate. The real challenge lies in maintaining agility and responsiveness while the organization grows in size and scope.

### *What I Tried*

- At Educate Girls, we have created a structure that helped me focus more sharply and give a lot more time to critical areas such as strategy, planning, and problem-solving. We built the organization to be highly decentralized. **We realized that the best solutions lie closer to the ground and created systems that allow decision-making and course correction at the ground level.** As we grew, I discovered that you also need to watch out for mission drift and actively remain a learning organization.

### *Insight*

- Scaling impact isn't just about strategy—it's about staying rooted to your mission. It is also **deeply linked to people and culture**. Empowering teams, building transparent systems, and staying true to the mission help an organization stay agile and effective, no matter how large it grows.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What helps your organization stay true to its mission as it scales**

# Leading change with accountability



## *Vanessa D'souza*

**SOCIETY FOR NUTRITION, EDUCATION  
AND HEALTH ACTION (SNEHA)**

- **Vanessa D'Souza has served as CEO of SNEHA since March 2013. Prior to that, she worked with Citibank India in various positions, her last role being: Director, Citigroup Private Bank. She holds a Bachelors (Honours) degree in Economics and a postgraduate degree in Management with a specialization in Marketing. Vanessa pursued the Management Executive Development Programme at Stanford University, USA. She also holds a postgraduate Diploma in Public Health Nutrition. She was a Dasra Social Impact Fellow in 2015. She has been a recipient of the Mother Teresa Social Leadership Scholarship, to attend the Strategic Perspectives in Non-Profit Management Programme at Harvard Business School in 2017. She was a Motwani Jadeja Impact Fellow in 2024**

## About SNEHA

- SNEHA is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health, nutrition, and safety of women and children living in vulnerable urban informal settlements. SNEHA was established in 1999 to address the twin goals of **improving health-seeking behaviour among underserved communities and improving the quality of public health services**. The organisation works to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality and morbidity, child malnutrition, and gender-based violence.

### *Dilemma*

- A few years ago, we introduced electronic attendance using a phone-based app. The design and implementation were undertaken by a member of our senior team. **While the process itself was simple, there was significant resistance due to the transparency and accountability that the app introduced.** Field teams cited connectivity issues, difficulties using the app, and cultural concerns around trust. Over time, even senior teams began pushing back, raising concerns about staff motivation.

### *What I Tried*

- We first addressed the technology concerns by ensuring network connectivity at all centers. We conducted intensive training so every staff member felt supported throughout the process. Initially, we condoned lapses and continued salary payments even when entries were incomplete. Once systems and confidence were in place, we took a firm stand—future lapses would not be overlooked, and salaries would not be paid if attendance was not marked. **Discipline followed almost immediately.**

### *Insight*

- Change management needs to start with buy-in at all levels. In this instance, the app was designed and implemented by a senior team member without taking adequate buy-in from the wider team. **Listening and empathy are essential, but so is resolve.** Leaders need to stand firm if they truly believe something will benefit the organization's work. A year later, the entire organization was appreciative of the benefits the app brought in.

### *Reflection prompt*

**Are there situations where setting clearer expectations and taking firmer decisions might strengthen trust in your organizational culture?**

# Balancing fairness & market realities in non-profit salaries



## Raj Gilda

LEND-A-HAND INDIA (LAHI)

- **Raj Gilda, Co-founder & Director (Strategy and Development), a banker-turned-social entrepreneur leads resource mobilization and external relations at Lend A Hand India.** With over 20 years of experience in education, banking, insurance, and IT, he transitioned to full-time in social development sector in 2011. His past roles include positions at Citibank and Deloitte Consulting in New York. Raj has been involved in various government advisory roles, such as a member of the National Skill Development Agency (NSDA) from 2014-17 appointed by Gov of India, part of the committee to review scheme of vocationalisation of school education and part of the Curricular Area Group for Vocational Education under the National Curriculum Framework(NCF) 2023. **He is a Chevening Gurukul Scholar at the London School of Economics. He's recognized as a top 100 graduate alumni of the University of Texas at Austin and received an award for community service from the U.S. President.** Raj is an Electronics Engineer from the University of Pune, and holds an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin.

