

Young leaders: Key traits of big achievers under 40 years

Francisco D'Souza was 38 when he became the CEO and president of Cognizant in 2007. In five years since, he has led the company from \$1.4 billion to over \$6 billion in revenues. The board picked him young, but only on merit. "It was all about expertise and track record. If anything, my age was seen as an advantage," he recalls.

Only 43, D'Souza is already the leader of 130,000 employees. What does he do next, with at least 17 years ahead in his career? His answer is as simple as it is chilling - there is always an expectation to do more and faster. Welcome inside the mind of a leader who has already scaled the peak and still has plenty of age and drive left in him.

Across India Inc, more and more men and women are walking into the corner room before they turn 40. Sanket Akerkar, the India head of Microsoft, became MD at 37; Ajay Srinivasan, who heads the Aditya Birla group's financial services business, first became CEO at 34 and has carried the title for 14 years.

For them, getting to the top was just one half of their career challenge. Staying there, and meeting expectations, is the second and perhaps more difficult half.

ET spoke to both these men and more like them, headhunters and mentors, to identify key characteristic traits that propel people early to the very top...and help them do well there. We found five. Read on and find out if you have them.

They start well and seize the crucial moment

R Suresh, MD-India, Stanton Chase International, who successfully placed 8-10 CEOs under 40 in the last financial year, draws out three distinctive phases in their career. First is the formative - brilliant academics, IIT plus IIM or equivalent to start with.

Next, he says, comes the adolescence phase - this should have had at least 10 years of structured grooming with exposure to multiple disciplines. Lastly, there is the adult phase - there should have been at least a 5-year period where expertise in cross-functional management, risk taking, strategy and managing other leaders get engrained.

"The crucial part is those five years wherein the bright adolescence gets morphed into matured adult-capabilities. The leadership potential can be spotted five years before the selection," says Suresh.

That was the case for Microsoft's Akerkar. Conversations and preparation for a role in India started 4-5 years ago before he assumed charge in 2010 as India head. He was working for the company in the US back then. He had two stints with McKinsey before that, split by an MBA in 1998 from the Kellogg School of Management.

"Getting an experience to work in India was important for me. One, India is a growth market and from a personal point of view, I was keen on an India stint because I am of Indian descent," he says.

"It's about seizing opportunities and proving your mettle," says Cognizant's D'Souza.

"Early in my career, I was presented with an opportunity to work with a team to build Dun & Bradstreet's IT captive in India. I jumped at the opportunity, and that captive became Cognizant," he says.

CEOs MUST REMAIN FOCUSED They think like marathoners

A headhunter who did not wish to be named says some companies often question the wisdom of anointing a CEO at 34-35. "You burn out fast. How many peaks can you achieve in your career?" he asks. That's perhaps why Ajay Srinivasan, chief executive - financial services, Aditya Birla Group, sees his career as a marathon.

"We need to think of our careers in the way a marathoner thinks about running; not the way a sprinter does," he says. "There will be ups and downs; good days and bad. A sprinter will lose if he does not have a good start or stumbles on the way. The marathoner can deal with these and still come out ahead."

Srinivasan has been working for 24 years and he has been a CEO for more than half his working career. He became the CEO of Prudential ICICI AMC when he was 34. He spent a couple of years in this role before he was asked by Prudential to move to Hong Kong to head their fund management business across Asia.

By the age of 37, he had become a CEO of CEOs, as he went about building a regional fund management business for Prudential across Asia. As the business grew, he had the CEOs of 10 countries reporting to him. He then came back to India in 2007 to head the Aditya Birla Group's financial services businesses.

They keep it Humble

When he is searching for young CEOs, one trait K Sudarshan, Managing Partner-India, EMA Partners International, keenly looks for is humility. "Arrogance is a put-off when companies are searching for young leaders," he says. That's also a function of the volatile economy. "Attitude works well when the going is good, but in tough times, egotism and over-confidence are least desirable."