Leaders Who Are Born Women

It’s a good time for working women in India, where they have become trailblazers in every industry. But creating diversity at the top will require a coordinated effort from society, employers, and policy makers.
About the Study

This report draws from A.T. Kearney’s 2017 study, *Gender Diversity in India’s Workforce*, and is based on primary and secondary research. For primary research, we surveyed 150 women about the challenges they face at work and the potential solutions to the issues. Participants were working women at various stages of life who held junior, middle management, and senior positions across a cross-section of industries. We also conducted several in-depth interviews with successful Indian women to understand their professional journey and to identify the patterns that set them apart. For secondary research, we examined women-friendly policies adopted by a variety of organizations and researched policies and legislations that other countries have introduced to help working women.

About A.T. Kearney

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Foreword

Organizations all over the world have understood the importance of gender diversity. In addition to having access to a wider talent pool, varied opinions, and ability to better meet the different needs of the customer, gender diverse workplaces also make core financial sense. Despite companies acknowledging the importance of gender diversity, women at senior leadership positions are a small minority, especially in India.

*Leaders Who Are Born Women* is A.T. Kearney’s attempt to document the progress in women’s participation in the Indian workforce and highlight the challenges that women face in their journey toward the pinnacle of their profession. In addition, it also captures the stories of several successful Indian women who have overcome these challenges, in their own unique way.

The study aims to improve awareness of the difficulties that women face at various points in their career and start a discussion on how the various stakeholders—women themselves, their families, employers, and the government—can come together to effect real gender diversity.
Executive Summary

Indian women have made great strides in their careers across a multitude of sectors. A growing number have made their mark as CXOs at several of the country’s corporate enterprises. Over the past decade, they have contributed to iconic space missions, achieved sports glory in the Commonwealth Games and in the Olympics, become entrepreneurs, and shaped social and economic policies.

Although these trends are encouraging, women make up only a quarter of the country’s workforce—and their participation shrinks as one moves toward senior management positions, with less than 5 percent of such positions held by women.

Our 2017 study, *Gender Diversity in India’s Workforce*, reveals that women do not lack the skills needed to take on top roles. Compared to men, however, they face challenges that prevent them from realizing their full potential. India’s working women are diverging from the roles society expects them to play, juggling family demands, confronting conscious and unconscious bias in the workplace, and experiencing a lack of meaningful and interesting opportunities, especially for those who want to come back to the workforce after taking a career break.

To understand the issues women face and the ways they can overcome them, four dimensions have been identified: self-belief, support from family and friends, organization culture, and government support. Here, we tell the story of how women have overcome professional obstacles through determination and a strong support system. We discuss leading organizations’ best practices along with women-friendly regulations from other countries from which workplaces in India and policy makers can learn. All stakeholders—working women, employers, and policy makers—need to come together to create a comprehensive and practical plan to help women progress in the workplace.
A Case for Change

“I look forward to the day when half our homes are run by men and half our companies and institutions are run by women. When that happens, it won’t just mean happier women and families; it will mean more successful businesses and better lives for us all.”

—Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook

We have come a long way

Not long ago, the working Indian woman was a rare species. In many parts of the country, it was considered unacceptable for a woman to step out of the house for work, and the idea of a woman having a career was a foreign concept. Even in societies where women could pursue a career, few domains were considered respectable, so most women worked as teachers, nurses, or secretaries. There was also a bias that women cannot hold intellectually challenging jobs.

Today, Indian society has evolved considerably. Working women are not just tolerated, but celebrated and encouraged, and they have penetrated every field. More than 34 percent of all employees in the IT sector are women, and they are doing particularly well in fields that were previously considered a male stronghold.¹ For example, 12 percent of India’s pilots are women, which is well above the 3 percent global average.² Similarly, 51 percent of all students joining medical colleges are women.³ Today, women lead many of India’s top financial institutions, are some of the most valued scientists contributing to the country’s success in its space programs, and are making waves in sports and entertainment. As a crowning glory, in 2007, Ms. Pratibha Patil became India’s first woman president—the head of state and the commander-in-chief of the Indian Armed Forces.