## About LAHI

- Lend A Hand India is a Pune-based non-profit organisation dedicated to transforming education and livelihoods for young people across India by integrating vocational and practical skills with mainstream school curricula. Established in the mid-2000s, LAHI works at the intersection of education, employability and entrepreneurship, partnering with government schools and state education systems to make secondary and higher secondary (Grades 9–12) education more relevant to real-world opportunities. **It develops and implements hands-on skill programmes like the Multi-Skill Foundation Course (MSFC)**, sets up labs and workshops in schools, recruits and trains local vocational instructors, facilitates internships, and supports youth with career development and employment pathways.

### *Dilemma*

- **We are competing for talent.** Given current market conditions, we must pay new hires more than long-term, proven employees.

### *What I Tried*

- We tried a few approaches to address this tension. We onboarded recruits in part-time roles so that total compensation was more comparable with that of existing staff. We laid out a clear, three-year compensation growth plan for long-term team members so they had visibility into potential increments. **We offered a one-time incentive to existing team members so that this did not add to recurring commitments.** We also introduced a performance-based variable bonus plan.

### *Insight*

- Compensation decisions rarely feel like clear wins. **Balancing fairness and market realities is often a lose-lose proposition**, but leaders must continue to engage with it transparently and thoughtfully, even when perfect solutions don't exist.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What market pressures are testing your values right now, and how are you navigating them?**

# *Institutional journey from care to inclusion*



## *Archana Chandra*

**JAI VAKEEL FOUNDATION & RESEARCH CENTRE**

Archana has charted a commendable professional journey from the corporate sector to the social development space. Prior to her current positions, Archana has worked in various marketing, public relations, and human resources roles at The Akanksha Foundation, Informix (a division of IBM), and Bennett, Coleman and Company Limited, commonly known as The Times Group. Currently, she is the CEO & Board Member of Jai Vakeel Foundation & Research Centre, India's largest and oldest non-profit working in the space of Intellectual Disabilities (ID). She and her team have helped Jai Vakeel emerge as the largest organisation of its kind in India by 2019. **She serves as the Trustee of Society for Rehabilitation of Crippled Children (SRCC), which in collaboration with Narayan Health, has built one of the largest paediatric hospitals in the country. As a member of the Advisory Board of Annamrita (which is part of the ISKCON Food Relief Foundation), she helps govern one of the largest NGOs in the country that serves mid-day meals to under-resourced children.** She recently joined the Advisory Board of India Leaders for Social Sector (ILSS), an organisation dedicated to strengthening leadership and talent in the social sector through curated programs, fellowships, and strategic ecosystem support.

## About **Jai Vakeel Foundation & Research Centre**

- For over 80 years, Jai Vakeel Foundation, a proud recipient of the National Award, has supported individuals with Intellectual Disability (ID). As India's oldest and one of the largest not-for-profit organizations in this space, we remain committed to looking at each individual with a belief in their potential to lead fuller and more inclusive lives. **Our approach is holistic: we aim to integrate our students into mainstream society by providing Healthcare, Education & Skill Development.** To address the absence of a uniform curriculum, we developed Disha Abhiyan, a structured curriculum for children with Intellectual Disability. Certified by NIEPID, this curriculum has been institutionalized across Maharashtra, impacting over 20,000 children to date

### *Dilemma*

- When I stepped into the role of CEO at Jai Vakeel Foundation, the challenge was not simply to lead a 70-year-old institution—it was to navigate a fundamental tension.** How do you honour a founder-led legacy built on extraordinary personal devotion while evolving it into a structured, professional Center of Excellence that can outlive individual dependency? For decades, the campus had been a place of lifelong care and protection. But if inclusion was truly our north star, we had to ask a harder question: were we preparing individuals with Intellectual Disability to participate meaningfully in the world beyond our campus?

