

Cities should respect their citizens

Indian cities are in a mess because the bureaucrats and politicians have been taking the pride of ownership away from the citizens, says Ashok Kheny, MD of NICE, promoters of the Bangalore-Mysore Expressway project, in a chat with ManagementNext



Which global city can Bangalore emulate?

Bangalore is unique and you cannot copy systems from other cities - just like no one can wear someone else's suit. For any city to be well managed, what is first required is to bring in civic pride. Civic pride is about ensuring individual dignity and self-respect. What's happening in Indian cities is that they are taking away citizen's personal dignity. When you take away personal dignity, you take away the pride of the ownership of the city.

For simple things like electricity or water connection, citizens have to go through a lot of harassment. Even to pay taxes, you have to go through harassment. When you do this you cannot expect the citizens to love the city. Naturally, people will say 'I don't care'. When people are harassed, they naturally don't like to come out to do anything for the city. People throw things on the street in India while they keep their houses clean because they don't respect the city. They don't respect the city because the city does not respect them.

It's important to make cities citizen-friendly. Once you start making the city citizen-friendly, then everything will fall in place. Cities can learn from companies like Infosys where employees have a pride in working for that company even if other companies may be writing better software.

What can city administrators learn from the way you manage your projects?

In our project, I don't tell people what to do. I come into the picture when they cannot handle a problem or a situation. I build confidence in such a way that most of the time people come out with their own solutions for the problems.

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How can Indian cities be made into better place to live in?

The rich people of the city should start speaking up. Solution should come from top down, not bottom up. Townships in the West are run like businesses. We need to do the same.

In the West businessmen become politicians. Whereas in India politicians are trying to become businessmen. The bureaucrats have no clue of profit and loss and they advise politicians. It's just like the blind leading the blind.

I have immense confidence in the generation that is born after the 80's.

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I have a very simple philosophy. Respect people and they will give their best. Among the people I have hired 10 years ago, hardly anyone has left me including the drivers and security people. When you respect them they pay you back with their respect for you.

I don't believe in too many meetings. My style is management by exception because I know that I'm not an expert in all the fields. Indians don't like to be told what to do because they have an independent spirit. If you tell them what to do, they will try doing the opposite way. I let them manage themselves. I don't see my top managers for weeks. I don't micro manage. It has to run by itself.

My focus is on public relations and legal issues. I focus on legal issues to ensure that we don't break the law.

How have you been managing the media considering that your Bangalore-Mysore Expressway project is ridden with controversies?

The media was quite negative in the initial years. I realized the mistake of keeping everything secretive, just like a typical Indian company. But one day I decided to be open and transparent. They were shocked at our openness. In fact, we started getting a lot of constructive criticism after that.

Your message to the CEOs of large infrastructure projects?

Play by the rules, do it the legal way and have a level playing field for everybody.

We have learnt by saying 'no' to people even if they are related to chief ministers or prime ministers. That's why when we had the inauguration of the first phase of the project we did not call bureaucrats and politicians.