

Vineet Nayar: A Life of Inverted Pyramids; A Biographical Research Paper on Leadership, Management Innovation and Philanthropy

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ABSTRACT

Vineet Nayar (b. 1962) is an Indian business leader, management author and philanthropist whose career spans four decades and three distinct arenas: entrepreneurial intrapreneurship at HCL's Comnet venture, the transformation of HCL Technologies as President (2005) and Chief Executive Officer (2007–2013), and large-scale education reform through the Sampark Foundation, which he co-founded with his wife Anupama Nayar in 2005. This paper reconstructs his life and work from his own writings; Harvard, Darden and HEC Paris teaching cases; peer-reviewed journal articles and academic book chapters; official records of bodies such as the National Stock Exchange of India and Thinkers50; and more than three dozen newspaper, magazine and interview sources published between 2006 and 2026.

The analysis finds a remarkably consistent through-line. Whether leading 85,000 software engineers or partnering with hundreds of thousands of rural schoolteachers, Nayar has argued that value is created at the interface between frontline people and those they serve, and that leaders exist to enable that “value zone” rather than to command it (Nayar, 2010a; Hill & Tedards, 2020). His “Employees First, Customers Second” (EFCS) philosophy reframed managerial accountability, drew praise from Fortune, BusinessWeek, Gary Hamel and Tom Peters, and became a Harvard Business School case (Hill et al., 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2006). It also carried HCL to growth through the 2008–09 recession, when many rivals shrank (Knowledge at Wharton, 2010). His later “Teachers First” model at Sampark extended the same logic to public education at a cost of roughly one US dollar per child per year, with state governments reporting learning gains of 35 to 40 per cent in participating schools (Hill & Tedards, 2020; Tribune News Service, 2024). The paper situates Nayar within servant-leadership, transformational-leadership, service-profit-chain and management-innovation scholarship, and closes with directions for future research.

KEYWORDS: Vineet Nayar; HCL Technologies; Employees First, Customers Second; management innovation; servant leadership; organizational transformation; Sampark Foundation; frugal innovation; Indian IT industry; philanthropy

1. INTRODUCTION

Few executives from the Indian information technology (IT) services industry have shaped global management conversation as directly as Vineet Nayar. When Fortune columnist David Kirkpatrick profiled HCL Technologies in April 2006, he described its approach as “the world’s most modern management” and argued that the future of management might well be Indian (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Four years later, Nayar’s account of that transformation, *Employees First, Customers Second: Turning Conventional Management Upside Down*, was published by Harvard Business Press and went on to sell more than 100,000 copies (Nayar, 2010a; Porchlight Book Company, n.d.). In 2011 he was ranked 40th on the Thinkers50 list of the world’s most influential management thinkers (Thinkers50, 2011).

Yet Nayar’s significance is not confined to one company or one book. His career offers an unusually complete arc: a young man who lost his father as a schoolboy, a management trainee who became an internal entrepreneur, a turnaround chief executive, a best-selling management thinker, and then a full-time social innovator who applied corporate change methods to India’s government primary schools (Business Standard, 2013; Hill & Tedards, 2020; Sen, 2013). In 2026 he returned to the management bookshelf with *Humans First, Machines Second*, extending his people-centred argument into the age of artificial intelligence (AI) (Nayar, 2026).

This paper asks three questions:

1. What formative experiences and career stages shaped Nayar’s leadership philosophy?
2. What did the Employees First, Customers Second (EFCS) transformation at HCL Technologies consist of, and how was it received by scholars, analysts and the press?
3. How has Nayar translated that philosophy into social impact through the Sampark Foundation, and what does his trajectory contribute to leadership scholarship?

The paper is deliberately appreciative in orientation, focusing on Nayar’s contributions and the lessons they hold for leaders, while remaining transparent about the nature of its evidence. Table 1 summarizes the milestones discussed.

Table 1
Chronology of Key Events in Vineet Nayar’s Life and Career

Year	Event	Source
1962	Born; grows up in Pantnagar, in present-day Uttarakhand	Sen (2013)
1985	Graduates from XLRI and joins HCL as a management trainee	Finextra (2010)
1992–1993	Incubates Comnet, pioneering remote infrastructure management	Schner (2013); Press Trust of India (2013)
2005	Becomes President of HCL Technologies; co-founds the Sampark Foundation	Hill et al. (2007); Nehru (2023)
2006	Fortune calls HCL’s approach “the world’s most modern management”	Kirkpatrick (2006)
2007	Appointed CEO; Harvard Business School publishes the case “HCL Technologies (A)”	Finextra (2010); Hill et al. (2007)
2008–2009	HCL grows through the global recession	Knowledge at Wharton (2010)
2010	Publishes <i>Employees First, Customers Second</i> ; named Vice Chairman	Nayar (2010a); Finextra (2010)
2011	Ranked 40th on the Thinkers50 list	Thinkers50 (2011)
2012	Named to Fortune’s first global “Executive Dream Team”	National Stock Exchange of India (2021)
2013	Hands over as CEO in January; leaves the HCL board in December to lead Sampark full time	Besseyre des Horts (n.d.); Business Standard (2013)
2015	Launches Sampark Smart Shala	Give.do (n.d.)
2016	Named to Forbes Asia’s Heroes of Philanthropy and Foreign Policy’s Global Thinkers	Koppisch (2016); Foreign Policy (2016)
2021	Nominated to the board of the National Stock Exchange of India	National Stock Exchange of India (2021)
2024	Uttarakhand and Haryana expand Sampark smart classrooms to thousands more schools	ANI (2024); Tribune News Service (2024)
2026	Publishes <i>Humans First, Machines Second</i>	Nayar (2026)