### *What I Tried*

- Shifting from “care” to “inclusion” required introducing structure, making difficult choices, and moving from a relationship-driven fundraising model to one rooted in institutional strength and financial resilience. We began by identifying our core strengths and defining programs that supported long-term inclusion while letting go of efforts that, though meaningful, were not central. We formalized our Community Integration Program, opening our campus to volunteers and professionals, while creating opportunities for students to engage with the wider world through travel, work exposure, and social participation. In parallel, we strengthened the institution by building a corpus, bringing in program leaders and skilled volunteers, and investing in HR, communications, and monitoring. **This enhanced accountability, enabled us to measure outcomes, and laid the foundation for scale, including the launch of Disha Abhiyan, India's first structured curriculum for children with intellectual disabilities, now institutionalized across Maharashtra and expanding nationally.**

### *Insight*

- Leadership has meant stepping back to reflect on what we are truly trying to solve and having the courage to make difficult decisions to stay aligned with our mission. **Building systems that outlast individuals is what allows care to evolve into inclusion and intention to translate into lasting impact.**

### *Reflection prompt*

**What systems needs strengthening in your organization for its mission to endure beyond individual leadership?**

# Building leadership for the next phase



## Kalyani Subramanyam

MAITRAYANA FOUNDATION

- **Kalyani Subramanyam is a leading voice in women's empowerment and social justice in India, with over 25 years of experience working at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and rights.** She is the CEO of the Maitrayana Charity Foundation, where she champions innovative, rights-based approaches, most notably the use of sport as a pathway to leadership, confidence, and equality for girls and young women. A trained social worker, Kalyani spent 18 years at The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, where she pioneered The Young People's Initiative, a landmark empowerment programme that has reached over 130,000 girls nationwide and received national and international recognition, including the Goal Lifetime Achievement Award. Her work spans programme design, strategy, and grassroots partnerships, with a deep commitment to safeguarding and ethical practice. Kalyani serves on **UNICEF's International Safeguarding Children in Sport Advisory Board and advises institutions on Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) frameworks.** A Vital Voices Lead Fellow and Dasra Leadership Programme alumna, she has been widely recognised for her leadership, including honours from Decision Maker Magazine and national women's leadership platforms. **Through her work, Kalyani continues to shape spaces where girls not only participate, but lead, decide, and thrive.**

## About Maitrayana

- Maitrayana was born from a simple but radical belief: when girls claim their right to play, they begin to claim their right to lead. A Section 8 not-for-profit, **Maitrayana advances girls' and women's rights by using sport as a powerful tool for social change.** Through The Young People's Initiative (YPI) Maitrayana works with adolescent girls and young women across urban-rural communities in Mumbai, Delhi, and Bengaluru, meeting them where they are, on fields, courts, and open grounds that often mark the first spaces of freedom. Sport becomes the entry point; rights, leadership, and agency become the outcome.

### *Dilemma*

- As Maitrayana evolved from establishing programs to envisioning its next phase of growth, I realized that some senior leaders who had served the organization brilliantly so far might not be equipped for what the future required. They were exceptional at building systems and delivering programs, but the next stage demanded comfort with ambiguity, strategic thinking, and the ability to lead the organization into new spaces. **The dilemma was stark: how do you honor past contributions while recognizing that the very strengths that built the organization may now be limiting its future?** And how do you have this conversation without destabilizing morale or compromising compassion? For me as a leader, this realization was deeply unsettling. I found myself questioning whether I was ready to “rock the boat,” how my decisions would be perceived, and even my own leadership ability.

### *What I Tried*

- I approached the issue analytically and transparently. I consulted my board, shared the dilemma openly, and together we tried to examine it dispassionately. **I mapped the challenge across technical, cultural, and emotional competencies, dissecting where the gaps truly lie.** I also reached out to peers in my network who had used leadership assessment tools to understand how other organizations navigated similar transitions. Through this process, I realized that our performance metrics focused almost entirely on current delivery, not future readiness, and that this structural blind spot was contributing to a leadership deficit. Naming this honestly was uncomfortable, but necessary.

