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Distilling the Wisdom of Gurus

An unknown Indian gets the world's foremost management thinkers to predict the future

The advent of a new millennium has spawned a bevy of crystal-ball gazers. For evidence, look closely at the number of titles that have hit the bookstalls recently. We picked up one such effort on our radar, which was unusual in its own right. Management 21 C is an ambitious effort to bring together the biggest names in the management, who collectively seek answers to the future of leadership, business processes and organizational structures. The project mastermind: Subir Chowdhury. Subir who?

Precisely what we asked too. But before we raise the veil off this is unknown Indian, a bit more about the book. A few weeks after it was published in October last year, Management 21C climb to the top of the business bestseller charts in Europe, displacing Bill Gates' Business@Speed Of Thought. What's more, www.amazon.co.uk has already featured it in its Best of 1999 list. Now to think that this project was almost still-born in the first place. Three years ago, the US-based Chowdhury says he was bitten by the management bug. A graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology and a post-graduate in Industrial Management from Michigan University, the 32-year-old Chowdhury says he had no moorings in management to speak of other than a passion for Peter Drucker's writings and a couple of years experience with Apple Computers and General Motors each. "For the next few months, I spent close to 18 hours a day reading every piece of influential management literature that I could lay my hands on," reveals Chowdhury in an interview with Businessworld.

It was during this that Chowdhury hit upon the idea to assemble some of the best minds to predict what the future of management would be. "I wanted to create a powerful network of minds who would delve into the complex issues facing corporations and individuals," says Chowdhury. Based on his research, he worked out a 25-page White Paper, which sketched out the key management challenges facing the 21st century. He then got in touch with management thinkers like C.K. Prahalad, Warren Bennis and Rosabeth Moss Kanter. "Their first question understandably was: who are you?" says Chowdhury. It took several days of persuasion to convince these management gurus that Chowdhury says he had a tough time dealing with Hamid Boucikhia, a professor of strategic management at Essec, Paris. For days, Chowdhury exchanged mail explaining his project to a seemingly unconvinced Hamid. "Today, when Hamid talks about personal power to his class, he keeps referring to my project," says Chowdhury.

During a recent visit to hometown Calcutta, Chowdhury was invited to speak to a professional body. "When I walked in, my hosts couldn't believe that I was so young," says Chowdhury. "Everyone in India seems to be preoccupied with a person's age. It's not the same in the US. The greatest thing about America is the brainpower seldom has little to do with how old you are."

Clearly, if there's one lesson to be drawn from Chowdhury's project, leadership in the 21st century will be centered on intellectual honesty and above all, an all-consuming passion. *



Extract

Innovation requires courage as well as imagination. Leaders must create cultures in which experiments, questions, and challenges to the prevailing model are not just for the courageous. There is ample evidence that innovation requires multiple experiments. One study of industrial innovation showed that it took 300 raw ideas, reflected in 300 formal proposals, winnowed down eventually to nine development projects, to produce commercial successes. Pfizer tests over 100 leads per year in order to find one promising for new drug development.

Because Innovation is hard to predict, may occur anywhere, and requires multiple experiments, world-class companies expect innovation all the time, everywhere. They generate activity at three levels of the pyramid:

■	At the peak, a few big bets about the future, and thus the biggest investments in product, technology or market innovation.
■	In the middle, a portfolio of promising but not-yet-proven experiments, early-stage new ventures, prototype, or other stand-alone projects.
■	At the base, a large number of operationally-embedded incremental innovations, continuous improvements, and early stage new ideas that boost immediate revenues, take out costs, increase speed, or create a client success-but even more, suggest a promising new direction for the future.

The pyramid is not static. Influence flows in many directions: top-down, bottom-up, or horizontally across the company.

From Rosabeth Moss Kanter's
Essay on Kaleidoscope Thinking