2. METHOD AND SOURCES

The study follows a qualitative, biographical-documentary design of the kind used in leadership historiography, in which a life is reconstructed from documents and the resulting narrative is interpreted against theory. Sources were gathered in September 2026 and grouped into six tiers:

Tier	Source type	Examples used in this paper
1	Nayar's own writings	<i>Employees First, Customers Second</i> (2010a); <i>Harvard Business Review</i> "How I Did It" article (2010b); Forbes essay (2010c); <i>Humans First, Machines Second</i> (2026)
2	Peer-reviewed and scholarly publications	Human Resource Management International Digest ("HCL Technologies Puts Employees," 2014); Management and Labour Studies (Patro, 2012); Cambridge University Press chapter (Davila, 2021); <i>Collective Genius</i> (Hill et al., 2014)
3	Academic teaching cases	Harvard Business School cases by Hill, Khanna and Stecker (2007) and Hill and Tedards (2020); HEC Paris case by Besseyre des Horts (n.d.); Darden case by Ramdas and Gajulapalli (2008)
4	Official records and analyst research	National Stock Exchange of India (2021); Thinkers50 (2011); Forrester (Hammond, 2011)
5	Newspaper and magazine reporting	Fortune (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Snyder, 2010), Forbes (Raghunathan, 2016; Moore, 2012), Business Standard (2013), Business Today (Sen, 2013), The Tribune (Tribune News Service, 2024), EducationWorld (Nehru, 2023), The Week (Anand, 2026)
6	Interviews	Knowledge at Wharton (2010), strategy+business (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010), Fast Company (Baldoni, 2010), CIO (Overby, 2010), LEADERS (Schner, 2013), NewsX (The Daily Guardian, 2020)

Where sources disagreed, for example on the year Comnet was founded or on HCL's revenue base in 2005, the discrepancy is reported rather than silently resolved. Claims that appear only in promotional speaker biographies were used sparingly and are attributed as such. All citations follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.).

3. EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION (1962–1985)

Vineet Nayar was born in 1962 and grew up in Pantnagar, a university town in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Uttarakhand (Sen, 2013; MBA Rendezvous, 2020). Pantnagar is home to G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, the institution around which much of his early life revolved. He attended the university's Campus School, and in 2014 he and Anupama Nayar returned to dedicate a new auditorium there, named after his mother (India Speakers Bureau, 2023; Nayar, n.d.-a).

His childhood was shaped by early loss and by a family's resilience. Nayar lost his father when he was in class nine, and the family was left with only ₹300 in the bank; his mother and his two brothers took turns supporting the household (Sen, 2013). Looking back, Nayar has described each later stage of his career as a personal risk undertaken knowingly, "a risk of personal reputation" (Sen, 2013). The experience of a family pulling together through hardship foreshadows two themes of his leadership: a deep respect for the people who carry an organization, and an instinct to give back to the community that sustained him.

His mother, Janak Nayar (1936–2017), was a schoolteacher with some 35 years in education, and she is repeatedly identified as the moral inspiration for his later philanthropy (Sampark Foundation, n.d.; Ganotra, 2026). Nayar has said that his plans for Sampark were shaped both by three decades in technology and by his small-town upbringing (Sen, 2013). That combination, a technologist's faith in scalable systems joined to a teacher's household view of education, recurs throughout his career. His attachment to his home region endures: announcing a 2024 expansion of Sampark's work in Uttarakhand, he said that "being from Uttarakhand, both Anupama and I feel incredibly fortunate to give back to our home state" (ANI, 2024).

Nayar earned a Bachelor of Technology in mechanical engineering from the College of Technology at G. B. Pant University, and then a postgraduate management degree from XLRI, Jamshedpur, graduating in 1985 (India Speakers Bureau, 2023; MBA Rendezvous, 2020; National Stock Exchange of India, 2021). XLRI, a Jesuit business school known for its strength in human resource management and business ethics, is a noteworthy formative setting for a leader whose signature idea would concern the relationship between managers and employees. Anupama Nayar, his future wife and Sampark co-founder, is also an alumna of G. B. Pant University and a trained special educator who later taught dyslexic children (Nehru, 2023; Sen, 2013).

4. EARLY CAREER AND THE COMNET VENTURE (1985–2005)

Nayar joined HCL in 1985 directly from the XLRI campus as a management trainee (Finextra, 2010; MBA Rendezvous, 2020). HCL, founded in 1976 by Shiv Nadar and colleagues, was then primarily a computer hardware company. Nayar would spend 28 years in the group, later remarking that few organizations allowed a person to rise from the entry level all the way to chief executive and vice-chairman (Business Standard, 2013). C. P. Gurnani, later chief executive of Tech Mahindra, who joined HCL a year after Nayar, remembered him as “a quintessentially great salesman” with “a flair for marketing” (Sen, 2013).

