

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews NILOFER MERCHANT



Nilofer Merchant is a corporate director, business writer and speaker. Her ideas and approach to innovation, creativity and leadership are regularly featured in the Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek, Forbes and Harvard Business Review. Her work at Fortune 500 companies and Silicon Valley start-ups over the last 20 years fuel her innovative ideas on frameworks, strategies and cultural values.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Nilofer Merchant: Listening. Honestly, growth happens when we expose ourselves to new ideas. This means not just mingling with new people (often bucketed into networking) but also listening... “What do they know or do that I don’t know about?” I will take notes on new ideas, even if I don’t quite agree with that particular point, and then I’ll consider what aperture view that person has that makes their idea or direction valid. Most of us talk about how much we LOVE innovation but actually, most of us hate to listen to new ideas. Yet, listening is the key attribute of great leaders: embracing newness by considering diverse, sometimes opposing points of view.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

NM: I got fired by Carol Bartz (who was then CEO of Autodesk and later CEO of Yahoo). She told me that while I had gotten the right idea across a finish line, I hadn’t done it in a way that built trust throughout the team. After this, I asked myself “Is there was a way to create amazing results WHILE doing it in a way that leads to shared ownership?” Only through exploring that question did I begin to understand the nuances between decisiveness and deliberation and how vital both are for teams to see how a decision was made. It was a question I chased for 10 years, and ultimately led to my first book on collaborative direction setting, *The Next How*.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

NM: What’s really interesting is that we teach a lot about strength — knowing enough, being decisive, appearing confident.

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Q&A with Nilofer Merchant

In an article Nilofer Merchant wrote for the Harvard Business Review she says, “The one thing leaders don’t do is to check out. Especially now, when we need leadership more than ever.”

This interview shows how Nilofer exudes collaboration, innovation and continual improvement as a leader.

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We teach leaders about being in charge but we don't teach them how to lead together — how to say “I don't know,” which allows us to step back, and others to contribute.

We teach leadership as if it's “the one” person in charge rather than teaching leadership that lets move further together.

I'm reminded of the African philosophy that you write about in your book, it was chapter 5 of *Your Best Just Got Better* — “If you want to go fast, go alone...but if you want to go far, go together.”

We're going have to learn how to lead together.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

NM: Start asking yourself what you need to start doing to be adaptive, fast and flexible. Today, research shows that even true “advantages” dissipate after 12 years in slow moving industries and 5 years in fast ones. We're not in the business of preserving what is, we're now in the business of routinely reinventing.

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

NM: To embrace new ideas, you have to have space in your heart and mind for something new to come in. I noticed one year when I was at TED (and about to deliver a talk), I wasn't listening very well. I was worried and anxious about my speech. I could tell the difference afterward. If we don't create space to hear new ideas, we don't have the opportunity to embrace new ideas. I regularly participate in 3-day retreats that help me clear my mind and have found I am a much better listener as a result.

Basically I let people populate my mental picture of their idea with facts, resulting in a much clearer vision of their point.

JW: *How would you define yourself in just one sentence?*

NM: Oh, hard question. Someone a while ago called me the “Jane Bond of innovation,” and it stuck.

I've always been good at solving problems that at first seem impossible or intractable. But the truth is simply that I'm willing to keep turning over the situation until I see something no one else has seen—and I let a lot of people inform that process by asking questions or creating a space where others can ask questions.

So, in just one sentence, I would say: I'm pretty good at leading togetherness.

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