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Dear Reader,

The term 'high anxiety' best defines the current state of the world's mental makeup, and for good reason that is all too apparent. In this context our lead story penned by **Jennifer Moss** and **Jen Fisher** takes on an urgent relevance. They talk about toxic customers, unproductive employees and contagious pessimism that has yielded a hopelessness epidemic that is taking the world's workplace by storm. It's an essential read for all those who can read. Hope, they argue, is not only a powerful strategy to inspire change but also a key leadership skill for thriving in an uncertain future.

Our second lead by **Stacey Ashley** analyzes the word 'nice', and how productive is it as a corporate strategy to be pleasing, agreeable, delightful and amiably pleasant at all times? "Being nice means that everything is always 'going well', whether it is or not. There is no true sharing of the 'state of play' with people throughout the organization. This is cause for concern if you want a commercially viable business. Being nice and not being honest is unfair to your people," says Stacey.

Mohammad Zakaullah Khan has penned our third piece, and it addresses the burning issue of our times, that of mental health, and the need to include the mentally ill in our social narrative. "I believe that the solution lies in the telling of these stories rather than hiding them... For those with mental illness, however, the prevailing norm is to keep it secret and pretend like it doesn't even exist. Therefore, each individual suffers alone, with no one to validate their experience."

Back-of-the-book we travel to Manchhar Lake and talk about reviving its fading magic in our 23rd edition of the column Nature Calling for Action Stations. Stay blessed, stay safe, stay hopeful and be nice 😊

*Articles curated from online content by JJ highlighting professional and expert knowledge on 'Managing People, Business and Yourself'

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Toxic customers, unproductive employees, and contagious pessimism: How the hopelessness epidemic is taking the workplace by storm

By **Jennifer Moss and Jen Fisher** | 10 min read

Hopelessness is at epidemic levels and taking a toll on people and organizations. Workers of all ages are feeling more hopeless than ever. A national poll released this past spring by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School found that [nearly half of Americans under 30 years old reported feeling “down, depressed, or hopeless”](#) at least several days a week. In 2023, U.S. employee engagement fell at a rate 10 times faster than in the previous three years, according to one estimate. Globally, employee stress is at a record high, according to [Gallup’s State of the Global Workplace 2023 report](#).

It has often been said that hope is not a strategy, but it’s time to challenge that myth. Hope is not only a powerful strategy to inspire change but also a key leadership skill for thriving in an uncertain future.



Employee engagement is falling at a record rate - GETTY IMAGES

Hope, as defined [in Snyder’s Theory of Hope](#), named for the late psychologist and researcher Charles Snyder, can be the antidote to uncertainty. Hope helps people envision a concrete path to a better situation, empowering them to set goals and make plans to reach these positive outcomes. It drives action, propelled by the will to follow through. It’s an attribute that is more tangible and goal-oriented than related emotions like optimism and empathy—and it’s those

qualities that make it both possible and necessary to operationalize hope in the workplace.

A constant state of polycrisis

Yet hope has been hard to come by lately, and there are a few reasons why. As the pandemic moves into our rearview, the rapid adoption of new technology and AI is keeping uncertainty at the forefront. Gallup [data](#) shows that more workers fear that technology is making their jobs obsolete. That fear jumped by seven points since 2021 and has grown more in the past two years than at any time in Gallup's trend since 2017.

Fear of technology aside, [research](#) finds that being exposed to persistent crises leads to feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, and aggression. We're living in a polycrisis state—facing a global pandemic, two major wars, political and economic uncertainty, and an onslaught of natural disasters. Many people feel like the doom loop will never end. Then, when feelings of hopelessness persist, a 2023 [study](#) found that it decreases our sense of belonging, community, and performance. It also makes us susceptible to fight-or-flight responses, which increases emotional volatility.

We've all witnessed a dramatic rise in emotional instability since 2020. A New York Times article, aptly titled, [A Nation on Hold Wants to Speak With a Manager](#), discusses the rise in “toxic customers” and their impact on professional cynicism and hopelessness. In 2020, there were 183 unruly airline passenger reports. In 2021, there were more than 5,981. One airline agent shared that before she would cry at this kind of treatment by a customer—now she's just “judgmental” and “pessimistic.” This is just one of myriad sectors hit with enormous volatility. Customer experience,

stakeholder relationships, innovation, and productivity are at risk if employees feel angry, stressed, and hopeless.