4.1 Founding Comnet

The decisive early chapter was Comnet, an internal start-up that Nayar created in the early 1990s. Most sources date its founding to 1993 (Finextra, 2010; Telecompaper, 2010), while Nayar himself recalled incubating it in 1992 (Schnier, 2013). Business Today recounts that when Shiv Nadar wanted HCL to enter telecommunications in the mid-1990s, most of the industry favoured pagers or GSM; Nayar instead evaluated whether satellite communications could compete on cost with conventional wireless telephony, and from that thinking built HCL Comnet into an infrastructure management company (Sen, 2013). Press reports credit Comnet with incubating what became known as the remote infrastructure management (RIM) industry, in which a provider monitors and manages a client’s IT infrastructure from offshore delivery centres (Press Trust of India, 2013). Comnet later grew into a business estimated at between \$1.3 billion and \$1.4 billion (Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014; Sen, 2013). “He can think disruptive,” Gurnani observed (Sen, 2013).

4.2 Lessons from a start-up

Comnet functioned as Nayar’s leadership laboratory. In a 2013 interview, he explained that the start-up had no revenue, profits or brand with which to attract talent. He therefore learned to recruit people by offering them hard problems and challenges rather than status or entitlements (Schnier, 2013). Several biographical profiles note that many ideas later formalized as EFCS were first developed and tested at Comnet (MBA Rendezvous, 2020; CSRBox, n.d.). This matters analytically: EFCS was not a slogan invented at the top of a large firm, but the scaled-up practice of an entrepreneur who had already seen it work in a small one.

4.3 The road to the presidency

By the mid-2000s Nayar was considering a move into social development, and in 2005 he and Anupama registered the Sampark Foundation (Nehru, 2023). According to Forbes, he stayed on at HCL at the founder’s request (Raghunathan, 2016), and one career profile records that Shiv Nadar first asked him to take charge of HCL Technologies in 2004, an offer Nayar declined before accepting a year later (MBA Rendezvous, 2020). He became President of HCL Technologies in 2005 (Finextra, 2010). Business Today later noted that “Nayar never wanted to be a CEO,” a point he himself makes in his book (Sen, 2013).

5. PRESIDENT AND CEO OF HCL TECHNOLOGIES (2005–2013)

5.1 The situation in 2005

Nayar inherited a company that looked healthy on paper but was strategically adrift. The Harvard Business School case written about this period describes an HCL enterprise with \$3.7 billion in revenue, a market capitalization of \$5.1 billion and 41,000 employees in 11 countries, yet one poorly prepared for a market shifting from hardware to software and services (Hill et al., 2007). HCL Technologies itself, the services arm Nayar led, is usually described as a roughly \$0.7 billion business at that time (Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014); Business Today put HCL Technologies’ revenue at \$764 million when Nayar became President (Sen, 2013). The two sets of figures refer to different corporate perimeters and should not be confused.

The core problem was relative decline. HCL had grown at around 30% a year from 2000 to 2005, but its Indian rivals were growing faster, so the firm was losing share and mindshare (Hammond, 2011; Nayar, 2010b). Nayar has written that Shiv Nadar and the board already sensed trouble and did not need persuading that change was necessary (Nayar, 2010b). One profile adds that HCL lost three significant clients in Nayar’s first week as president (MBA Rendezvous, 2020). In a strategy+business interview, Nayar recalled that the loss of a major contract taught him a decisive lesson: individual employees had done their best, but “your organization did not support them” (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010).

5.2 Leading the transformation

Nayar’s first move was diagnostic rather than directive. Through an exercise he called “Mirror Mirror,” he travelled widely to meet employees, customers and partners and invited people at every level to confront the company’s actual position (Nayar, 2010a; Soni, 2021). His book frames this as creating urgency by letting

employees see the truth of the present while also feeling the appeal of a possible future (Nayar, 2010a). A strategy+business profile of Linda Hill's research highlights a telling detail: to start the culture change, Nayar reached out not to experienced managers but to young frontline employees (Swetzkoff, 2015; see also Hill et al., 2014).

Nayar did not present himself as the source of every answer. "I didn't follow a planned approach," he told Fast Company; "we discovered, we experimented, and we implemented" (Baldoni, 2010). In his *Harvard Business Review* account, he describes the choice facing HCL through the image of an executive trapped on the ledge of a burning building, who must either wait for rescue or leap (Nayar, 2010b). He also explains how he won over each stakeholder group in turn: the founder and chairman, the board, senior executives, managers and finally employees. The article's summary notes, memorably, that the CEO danced for employees at a company event, a gesture Nayar later explained as a way of removing the mystique of the chief executive's office (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010; Nayar, 2010b).

5.3 Growth through the global financial crisis

Nayar was appointed CEO in 2007 and a whole-time director in 2008 (Finextra, 2010). The EFCS culture was tested almost immediately by the 2008–09 recession. Knowledge at Wharton reported that during the downturn HCL grew operating profit by 21% year on year, was ranked first for employee satisfaction in 2009, and improved customer satisfaction by 43%; as Nayar put it, "we ended up growing while our competition ended up going down" (Knowledge at Wharton, 2010). The company also made a bold acquisition, the Axon Group, in the middle of the recession, a move that signalled confidence to employees and customers alike (Knowledge at Wharton, 2010). Fortune reported that HCL's revenue grew by 23.5% in 2009, and Nayar attributed that resilience not to new products, geographies or services but to the employees-first concept itself (Snyder, 2010).

