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# [Leadership tips from Silkyara tunnel rescue](#)

Hindustan Times

December 13, 2023 Wednesday

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## **Body**

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India, Dec. 13 -- As the 41 workers who were trapped in the [Silkyara Tunnel](#) in Uttarakhand came out alive after 17 days it was difficult to say whose joy was greater: The trapped workers, their families, the nation that had watched and prayed each day, or the [rescue](#) teams that had been working day and night.

There is much for all leaders to learn while managing highly visible crises. [Leadership](#) was shown by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he publicly claimed that no efforts or expenses would be spared to [rescue](#) the workers. Pushkar Singh Dhami, the Uttarakhand chief minister, took it upon himself to prioritise the extraction of the workers. While questions were being raised about the root cause of such an accident, the clear focus of the top [leadership](#) of the nation helped the entire team to stay focused on saving the lives of the workers.

On November 13, 2023, a day after the incident, it was thought the workers could be [rescued](#) in a day. As the facts were collected, it became clear the problem was complex and needed greater engagement and required to be broken down into solvable parts. The first emergent problem was to send food and water to the workers to keep them alive. The second problem was to keep experimenting with different ways of [rescuing](#) the workers. By the 10th day, food and water were reaching the workers.

A multi-party team from the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), the Indian Army, Border Road Organisations, police, and local authorities was put in place to assist the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd. (NHIDCL) to unblock the [tunnel](#). Lieutenant General (retired) Syed Ata Hasnain, a member of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) team, played a key role in managing operations. Experts from various fields, including engineers, geologists, and medical personnel, also joined the operation. A senior IAS officer, Neeraj Khairwal, was in charge of managing the operations and keeping the information flowing during the operations.

Experimentation and multiple methods were adopted, with five methods being tried simultaneously. No early commitment was made to any one course of action. Guidance was sought from the personnel involved in the Thailand cave tragedy and the Norwegian Geotechnical Institute (NGI). Anyone who offered help was welcomed. For example, Chris Cooper, a micro tunnelling expert and Arnold Dix, president of the International Tunnelling and Underground Space Association, analysed, advised, and supervised the horizontal drilling process.

The families of the workers were allowed to speak to those trapped inside, which possibly helped in boosting the workers' morale. The trapped workers displayed [leadership](#) as they remained optimistic and told their contacts not to worry. The workers trapped inside were young and resilient and did not panic, remained a team, exercised, and boosted each other's morale.

## Leadership tips from Silkyara tunnel rescue

It was heartening to see that the workers celebrated the arrival of Feroz Qureshi, a 34-year-old rat-hole miner, and gave him almonds to eat. The workers not only took care of themselves but also kept each other's spirits high, adding to the optimism of the **rescue** workers. The transparency displayed in communicating the actual problem helped cut down on media speculation. It also helped experts to chip in where they could.

On the 15th day, when the auger drilling machine broke down, rat-hole mining techniques were used. The **rescue** team used the most appropriate technology to execute the plan rather than be bothered about the fact that the technique had been banned. Detailed planning on how the workers would be taken care of when **rescued** showed the attention to detail in the **rescue** operation. This is another lesson for leaders.

Extraordinary calm and level-headedness would have been required to make decisions to carry out the **rescue** with people who do not typically work together. The ability to understand the problem and then look at possible methods of solving the problem with all team members is an effective demonstration of **leadership** by all involved, irrespective of authority.

Neharika Vohra is professor and chairperson, Ashank Desai Centre for **Leadership** and Organisational Development, IIM Ahmedabad. The views expressed are personal

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