### *Insight*

- An organization's next phase requires leaders who can see, hold, and shape the future, not just execute for the present. **Building a future-ready leadership team demands courage:** to assess honestly, to speak transparently, and to make decisions that honor the past but do not allow it to define the limits of the future.

### *Reflection prompt*

**Which capabilities that were built by your organization may need to cease, change, or evolve for its next chapter?**

# The choice of scaling deep



## Sonal Kapoor

PROTSAHAN

- Sonal Kapoor is the Founder and CEO of Protsahan India Foundation and an Ashoka Fellow, committed to strengthening care and protection pathways for adolescent girls growing up amid extreme poverty, migration, violence and heightened vulnerability to intergenerational abuse and exploitation. Trained in public health, child rights, and business administration, Sonal's work centres on building the capacities of India's frontline caregiving workforce, so that vulnerable girls can remain in school, access psychosocial care, and grow up within their families, rather than being institutionalised or pushed into early marriage or labour. What began with 43 girls in 2010 has, under her leadership, grown by 2026 to reach over 96,000 Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, and historically marginalised girls across high-risk urban communities—all of whom are the first in their families to complete school, enter university, and step into their first jobs. Today, Protsahan is recognised as a deeply rooted grassroots organisation and a trusted trauma-informed care partner within India's child protection and social welfare ecosystem.**

## About Protsahan

- Protsahan is a Delhi-based organisation working to strengthen India's care and protection ecosystem for marginalised adolescent girls facing, or at high risk of, abuse, exploitation and violence. The organisation intervenes at critical points where girls are most vulnerable to child marriage, exploitative labour, and sexual abuse, and supports their transition toward safety, education, health, healing arts and sustainable livelihoods. Rather than removing girls from their social contexts, **Protsahan focuses on reinforcing the systems around them- families, communities, and frontline public services.** By enabling access to government entitlements and social protection, the organisation reduces the need for institutionalisation and prevents cycles of early marriage and re-exploitation, allowing girls to remain rooted in their families while rebuilding their lives.

### *Dilemma*

- The challenge was to scale the idea of Protsahan at the grassroots [healing childhood abuse], without necessarily growing the organization incrementally. It required **understanding the subtle difference between growth and scale** and doing so in ways that made sense to communities, not just to funder dashboards or reporting cycles.

### *What I Tried*

- I learned that every leader must know when and how to say no. Scaling deep at the grassroots is precious; that's what truly changes lives. Not every idea needs to become an app, a policy, or a global model. Some ideas need to grow better roots, like mycorrhizal networks of fungi that nourish the soil from within, so that forests can thrive. Efficiency is doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right thing. The art of leadership is knowing which one is required in each season, and having the courage to hold the tension between the two with deep listening, and without losing one's *raison d'être*.

### *Insight*

- Many of our traditional thinking habits insist that we must attack something and prove it wrong before we can suggest a change. **The harder, braver act is to acknowledge that something is excellent and still say, it is not enough.** Change does not always mean rejection; sometimes it means deepening what already works.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What needs to grow and what needs to deepen in your leadership or organization right now?**

# Building a learning organisation



## Aakash Sethi

QUEST ALLIANCE

- **Aakash Sethi, a visionary leader, is transforming the education-to-employment landscape in India by driving innovative learning solutions that equip young people with 21st-century skills and cultivate self-learning mindsets.** Under his leadership, Quest Alliance has pioneered experiential learning models that prepare young learners for an evolving world of work, impacting over 2 million learners to date. Aakash has facilitated a community of over 40 non-profit organisations working in the sector to share knowledge, worked with over 10 state governments to integrate a dedicated curriculum, and built the capacity of teachers and principals to create self-learning environments. **He has launched the Quest Learning Observatory, a collaborative space that integrates sustainable practices, interdisciplinary experimentation, and emerging trends, where members can reimagine, experiment, and co-create regenerative cultures for their organizations.** Aakash's vision has shaped Quest2Learn, a flagship event, into a bold, creative, participatory process, co-created with young people in India who are demonstrating critical thinking, self-awareness, reimagining career pathways, and innovative, community-led solutions.
- **An Ashoka Fellow since 2019, Aakash continues his unwavering commitment to empowering marginalized youth and shaping transformative educational pathways that redefine India's future of learning and employment.**