The HEC Paris case on this period concludes that the crisis became a "stress test" that HCL passed, with revenue rising 34% in 2007–08 and a further 17% in 2008–09, and that it reinforced the company's strategy of differentiating through customer experience delivered by empowered employees (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). Forrester likewise reported a sector-leading compound annual growth rate of about 25% through the 2008–2010 recession and a 35% rise in revenue per employee (Hammond, 2011).

On 1 November 2010 Nayar was additionally named Vice Chairman, a role he said he accepted on behalf of 70,000 "HCLites" (Finextra, 2010).

5.4 Succession and departure

On 17 January 2013 Nayar handed the CEO role to Anant Gupta, who had been elevated to chief operating officer the previous July; Nayar remained Vice Chairman and Joint Managing Director (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). In December 2013 he stepped down from the board to devote himself to the Sampark Foundation and became a senior advisor to HCL Technologies and HCL Corporation (Business Standard, 2013). Shiv Nadar marked the transition by calling Nayar a friend and colleague of more than two decades whose bold ideas had inspired others to dream big (Press Trust of India, 2013). Explaining his choice, Nayar said: "When I made up my mind that I want to bring about large-scale change in the social sector, I couldn't have done that as the CEO of a listed company" (Sen, 2013).

By the time he left, HCL Technologies had become a roughly \$4.7 billion company with more than 85,000 employees in 32 countries (Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014). Figures compiled for the HEC Paris case show that between June 2005 and June 2013 annual revenue rose by 514%, net income by 440% and revenue per employee by 56%, while the workforce more than doubled from 42,017 in June 2007 to 87,196 in September 2013 (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). Business Today reported that Nayar divested his HCL shares to fund Sampark (Sen, 2013).

6. THE EMPLOYEES FIRST, CUSTOMERS SECOND PHILOSOPHY

6.1 Core logic

EFCS rests on a short chain of reasoning. The purpose of an IT services firm is to create differentiated value for customers; that value is created where frontline employees meet customers, a space Nayar calls the "value zone"; therefore the firm's management and support functions should be organized to serve the people in that zone (Nayar, 2010a, 2010c). Nayar arrived at the idea after conversations with customers revealed that what they valued most in HCL, above its products and technologies, was its people (Nayar, 2010b). In his own words, "the business of managers and management should be to enthuse and encourage employees so that they can create a different shared value" (Moore, 2012).

The slogan was deliberately provocative. Nayar told Fortune that people were aghast the first time he said it (Kirkpatrick, 2006). The point, however, was never that customers matter less. “By employees first you can actually deliver your promise of customers first,” he explained (Moore, 2012). Customers are best served by employees who are trusted, informed and supported, and conventional hierarchies often obstruct exactly those employees. In launching the book, Nayar likened the shift to the spread of democratic principles, arguing that firms could perform better by running themselves more democratically (Marketwire, 2010). He summed up the new relationship simply: “Our management is accountable to employees as much as employees are to management” (Overby, 2010).

6.2 Four stages of transformation

Nayar’s book organizes the change into four overlapping stages (Nayar, 2010a):

1. **Mirror, mirror:** create urgency by showing everyone the truth about the present and the promise of the future.
2. **Trust through transparency:** push open communication and information-sharing further than is comfortable. Sharing detailed financial information meant, in Nayar’s words, that “there is now only one version of the truth” (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010).
3. **Inverting the pyramid:** make managers and enabling functions accountable to the employees in the value zone.
4. **Recasting the CEO’s role:** transfer ownership of change to employees by decentralizing decisions and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. “The role of the CEO is to enable people to excel, help them discover their own wisdom,” Nayar told Fast Company (Baldoni, 2010).

6.3 Signature practices

The philosophy was operationalized through concrete mechanisms, several of which were radical for a listed company in 2005–2008:

Practice	What it did	Principle served
Open 360-degree feedback	Managers, beginning with Nayar himself, posted their 360-degree results on the intranet for all employees to see; thousands of managers followed the CEO’s lead (Nayar, 2010a; Besseyre des Horts, n.d.)	Trust, reverse accountability
U&I forum	An online forum, launched in late 2006, where any employee could question the CEO, with answers visible company-wide (Nayar, 2010a; Besseyre des Horts, n.d.)	Transparency
Smart Service Desk	Employees raised tickets against support functions such as HR and finance; only the employee who raised a ticket could close it, and some 52,000 tickets a month were being raised years later (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.)	Inverted pyramid
Trust pay	Removed the variable, performance-linked portion of pay for many junior engineers and paid the full amount as fixed salary (Nayar, 2010a)	Trust
Directions meetings	Annual meetings in which the CEO shared strategy with employees and took questions; in 2012 more than 25,000 employees took part (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.)	Transparency, shared strategy
Employee First Councils	Passion-based employee communities that generated ideas and initiatives (Nayar, 2010a)	Ownership of change

The Harvard Business School case summarizes this first phase under the tagline “Employee First, Customer Second” (Hill et al., 2007). Forrester’s analysts characterized the result as radical transparency combined with greater autonomy for individual teams (Hammond, 2011). An HEC Paris teaching case, drawing on HCL’s own descriptions and a Frost & Sullivan study, independently documents these mechanisms (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). A Darden School case likewise describes EFCS as a strategy to invert the organizational structure and build transparency and accountability (Ramdas & Gajulapalli, 2008).

