# Bringing the outsider in: leadership lessons worthy of a movie

## The hopeful message of an award-winning Spanish film starring IESE's Kandarp Mehta is more relevant than ever in today's divided world.

December 16, 2024

The challenges faced by a newly arrived immigrant trying to overcome small-town prejudices and establish a sense of belonging is a story as timely as today's headlines — as well as

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being the subject of a new film starring Kandarp Mehta, a senior lecturer of entrepreneurship at IESE who also moonlights as an actor.

In 2024 the Spanish movie, *L'àvia i el foraster*, won the Golden Tesela award for Best Picture at the International Film Festival of Alicante, Spain, with Mehta himself receiving the Silver Tesela for Best Actor.

The film's title translates as *Grandma and the foreigner*, and it refers to the unlikely friendship between Señora Teresa (played by Neus Agulló, who also won a Silver Tesela for Best Actress) and Samir (played by Mehta) who had been a tailor back in his home country of Pakistan but is now working as a grocer in a Valencian village in Spain. Teresa is the town seamstress, and to put his own tailoring expertise to use, Samir strikes a deal with her to use her sewing machine. However, the two choose to keep their collaboration a secret, since the townspeople are reluctant to have an immigrant make their garments.

The Valencian director, Sergi Miralles, says the script was partly inspired by a real story and his own experience of small-town life. The word *foraster* (in Valencian) or *forastero* (in Spanish) can be translated as "foreigner" but it also means "the stranger," "the outsider," "the one who doesn't belong." As Miralles explained in a radio interview, *foraster* doesn't necessarily mean the person comes from very far away. Locals use it colloquially to refer to someone from the neighboring village or the one who marries your daughter; it's the stereotypical "other" — not one of us.

This "everyday xenophobia," as Miralles calls it, is something we all do without thinking. Miralles elaborated in another interview: "It isn't about truly feeling distrust toward the Pakistani grocer or the Chinese shopkeeper; it's simply ignorance. It's something intrinsic to human nature: the fear of what's different."

"Politicians insist on telling us that things are bad when they're really not that bad. In a way, we're all outsiders at some point in our lives … I believe that if we each do a little bit — not even a lot, just a little — there doesn't have to be any problem at all."

This positive message — the ability of diverse groups of people from different worlds to overcome biases and collaborate on a common project — is what Miralles aspires to convey through his film. It is also a message that Mehta himself attempts to convey through the workshops on negotiation and creativity he leads for executives and management students at IESE. "Grappling with difficult topics may make us feel uncomfortable," says Mehta, "but feeling uncomfortable is not a bad thing if we are willing to push through the discomfort, find

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points of connection and commonality, and use the experience as an opportunity to learn and grow."

## Leadership lessons

Leading diverse teams, especially when one or more members may be perceived as outsiders, can present unique challenges.

"As some people say, racism is not the shark, it's the water," Mehta says. "The root of discrimination may be a vague fear. Fear of how the other person thinks, how they behave, of their intentions. Due to this, we reject the other who is not like us. When we reject others just because of the color of their skin, their nationality, their ethnicity, their last name, their faith, their gender, we miss out on a richer experience in life."

"A key message of the film is that when you attempt to reach out and have a conversation with the outsider, you may find something in common. This connection may help you in life and, at the same time, you may help make someone else's life more meaningful, too."

## Seeing potential

Recognizing each person's unique potential means getting to know people on a deeper level and identifying their potential in contributing to any project.

"In the film, Samir gets the opportunity to help, not because he is an immigrant, but because he is a person who has been trying to integrate *and* he comes across people who are willing to accept him and his work. In the end, they find common ground."

Mehta stresses it's essential for members of a team or organization to be able to come together and share common ground and values in order to function.

## Celebrating difference

Finding common ground doesn't mean sacrificing individuality, however. Mehta cites "a beautiful scene in the movie" when Teresa's grandson Enric (co-star Carles Francino) remarks on the traditional dress that Samir's daughter is planning to wear to the town festival, noting that the dress is very different. Samir responds that there's nothing wrong with being different because we always remain who we are; his daughter will always be his daughter,

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and his duty is to teach her about their family values and culture. Neither person is seeking to impose their style of living on the other. Instead, they want to work together, each in their own way, to do something good for the town.

“This is a great lesson for managers,” says Mehta. “When someone joins an organization, you shouldn’t have to sacrifice who you are or erase your identity. Instead, managers need to convey to their team members, ‘Come work with us and together we can find common ground and help each other.’”