## About Quest Alliance

- A pioneer in India's education and skilling ecosystem, Quest Alliance works to equip young people with the future-ready skills they need to thrive in their careers. **Quest Alliance is a non-profit organization that has worked for close to two decades, across Indian states, at the intersection of education, technology, and learner development.** Partnering with governments, funders, public education institutes, and CSOs, Quest Alliance designs and implements system- and learner-level interventions that prepare confident, informed, career-ready young learners, who are often marginalized, to navigate and conquer the world of work.

### *Dilemma*

- As a leader, I often found myself caught between the urgency to deliver outcomes and the need to create space for people to learn, experiment, and grow. **Balancing pace with patience,** especially in a fast-moving, mission-driven organization, was far more complex than I initially expected.

### *What I Tried*

I began by stepping back and listening more deeply to what my teams were experiencing beneath the surface of tasks and timelines. **Instead of stepping in to "fix," I focused on clarifying the future state** and creating conditions where people felt safe to interpret, try, and iterate. I learned that my role wasn't to accelerate everything, but to hold space so that teams could find their own rhythm and agency. I discovered that alignment emerges more naturally when people see themselves as co-owners of the future. This shift built more trust, more leadership, and more resilience across the system.

### *Insight*

- Leadership is less about driving speed and more about shaping spaces and creating the conditions where others can step into their power. When we design for agency, the system moves forward with far more clarity and collective ownership. Building rituals around care and connection on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis helped create a sustained practice of this mindset.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What conditions are you creating for your teams to learn, experiment, and lead?**

# *Building a values-aligned leadership team*



*Pooja Taparia*

ARPAN

- **Pooja Taparia is the Founder and Chief Executive of Arpan, a globally recognized non-profit dedicated to eliminating Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in India.** Since founding Arpan in 2007, she has transformed it into one of the world's largest organizations in this field, reaching over 20 million children and adults through innovative outreach and advocacy models. Under her leadership, Arpan has pioneered CSA prevention programs, influenced national life skills curricula, and trained millions of children and teachers across India. Pooja's visionary approach has earned her and Arpan numerous accolades, including the **Architects of the Future Award (Austria), WISE Award (Qatar Foundation), and the C. Henry Kempe Award (ISPCAN, USA)**. She is a global thought leader, advising initiatives such as the To Zero initiative (Oak Foundation, Europe), Stepwell Alliance (UK), and Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation (USA). A sought-after TEDx speaker, Pooja is regularly invited to share her expertise at institutions like Harvard Graduate School of Education and The Fletcher School at Tufts University and the likes of Bridgespan, Dasra, ILSS and others. With academic credentials in Applied Art, Commerce, Economics, and Non-profit Management from Columbia University, Pooja continues to drive systemic change, inspiring a safer world for children everywhere

## About Arpan

- Arpan believes every child has the right to be safe from sexual abuse and to heal from its impacts. It is India's largest NGO addressing Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), with over 140 professionals delivering prevention and intervention services to children and adults across socio-economic backgrounds, genders, sexualities, castes, religions, and political affiliations. **Arpan's core work focuses on Personal Safety Education for children and adolescents aged 4–18 through schools**, complemented by training for parents, teachers, professionals, and government duty bearers, as well as advocacy and research to drive systemic change.

### *Dilemma*

- One of the ongoing challenges I've faced as a leader is **building a values-aligned leadership team that can help Arpan solve complex problems** while also nurturing a great place to work. Although half of our current leaders have been with us for over a decade and strongly reflect our values and culture, the other half has been a rotating mix of individuals. Some stayed for a few years; some we could not continue with.

