

Original Research Article

Character of youths: An Indian way to respond to VUCA challenges in business

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Abstract: Ostensibly, theories from the eastern and western worlds have emphasized different aspects of character, while in India, greater importance is attached to character building. We must understand that character building establishes surroundings for the human being with distinct values and virtues persisting inside him. This study attempts to explain the importance of the character merits of young managers in mitigating volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) challenges encountered in a business journey. This scholarly effort, with a framework of being reflective and expressive, attempts to capture empirical and qualitative data, hence presenting a model and explaining the connection between the character of young managers and VUCA. The authors initially mine on what character implies and how it could be plausibly examined. Character, as a manifestation, is qualitatively distinguished as a sum of one's bent of mind, embracing the brighter part of good qualities and consolidating a frame to capture the countenance of a genuine personality. We must understand that for organisation's growth and sustainability, it is vital for the human resources department to maintain a training methodology that is systematic and focused on character building.

Keywords: character; character merits; social orders; youth; VUCA; CVS model

Received: 2 November 2023; Accepted: 20 November 2023; Available online: 19 December 2023

1. Introduction

Social orders in nations are meant for more than mere survival. These are helpful in developing our understanding of humans as social beings. This in turn brings inner strengths for countering the challenges of starting and sustaining a variety of economic activities. The focus should be on the aptitude for dealing with the emerging moral degeneration created as a by-product of scientific and societal changes. Besides this, nations must gauge how to work as a fragment of an inexorably complex global community where demands and desires rule. The ethics and values of youth are constantly a matter of concern for care-taking nations. History provides facts on the apprehension that society reflects on the character of the novel generation, especially youth^[1]. However, these concerns are not sufficient to believe that the young generation would have the character indicative of uplifting society and individuals.

India is home to the world's largest youth population and will retain that dominance for the upcoming few decades. People aged below 35 years constitute 70% of the population. According to the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, the Indian population census of 2011 records the adolescent population figure at 550 million. The demographic dividend must be shielded from the ills prevailing in society. The creative energy

of youth could be tapped for positive development and nation-building by engaging and channeling their potential.

In Indian society, several factors disturb the youth population. About two and a half percent of the populace between 15 and 24 years of age exhibited vulnerability to mental morbidity like behavioural and mental disorders. As per the 2022 reports of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India, nearly 170,924 individuals ended their lives voluntarily by self-destruction. Among the persons aged 30 years and below, about 34% have committed suicide in India. According to the third objective of the mental health action plan put forward by the World Health Organisation^[2], by the year 2020, all countries are expected to reduce the suicide rate to 10%. In the year 2019, global health observatory data shows Indian suicidal rates at 12.69 per 100,000 populations^[3]. According to the fact sheet of the World Health Organisation^[4], among youth aged between 15 and 19 years, 50% suffer from one or another psychological syndrome by the age of 14, and one-third of the deaths caused are attributed to suicide. The concerned behaviours of youth like tobacco use, minimal physical activity, unprotected sex, or exposure to violence are affecting society. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) commissioned in India revealed that tobacco usage was a matter of concern among teens aged 15–19 (19%) and men aged 20–34 (45%). Alcohol consumption among teens aged 15–19 was about 9%.

These young individuals will manage the business in India, which will be full of VUCA situations. How will they mitigate VUCA challenges in the business? Will it be largely reliant on the youth's character merits? Thus, the progression of such merits is imperative to sustain and prosper in the business.

The character: An Indian way

Character is a composition interpreted with anticipated qualities possessed by human beings. These are anticipated characteristics—the habits, strengths, and traits that compose a compelling personality. These are garnered right from the prenatal stages, added and refined during the individual's life journey, and experiences are added as well.

Swami Vivekananda's character was considered the fundamental delineation for this paper. He remarked that, as contentment and misery pass before a person's soul, they leave diverse impressions, and the sum of these impressions is referred to as man's "character"^[5]. If you look at a man's character, which is actually just an amalgamation of tendencies—the total of his mental bent—you'll notice that sadness and contentment play equal roles in shaping his personality. Both good and evil play a role in shaping the character. At some point, suffering is a better educator than bliss. Vivekananda states that if the impressions that fall upon us are good, our character will become good, and vice versa. Character building is a sequence of consequences initiating conditions for the incumbent to manifest assorted principles and merits endured within the individual. To our understanding, each human being is born noble, but the surroundings in which the incumbent is nurtured may not endow innate wisdom. Character building and its progression eliminate undesirable character traits in a person. It steers towards a precise course, enabling one to guide himself and his surroundings. Such character-building is necessary for every activity, including business.