When it comes to [retention](#), workers who describe feeling hopeless are more likely to miss work or disengage, leading to higher absenteeism and quit rates. And, hopelessness is contagious. [Researchers](#) have found that “one member's pessimism and lack of motivation can influence others, diminishing team morale and cohesion.”

Hope is a hard skill

Hope has long had a reputation as a soft emotion, a Pollyanna perspective that everything will turn out just fine if you look at the bright side. But scientists are discovering that there is real power in hope. Higher levels of hope are connected to improved [well-being](#) and can help people find meaning and purpose. Hope builds resilience in the face of uncertainty—a key driver of workforce disengagement and attrition. Hope is an antidote to learned helplessness and makes people feel like they have the ability to address big, overwhelming problems. Hope also drives “human sustainability”—the degree to which an organization creates value for people as human beings, leaving them with greater health and well-being, stronger skills and employability, good jobs, opportunities for advancement, progress toward equity, increased belonging, and heightened connection to purpose.

The workforce has made a huge shift from empathetic to cynical over the last few years. If leaders care about employee well-being and the success of their firms, they must place rebuilding trust and hope at the top of their strategic agendas. Here are some practical suggestions for building hope skills for a future-ready

workforce:

- **Reskilling and upskilling:** To reduce fears of obsolescence, give workers the skills they need to meet future demand. Even if those skills aren't applicable to your organization later on, they will increase worker hope today and ensure human sustainability for the future.
- **Be explicit when setting expectations:** "Above and beyond" is not a concrete goal. We need to provide clear guidelines, ensure goals are attainable, and recognize and reward when key objectives are met.
- **Provide consistent but flexible feedback:** Some workers like and need more frequent feedback, while others prefer less. Build flexible feedback systems that hit the right balance between under- and over-management
- **Embrace agency:** People are more intrinsically motivated when they've been involved in defining and meeting their goals. If we want people to be more intrapreneurial and innovative while reducing learned helplessness, it's critical to empower workers to solve problems in their own way.
- **Respect change fatigue:** The workforce is still experiencing high rates of burnout which increases resistance to change. Ensure the change you're making adds significant value right now—or let it wait. If change is imminent, exercise empathy. Ask people for open feedback throughout the process and act on what you hear to the best of your ability.
- **Celebrate when we deviate:** When workers fail, let go of it quickly and reframe it as an opportunity for continuous learning. If workers feel like they have the psychological safety to try

out new ideas without reproach, they will take more risks, which builds a cycle of hope.

- **Allow for recovery:** Productive rest helps us to be more emotionally regulated and increases critical thinking. Never getting to the "bottom of the pile" increases a cycle of hopelessness. When workloads are unmanageable, people start to question the point of their efforts. They disengage. They're less productive. And then their workload becomes even more unmanageable, creating a vicious cycle. Rest is a prerequisite for productivity. Leaders need to model the behavior so employees feel like rest is supported.

As more organizations begin to prioritize human sustainability by helping their employees become healthier, more skilled, and connected to a sense of purpose and belonging, they have an opportunity to instill hope in leadership and encourage it in workers.

An organization (or a community, or a family) filled with people that have a sense of meaning and purpose is stronger than one made up of disengaged, unhealthy, and unhappy people. Cultivating hope is an essential part of driving human sustainability. Organizations that embrace this perspective stand to build a virtuous cycle in which improving human outcomes enhances organizational outcomes and vice versa, contributing to a better future for all ■

Source:

https://fortune.com/2024/01/16/toxic-customers-unproductive-employees-contagious-pessimism-hopelessness-epidemic-work-careers-moss-fisher/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=ceo-daily&utm_content=2024011711am&tpcc=NL_Marketing

Is 'Nice' the Way to Achieve Great Leadership?

By **Stacey Ashley** | 6 min read

N^{ice}:

1. pleasing; agreeable; delightful
2. amiably pleasant

When does being nice in the workplace become unhelpful?

