

# When leaders take on the onus of promoting wellness by leading from the front



## THE RUNNING COMPANY SHRENIK AVLANI

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My life had taken its normal course, right now I would have been sitting in a newsroom, staring at a computer, the keyboard resting half on a desk and half on my bulging belly, feeling smug about some headline I would have trashed up against a deadline. But a decade ago, I ran the half marathon at the then Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon (SCMM). My life took a very different turn and jolted me into action.

The SCMM (now Tata Mumbai Marathon) has also been the starting point of several business leaders' fitness journey. Everyone knows about Anil Ambani's presence at the race who ran the very first Mumbai marathon in 2004 surrounded by bodyguards. Tata Sons' current chairman N. Chandrabosekaran and former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan have also been seen sweating it out in this race over the years. Mahindra & Mahindra's chairman Anand Mahindra famously participates in the Dream Run to raise funds for the non-profit Nandhi Kail, which he founded.

Since the first Mumbai marathon, the race has grown manifold. There were 800 full marathoners with just 88 women for the first

race in 2018, there were close to 6,955 full marathoner, including 503 women. Over the years, this sporting event, promoted by Procam International, has become a permanent fixture on Mumbai's cultural calendar, and owing to the growing number of business leaders who run these days, the country's corporate calendar too. Close to 600 managing directors, presidents and C-suite leaders will be among the 50,000-plus runner who will run the Tata Mumbai Marathon on 20 January.

"The involvement of so many business leaders in this run has had a direct impact on India Inc. taking employee fitness seriously. A leader's passion for running and fitness is infectious," says Sandeep Chaudhary, chief executive officer of Aon Consulting India. While Indian companies would have introduced employee wellness programmes eventually because global offices already had these in place, Chaudhary, a seasoned marathoner, believes that the Mumbai marathon "hastened the process and helped improve the adoption rate among employees".

Gagan Banga, managing director and chief executive officer of Indiabulls Housing Finance, agrees with Chaudhary. "The Mumbai marathon changed the corporate culture pan-India. It turned India Inc's attention to employee fitness and also brought in a lot of money into this sport, which is good," he says. Before the Mumbai marathon, recreation rooms for employees were considered employee wellness initiatives. "But after the marathon got popular, many corporate wellness programmes started turning into a bottom-up phenomenon, where the employees wanted to do something about their sedentary lifestyles," says Salli Murthy, a runner and managing director, General Mills India and South-East Asia.



Anand Mahindra in the 2013 edition of the Mumbai marathon. AP

While Vivek Singh, joint managing director, Procam International, makes no claims about the race being responsible for promoting wellness at the workplace, he does say "this race kick-started a running revolution in the country".

According to an ASSOCHAM paper *Corporate Wellness Program: Benefits to Organization and Economy*, 42% of India's top 500 companies still don't have a wellness programme. "This is at a time when a prospective candidate faced with a choice, with everything else remaining the same, will pick a company that has a better wellness programme of the two," says Garima Dhamija, founder-partner, Salto Dee Fe, a talent management consult-

ancy. So companies that are still on the fence, need to their strategy when it comes to including sporting and activities for their employees.

Some of the best fitness programmes in India are in controlled by active bosses. For example, in 2011 Tata Consultancy Services, under Chandra Sheelaship, sent 2,000 participants to Mumbai marathon. The following year it launched its programme, which has grown to become one of the largest corporate wellness programmes, with more than 100,000 participants.

**Talking about the benefits of being active at gatherings creates a lot of awareness**

Banga has been directly involved in the company's wellness initiatives through the GetFitGo programme, which sets team goals such as covering a certain distance month or losing a certain amount of weight. "I talk about my running to the benefits of being active internal gatherings. That creates a lot more awareness and inspires many to adopt an active life," says Banga who will be running on Sunday.

This year Tata Mumbai Marathon's motto is "Be Better are plenty who need to be better. This Sunday is a good time to start."

*The Running Company is a column that explores how running events have impacted organisational culture. Shrenik Avlani is co-author of The Shift Way, a book on Normal fitness*

**ACHIEVEMENT-FORE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT**

Dr. Jitendra Das, Director, FORE School of Management, New Delhi has received the 'Certificate of Excellence' and the 'Educationist of the Year in Asia Award' in the Asia Pacific Education and Technology Awards (APETA) & SUMMIT 2019 organised jointly by ASSOCHAM and The Education Post on January 3, 2019 at Hotel Pride Plaza, Ahmedabad.