2. Research questions

The literature review on the subject does not answer the following two research questions:

- What does character imply for Indian youths, and how could it be plausibly examined? This question was examined through a study of all possible literature on the subject over a period of about one year.

- What character merits in youths are essential to mitigating the VUCA challenges faced by Indian business? This question has been addressed through the analysis of empirical data using the methodology of Focus Group and Delphi technique.

3. Data description

Character as a complex phenomenon was explored using structured secondary research with inductive reasoning. The parameters of character were discovered through deductive approaches, with concrete evidence from the existing theoretical framework. The attributes of character attributed to the western globe slightly vary as compared with the east. Scholarly philosophies such as Gandhi^[6] were the prime contributors to understanding the character in an Indian way. Character-based thoughts of these philosophers were more leaning towards religious ideologies. Religious preaching institutions like Ramakrishna Math, Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama, and Advaita Ashrama were among the places personally visited by one of the authors of this study. Books and notes gathered during the research journey helped to construct a list of universal character merits based on religion. Further, the research explored religious teachings and texts of Buddhism (Dhammapada), Christianity (Bible), Islam (Quran), Judaism (Tanakh), and Indian ethos like the Bhagavad Gita^[7] and Yoga Sutra^[8], to discover the reliability of these merits mentioned by the scholars. This list was subject to revision and refinement after considering relevant quotes. To synergize with western thoughts, the literature related to “character strengths” enclosed in the Values in Action (VIA) classification^[9]; “Big 5 personality traits”^[10] and the six pillars of character^[11] were considered. A more holistic approach came by reviewing the Japanese education system^[12] and UNESCO transversal competencies in educational policy and practice^[13]. Transversal competencies comprised the virtues and values of 10 nations, namely: India, Australia, the Republic of Korea, China (Shanghai), Mongolia, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. This holistic study resulted in the identification of 268 character traits. These traits were then subjected to filtration by removing duplicates and negative-oriented traits.

This study draws data from both primary and secondary sources. Longitudinal research was based on a literature review spread over a year to discover a set of 268 character traits. The identical ones were then filtered out to reproduce an assorted 191 character traits. Subsequently, discrimination based on the positivity of the traits resulted in the estimation of 56 character merits. With the assistance of a focus group of training professionals and academicians in HRD, the character traits were then summarised into 26 numbers. Finally, the synthesis of character variables in the questionnaire was recognised after the application of the Delphi technique. Advocates (10), psychologists (9), teachers (15), social workers (10), and religious preachers (9) were among the fifty-three professionals contacted. To obtain independent judgment, an enumerated assessment gauge with description and a Q-sort rating scale^[14] were employed. These professionals selected the ten-Character Merits from a filtered list of twenty-six.

4. Materials and methods

The application of management decision-making methodologies like Delphi technique and Focus Group, involving experts from eight different states in India, recognised a set of 10 attributes of human behaviour that were of top priority considering the Indian youth. They were paraphrased as “Character Merits” as these traits resemble only positive human character, and they have been used consistently to convey the same meaning. These merits are:

- Self-discipline
- Faith in yourself and supreme power

- Courage
- Purity of thought and action
- Morality
- Love for the nation
- Truthfulness
- Patience
- Service
- Dedication

These 10-character merits are examined to assess their utility in mitigating VUCA challenges in the Indian business world. These Character Merits are particularly associated with the antecedents of OCB (Organisational Citizenship Behaviour). The consequences uncover that the Character building via continuous training may facilitate OCB and enhance individuals' performance at the workplace^[15]. These 10-character merits are likely to impact the effectiveness of the Indian youths in managing the VUCA situations of the business.

The source of data is a literature review and focus group discussion of only one profession representing 8 Indian states, followed by information generated through the Delphi technique of 53 professionals representing 5 professions. These small numbers, not representing pan-India, are limitations of the data. Another limitation is related to the validation of the data because the study is exploratory in nature.

5. Results and discussions

The weak and vulnerable character among the youths creates doubt about their capabilities in running and sustaining businesses in difficult and uncertain times. Looking at VUCA challenges^[16] as witnessed in business, these doubts reflect its seriousness. In Indian society, several factors disturb the youth population. As mentioned earlier, quite a significant number of youths in India were found to be vulnerable to mental morbidity, like behavioural and mental disorders. In this framework, the character of youths should be strong enough to remain mentally healthy with a solid foundation of moral values. Swami Vivekananda's cataloguing of character was taken as the basic delineation for this scholarly study. He observed that a person's character is the sum of their inclinations. This could be the sum of the incumbent's mind's proclivity; despair and cheerfulness become the foundation for crafting the individual's character.