I have been seriously pondering this question.

In recent weeks I have had three encounters with leaders of organisations who are bemoaning the niceness of their organisational culture. Organisations where people will say, "Everyone is really nice around here", and "It's a nice place to work".

This sounds good on the surface, yet what else is going on?

What is hiding behind the curtain of nice?

What is nice covering up or obfuscating?

Here are a few examples of what is happening in these organisations.

➡ Being nice means leaders choose not to offer feedback to their people because they might upset someone or hurt their feelings. So, they do not offer useful or specific feedback at all.

➡ Being nice means that everyone gets a good performance review. Everyone in the organisation 'meets expectations'. Some may exceed expectations, even though when measured objectively they do not. Setting false expectations of performance.

And expectations that salaries will also consistently increase.

➡ Being nice means that everything is always 'going well'. Whether it is or not. There is no true sharing of the 'state of play' with people throughout the organisation. As long as the organisation remains operating, everything is 'fine'.

In these situations, nice is being used as camouflage for sharing truth.

Rather than owning the state of play, the level of performance, real expectations, these are being papered over with 'nice', so that everyone is 'happy'. This is cause for concern if you want a commercially viable business, with people who are performing well in their roles, growing their capability, and meeting reasonable expectations.

Imagine if, in the interest of being 'nice', you were to choose not to offer your people feedback, insights, and observations into their performance. What they are doing and how they are doing it, in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Without feedback, you deprive your people of the opportunity to learn, to improve, to make different choices, to grow, and make progress. They do not receive



the gift of feedback from you.

Now consider the situation where you give everybody a positive performance review, regardless of their level of performance. This leads to reward for people who may not be deserving of it, and again does not let them know what they may need to do or change, to be performing at a reasonable level. It sets a false expectation and does not create the opportunity for improvement and growth, for people to reach and live in their potential. Equally, as a genuine team contributor, it can be very frustrating to see others be rewarded when they clearly are not performing.

This can lead to other consequences over time as people get promoted to roles for which they are not prepared. Their ability to perform well in these roles is compromised. What this means, particularly for leadership roles, is people are under-prepared, ill-equipped, and unable to rise easily to the level of expectation.

If you have leaders who are ill-equipped leading your business, you can imagine where that might end up. It does not bode well for a commercially successful, viable, sustainable, relevant, current organisation.

When you want to make progress, change, or transform your organisation, and you are not being honest about your current situation, performance, and people, then it is incredibly difficult to choose the right way forward. It is challenging to determine which elements to focus on in order to make the progress you desire. You do not know where your leverage is, as you do not have a clear set of valid information about where you and your organisation are right now.

On top of this, when you have not been open and honest with people about their level of capability and performance, when somebody else comes along who is open and honest with them, it can be confronting

to these individuals to receive real feedback and observations. You are not creating a fair situation for your people when you could be clear with them right now.

“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact

on the world around you.

What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide

what kind of difference you want to make.”

~ Jane Goodall

To create opportunity for people to thrive, we can certainly be nice, but not to the detriment of being open and honest about information that is relevant. Niceness is about sharing things that can be helpful in a way that is supportive, encouraging and creates opportunity. Yet, being nice and not being honest is unfair to your people.

As leaders, we have a clear responsibility to create supportive environments in which people can thrive. Part of that is giving them the opportunity to do just that by sharing with them relevant information about their performance, about the opportunities for them to grow, about what the future could hold for them as they develop. Not sharing this information with them does not serve them. And, in my opinion, is not very nice.

So leaders, I challenge you to be fair with your people. By all means be nice, but do not cover up the truth. Give people opportunities to make better choices, to support themselves, to learn, to grow, and each day have the opportunity to be better than the day before, while also contributing to the success of your organisation.

