

Falling in Love with Learning: Leadership, Work Culture, and Collapse at BYJU'S

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Abstract. This case study examines the leadership, work culture, and ethics at EdTech company BYJU'S. It explores BYJU'S journey from being one of India's most valued and respected EdTech start-ups to one of the most criticized companies in three years. The case analyses the leadership and decision-making style of the founder/promoter, Byju Raveendran, along with the work culture and ethical practices, which have been transposed into a "toxic workplace" by BYJU's. The case examines how leadership and decision-making style, coupled with organizational culture, contributed to the fall of BYJU'S. The case is suitable for Organizational Behaviour, Leadership, and Industrial and Organizational Psychology courses at the MBA and MBA Executive levels.

Keywords: leadership, decision-making, power, Edtech, work culture.

1. Introduction

The EdTech company BYJU'S became the first Indian unicorn in the education sector. The co-founder and CEO, Byju Raveendran, charted a lesser-known territory of digital education in India. His mission of "democratizing education" by providing quality education to the underprivileged fuelled hope and passion among many students. His vision, charismatic personality, and ability to integrate technology in education made BYJU'S one of the biggest players in the EdTech space, not only in India but also globally. The COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be a game-changer that made BYJU'S a household name. With 150 million registered users and a peak valuation of \$22 billion in 2022, within eleven years of inception, BYJU'S was a company too good to be true. However, its aggressive push for growth became a nightmare for many, especially in the post-pandemic period, with students, parents, and employees all suffering at the hands of the company. Financial shenanigans, sharp practices in advertising, and toxic culture became synonymous with BYJU'S by 2025.

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2. Industry Overview

The Indian EdTech sector witnessed exponential growth in recent years, becoming one of the largest global markets for digital education. The demographic advantage of more than 500 million people under the age of 25 years and deep internet penetration have made India a fertile ground for digital education platforms. By 2023, there were 750 million internet users in India, many of whom accessed multiple learning/education platforms on mobile phones through low-cost data plans. The growth of Indian EdTech companies skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic, as educational institutes shifted to online teaching and people spent more time in front of their mobile and laptop screens. This change provided EdTech companies with an unprecedented opportunity to grow and scale up their business. During this time, EdTech companies like BYJU'S, Unacademy, upGrad, and Topper witnessed a high jump in their user base. These companies also capitalized on the opportunity by offering flexible, self-paced, visually appealing, and test-prep digital education content. The Indian EdTech sector witnessed investment of 4.7 billion between 2020 and 2022.

However, post-pandemic, with schools and colleges reopening, the EdTech sector had a reality check. As the funding slowed, pressure to be profitable mounted across the Indian EdTech sector, and the focus shifted from the noble objective of providing accessible education to profitability. This change in approach resulted in employee layoffs, valuation markdowns, and eventually the shutdown of small ventures. At the same time, the EdTech sector also came under growing regulatory scrutiny. In 2022, the government of India issued advisories to EdTech companies against using false and misleading advertisements. The government also encouraged parental supervision over online learning tools for the protection of minors' data and privacy.

Despite these challenges, all was not gloomy for the EdTech sector. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promoted digital learning for mass penetration of education. Government-led digital learning platforms like DIKSHA and SWAYAM provided free and quality education/learning to the masses, whereas private players shifted focus to personalized learning, skill development, application-oriented learning, and hybrid education models.

3. Background of the Company

Byju Raveendran and Divya Gokulnath established BYJU'S in 2011. The company started as an online video-based teaching and learning platform for school students and aspirants preparing for competitive examinations. BYJU'S launched its flagship product, The Learning App, in 2015, providing educational and learning content for students from classes 4 to 12. Over the years, BYJU'S