6.4 From EFCS to “ideapreneurship”

EFCS evolved after its launch. The HEC Paris case describes a second stage in which the philosophy moved from being management-driven and employee-embraced to employee-driven and management-embraced, captured in the term “ideapreneurship” (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). Its flagship was the Value Portal, through which employees proposed improvements directly to customers: by 2013 some 12,000 employees had generated more than 22,000 ideas for over 300 customers, of which more than 6,000 had been implemented, delivering

over \$300 million in value (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). A peer-reviewed case digest in *Human Resource Management International Digest* reported comparable figures, around 20,000 ideas from 12,000 employees and more than \$250 million of value, and concluded that putting employees first had brought HCL “rich rewards in terms of market-leading innovation and profitability” (“HCL Technologies Puts Employees,” 2014).

The durability of that vocabulary is notable. Years after Nayar’s departure, HCL still described its workforce as “Ideapreneurs” and attributed a 2020 Forbes World’s Best Employers ranking to its people-centric culture (Business Wire, 2021). A longitudinal academic study of HCL sustainability and annual reports from 2011 to 2019, published by Cambridge University Press, found that EFCS had matured into a model of innovation through value co-creation resting on three pillars: employee wellbeing, employee empowerment and innovation at the employee–customer interface (Davila, 2021).

7. PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES AND RECOGNITION

7.1 Business results

Measured by scale, the HCL Technologies transformation was among the most significant in the Indian IT sector of its era. Revenue rose from about \$0.7 billion in 2005 to about \$4.7 billion by 2013, while the workforce grew to more than 85,000 people across 32 countries (Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014). When Fortune first profiled Nayar in 2006, HCL had about 30,000 employees (Kirkpatrick, 2006). The HEC Paris case records that HCL’s revenue per employee in 2013 was about 21% above the industry average and 24% above the average of India’s three leading IT firms (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.). Forrester concluded that putting the customer second, though it sounded heretical, had worked (Hammond, 2011).

7.2 Recognition of the company and the leader

Year	Recognition	Source
2016	Forbes Asia “Heroes of Philanthropy” (with Anupama Nayar) and Foreign Policy “Global Thinkers”	Koppisch (2016); Foreign Policy (2016)
2013	Forbes “Heroes of Philanthropy” list	Nayar (n.d.-b)
2012	Fortune’s first global “Executive Dream Team”; HCL wins France’s Prix Olivier Lecerf management award	National Stock Exchange of India (2021); Besseyre des Horts (n.d.)
2011	Ranked 40th on the Thinkers50 list of influential management thinkers	Thinkers50 (2011)
2010	<i>Employees First, Customers Second</i> named among the year’s best business books by Amazon UK and Library Journal	“Vineet Nayar” (2026)
2009	HCL ranked first in employee satisfaction	Knowledge at Wharton (2010)
c. 2008–2009	HCL Technologies named among the world’s most influential companies by BusinessWeek; named Best Employer in India by Hewitt Associates	Nayar (2010b); Nayar (n.d.-a); Porchlight Book Company (n.d.)
2007	Harvard Business School case “HCL Technologies (A)” published; London Business School also adopted HCL as a teaching case	Hill et al. (2007); Boston University Questrom School of Business (2014)
2006	Fortune describes HCL’s approach as the world’s most modern management	Kirkpatrick (2006)

Eminent management thinkers also endorsed the work. C. K. Prahalad wrote the foreword to Nayar’s book and recommended it as a practical CEO narrative of transformation; Gary Hamel urged doubters of the inverted pyramid to read it; and Tom Peters remarked that he was on the verge of calling Nayar “the next Peter Drucker” (HCL Technologies, 2011; Nayar, n.d.-b). Linda Hill of Harvard Business School, who included Nayar’s HCL story in *Collective Genius*, her study of leaders who unleash innovation, told Business Today that Nayar has always been an innovative thinker who “can create an environment of large-scale change” (Hill et al., 2014; Sen, 2013; Swetsoff, 2015).

8. AUTHOR AND MANAGEMENT THINKER

8.1 *Employees First, Customers Second* (2010)

Published by Harvard Business Press in June 2010, the 208-page book is Nayar’s candid, first-person account of the HCL transformation, written less as theory than as a practitioner’s field report (Nayar, 2010a). Its publisher positioned it as the story of a CEO who defied the customer-first orthodoxy and made management answerable

to employees (Harvard Business Impact, n.d.). The book has sold more than 100,000 copies and appeared in Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and French editions (Porchlight Book Company, n.d.; ThriftBooks, n.d.). It was featured in the Washington Post's On Leadership book series (Washington Post, 2011) and reviewed in XLRI's scholarly journal *Management and Labour Studies* (Patro, 2012), and HCL's transformation is taught through cases at Harvard Business School, the Darden School, HEC Paris and London Business School (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.; Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014; Hill et al., 2007; Ramdas & Gajulapalli, 2008).

8.2 Articles, essays and interviews

Nayar's June 2010 *Harvard Business Review* article, "A Maverick CEO Explains How He Persuaded His Team to Leap into the Future," condensed the change-management story into a teaching piece and has since been cited in academic work on trust, organizational control and blue ocean strategy (Nayar, 2010b; ResearchGate, n.d.). He also wrote for *Forbes* on why he put employees ahead of customers (Nayar, 2010c), recorded an HBR video on inverting the management pyramid (Nayar, 2010d), and was among a small group of executives invited to blog regularly for *Harvard Business Review* (Nayar, n.d.-a).

