

DARE Q & A with: Loveleen Kacker



Born in December 1954, Loveleen Kacker has a Masters in Political Science and a PhD in Social Anthropology. Starting at a time when there were fewer working women in India, Loveleen spent the first thirty years of her working life as a career civil servant, serving in various capacities in the Indian government. A large part of her career was spent in the social sector, in education, tribal development, and for women and child development. It is from here that her interest in the charitable development sector started, and she took voluntary retirement from the government to become the CEO of Tech Mahindra Foundation. The foundation is the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) wing of the Tech Mahindra IT outsourcing company. It works across eight cities in the areas of education, vocational training, and employment and disability. In addition to her work at the foundation, Loveleen is a published writer of fiction, with sixteen books to her credit, three of which are novels and the rest are books for children and young adults.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to cope with?

A: The most challenging period of my life was the more than three years during which I faced difficulties both at home and at work. In India, we say that karma determines what life dishes out to you, and how you deal with it becomes your karma, which will determine the way your future will unfold. I do not know whose karmic return it was, but both my parents were paralyzed and bedridden with severely debilitating illnesses that needed home-based nursing care. In this condition, my mother lasted over a year and my father less. With my only sibling working and living abroad for more than twenty years, it was left to me to care for them. Not only was this hugely taxing financially and emotionally, it was extremely difficult for me personally because I had a high-pressure, very demanding job and a boss with whom I did not see eye to eye. Two years of juggling between my own home, my parents' home, nurses, hospitals, and the demands of my job left me totally drained. I found myself dealing with headaches, elevated blood pressure, sleeplessness, panic attacks, and exhaustion. I ate too much or nothing—and gained weight either way. I missed out on a promotion, lost both my parents within a span of four months, and, the icing on the cake, became a victim of the typical Eastern philosophy wherein sons are valued more than daughters. When the will was read out, I was denied any share in the parental property because I was a female and would not be the one carrying on the family name.

To be discriminated against and denied my right because of my gender was a shattering experience. I thought this was something that happened to other people, to the poor and uneducated, and certainly not to (cont.)

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A: (*cont.*) an empowered woman like me. But it did happen. It was gender discrimination at its worst, and the whole experience left me devastated and demoralized.

Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to deal with it?

A: One is always afraid of a storm before it arrives. Once it's upon you, there is no choice but to live through it. So as soon as it was clear to me that the worst had happened, I had no choice but to chart the way ahead. Sitting in one corner and feeling sorry for myself has never been a choice for me. I gave myself the analogy of a patient whose coronary artery is blocked. If he does nothing about it he will die. The only choice he has is to create a by-pass, which, in this case, meant creating a new path and moving on.

Confronted with the unjustness of my parents' will, I was faced with one of the most difficult decisions of my life. Should I go to court and fight for my rights? That would have put me on a collision course with my sibling, drained me financially and emotionally, and would have forced the rest of the family to take sides. I knew for a fact that, despite laws that said otherwise, many in my country continue to believe that once a woman is married, she belongs to her husband's family and is not entitled to anything from her birth family. Let me clarify: in India, the law gives women all the rights, but prevailing societal norms give them nothing.

I chose not to fight, because the real issue was not money but the denial of rights. As I said, in spite of the laws women continued to be treated unfairly, therefore I had to support the women who were less fortunate than I. After all I was not the only woman in India who had been denied her rights. Every day women are discriminated against and treated as second-class citizens. So I decided to do something about it. I quit my government job and moved into the social sector to work for the poor and the less privileged in society.

One of the areas in which I work today is the rights of women and their empowerment. That Indian women are so often denied many fundamental rights—the right to life, to a childhood, to education, to nutrition, and even to basic health care—is often blamed on poverty. Yet even in poor homes, it is more likely that parents will use their limited resources first for the male child and only then for the girl—if anything is left over. It is also a fact that it is the rich in India who go in for prenatal ultrasound examinations to find (*cont.*)

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A: (*cont.*) out the sex of the child, often opting for abortion if the baby is a girl. Even today, the birth of a boy is celebrated while that of girl may be mourned.

I felt that I needed to fight for the cause of the poor and for the women, and to do that I moved to the Tech Mahindra Foundation, where I now work in the areas of education, vocational training and disability. It is my mission to ensure that at least 50 percent of our beneficiaries are women and girls.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: I wish I could say that I made one big mistake, learned from it, and never committed it again! The mistake I find myself making again and again is that I am opinionated, do not take contradiction very well, and I am not very understanding or tolerant of the weaknesses of others. This is a huge failing in me, and I have struggled to be kinder, more compassionate, and more understanding with people. Whether it's in the

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workplace or home, the struggle has always been between being right and being kind. In the long run, being kind is more important than being successful, but by the time one understands this simple truth, a great deal of damage may have been done. For me, this lesson has been a huge learning effort, and I daily remind myself to be more tolerant. Many of the difficulties I have faced in life have been due to this failing of mine.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: From the Indian perspective, I would tell her that the work environment is largely male dominated and that, to succeed, a woman has to work harder than the men, be more visible than they are, and fight the biases that go with being a “working woman.” These biases include perceptions that women do not work hard, that they need the “softer” jobs, that they cannot stay late or put in the kind of hours the men can, that they take more sick leave and childcare leave, and so on. I would also tell a young woman to be prepared for a sexist environment, to steel herself against it, and not be cowed by it, but to stand up for her rights. There is a glass ceiling, and although more and more women are now seen in high positions, they have had to fight and work a lot harder to attain them.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: The biggest confidence builders are, first, knowledge and, second, the awareness of the fact that (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) you are useful, that you contribute to the family, home, workplace, environment, and society.

Nothing reduces self-esteem more than the fear that you are redundant or somehow irrelevant.

No matter what I have done, whether it was the particular job or assignment I had or a book that I wrote, I have always spent a great deal of time learning all I could about it. Knowledge always gave me the edge and kept my confidence up. For example, after I quit my government job and took up a new job in the social sector, I spent a great deal of time reading about it, visiting less privileged areas, and volunteering to get firsthand knowledge about the lives of the people I served. I enrolled in two courses on corporate social responsibility to acquire an in-depth understanding of it. I also met with CSR heads of various companies to learn what they were doing. Only when I was sure I had learned all that I could did I start making changes in our office, setting performance targets, and so on. When discussions were held concerning our programs, I was on top of the situation, and I had the confidence to present a cogent and informed rationale for whatever I proposed.

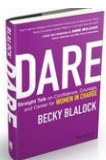
I would say that, no matter what area you work in, learn about it, experience it, and endeavor to improve your skills through training, special degrees and diplomas, and research. Learn, and you will never lack confidence.

Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: I am a type A, self-driven personality. What I fear most is retirement—no longer being useful or having enough to do. I fear getting up in the morning and thinking I have nothing to look forward to.

As I am getting older, I realize it's a young world out there. The young men and women today are better educated and better equipped with both the latest knowledge and a certain dynamism. They have the hunger and the drive to work long, efficient hours to fulfill goals. The challenge for the rest of us, therefore, is to remain useful and relevant.

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