Miles to go before we sleep

Although women have made significant progress, there is still a long way to go.

Workforce participation remains a major cause for concern with women making up only 24 percent of the total Indian workforce—much lower than the 40 percent global average.

While it is not surprising that workplaces in developed nations such as Australia, Canada, and Sweden have a healthy representation of women at about 47 percent, it comes as a shock that

¹ “Making diversity work – Key trends and practices in the Indian IT-BPM industry,” NASSCOM and PwC, March 2016
² Directorate General of Civil Aviation report, November 2014
³ “More Women Study Medicine, but Few Practice,” Times of India, January 2016
India also falls behind developing countries such as Uganda, Ukraine, Papua New Guinea, and Nepal, which have close to equal numbers of working men and women.\(^4\)

The problem starts early—with education. The literacy rate among Indian women is only 51 percent, and half of all girls enrolled in school drop out by class 10.\(^5\) This lack of education has a direct impact on the kind of jobs they are qualified for. Women in India are largely employed in the informal, semiskilled, or unskilled sectors such as domestic work, where incomes are low and erratic and have limited or no job security. Of the total population of working women, only 17 percent are employed in the service sector (see figure 1).

Female participation in the workforce starts small. Only about 27 percent of women over the age of 15 have jobs, and the proportion tapers down as seniority increases. There is a serious dearth of women in top management with less than 5 percent of senior roles held by women. This absence of women role models along with work–family balance and expectations of mobility are the top three challenges that women say stop them from reaching leadership positions (see figure 2 on page 5).

It is not enough to get more women to enter the workforce; it is equally important to retain them and help them take on the mantle of leadership.

**The bottom line**

While greater participation of women bodes well for the economy, it is just as beneficial to employers. Hiring women gives firms access to a wider talent pool, and having more women


\(^5\) “Quick Take: Women in the Workforce: India,” Catalyst, 2015
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in senior roles has been observed to have a positive effect on a company’s financial performance (see figure 3).

In addition, workplace diversity leads to a multitude of ideas, helping firms reinvent themselves and remain relevant in a changing world. The unique perspectives that women bring to the table improve decision-making. And with more products targeted at women consumers, forward-thinking firms aim to represent the markets they are trying to capture.

In a nutshell, having more working women will prove beneficial to India’s economy, to employer organizations, and most importantly, to women.

Figure 2
Women have an array of hurdles to clear to reach the top

In your opinion, what are the key challenges women face in achieving leadership positions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% commitment versus work-life balance</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of mobility</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of female role models</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of family or social support</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited network or sponsorship</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills and qualification gap</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 percent because respondents could select multiple answers.
Source: A.T. Kearney 2017 Gender Diversity in India’s Workforce study

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Figure 3
Firms with women as top executives tend to see more growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>No woman on the board</th>
<th>One or more women on the board</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return on equity</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net debt to equity</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price-to-book value</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net income growth</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Study conducted over six years.
Sources: Gender Diversity and Corporate Performance, Credit Suisse, 2012; A.T. Kearney
“Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you’ll be criticized anyway. You’ll be damned if you do, and damned if you don’t!”

—Eleanor Roosevelt, former first lady of the United States

Ambition, skills, work ethic, and individual priorities all contribute to one’s career choices and professional success. Everyone—man or woman—has a unique career path defined by the opportunities and challenges one faces on the journey.

For women, several common themes contribute to or deter from their professional success. For centuries, they have been dragged down by social stigma. Now is the time to acknowledge and BEAT down the barriers to success (see figure 4 on page 7). Four dimensions can help women succeed.

**Self-belief: “I am; I will”**

“I’m a feminist. I’ve been female for a long time now. I’d be stupid not to be on my own side.”

—Maya Angelou, American poet and civil rights activist

Our study makes clear that firms recognize skills are gender agnostic: women do not in any way lack the skills needed to succeed in leadership positions. They are as talented, hardworking, and motivated as men. What sets successful women apart is their belief in themselves and their abilities. Although there are numerous stereotypes about women leaders, it is important not to buy into these myths, which only serves to give them more strength. The barriers come not only from external sources but also from women themselves.