Major business publications sought out his views. Knowledge at Wharton examined how putting employees first helped HCL win more business during the recession (Knowledge at Wharton, 2010); strategy+business featured him in its Thought Leader interview series (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010); and Fast Company, CIO and *Forbes* published extended conversations with him (Baldoni, 2010; Moore, 2012; Overby, 2010). A recurring theme is his refusal to rest on success: "You are one inch from being obsolete," he told CIO, even as HCL was growing strongly (Overby, 2010). He remains an active public commentator; in 2025, for example, a LinkedIn post in which he urged parents not to treat board-examination marks as a verdict on a child's future drew national press coverage (Education Post, 2025).

8.3 *Humans First, Machines Second* (2026)

In July 2026 Penguin Business published *Humans First, Machines Second: 30 Sparks to Reimagine Winning in the Age of AI* (Nayar, 2026; SapnaOnline, 2026). Its publisher describes it as thirty short "sparks" drawn from boardrooms, classrooms and crises (Penguin Random House India, 2026). The book's central claim is a direct descendant of EFCS: because AI is available to every competitor, people become the only durable source of differentiation, and firms that mistake AI adoption for transformation will lose to those that keep humans at the centre (SapnaOnline, 2026).

An early review in *The Week* welcomed the book as a refreshing, drama-free take on AI at work. The reviewer highlighted Nayar's argument that AI amplifies whatever culture an organization already has, improving healthy cultures and automating chaotic ones, and noted that the book relies on stories from HCL, Comnet and Sampark rather than abstract theory (Anand, 2026). The continuity is striking: sixteen years after arguing that employees should come before customers, Nayar argues that humans should come before machines.

9. THE SECOND ACT: SAMPARK FOUNDATION AND FRUGAL INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

9.1 Origins: "Enough"

The Sampark Foundation was registered in 2005 by Vineet and Anupama Nayar at the urging of his mother, Janak Nayar; *sampark* means "connection" in Hindi (Nehru, 2023; Ganotra, 2026). For its first eight years it was run largely by Anupama while Vineet led HCL (Sen, 2013). Nayar tells a vivid story about why he eventually left corporate life. Shortly after his book's success, he boasted to his mother about his achievements. She tore a sheet from a copy, wrote a single word on it, sealed it in an envelope and told him to read it later; the word was "Enough" (The Daily Guardian, 2020). Nayar draws a general principle from the episode: once a person has achieved financial security and professional recognition, the remaining third of life should be devoted to the family and country that made that success possible (The Daily Guardian, 2020).

9.2 From grant-making to a "disruptive design shop"

Nayar and his wife committed \$100 million of personal wealth to Sampark, more than half of what they owned, with the goal of transforming learning outcomes for 20 million children in rural government schools by 2025 (Hill & Tedards, 2020; Raghunathan, 2016). In its early years the foundation funded the projects of other non-profits and experimented in several fields, including water conservation with farmers in Tamil Nadu and drought-resistant cropping in Maharashtra (Sen, 2013). An impact study of its grant-making showed only marginal results, and the Nayars concluded that grants alone would never reach their target (Nehru, 2023; Hill & Tedards, 2020).

After leaving HCL, Nayar applied his change-leadership methods to the foundation itself. Harvard Business School's case on this period describes how he turned Sampark into a "disruptive design shop" built on frugal innovation and a "Teachers First" model of change, a deliberate echo of EFCS (Hill & Tedards, 2020). "The business of philanthropy is the business of change, and this is large-scale social change," he told Forbes (Raghunathan, 2016). Anupama Nayar, a trained special educator, designed much of the pedagogy (Nehru, 2023).

9.3 Sampark Smart Shala and its tools

The flagship programme, Sampark Smart Shala, launched in its current form in 2015 (Give.do, n.d.). Its kit contains sixteen components, including a rechargeable audio device voiced by a mascot called "Sampark Didi" that delivers 112 researched lessons in English and mathematics (Nehru, 2023). Low-cost teaching aids such as coloured rings, plastic blocks and geometric shapes are used to teach 23 basic mathematical concepts (Raghunathan, 2016). The design philosophy is explicitly frugal. "If it's not frugal, it'll not scale," Nayar explained (Raghunathan, 2016), and he has argued that handing iPads to children in places without electricity cannot work (Garnett, 2018). Foreign Policy captured the approach by honouring the Nayars for "unplugging technology so kids can learn" (Foreign Policy, 2016).

Sampark works at the invitation of state governments rather than around them. It distributes kits through state education departments, trains teachers, runs helplines, and tracks the monthly progress of millions of children through a mobile application, reporting quarterly to the states (Pal, 2017). During the COVID-19 school closures it launched a free learning app, Baithak, in April 2020 ("Sampark Foundation," 2026). Its newest tool, Sampark TV, equips classrooms with a 43-inch television and an Android set-top box preloaded with about 1,000 hours of offline content, including 500 lesson plans and gamified assessments for classes 1 to 8 (ANI, 2024).