While every organisation strives to employ and retain individuals with towering moral character, with minute evidence of efforts on weighing character merits, there is hardly any effort towards character building in the organisation. By adopting a proven methodology, ten-character merits were identified with their pragmatic applicability in the framework of mitigating VUCA challenges in businesses by young budding managers.

The identified character merits can very well be seen in the behaviour of around 500 employees of Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai when it had a terrorist attack on Wednesday, 26 November 2008. During this uncertainty, employees of the hotel, including the housekeeping staff, transport facilitators, guards, and waiters, who knew fire exit routes and ways through the lodging, decided to remain in the building under attack until their clients, around 1200 in number, were safe. They were the very model of ethical, selfless behaviour exhibiting the Indian Character Merits enumerated above. Due to this character, there were only 37 casualties, mostly hotel employees living up to the Indian value "Attithi Devo Bhava" (Guests are God). This is a classic

instance of the critical importance of the character in facing VUCA situations. This occurrence put the entire hotel business, as well as the iconic Taj Mahal Hotel, at risk of being ruined. But the strong values and character of the employees saved this business despite a tough VUCA situation.

Another example of exemplary character merit is from the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. It was the final of the men's high jump. Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi was facing Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim in the final. Both athletes crossed the 2.37-metre mark, keeping par with each other. The Olympic authorities extended three more attempts to both, in a process to get a clear winner. Yet, both failed to cross their previous 2.37-metre performance. One last chance was given to both, but Tamberi withdrew on account of a serious leg injury. Now here is the catch: with no opponent, the second athlete, Barshim, was to be a clear winner, but it was here that he exhibited some deeper insights into possessing a tall character. He politely inquired from the Olympic officials if the gold could be shared amongst the two competing finalists. The response was only if Barshim withdrew from the final attempt, which he did without thinking twice. Barshim announced his withdrawal, and this became a historic moment with the Italian opponent Tamberi racing to embrace Barshim, screaming with inner joy. This was an exemplary example of what character merit is; it is all about sharing, love for sports, and the immense sacrifice one must make on a journey.

Now let us see what emerges in the business environment engulfed in VUCA. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity^[17-19]. Any business needs to check its comfort levels with each component of VUCA. Let us accept that it is there, here, and omnipresent.

Volatility: When situations change rapidly and in an unpredictable manner, they are considered volatile. Volatility is an essential component of a business. New information and dynamic data translate everything around us. The mantra is to create, innovate, assess, learn, and reiterate. This journey paves the way for shifting strategies, choosing new roadmaps, and evolving roles. Everything around us is quickly evolving. In this volatile world, we are expected to be prepared for the unforeseen, be ready for exciting new bends in the road, and not be shaken when the unavoidable curves are encountered. The company's journey and the industry it represents have a major impact on this variable. The landscape is constantly changing and dynamic by nature, thereby demanding a responsive mode of crafting and adjusting to the roadmap. Hence, it becomes necessary to appreciate and anticipate changes, discover approaches for being ready, stroll towards them, and transform them into opportunities.

Uncertainty: It is the nonexistence of certainty, a state of insufficient knowledge where it is impossible to express the existing state and a forthcoming outcome. Uncertainty is a state where the impact of a possible outcome cannot be assessed. The principal uncertainty for a business is its survival. The big question is whether the enterprise or the organisation in discussion will exist in the times to come. The risks associated with small firms, especially start-ups, are high and intertwined. Their founders and CEOs may be in a battle for survival, generating funds throughout their firm's life cycle. Performance is extremely dynamic, and uncertainties over it mark impediments at each stage. The old mind sets, and the new ones need to symphony, which in itself is a difficult proposition. The older ones bring in wisdom, while the new ones sprout with innovative ideas, ready for testing. With this pace in mind, the career opportunities are deluged. For instance, a top-performing manager may be inclined to lay hands with another team. On a similar note, a fresh inductee with a responsibility matrix may like to rise and hitch-hike on limitless opportunities. Uncertainty may evince in any direction as a matter of surprise, challenging each other constantly.

Complexity: The condition of a product or situation being difficult to understand or of a problem lacking simplicity. We must understand that developing a new product is a complex process. The platforms may be different, and the support is even more complex. For example, the mobile phones offered by different

manufacturers had embedded apps both within the product and on the websites that supported their utility. The same applies in an organisational framework that draws heavily from a legal framework as well. Here too, the complexity intertwines with the business processes in an organisational setting.

Ambiguity: Many times, most people in business are not new to the concept of ambiguity. It means that a situation has the quality of being open to more than one interpretation. In businesses, there is an on-purpose ambiguity with respect to the organisational design. This may be as a result of increasing the number of people and possessing a rigid role definition, followed by automation and some formalised processes. These may create situations of ambiguity.