I'd love to know your thoughts ■

Source:

<https://staceyashley.medium.com/is-nice-the-way-to-achieve-great-leadership-321c7eb2f1d5>

The need to include the mentally ill in our social narrative



By **Mohammad Zakauallah Khan** | 6 min read

As a haemophilic child in the Karachi of the mid 80s, my social circle was always limited and my social skills, perhaps as a result, developed slower than what might be considered “normal”. I understood to an extent that this was because I spent less time playing cricket in the streets with the other children and more time in the wards of Fatimid Foundation, a recently opened facility that provided care for patients of haemophilia and thalassemia at no cost. As it would happen though, it was an incident at Fatimid Foundation that taught me the true reason why I could never be part of that crowd.

Being from a well-educated family, it was my usual practice even as a 7-year-old to bring a book with me when I went to Fatimid, as the wait there could be a few hours or more, and I was an avid reader even then. On one occasion, my knee was badly swollen, so we went to Fatimid as per usual practice. The place was particularly crowded that day, and there were two or even three patients to each bed. With three beds to a room, there were some 12 people around me, seven patients and five attendants. I, however, was the only one with a book, and what was worse, the only one wearing shorts. Everyone else was visibly from lower social strata.

I will repeat here that Fatimid Foundation provided free of cost care. Haemophilia was barely known of at the time, so treatment was hard to find anywhere, and where it was offered, it was expensive. As a result, Fatimid saw a cross section of society every day, with the great majority being

those of lesser means. But within the fraternity of haemophilia patients there, such matters were utterly irrelevant. Which is why, that day, it came as a shock to me that one gentleman, not a patient himself but an attendant, chose to make fun of me for wearing shorts in a public place.

I don't remember his exact comment, but it was so out of place that I can now only surmise that he must have been an uncle or more distant relative of the patient he was with, rather than the father, or else he would have been more sympathetic to a child who shared his own child's pain. As it was, a fully grown man was making fun of a 7-year-old for wearing shorts. Suddenly, in a room full of people like myself, many of whom I met often, I was the one who felt out of place. His comment had created a have versus have-nots mentality, and though no one laughed outright or added to his words, there was a general agreement with his sentiment.

Somehow, I was able to master my shame enough to make a coherent reply, which was to the effect that my knee was so swollen, that even the weight of a layer of cloth would cause me great pain. And though this was true, it was also true that I had actually worn shorts that day just because a seven year old boy sometimes wears shorts!

However, the effect of my comment was electric. Suddenly, all the patients and all the parents in the room were sharing in my pain, and the crass uncle became the outsider! That was the day on which I understood the power of a shared narrative. Even though I had few friends, even though I could not participate in so many activities that my peers

routinely did, even though I had to suffer through an amount of pain that no “healthy” person could understand, I never felt alone after that day. I knew people existed who were going through exactly what I was going through, and that I could share my troubles with them anytime. Because we are bound by a common narrative that transcends all other dividing lines, be it education level, income level or even religious differences. Unfortunately, I have since learnt that there is one group in our society that is unable to find such comfort... and that is the mentally ill.

Shared narratives can be incredibly diverse, whether it is a narrative born of faith, geographic location, or a particular struggle faced in life. But what they all require is the coming together of people who have lived that narrative or who can buy into it. For those with mental illness, however, the prevailing norm is to keep it secret and pretend like it doesn't even exist. Therefore, each individual suffers alone, with no one to validate their experience.

The worst part is that this kind of thinking is not found just in the lower income or lesser educated parts of society, it is rather prevalent across all demographics, which means that the change that is so obviously necessary is all the more unlikely.

I have seen firsthand a friend of mine struggle with such difficulties. Both his parents are doctors, one a highly sought after surgeon. Yet, when my friend started suffering from severe paranoia, no immediate effort was made to rectify the problem through treatment. Instead, every effort was made to keep him home and isolated from the world so that the situation would not become a matter of shame for the family. Unsurprisingly, my friend, who I met fewer and fewer times those days, went from bad to worse and eventually suffered a breakdown. This finally prompted his family to get him started on sessions with a clinical psychologist and the medication she provided, but everything was still kept entirely hush-hush, and I only found out about a year later. And while he finally started getting better, here the parents made the most ‘Pakistani’ decision possible and chose to get him married off as soon as possible!