9.4 Scale and impact

Year reported	Children reached	Teachers	Schools	Source
2026	More than 20 million	About 850,000	About 140,000 (Sampark TV)	Ganotra (2026); Nayar (n.d.-b)
2024	—	—	About 125,000 across eight states	Tribune News Service (2024)
2023	10.49 million	672,000	123,000	Nehru (2023)
2019	More than 7 million	200,000	90,000	Hill and Tedards (2020)
2018	7 million	—	76,000	Garnett (2018)
2016	3 million	100,000 in training	50,000	Raghunathan (2016)

The cost-effectiveness is as striking as the scale. Harvard's case reports that Sampark's 130 employees reached more than 7 million students at about \$1 per child per year, which the authors describe as unprecedented in the Indian education context (Hill & Tedards, 2020). The learning gains have been substantial. Forbes reported that in Uttarakhand the share of children able to do addition rose from 41% to 91%, subtraction from 33% to 89%, multiplication from 25% to 83% and division from 15% to 73% (Raghunathan, 2016). In a 2018 Forbes interview, Nayar cited independent assessment studies showing a 56% increase in learning outcomes under Sampark Smart Shala (Garnett, 2018). In Haryana, where more than 6,600 government primary schools already had Sampark smart classrooms and 1,000 more were added in 2024–25, the state's Additional Chief Secretary reported "a 35 to 40 per cent increase in learning outcomes" (Tribune News Service, 2024). In Uttarakhand, a 2023 pilot in Champawat district showed a 40% improvement, and the state and the foundation expanded Sampark TV to 4,337 schools serving 250,000 children, backed by a ₹75 crore commitment from the foundation (ANI, 2024).

By 2023 the foundation operated in eight states: Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, at no charge to states or pupils (Nehru, 2023). The endorsement of these programmes by state governments, which have adopted and expanded them, is itself strong evidence of their value.

The work brought Nayar a second wave of recognition. Forbes Asia named Vineet and Anupama Nayar to its 2016 Heroes of Philanthropy list, and Foreign Policy named them Global Thinkers the same year (Foreign Policy, 2016; Koppisch, 2016).

10. PUBLIC SERVICE, BOARDS AND ADVISORY ROLES

Alongside his executive and philanthropic work, Nayar has held a wide portfolio of institutional roles, which together show a leader trusted in business, multilateral and public-policy settings.

- **World Economic Forum.** He served as a Governor of the Information and Communication Technologies community, as a member of the Global Advisory Board of the Women Leaders and Gender Parity Programme, and as a Community Partner of the Forum of Young Global Leaders. He also co-chaired the 2011 Annual Meeting of the New Champions (India Speakers Bureau, 2023; Schnier, 2013). His author profile further describes him as a founding member of the WEF's Asia Gender Parity Group (Nayar, n.d.-a).
- **Global CEO and policy networks.** He was an active member of the G100 group of chief executives (MBA Rendezvous, 2020) and a member of the steering committee of the India Council for Sustainable Development (Nayar, n.d.-a).
- **Advisory work.** He has served as a senior advisor to ChrysCapital and the McKinsey Leadership Institute, mentored technology start-ups, and sat on the advisory board of the Millions Learning project led by former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard (CSRBox, n.d.; London Speaker Bureau, 2024).
- **Think tanks and juries.** He is described as a founding member of Brookings India and a juror for the Harvard Business Review McKinsey Awards (SHRM Speakers Bureau, n.d.).
- **Capital-markets governance.** The National Stock Exchange of India's 2021 annual general meeting notice proposed his appointment to its board as a shareholder director, subject to approval by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (National Stock Exchange of India, 2021); he joined the board in July 2021 ("Vineet Nayar," 2026).
- **Education policy.** He has been reported as a member of a Ministry of Education national focus group on educational technology in school education (Justapedia, 2022).

Nayar has also turned his public profile into a funding source. Under Sampark's "Speak-for-a-cause" programme, organizations that engage him as a speaker or consultant contribute to the foundation instead of paying a personal fee (Nayar, n.d.-b).

11. DISCUSSION: NAYAR'S LEADERSHIP THROUGH SCHOLARLY LENSES

Nayar's work is best understood not as a single management technique but as a portable philosophy that he has carried across very different organizations. Six established bodies of scholarship help explain why it has resonated.

11.1 Servant leadership and the inverted pyramid

Robert Greenleaf's concept of the servant-leader, one who leads by serving the growth and needs of others, anticipated the inverted pyramid by three decades (Greenleaf, 1977). Nayar's contribution was to make servant leadership auditable. Open 360-degree reviews, service tickets raised by employees against managers, and a public question forum converted an ethical ideal into measurable accountability (Nayar, 2010a). This is a rare example of servant leadership institutionalized in a large, publicly listed firm rather than practised by an individual.

11.2 Transformational leadership and leading change

The "Mirror Mirror" phase closely parallels the first step of John Kotter's change model, establishing a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996). Nayar's insistence on pairing the unflattering truth with the "romance" of a better future also reflects the inspirational-motivation dimension of Bass's transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Nayar, 2010a). His willingness to dance before employees and to publish his own feedback first reads, in these terms, as deliberate role-modelling (Kleiner & Sehgal, 2010; Nayar, 2010b).

11.3 The service-profit chain in knowledge work

EFCS offers a knowledge-industry version of the service-profit chain, which links employee satisfaction and capability to customer value, loyalty and growth (Heskett et al., 1994). In IT services, where the product is largely the expertise and judgment of engineers, that chain is unusually short. HCL's recession-era results, first place in employee satisfaction alongside a 43% improvement in customer satisfaction and continued profit growth, read almost as a field test of the model (Knowledge at Wharton, 2010; Snyder, 2010).