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# The power of conversations

To conquer the fear of the unknown, Mehta recalls his IESE PhD research, which centered on the creative process in the motion picture industry. It highlighted the importance of having meaningful conversations with the actors involved, practicing attentive and empathic listening, to draw out the best performance.

Mehta remembers an impactful experience early in his career at IESE. “The new recruits were invited to an all-day session but it wasn’t to teach us what we had to do or tell us how many papers we were expected to publish. Instead, it was just a day of conversations.” This helped build strong connections that last to this day.

IESE Prof. Fede Sabria also strongly advised him to have lunch on campus every day. It may not seem like much but Mehta has come to appreciate the power of randomly running into colleagues from different departments, sparking interesting conversations naturally. “I’ve made so many new friends just by having lunch on campus. You also meet students and get to know how they’re feeling and what their anxieties are.”

Through these interactions, he gets to know colleagues not only as professionals but on a more personal level, learning about their families and what’s going on in their lives. “This fosters a greater sense of connection and well-being,” he says.

Business leaders should think of how they, too, might create more opportunities and spaces for interdepartmental collaboration, outside of formal control structures. As research on creativity shows, organizations with more chaotic, open environments — where people casually bump into each other while going about their daily business — tend to generate more ideas. Mehta’s own research reiterates that when people are given ample opportunities to mingle and interact, a greater variety and number of solutions to problems tend to emerge. Regardless of whether these result in the best solution, “you always have a bigger inventory of ideas,” he says.

# The value of face-to-face

As virtual work becomes more common, leaders need to make a bigger effort to ensure a sense of proximity. Research shows that when there is physical proximity, levels of oxytocin — the love hormone — rise, so you actually feel better talking to the other person. “Personal chemistry is an accurate description because a chemical reaction actually occurs in your

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body," says Mehta. "In the courses I teach on negotiation, we talk about this. When you meet face-to-face, it's likely you will have a better conversation and you're more likely to establish a relationship of trust."

Improvisation, an acting staple, is another feature of good conversations. "Being able to improvise is a vital skill," says Mehta, who has developed his own improv framework, the Triangle of Truth, based on three pillars: understanding your true self; understanding the other person; and understanding the context. The deeper you understand these three, he says, the more effectively you'll be able to improvise.

"The better you know the script, the better you can improvise when new information is thrown at you. A good improviser always takes that information, integrates it and creates something new."

## Building trust and connection

Whether in companies or on movie sets, people are at their creative best and their overall performance improves when team members truly know and get along well with each other. This builds trust, leading to an environment in which people can become emotionally

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vulnerable — a crucial element for great acting and great leadership.

As Mehta puts it: “Trust means you give someone the power to hurt you, knowing they will never do that. And that was my experience with this film.”

For him, the collaboration on the set was powerful. Despite being less experienced than some of his co-stars, he learned constantly through their honest feedback in a supportive environment that fueled his own performance. Genuine personal connection, it turns out, is just as vital for creating art as it is for building successful teams.

And it’s important to define what “success” means. As Mehta tells executives when launching a new business venture, “you don’t do it just to make millions, but rather because you often want to solve a problem.” Similarly, *L’àvia i el foraster* was written to share a personal story, not to be a blockbuster, yet it has become unexpectedly successful because that story resonates with so many people.

The same could be said of Mehta’s career journey, who set out to study creativity in business yet has ended up in the business of creativity. As the director has said: “We held a casting in Barcelona, and our casting director presented us with three or four profiles, but from the beginning, we fell in love with Kandarp (who’s actually Indian). For me, he’s the great discovery of this film. I wish he would act more. He’s my big bet for the Goya for Best New Actor.” Whether or not a new star is born, Mehta’s message of fostering honest human connection is already a hit.

MORE INFO: Kandarp Mehta’s book *Conflict, crisis and creativity: a study of role evolution in creative teams* (2011) studies 13 different motion picture shoots to understand the process of “role evolution” and the key stages of team creativity that result in more innovation. Read more about it here.

IESE’s Learning Innovation Unit uses improv to enhance the IESE learning experience. Successfully piloted and regularly offered to professors and staff, “Yes, and…” workshops are also being tested in Executive Education programs. Led by Dominique Hudson, an expert in theatrical improv, these workshops are designed to get colleagues to interact in fun and creative new ways, thereby enhancing collaboration.

READ ALSO: Lights, camera, collaboration: tips on creative teamwork from Indian cinema

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*This article, written by Larisa Tatge, is published in IESE Business School Insight magazine*

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*#169 (Jan.-April 2025)*.

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