The worst part: neither the bride nor her family were told about the mental illness and ongoing treatment until after the marriage ceremony! Needless to say, such a union was off to a very poor start, and eventually, due to several other factors as well, the marriage collapsed, and my friend was worse off than ever.

Ultimately, through facing the problem head on and continuing diligently with his treatment, my friend made a full recovery and is today happily married, gainfully employed and a father to boot. But the question remains: if even a family of successful doctors approaches mental illness as a matter of shame, then how can we expect the rest of the populace to do any better?

The problem is that mental illness is unlike physical illness. After all, it is our minds that inform us of our reality. If I have an injured knee, there is no difficulty in accepting this, because though there is pain, it is still me that is carrying the injury. But if I have depression, or paranoia, or schizophrenia, that is more difficult to accept because my whole idea of who I am is under threat.

So the challenge is dual: First, to make society accept that mental illness is a valid diagnosis that many people suffer from, so that the sufferers should not be marginalized. Secondly, getting individuals to accept that they may suffer from some form of mental illness and to seek treatment for it.

Personally, I believe that the solution lies in the telling of these stories rather than hiding them. The solution lies in creating awareness about the many forms of mental illness, each so different from the other, and telling all of Pakistan that, “Look, here are the people who struggle with this issue, if you do too, then learn from them so you can do better!”

May we all do better in recognizing and treating mental illness from here on out ■

Muhammad Zakaullah Khan

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/time-include-mentally-ill-our-social-narrative-zakaullah-khan-fwxf/>

Nature Calling for Action Stations (NCfAS#23)

Reviving Manchhar's fading Magic



Settle for a pond

While the woes of the world continue unabated, we must resist our fatal attraction to assuming the Earth's burden, and surrender unconditionally to the Will of the Almighty. Allah Ma'alik. Yes indeed. We also know that He helps those who help themselves. Like the ripples in a pond that a pebble sets loose, we must settle for a pond, and a pond that lies within the casting range of our pebble, and sweat not that lies beyond our means and reach.

Glory that was

Quite recently I read an incisive piece on the glory that was Manchhar Lake, a sizeable pond, if you ask me, that our blundering and selfish ways have allowed falling on hard times. Penned by Dr. Ali Gul Khushik who teaches economics at the University of Sindh in Jamshoro, it's titled "Why Pakistan's Largest Lake Is Sick?" and appeared in the Ecology & Environment section of the Express Tribune on January 21, 2024 ([HTTPS://TRIBUNE.COM.PK/STORY/2453928/WHY-PAKISTANS-LARGEST-LAKE-IS-SICK](https://tribune.com.pk/story/2453928/why-pakistans-largest-lake-is-sick)).

Presently contaminated and turned saline by the infamous Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), Manchhar was once the largest fresh water lake in Pakistan. It lies around 17 kilometers west of Sehwan town, flanked by Kirthar Hills on its

west, Johi town on northwest, Bubak and Bhan Saeedabad on its north and Lakki hills on the south.

Poisoned hearts

"I noticed the gloomy faces of the fishermen and felt that it is not the lake that had turned saline, but rather the people of this vast lake who have become bitter as they have been robbed not only of their economies, their floating boathouses and their once vibrant fish business," writes Dr. Ali Gul Khushik. "It seems that even their souls have been snatched away from them. Along with the contamination of Manchhar's waters, the fishermen's hearts have also become poisoned. They gaze at the lake as I notice their parched and soulless demeanor. The government, political parties, non-government organizations and politicians have all turned deaf ears to the lake, its people and the very lush culture that it once was."

Since time immemorial

"Manchhar is an ancient, natural lake present since time immemorial," says Mustafa Mirani, a fisherman. "Our forefathers have been here since centuries. It is believed that Manchhar is older than 10,000 years. It is mentioned in the memoirs of ancient Greek, Chinese, Arab and British travelers and historians."

Villain of the peace

According to the fishermen, since centuries Manchhar enjoyed prosperity until the saline and contaminated waste waters from the agricultural lands of Guddu and Sukkur barrage catchment areas was drained into it in 1991-92, through

"Along with the contamination of Manchhar's waters, the fishermen's hearts have also become poisoned"

- Dr. Ali Gul Khushik, (economics professor, University of Sindh in Jamshoro)

the 111km long RBOD, which is the culprit of all troubles faced by Manchhar, its freshwater ecosystem and the human population. It has put the very existence of the lake into peril. Before construction of RBOD, all sources of water flowing into Manchhar were sweet.