11.4 Management innovation

Gary Hamel has argued that innovations in how organizations are managed can create more durable advantage than product innovation (Hamel & Breen, 2007). Hamel's endorsement of Nayar's book, and Fortune's description of HCL's management as the world's most modern, position EFCS as an early and well-documented instance of management innovation originating in an emerging market (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Nayar, n.d.-b). The

Cambridge chapter by Davila (2021) places it explicitly among innovations through which emerging-market firms moved from imitators to leaders, and Hill and colleagues use it to illustrate how leaders cultivate “collective genius” (Hill et al., 2014).

11.5 Value co-creation

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argued that value is increasingly co-created in interactions between firms and customers. Nayar’s “value zone” names the organizational location where that co-creation happens, and it is fitting that Prahalad wrote the foreword to *Employees First, Customers Second* (HCL Technologies, 2011). Longitudinal analysis of HCL reports confirms that co-creation at the employee–customer interface became one of the model’s three pillars (Davila, 2021), and the Value Portal turned it into a working system that generated thousands of implemented ideas (“HCL Technologies Puts Employees,” 2014).

11.6 Frugal innovation and the transfer to the social sector

At Sampark, Nayar replaced “employees” with “teachers” and “customers” with “children,” and the logic held. The “Teachers First” model places the frontline educator at the centre and redesigns the system to support that person (Hill & Tedards, 2020). The foundation’s low-cost, offline-first tools fit the frugal-innovation paradigm of doing more with less for many (Radjou et al., 2012). Its choice to scale through state governments, rather than build a parallel system, reflects an understanding that reach in public education comes from strengthening existing institutions (Pal, 2017), and its adoption by state education departments is a powerful signal of its credibility (ANI, 2024; Tribune News Service, 2024).

11.7 Synthesis

Taken together, these lenses suggest that Nayar’s enduring contribution is a transferable design principle: identify where value is really created, place the people who create it at the centre, and make everyone else accountable for enabling them. The principle has now been applied to a multinational IT firm, a national education programme and, in his 2026 book, to the relationship between people and AI (Nayar, 2026). Few leaders have tested one idea across such different domains, and fewer still have seen it succeed in each.

12. SCOPE OF THE EVIDENCE AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Nayar’s influence on management thought is extensively documented, and this paper has drawn on peer-reviewed publications, teaching cases, official records and independent journalism to trace it. As with any biographical study of a living leader, the evidence also points to fruitful directions for further research.

1. **Complementing first-person accounts.** The richest descriptions of the HCL transformation come from Nayar’s own book, articles and interviews (Nayar, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), supported by teaching cases written with company access (Besseyre des Horts, n.d.; Hill et al., 2007). Interviews with former HCL employees, customers and competitors would add valuable further perspectives.
2. **Isolating the effect of EFCS.** HCL’s growth from 2005 to 2013 coincided with strong global demand for Indian IT services, strategic acquisitions, and the contributions of many talented executives. Firm-level comparative studies could estimate how much of the performance advantage EFCS-style practices explain, a question of wide interest to managers.
3. **Reconciling figures across sources.** Sources differ on some details, such as Comnet’s founding year (1992 or 1993) and final scale (\$1.3 billion or \$1.4 billion), the Sampark Foundation’s founding year (2004 in *Business Today*, 2005 elsewhere), and HCL’s 2005 revenue base, which varies with the corporate perimeter being described (Hill et al., 2007; Schnier, 2013; Sen, 2013; *Telecompaper*, 2010). A few recognitions, such as the Forbes 2013 listing, were confirmed here only through biographical sources.
4. **Independent evaluation of Sampark.** Sampark’s learning gains have been reported by the foundation, by Forbes and by state education officials (ANI, 2024; Raghunathan, 2016; Tribune News Service, 2024). A randomized or quasi-experimental evaluation published in a peer-reviewed journal would give the model the rigorous evidence base that could help other countries adopt it.

These directions do not diminish Nayar’s achievements; rather, they reflect how much his ideas have to offer scholars of leadership, organizational change and education reform.

13. CONCLUSION

Vineet Nayar’s life reads as a sustained experiment with a single conviction: organizations flourish when those who create value are trusted, informed and served by those who lead them. The conviction took shape in a teacher’s household in Pantnagar, where a family that had lost its father pulled together to survive. It was tested in the start-up conditions of Comnet and scaled across more than 85,000 people at HCL Technologies, where it

helped turn a lagging pioneer into one of the fastest-growing firms in its industry and carried it through a global recession (Boston University Questrom School of Business, 2014; Hill et al., 2007; Knowledge at Wharton, 2010; Sen, 2013).

His greatest originality may lie less in any single practice than in his willingness to make leaders accountable in public. By posting his own feedback, answering employees' questions in the open and inviting the frontline to rate managers, he gave the abstract ideal of servant leadership an operational form that business schools on several continents continue to teach (Nayar, 2010a; Hill et al., 2007).

Perhaps most tellingly, Nayar did not stop at corporate success. Prompted by his mother's one-word challenge, he committed more than half of his wealth, and his time and methods, to India's government primary schools, where Sampark now reports reaching more than 20 million children and where state governments have documented striking gains in learning (Raghunathan, 2016; The Daily Guardian, 2020; Ganotra, 2026; Tribune News Service, 2024). With *Humans First, Machines Second*, he has extended the same humane argument into the age of AI (Nayar, 2026). For scholars and practitioners alike, Nayar offers a rare case of a leader whose philosophy has proved portable from the boardroom to the classroom, and whose career suggests that the most modern management may, in the end, be the most human.

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