### *What I Tried*

What I've learned is that while most people join with sincere intent, their ability to uphold Arpan's values, especially accountability and excellence, determines whether they can truly contribute to solving the deeper, more complex challenges of our work. The level of ownership required at the senior level, along with the drive to deliver exceptional, mission-aligned work, is essential not just for outcomes but for maintaining a healthy, motivating workplace. Despite strengthening our recruitment process, identifying this "right fit" has remained challenging. As a result, we've begun intentionally developing our Senior Managers into Directors, believing that leaders who grow from within will be better value-aligned and will help us solve this challenge.

### *Insight*

- Value alignment is key to building a strong leadership team to do impactful work and solve complex problems. If value alignment is missing, it eventually becomes difficult for individuals to sustain themselves within the organization. Identifying fit early—and enabling timely exits when needed—serves both the individual and the organization.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What helps your organization manage talent with strong value alignment in an effective and timely manner?**

# *Leading with care in times of crisis*



## *Devyani Chaturvedi*

DEVELOPMENTAL ASSOCIATION FOR  
HUMAN ADVANCEMENT (DEHAT)

- **Devyani Chaturvedi is a gender and development practitioner with over a decade of experience working in some of the most underserved rural and border communities of Uttar Pradesh, India.** Her work focuses on child rights, gender justice, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), with a strong emphasis on community-led leadership and grassroots change. She has led initiatives that have helped prevent child marriages, support survivors of violence, and expand opportunities for adolescent girls and women. Devyani also engages in global platforms and networks, contributing grassroots perspectives to international dialogues on gender equality and SRHR.

## About DEHAT

- **Developmental Association for Human Advancement (DEHAT)** is a non-profit organisation working to **improve public health, nutrition, and social development outcomes** among underserved rural and marginalised communities, primarily in Bihar. Through community-based programs, DEHAT works with adolescents, women, and families to address issues such as child marriage, early pregnancy, trafficking, violence, and economic vulnerability.

### *Dilemma*

- When DEHAT's founder and leader passed away in 2021, I found myself leading a rural organization in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh, a patriarchal border district where women rarely lead, let alone a gender-fluid person like me. **The organization was grieving, financially unstable, and we were unsure if it could survive.**

### *What I Tried*

- Instead of asserting authority, I led through care. I held space for grief, uncertainty, and ideas from across the teams and people associated with DEHAT. Over time, we slowly re-imagined DEHAT from a traditional NGO into a feminist, proximate, and inclusive collective. We confronted gender bias within our own systems, redefined leadership structures, and centered healing and care as an organizational practice. **Many resisted this shift, but those who stayed built something stronger—a culture rooted in courage, solidarity, and shared power.**

### *Insight*

- True leadership is less about direction and more about co-creation. **Transformation happens when people feel seen, safe, and trusted to lead.**

### *Reflection prompt*

**Where has care and not control been the kind of leadership your organization needed?**

# *Taking the lead for systems change*



*Suparna Gupta*

AANGAN TRUST

- **Suparna Gupta is the Founder of Aangan, established in 2002 to protect the most excluded and vulnerable children.** She developed a pioneering approach that partners with state authorities to strengthen standards of care for rescued and trafficked children in shelter homes across India, ensuring that children's voices remain central to the system designed to protect them. Since 2013, she has led the development of a child-harm prevention model in high-risk "hotspots" affected by child marriage, trafficking, and child labour to mobilize local women, adolescents, and government officials coordinated action for child safety. In 2023, along with a seven-member citizen group, she co-founded Nanhe Kadam Prison Creches Project, in partnership with the Prison Department of Maharashtra. **Suparna is an Ashoka Fellow and an Asia 21 Leader with the Asia Society. She is Edward S. Mason Fellow** at the Harvard Kennedy School. Her writing has appeared in The Washington Post and leading Indian publications.

## About Aangan Trust

- Saajha is a not-for-profit organization working to improve learning outcomes for children from underserved communities by strengthening parental engagement through accessible technology. **The organization delivers structured academic support via familiar platforms such as WhatsApp**, enabling families to actively participate in their children's education despite limited time or resources. Designed to be scalable and cost-effective, Saajha's programs emphasize long-term learning capacity, helping children build foundational skills, and the ability to learn independently through sustained family involvement.

