

ASCEND: From Rupture to Reinvention on the Second Curve of Leadership

*How a deeply personal crisis evolved into a framework for shared elevation, inspired by Handy,
Drucker and Stoic thought.*

As I walk through the hallowed corridors of Chicago Booth, one of the world's premier business schools, the polished floors echo not just with the ambition, but with the silent footsteps of a young boy from India, once silenced by grief, lost in the haze of a world that no longer made sense, unable to give voice to the pain of losing a parent.

That boy was me.

This duality, grieving teenager and determined MBA candidate, reveals a deeper truth. It reflects the essence of Charles Handy's Second Curve¹. True transformation, he argues, doesn't begin with strength or certainty. It starts at the fragile intersection of crisis and opportunity².

Through personal catastrophe, followed by a period of profound emotional numbness, supported by institutional compassion and driven by relentless self-reinvention, my journey brings Handy's theory to life beyond the page. It is not merely a business philosophy; it is a blueprint for those who choose to transform¹.

The journey from India's narrow hallways to Chicago's gleaming towers reveals how second curves emerge through community support, strategic pivots, and the conscious decision to evolve.

And from this journey, a repeatable path emerged, one I now call ASCEND, a six-stage framework tracing the arc from rupture to reinvention to stewardship.

The First Curve: Foundations and Fractures

Growing up in a lower-middle-class Indian household, my world revolved around one steady force: my father.

He was more than just our provider. He was my compass, my confidant, and the quiet strength behind every small dream I dared to hold. His job at the Indian School of Business (ISB) gave our family stability, but it was his unwavering belief in me that made the future feel possible.

"Keep charging, I am always behind you" he used to say. That line never left me. It still carries me.

That modest yet secure foundation set me on a clear and hopeful path, one that promised a steady ascent. Gaining admission to a distant engineering college wasn't just an academic achievement. It felt like the natural rise of a life carefully and lovingly built.

One day, while my father was away on an official tour, the phone rang, and in an instant, everything changed.

¹Handy, Charles. *The Second Curve: Thoughts on Reinventing Society*. London: Random House UK, 2016.

² Handy, Charles. "The Sigmoid Curve." The Open University, 2007.

https://www.open.edu/openlearn/pluginfile.php/632490/mod_resource/content/1/sst_ar07_10t_2.pdf.

He had passed away from a massive cardiac arrest.

There was no warning, no goodbye, just deafening silence where his presence used to be.

With him, everything we had built: our family's sense of security, our financial footing, my dreams of moving forward, came crashing down. What had felt like a steady climb suddenly turned into a freefall.

I was just 15, and Charles Handy's warning echoed with brutal clarity: "*The danger comes when you cling to the first curve too long*"¹.

But there was no time to cling. Everything changed at that moment and there was no gentle slope, no gradual decline, just a sudden rupture.

Our grief came fast, but reality came faster.

Relatives scrambled to crowdfund his funeral. My mother, who had never worked before, was suddenly thrust into a world she wasn't prepared for. And there I was, holding my engineering admission papers, what once felt like a ticket out, a dream within reach, now meaningless in a world that had turned upside down.

The numbness I felt wasn't just sorrow; it was panic made physical. A first curve severed mid-ascent.

In the days that followed, a storm of impossible questions consumed me. How could I leave my grieving mother alone? How could I support her when I could barely hold myself together? How would we survive? Could I even afford to study anymore?

Initiating the Second Curve: Institutional Compassion as Catalyst

In the chaotic aftermath, when our world was unraveling and every certainty had faded, the Indian School of Business stepped in. They didn't just offer condolences. They offered my mother a job and quietly took on the burden of funding my undergraduate education.

It wasn't a policy. It wasn't a procedure. It was compassion, operationalized, restoring our dignity and momentum.

They didn't just help us survive. They helped us begin again.

Handy argued that institutions must be humane communities of contribution¹. ISB did just that. By stepping in when it mattered the most, it lived out Handy's conviction that organizations must be measured not only by output, but by impact¹.

In that moment, ISB became more than a business school, it became a lifeline. A bridge between a life that had collapsed and one that was waiting to begin. It marked what Charles Handy calls "*the vital overlap period*", when the first curve ends and the second quietly begins, often without announcement¹.

Fifteen days after my father's passing, I boarded a train to join college. That farewell, leaving behind a home steeped in silence and sorrow, was the hardest moment of my life.

Every part of me wanted to stay. But staying wouldn't stop the world from moving. And so, with a tear-soaked resolve, I left, carrying grief in one hand and obligation in the other.

In the days that followed, I watched my mother transform from a grieving homemaker into a working professional, stepping into the harshest corners of reality without flinching. She didn't ease into it. She was hurled into survival.

Her mornings began at 5 am, not with rest or relief, but with the weight of a new reality and the resolve to face it anyway. Grief lingered in the corners of each day, but she kept moving. Not because she had healed, but because she had no choice.

And in her quiet, defiant forward push, I witnessed the purest form of resilience I have ever known.

Pedagogies of Resilience

Motivated by her example, I committed myself to education with renewed purpose. Not for grades, but to reclaim a future we had nearly lost. I graduated with strong results and secured multiple job offers even before completing my degree.

My first job wasn't just employment. It was oxygen. It gave us space to breathe, to feel safe again. It gave me room to hope beyond the next day.

Yet as I progressed, every milestone felt strangely detached. Each congratulatory email, every raise was met with a brief pride, followed by a deeper, unsettling silence, as if I were watching someone else's success from behind a glass wall.

I had rebuilt the structure of my life, but the soul of it still felt missing.

As Marcus Aurelius wrote, "*A man does not have to look about for the means of living, but for the way of living*"³.

I had found the means. But I was still searching for the way.