**Unconscious behavior of women**

Women are natural multitaskers, seamlessly managing work, home, and everything in between. Anecdotal evidence and research both show that women are better multitaskers than men.6,7 To try to stay on top of every situation, women often spread themselves too thin. This translates into a problem with delegating tasks, both in their personal and professional lives. In an unconscious attempt to do everything perfectly without help, women are at high risk of burning out before realizing their full potential.8 Every leader needs to develop the ability to delegate responsibility; most women will have to consciously develop this trait. Several women we interviewed admit they have difficulty transitioning from work mode once they get home and vice versa. This may indirectly lead to employers thinking work is not a top priority for their women employees.

7 “Gender Differences in Multitasking Reflect Spatial Ability,” Timo Mäntylä, Association for Psychological Science, 2013
8 “Study Shows Journalism Burnout Affecting Women More than Men,” The University of Kansas, 2015

“Women sometimes are unable to compartmentalize the different facets of life—switch off from work when at home and vice versa.”

—Nishita Mazumdar, Cluster head, Leading retail bank
However, this is not always detrimental. Women are seen to be efficient and productive employees because they are motivated to complete their duties on time so they can go home and fulfill their personal obligations. However, to ensure a sustainable career, women must be clear about their priorities in both their professional and personal lives.

**Self-propagated biases for and against women**

Women are victims of both conscious and unconscious bias at work, but some of these biases become self-fulfilling prophecies. Because of the scarcity of women role models in senior leadership, women often are forced to learn from men. A common belief is that women may be too soft to make decisions at senior roles. Our research shows that women cope with this stereotype in two ways—both less than ideal. They either fall victim to reverse-stereotyping by acting “less feminine” to be taken seriously, or they compromise and do not fight for what they deserve, for fear of being labeled “aggressive.” Both reverse stereotypes and compromise are unhealthy and limit the choices and freedom at work. This leads to women play-acting a leader’s role rather than discovering their natural leadership style.

“Focus on your work, do not mould yourself to fit into the stereotypes that the male counterparts have created.”

—Ubika Dev, Co-Founder, InstaTaskers
A network of support: “Together, I can”

“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

—Jane Howard, English novelist

Every woman needs a support system, whether it is her parents, her partner, her children, or her extended family and friends. The role that family and friends play is twofold. On the one hand, this support system allows a woman to go places in her career by sharing her personal responsibilities and making her burdens at home lighter. On the other hand, it serves as a haven that motivates and encourages women to fulfill their potential and allows them to regroup and make important decisions during turbulent times.

Family support is a key contributor to a woman’s professional success. Our study shows that a supportive family is an important differentiator between a woman who is promoted to a leadership role and one who drops out of the workforce or settles for a lower office.

Several areas can be crucial to their success:

**Family background and upbringing**
A woman’s childhood and early life are huge determinants of professional success. One overwhelmingly similar refrain we heard from successful Indian women was the role their parents and school played in shaping their life. Successful women have supportive parents—parents who do not differentiate between boys and girls and who instill in girls the desire to dream big, achieve, and never settle. It comes as no surprise that parents are the role models for many of these women. Childhood support received from family as well as teachers makes women ambitious and helps them believe in their abilities.

**Workload distribution**
As women grow in age and stage of life, their personal commitments increase and demand more of their time. One encouraging trend that comes through in both our survey and our interviews is that the institution of marriage is undergoing a healthy change. Men and women both understand the need to be happy and fulfilled individually for them to be happy together. Although women continue to do more household work or are responsible for making household decisions in most families, marriage is no longer a major reason for women taking a career break or changing their priorities, but motherhood is.

