I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

George Bernard Shaw

Vineet Nayar (2010) was convinced that HCL Technologies, an information technology (IT) services provider based in Delhi, had to change if it was to meet the demands of customers for long-term partners, not just to hire discrete IT services. HCL did change. From 2005 to 2009, and despite the financial crisis of 2008, it nearly tripled its annual revenue, doubled its market capitalization, and was acclaimed as a best employer in India. Perhaps most significantly, it had developed an Employees First, Customers Second (EFCS) culture.

Nayar had the insight that he could not just transform his company single-handedly. He could not just take the “leap” into a new organization culture by himself; he had to help everyone take the “leap.” For people to work for change, they had to be convinced themselves that the present ways of operating were inadequate and that there was a clearly superior, viable alternative.
But how can thousands of employees become convinced that change is needed and possible? Nayar realized that giving charismatic speeches, even if he could, was insufficient; active participation was necessary. He met senior managers in small groups and employees in large meetings to challenge them to face the reality of HCL’s current position. These gatherings as well as meetings with customers helped to develop the alternative where the emphasis would be on customers partnering with HCL employees to provide IT solutions, which grew into the EFCS culture. Later these gatherings came to be called Mirror Mirror and were relied upon to reflect on HCL and plan for change.

In 2005, Nayar invited 100 senior managers for three days to form a strategy to define and implement the EFCS culture. Rather than talk and persuade, Nayar encouraged discussion where managers voiced their ideas and hopes but also their concerns, their “Yes, buts…” Some managers feared that HCL would fail to win global customers while losing its local base; other managers raised questions about specific strategies; still others wanted to charge ahead quickly. Three days of expressing their views fully, listening to each other, and refining their strategies helped to build a solid consensus.

Employees also needed to appreciate the need for change and to understand the EFCS culture. Nayar held company-wide meetings called Directions that, though they might include 4,000 employees, stimulated discussion and thinking. To set an open atmosphere, Nayar began by dancing around the room to Bollywood music, asking individual employees to dance with him. He reasoned that employees would then see him as an open-minded person, though not a particularly good dancer, and be willing to voice their concerns. Indeed, two hours of animated discussion typically followed his opening remarks.

Small-scale catalysts complemented discussions on culture. An on-line system facilitated employees making suggestions and lodging complaints; staff recorded whether their manager’s response was satisfactory. This program put managers in the service of front-line employees, making the EFCS culture concrete.