5.1. A model for developing character merits among business managers

Let us have a perspective in an organisational setting. Any organization is made up of people. All organisations strive to employ and retain those who have demonstrated good moral character. However, to the best of our research and exploration, there is little or no evidence towards measuring and developing character merits amongst the employees. This is a missing parameter, and if the organisation truly values this proposition, then it must engage in evaluating its character merits. This will also enable us to find ways to develop and hone the required character merits. This will indeed benefit the ecosystem in its progression.

Thus, it is pertinent to discern on the subject, suggesting a methodology for character building in business organisations. In order to do so, organisations must craft robust systems that revolve around good practices that guide people's orientation. In an era of globalisation, virtues and culture have become mystified^[20]. Thus, for building one's character, there is a requirement for manifesting virtues within incumbents and, at the same time, eradicating unsuitability within them! As authors, we have identified and crafted certain procedural systems that may be essential for sustaining a business in a VUCA context.

Personal accounting: In a traditional belief system, we tend to endanger those noticeably committed youth who are honest and have the potential to make a difference. These are the ones who care for their work, unlike the crowd. We tend to curb them down as a set of being driven by presets rules and regulations^[21]. It is observed that several individuals possess a high degree of orientation toward their work ethics and profession, much beyond their current job requirements and the organisation they are employed with. Yet, self-discipline is the driving force and a potential character merit that displays one's own standard and guiding rules. As a matter of evidence, their character traits are not built over night, like Rome was not built in a day. It is an accumulation of journeys not driven by a set of laws and policies but grounded by the richer embodiment steered by behaviour exhibited and embedded from top to bottom. The traditional way of assessing people with quantitative performance scales needs to be replaced with an evaluation of the moral obligation and intrinsic inspiration of the individual. Thus, this personal accounting methodology centres around the commitment of the individual to the fundamental foundations. The mindfulness created through personal accounting would stimulate the job-creating crafting behaviour of the employees, promoting OCB^[22].

Vicarious learning: The key to sustainability is having faith in oneself, peers, and the organisation in which the incumbent is associated. This vicarious learning provides a platform for engaging in innovative practices that focus on solving problems and crafting a personal rapport, thereby creating a level playing field for accountability. What a metaphor that we should not carry work home but that it is advisable to bring co-workers home? Faith doesn't develop overnight or through engaging together in office hours. It is an agglomeration of values at the workplace with colleagues and insights into each one's struggles, passions, and goals that lead to the strengthening of faith. It demands cohesiveness and unstructured socialisation that is inclusive of the family, an extension of expressing togetherness. As a result, this level of satisfaction stimulates

the employees to reciprocate positive commitments^[23]. Humans are based on learning from live examples, following role models for their personal course correction, and believing that these positive roles are supposedly indispensable in crafting character^[24]. Self-introspection is critical, allowing employees to challenge their own assumptions and, as a course correction, re-assess and align their skills. In historical evidence of organisations where stability is higher, people in high order of hierarchy engage more with people as compared to those lower in the hierarchy. This may be an enabler in shaping the character and skills of the newer ones, and as a result, the personalised intervention may assist in organisational performance^[25]. For this, a robust system is needed that focuses on mentoring and coaching younger ones up the ladder.

Periodic discussion forums: There is historic evidence that the HR policies do reflect some standards, derived from rules and regulations around the individual's behaviour. Arrogance creeps in when discourse is absent. At the same time, morality, a key ingredient of character merit, does not have any written laws. A practice of constant deliberation on moral principles may imbibe good practices; for example, sexual harassment-related issues can be simply countered with empathy emanating from shared experiences. In this context, organisations can create half-hour open sessions that revolve around building values, idealism, and virtues, essential to character building. Storytelling and stressing moral values can be a spinner with positive outcomes by engaging employees, resulting in their empowerment^[26].

Residential camps: It is evident that when the energetic youth are extended with an opportunity to be engaged in constrictive bonding, such as camping, etc., it provides a flavour to flourish with togetherness^[27]. Participating in residential camps may lead to the creation of a positive outcome within youths, defined as generating hope, elevated independence, a higher degree of responsibility, a positive identity, engaged social norms, and a self-esteem^[28-31]. Interestingly, the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII) acknowledges that these residential camps lead to an augmentation of skills for innovativeness^[32]. Thus, active engagement in the program by the youths benefits mostly from a high degree of participation and retention^[33]. These residential camps with a focus on youth programming can be easily replicated in organisations, instilling love for the nation and purity of thought. It is a continuous process, embracing character-building at each step^[34]. Empirical data validates that people who have experienced residential camps are rated by cohorts as more truthful compared to those who did not participate in any such camps. Additionally, games in these residential camps aid in shunning egoism, a common conundrum in organisations^[35].