Thriving settlement gone sour

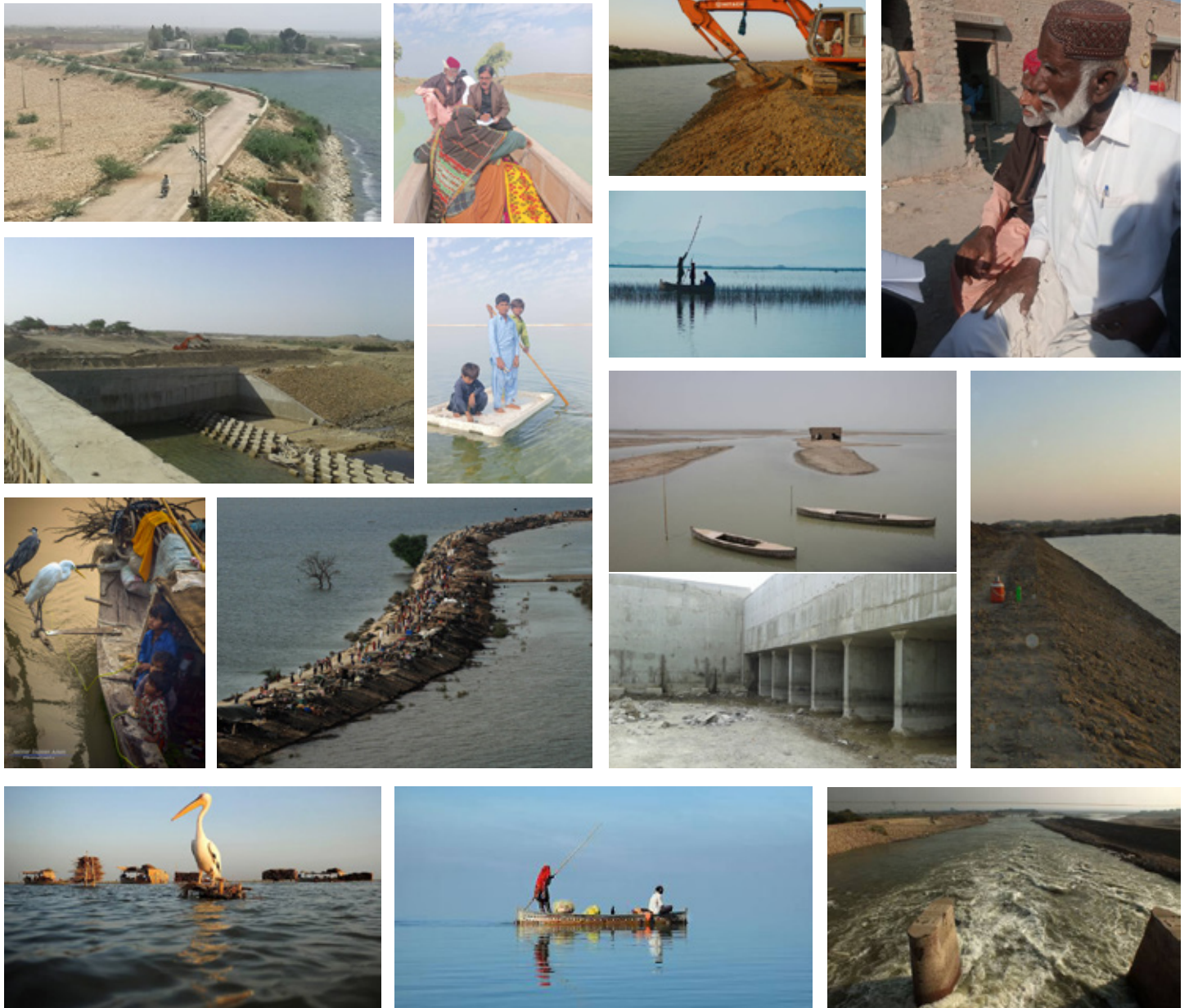
During its glorious days, the population of Manchhar Lake was estimated to be around 100,000, but over the past few years, outward migration has intensified, mainly due to the deteriorating quantity of catch and diminishing opportunities for agriculture and other livelihoods. Of the 2,000 fishing boats, the number has reduced to less than 50.