Even though men are becoming more involved in raising children, women remain the primary caregivers. Even if they are equally committed to work post-maternity, it indirectly affects them more. For example, their freedom to take assignments that require frequent travel or roles...
with frequent schedule changes is severely hampered. Although the government has mandated six months of maternity leave, reintegration into the workforce is easier said than done. Multiple women we interviewed mention taking a break from their careers, especially after the birth of their second child. While the outlook for working mothers is far better than it was a decade ago, maternity and motherhood leave still puts women on a slightly slower track than their male colleagues in the short term. Women have coped with this in a variety of ways, but a shared sentiment is that a setback of one to two years or one missed promotion cycle does not matter in the long run. They encourage other women to take a short career break when required and come back refreshed and re-energized.

**Extended family and friends**
The Indian family system has evolved. The stigma attached to a working daughter or daughter-in-law has come down significantly. Contrary to popular belief, the extended family system has proven to be an advantage for young parents. For women who do not have access to nannies or day care, or are not comfortable in entrusting their child’s care to outsiders, extended family has proved to be a boon as women receive childcare support from their parents and in-laws. The restrictions placed by in-laws on women pursuing their careers after marriage are also shrinking, with two-income families and working daughters-in-law becoming a source of pride.

**Organizational culture: “You can, too”**
No matter how self-motivated women are or how much support they receive from their families, they cannot succeed in an unempathetic, unsupportive work environment. Our analysis shows that firms are the most important factor that can help working women succeed: 93 percent of respondents believe companies play an essential role in creating gender diversity and should implement initiatives to that objective.

**Firm leadership, mentoring, support network**
An individual’s leadership style is a combination of his or her inherent style and the organization’s culture. Across fields, women believe organizations have the primary responsibility of giving women a safe and conducive work environment. The women we interviewed say they had a network of formal and informal mentors, both men and women, within their organization and outside, who helped them in their professional journey, which set them apart from others. However, the lack of mentors and sponsors is a significant issue. Only 32 percent of our survey respondents say they had supportive mentors and bosses.

Making matters more challenging is the fact that women still face workplace biases, both conscious and unconscious. In India, people are still evaluated and judged on the amount of time they spend in the office rather than on their

“Families these days are very supportive and this has made life easier for working women.”
—Anannya Saikia, Director, Ministry of Corporate Affairs

“Unconscious bias at work is a given; it exists. What I use to gauge the situation is—is the person being thoughtless or just not being thoughtful? Also, policy making is only 10 percent of the job. The policy needs to be ingrained in the culture of the firm for it to be successful.”
—Shalini Raghavan, CMO, Consumer Products Division, L’Oréal India
productivity and performance. Many women spend less time bonding with their teams after work because they are fulfilling personal obligations, and are often thought of as not being committed to work. Similarly, many people assume that a woman returning from a maternity break will put her career second to her family commitments and would prefer a less challenging role.

Women we spoke to also mentioned the additional pressure of dealing with different yardsticks for measuring the performance of women when compared to men. Especially in roles such as sales that involve external stakeholders, women often have to work twice as hard as men to earn respect and trust.

With few women present in senior leadership roles, women find themselves outnumbered in executive meetings, making it all the more difficult for their voice to be heard. It also becomes difficult for them to observe and learn how other women navigated similar issues. One common issue that multiple women recognize as a problem area is negotiating better deals for themselves. Hence, it becomes crucial to share and publicize stories of successful women because it gives younger women direction when they are confused and hope that they too can succeed despite the hurdles.

**Peer dynamics, hiring, the career path, and subliminal adoption**

Our study shows firms are not taking their responsibilities toward gender diversity lightly. Policies such as maternity benefits, work-from-home options, flexible working programs, and day-care centers attached to offices are becoming common, both in government offices and in corporations. The challenge, however, is in implementing these policies with the right spirit. There needs to be awareness that a woman who takes advantage of these policies is not shirking work but adopting a model that suits her situation. Training all employees, men and women, on gender inclusiveness creates awareness.

“Women might have to work harder to prove their mettle. But once proven, the work speaks for itself and they stay recognized.”

—Priya Kapadia, Head, Marico Innovation Foundation

“Hygiene policies like government-mandated childcare/maternity/paternity leave helps but open mindedness at work is also critical.”