### *Dilemma*

- As Aangan's work with vulnerable children deepened, we were confronted with a difficult choice. Our direct interventions were effective and emotionally compelling—we could see lives change in real time. Yet, the patterns we observed pointed to systemic failures far beyond individual cases. **The dilemma was whether to continue focusing on frontline service delivery, where impact was visible and immediate, or to invest in policy advocacy**—slower, uncertain work where progress is harder to measure, and credit is often diffused.

### *What I Tried*

- **I learned that sustainable change requires resisting the pull of immediacy.** We began documenting insights from the field and translating lived realities into evidence that government systems could respond to. This meant building credibility with policymakers, learning to speak the language of institutions, and accepting that influence often happens behind the scenes. It also meant letting go, trusting that impact at scale would come not from doing everything ourselves, but from strengthening the everyday systems and frontline actors responsible for protecting children.

### *Insight*

- Leadership for **systems change demands patience**, restraint, and the courage to work without constant visibility.

### *Reflection prompt*

**What would it mean to prioritize durability over visibility in your leadership choices?**

CH 11

# *Embedding innovation at scale*



*Prashast Srivastava*

SAAJHA

- **Prashast is the Co-founder and Director at Saajha, a not-for-profit improving learning outcomes in government schools. He has led the development of data-driven and tech-enabled systems that enable scale across public education networks. With prior leadership experience in business excellence, supply chain, and data systems at organizations like Dharma Life, he brings strong analytical and technical expertise. An engineer from BITS Pilani and an MBA from IIM Ahmedabad, he focuses on scalable, data-led social impact.**

## About Saajha

- Saajha is a not-for-profit organization working to improve learning outcomes for children from underserved communities by strengthening parental engagement through accessible technology. **The organization delivers structured academic support via familiar platforms such as WhatsApp**, enabling families to actively participate in their children's education despite limited time or resources. Designed to be scalable and cost-effective, Saajha's programs emphasize long-term learning capacity, helping children build foundational skills, and the ability to learn independently through sustained family involvement.

### *Dilemma*

- **A few years back, we realized that our unit costs were high, making it difficult to scale our interventions.** We were convinced that we needed to innovate, but the dilemma was how to do this without disrupting ongoing operations.

### *What I Tried*

- We set up a separate vertical called Sandbox, working with a smaller group of parents to pilot new interventions. **With the support of a research partner, we began running quick A/B tests to learn what worked.** While some interventions showed promising results in experimental settings, integrating them into operations took far longer than expected. Over time, it became clear that the context was changing faster than our tests, and the people responsible for implementation weren't deeply involved in the learning. This insight led us to restructure Sandbox, so that new initiatives were led by cross-functional teams, with operations, tech, data, and Sandbox jointly owning both experimentation and integration.

### *Insight*

- Innovation cannot sit on the sidelines. For new ideas to scale, the **people closest to implementation** need to be part of the experimentation.

#### *Reflection prompt*

**Who is missing from creative spaces, and who needs to be part of experimentation for innovation to scale in your organization?**