5.2. A model to study the character of young managers needed for mitigating VUCA challenges in business

The Centre for VUCA Studies (CVS) has tried to present a model based on character merits to mitigate VUCA challenges. As depicted in **Figure 1**, the identified 10-character merits have been applied to explore their utility in mitigating challenges in each of the VUCA elements, that is, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Self-discipline, dedication, faith in yourself, and supreme power are considered necessary character merits in young and budding managers to mitigate volatility in the business. In this connection, the example of the Taj Mahal Hotel is appropriate. Uncertainty in business can be faced with purity of thought and action, truthfulness, and service. In uncertain business conditions, behaviour with purpose is needed, and these character merits will facilitate such behaviour. At times, business looks complex, and one is not able to figure out the future course of action. Character merits like patience and love for nation (organisation) shall be supportive of exploring various alternatives necessary for mitigating the challenges of complexity in business. The morality, courage, and character merits will help in dealing with the ambiguity in the business. Risk-taking behaviour in business requires courage without losing moral ground.

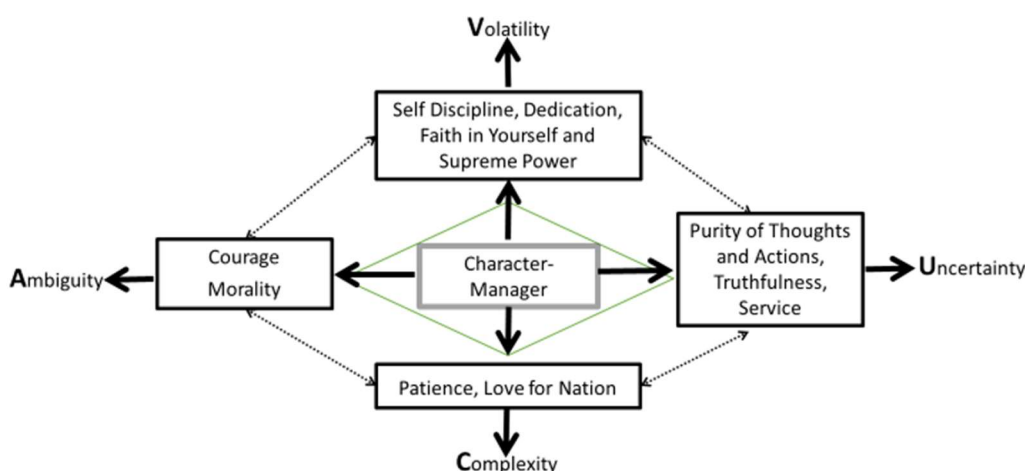


Figure 1. The CVS model of character and manager.

6. Conclusion

The educated youths are going to operate businesses in India and are expected to encounter VUCA situations. How will they mitigate VUCA challenges in the business? Will it be reliant on the character merits of young people? In Indian philosophy and traditions, a lot of importance is given to character development. The development of such merits is imperative to sustain and prosper in business. The challenging times in business require three Cs: courage, conviction, and character, where character is the foundation. Based on this understanding, a long list of character merits was drawn, and through a methodology, 10-character merits were finalized. A model of character merits to mitigate VUCA encounters in business has been proposed. This is an Indian way to respond to VUCA challenges by the young managers.

The organisations can attempt efforts to build the character of young managers by adopting the methodologies of personal accounting, vicarious learning, discussion forums, and residential campuses. The Centre for VUCA Studies (CVS) has tried to present a model of character merits to mitigate VUCA challenges. As depicted in the model, the identified 10-character merits have been applied to explore their utility in mitigating challenges in each of the VUCA elements, that is, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Self-discipline, dedication, faith in yourself, and supreme power are considered necessary character merits in young and budding managers to moderate volatility in the business. Uncertainty in business can be handled with transparency of thought and action, truthfulness, and service. Character qualities such as patience and love for the nation (organisation) will be essential in meeting the challenges of complexity in business. Morality and courage are very much needed to mitigate the challenge of ambiguity in businesses. Engaging employees by fostering values and virtues will help them overcome the maelstrom post the pandemic^[36]. The challenge is big, but with good intent, we can harness what makes a good character.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, AK, MJ, and AD; methodology, MJ; software, AD; validation, AK and MJ; formal analysis, MJ; investigation, AD; resources, AD; data curation, AK; writing—original draft preparation, MJ; writing—review and editing, AK; visualization, AD; supervision, AK; project administration, AD. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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