—Rupa Misra, Head, Research & Innovation Insights, IT consultancy

Participants we spoke to also believe that one way to gauge the gender sensitivity of a workplace is to see how many men in the top cadres have working wives.

Across roles and industries, women say they feel safe at work. About 70 percent of the respondents to our survey say their firms have zero tolerance for gender discrimination and a strong system to address grievances. A big majority—86 percent—say they have the same career opportunities as men, although they may face a few more challenges.

While the opinions of the women in our survey were similar on most topics, there is a big divide on the issue of gender-balanced hiring. One faction believes hiring based on gender is required to increase women’s participation in the workforce, while the other faction believes it may be insulting to women’s capabilities. Our analysis shows a clear trend. Of those who say gender
diversity initiatives are unfair to men, 90 percent work at junior or mid-management positions and are younger than 35 years. It is interesting to note that this preference for pure merit-based recruitment is echoed at the entry and middle level across industries. However, many men and women in senior leadership positions say gender-balanced hiring is not unfair to men, and there are enough opportunities for both to succeed.

One view that both women interviewees and survey respondents agree on is that gender-balanced hiring alone will not resolve the diversity issue. Both men and women need to be given equal opportunities after they are recruited.

**Government support: “We sure will”**

The fourth dimension that supports working women is women-friendly policies and regulations. Although India has laws to help women from the grassroots level to top leadership, policy makers can learn from other countries’ laws and tailor them to India’s scenario.

The Indian government has done a lot of good work through the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and it has not gone unnoticed. Our respondents came out strongly in support of the government’s mandatory six-month maternity leave policy. In addition, women hope the government will introduce a paternal or common parental leave. Such a policy also has an indirect benefit of conveying that both parents must be equally involved in child rearing.

While firms have the responsibility of making sure their women employees have fulfilling careers, the government is responsible for making them employable. This can be done by encouraging girls’ education and taking steps to further the economic freedom of housewives.

The four dimensions identified through the BEAT framework, when put together, have the ability to create an environment most conducive for the success of women. The drive to succeed however needs to be channeled from within, nurtured by support from family and colleagues, and enabled by organizations and policy makers.

**Light at the End of the Tunnel**

“A gender-equal society would be one where the word ‘gender’ does not exist: where everyone can be themselves.”

—Gloria Steinem, American feminist, journalist, and social and political activist

Alleviating the issues women face in the workplace will require collaborative action from government bodies, organizations, and working women—with women being the torchbearers.
Right tree to set up the nest

Policy support at the government and organization level is crucial for creating a level playing field. Although the improvement in maternity leave puts India on par with Nordic and other European countries, India still has a long way to go in offering paternity benefits. Currently, central government employees get 15 days of fully paid paternity leave that can be used within the first six months of a baby’s birth. However, this does not extend to men employed in the private sector.

Multiple respondents to our survey say paternity leave for new fathers or the option to split parenting leave between parents would ensure that women’s careers don’t suffer a setback because of prolonged absence. But before creating ambitious gender-inclusive policies, it is necessary to understand the situation by defining the latent biases women face, educating the workforce about these biases, and framing guidelines to steer clear of them.

The government’s effort to make women employable by improving girls’ education and helping women at grassroots levels is welcome. The government has already taken steps to ensure this, setting up 890 working women’s hostels across the country to benefit 66,000 working women by providing a safe living environment for those who need to travel away from home for work. In addition, the government has undertaken an initiative called Support to Training and Employment Program for Women to make girls over the age of 16 job-ready. The program also tries to help women become self-employed or entrepreneurs.

The National Policy for Women 2016 aims to improve the quality of work allotted to women and their contribution to the GDP, and to ensure pay parity. Fiscal and monetary policies will be reanalyzed from a gender perspective to provide incentives for land and business registrations in a woman’s name. Most importantly, the policy introduces measures to recognize the economic and societal value of women’s unpaid household work.