# Closing note

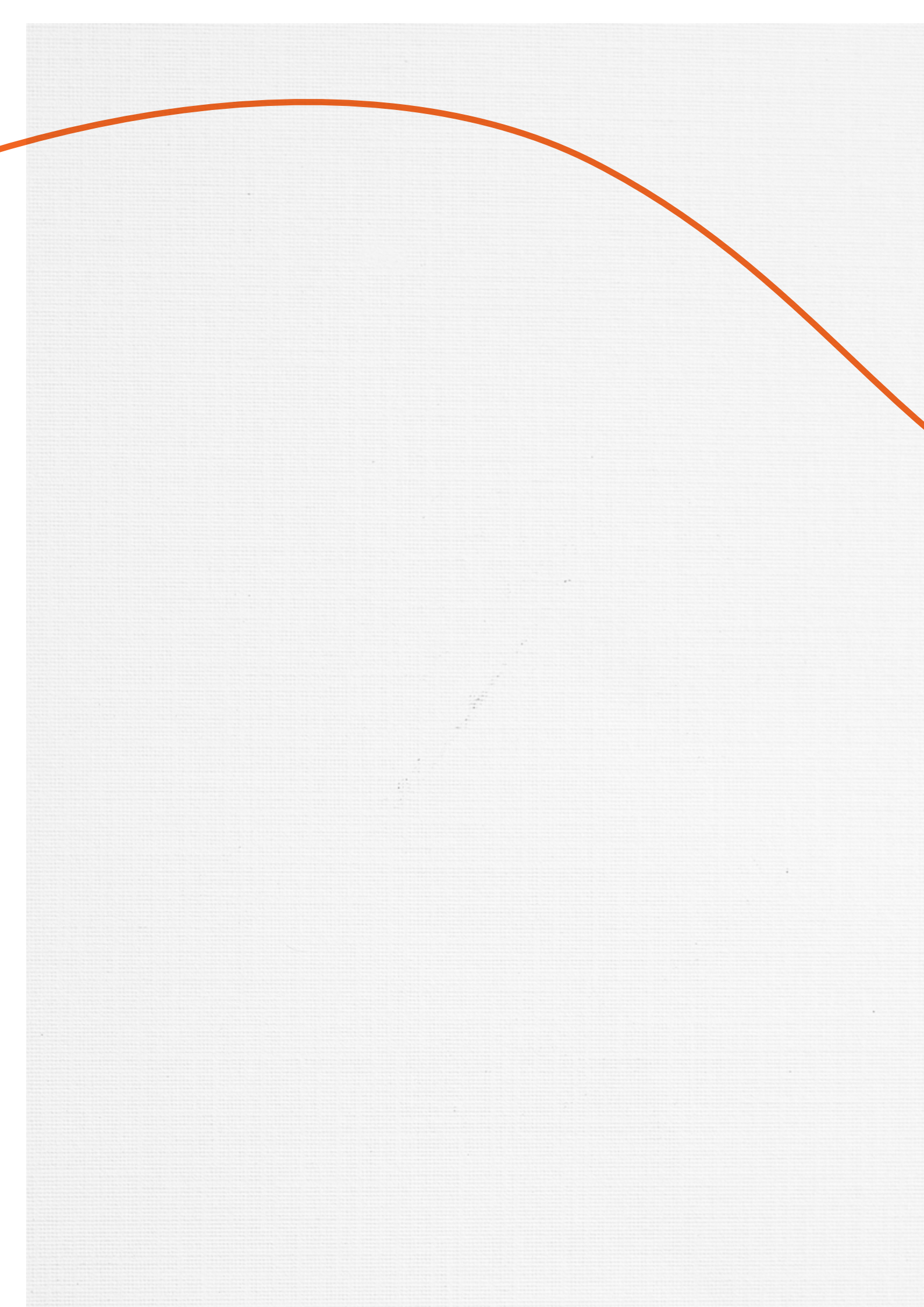


**The reflections in this collection remind us that leadership is not a destination, but a journey—one that evolves as organizations grow, contexts shift, and questions emerge. The dilemmas shared here do not offer neat resolutions. Instead, they reveal the inner work of leadership: learning to pause, question assumptions, listen more deeply, and act with courage even when the path forward is unclear.**

Across these pages, we see leaders navigating moments of transition—balancing care with accountability, values with market realities, urgency with long-term impact, and past successes with future readiness. What connects these experiences is not a single leadership style, but a willingness to reflect, adapt, and take responsibility for difficult choices.

At Dasra, we have seen that growth often comes from spaces where leaders can step back from day-to-day pressures, learn from peers, and examine their own assumptions with honesty and support. Many of Dasra's leadership programs are designed to create exactly these spaces—where reflection, peer learning, and practice come together over time. Leadership development, at its best, creates room for this kind of reflection—not to provide the right answers, but to build sound judgment.

*As you move forward in your own leadership journey, we hope these reflections serve as a reminder that dilemmas are not signs of failure, but markers of growth. The questions they raise are not ones to resolve once, but to return to thoughtfully, repeatedly, and together.*





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