When Manchhar waters were untroubled, there were more than 2,000 floating boathouses, but

presently there are less than 100 houses along the Manchhar bund. If the situation does not improve, the floating boathouses and the centuries-old culture of Manchhar will also vanish.

Sanctuary no more for lotus flowers, migratory birds and fish species

Contaminated and toxic water continuously being drained into the lake has completely degraded its ecosystem and biodiversity. Once it was center for production of the lotus flower and its root known locally as beh, but not anymore. Manchhar was once home to more than one hundred species of birds including coots, cranes, ducks, geese, herons, ibis, and mallards, but presently only three to



“The 111km long RBOD is the culprit of all troubles faced by Manchhar, its freshwater ecosystem and the human population. Diverting its saline water away from Manchhar is the only sustainable solution available for its revival”

– Dr. Ali Gul Khushik

four types of birds are to be found as most of the migratory birds of the Indus flyway now flock to other destinations for their survival and nurture.

During winter when the water gets better because of decreased flow of drained waste water in the RBOD, five to six species of fish are found whereas in summer, the only species found in the entire lake is pomfret as it can survive in the saline water. Even at the time of RBOD construction, there were more than 52 indigenous species of fish in Manchhar including pomfret, mori (*cirrhinus mrigala*), theila (catla) and rohu (*labeo rohita*), olive barb and many other freshwater species of fish.

Seeking Divine forgiveness

All fishermen organizations and Manchhar experts agree that RBOD is solely responsible for the destruction of Manchhar, and diverting its saline water away from Manchhar is the only sustainable solution available for its revival.

“Rather than fretting and fuming the shenanigans of the fossil fuel lobby and the machinations of the deep state, let’s pull together in righting this historical wrong and earn back Allah’s favor and forgiveness”

– Adil Ahmad (Author)

It’s a convoluted tale of wanton waste and plunder of the public trust that was earlier elaborated upon in greater and more technical detail by Naseer Memon in his piece “A dying lake” in Dawn of August 26, 2023 (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1772311>) which bears a close reading as well. Fixing the Manchhar Lake lies within our reach. So, rather than fretting and fuming the shenanigans

of the fossil fuel lobby and the machinations of the deep state, let’s pull together in righting this historical wrong and earning back Allah’s favor and forgiveness that we most desperately need. We have just come out of the hottest year on record, and scientists predict that in 2024 we will exceed the 1.5 C limit for warming set by countries in the 2015 Paris climate agreement, writes David Suzuki (The News International, Tuesday, Jan 23, 2024). “Meanwhile, Canada and the US are setting records for oil and gas production, and industry would like to keep it that way.”

Fossil fuel industry still running the show

Dr. David Takayoshi Suzuki CC OBC FRSC is a Canadian academic, science broadcaster, and environmental activist. He earned a PhD in zoology from the University of Chicago in 1961, and was a professor in the genetics department at the University of British Columbia from 1963 until his retirement in 2001. He says the main cause of the record warming – and the floods, droughts, wildfires, mass human migrations, species extinctions and economic hardships that come with it – is increasing levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide from burning gas, oil and coal.

“Meanwhile, Canada and the US are setting records for oil and gas production, and industry would like to keep it that way” – Dr.

David Takayoshi Suzuki CC OBC FRSC (Canadian academic, science broadcaster, and environmental activist)

“We’ve known this for at least half a century. Although limited progress was made at the COP28 climate summit in Dubai late last year, after 28 years, the overwhelming presence and influence of the fossil fuel industry and the fact that the conference was headed by United Arab Emirates’ top oil executive and this year’s summit in Azerbaijan will also be headed by an oilman illustrate that the fossil fuel industry is still running the show.”

Column by Adil Ahmad, Correspondent, TCS Octara.Com