Nest, not net

While government and firm policies are important to gender diversity, company culture plays an important role in ensuring women have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute. Several firms have instituted women-friendly policies to ensure they achieve gender balance and help women shatter the glass ceiling and progress to senior leadership roles. Most firms recognize that maternity and childbirth are major reasons why women take career breaks or even leave the workforce and give their employees the option to work from home for long periods of time. Having day-care facilities in-office is also a step toward helping working mothers. Mobility is a big challenge for young mothers and firms have devised a policy of paying not only for the travel and lodging of the employee, but also for her children and a nanny.

Firms can take an array of initiatives to create a more gender-diverse environment. For example, they can provide leadership training and a regular platform for employees to gather to increase the visibility of and access to women leaders both within the firm and from outside. This will give junior employees an opportunity to learn from and be motivated by successful women. Several firms have also instituted variations of a ladies’ power lunch, where women employees

“Delegate, trust others, do not be insecure. Things can, and will, get done without you.”
—Surabhi Agarwal, SVP, Regional Credit Cards, Asia, Citibank
can discuss matters important to them with the CEO. This creates opportunities for women to gain exposure while also giving top management a channel to engage with talented women employees.

**Firms can also promote a delivery-first attitude where management appreciates the quality and timeliness of deliverables, rather than the mode of delivery, not making it unnecessarily difficult for anyone working on a flexible schedule.**

The right organization culture with policies that focus on sensitization helps build an equitable, harmonious, and diverse workplace.

**Believe that you can fly!**

“I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves.”

—Mary Shelley

The home environment is a vital element in achieving gender diversity. Women have grown up being taught to multitask and be a perfect homemaker, and many now try to be a superwoman by excelling at work and then coming back to take charge of what has been “rightfully” theirs: the home. Women need to break free from these biases. This was a major theme resonating across our interviews. They need to prioritize, delegate, and cut themselves some slack at home, and they should know that it is acceptable to share household responsibilities with men.

It is important to seek and get support both in professional and personal spheres. Women need to reach out to the right set of people and, when necessary, make themselves heard. Networking and getting to know people in the corporate space is important. Women should focus on establishing and maintaining relationships at work, which will help them do better at professional engagements. Most importantly, they need to be strong and have the internal desire and motivation to succeed.

**Keep the Goal in Sight**

“Here is to strong women. May we know them. May we be them. May we raise them.”

—Anonymous

India has made remarkable progress in improving gender balance in the workplace, but we still have a long way to go, especially at senior leadership levels. Although every professional journey is unique, there is an overwhelming similarity in the types of challenges women must
overcome to succeed. However, there is no quick fix to these issues. Our BEAT framework highlights the significance of combined efforts from individuals, support networks, employers, and the government.

Strong policy support and institutional reforms continue to be a primary focus of the government. Equally important is the role of organizational culture in shaping the career path for women leaders. While policies, systems, and guidelines to support the growth of women are important, it is crucial to spread awareness about how to implement and embrace these policies.

Self-belief is the most underestimated factor for women in achieving their career aspirations. Keeping in mind that nothing can replace merit, every woman should work toward her goals without getting bogged down by society’s biases—easier said than done. Moreover, every woman should strive for her own leadership style and be passionate enough not to settle for anything short of her goals.

The outlook for India’s working women is optimistic with growing numbers rising through the ranks across industries. These powerful women will lead the way to more diverse workplaces in all parts of the country.

Here’s to the leaders who are born women.

“We overwhelm women, asking them to make right decisions at every turn, it’s not a big deal. Take a wrong decision and come back to work. The work environment is now incredibly open to people—both men and women—coming back to workforce.”

—Pallavi Tewari, Business Head, Furtados School of Music
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who participated in our study for shedding light on the issues that India's working women face. We are also grateful to the successful women leaders who participated in our one-on-one interviews for providing an in-depth look at how women navigate the intricacies of the workplace.
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The signature of our namesake and founder, Andrew Thomas Kearney, on the cover of this document represents our pledge to live the values he instilled in our firm and uphold his commitment to ensuring “essential rightness” in all that we do.