Multiplying Curves: Reinvention Through Strategic Pivots

Fueled by that early act of compassion, I set my sights on graduate studies in the US, arriving at New York University on a hard-earned merit scholarship. But dreams carry weight, and in New York, the financial burden quickly outgrew my means.

³ Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Translated by Gregory Hays. New York: Modern Library, 2003.

I made the painful decision to transfer to Wright State University. To the outside world, it looked like a step backward. To me, it was a deliberate, values-rooted pivot- a choice that preserved my scholarship and protected the integrity of my journey.

As Charles Handy writes, “*Effectiveness trumps efficiency*”¹. This wasn’t surrender or retreat. It was survival with intention. A small second curve to keep the larger arc alive.

Launching my career required a different kind of resilience, one that layered professional ambition on top of personal healing. I took on roles that offered both stability and steep learning curves, embodying Handy’s “*Shamrock Organization*”, not just as loyalty, but adaptability in motion¹.

Each promotion wasn’t just a resume bullet. It was quiet validation that even disrupted lives could be reassembled with purpose.

Returning to a business school environment, this time as a merit scholar at Chicago Booth, feels surreal. Back when I started, if someone had said “Chicago Booth”, I might have smiled politely and buried the thought. It wasn’t just distant. It was unthinkable.

And yet, here I am.

These very halls, which once would have echoed with the doubts of a boy fighting to stay afloat, now carry the quiet confidence of a man who has reimagined what’s possible.

As Handy wrote, “*The end is where we start from*”¹. And here, within this community, I have come to believe something even more profound: “*Communities complete individuals*”¹.

Stoicism as Emotional Infrastructure

In the midst of upheaval, Stoic philosophy became more than a framework. It became my emotional anchor. Marcus Aurelius’s reflection that “*what stands in the way becomes the way*” didn’t feel abstract. It felt lived³.

The Stoic principle of the dichotomy of control grounded me when everything felt uncertain³. I learned to focus on the only things truly mine: my effort, my mindset, and my response.

Slowly, rejection stopped feeling like failure and started feeling like redirection. Grief became a force I could shape, not just endure.

Through the writings of Epictetus to Seneca, I found solace in the belief that suffering wasn’t a punishment, but preparation⁴. And that the weight of change is not something to fear, but to carry with purpose.

⁴ Epictetus. *Enchiridion*. Translated by George Long. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012.

This mindset laid the emotional foundation for what Charles Handy describes as the essence of the second curve: *“The courage to leave comfort behind, the clarity to recognize when growth has plateaued, and the humility to begin again”*¹.

When I applied to Booth, it wasn’t just an act of ambition. It was a conscious embrace of reinvention. It was not a detour, but the next deliberate curve in my journey.

Framing Reinvention: Drucker as a Complement to Handy

While Handy’s Second Curve offered metaphorical scaffolding for my reinvention, it was Peter Drucker’s wisdom that gave it pulse and precision⁵⁶, transforming strategy into daily practice.

Drucker wrote *“Management is about human beings. Its task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their strengths effective and their weakness irrelevant”*⁵.

That conviction that management is not just science but a liberal art⁵, shaped how I chose to lead, especially in the fragile beginnings of my second curve.

Where Handy taught me to recognize inflection points and summon courage to consciously pivot, Drucker helped define how to lead through them: with intent, with empathy and with a focus on enabling others to survive⁶.

His principle of *“planned abandonment”*, the discipline to release what no longer serves⁷⁸, helped me reframe my transfer from NYU not as a failure, but as alignment with purpose.

His belief that *“the best way to predict future is to create it”* echoed as I stepped into student-led consulting at Booth⁵, shaping opportunities not just for myself, but for others.

In sum, Drucker’s lens did not shift the story from Handy’s. It enriched it, grounding the Second Curve not in abstraction but in the quiet, continuous work of leadership, contribution, and conscious renewal⁶.

Leadership on the Second Curve: Stewardship and Service

At Booth, I continue to lead initiatives centered on career development and social impact consulting.

These efforts aren’t just extracurriculars, they are a living testament to Handy’s legacy curve: *“Success not as a culmination, but as a contribution”*¹.

⁵ Drucker, Peter F. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

⁶ Drucker, Peter F. *The Definitive Drucker: Challenges for Tomorrow’s Executives*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

⁷ Drucker, Peter F. “Planned Abandonment.” *Three Minute Leadership* (blog), March 1, 2020.

<https://threeminuteleadership.com/2020/03/01/management-is-about-human-beings/>

⁸ “Planned Abandonment | Explanation | Peter Drucker.” YouTube video, 6:45. Posted by Vivek, May 2, 2024.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcGQrDVvNOY>

Creating pathways for others to access their own second curves brings to life Drucker's insight that *"the best way to predict the future is to create it"*⁵.

My leadership was never defined by roles or recognition. It meant showing up when it was hardest, listening when people spoke louder, and remembering what it felt like to stand on the edge with nothing but uncertainty.

I have collaborated on student-led consulting projects for impact-driven organizations not just to solve problems, but to reaffirm that growth is not a straight line.

It's a spiral, each turn shaped by resilience, compassion, and the quiet power of second chances.

Conclusion: Full Circle and Forward

The corridor that opened this story now stretches ahead, not just as a path I walk, but as a reflection of how many I can walk with. That, to me, is the truest success of any second curve.

From a shattered stillness of adolescence to a place of leadership at Booth, my journey has been one of conscious reinvention. Handy and Drucker offered the frameworks. Stoicism became my anchor¹⁵³. And institutions like ISB lit the first spark.

At Booth, the question is no longer, "What can I achieve?" but rather "What can I enable?" That, to me, is the essence of the Second Curve. Not a solitary ascent, but a shared elevation.

A journey from being helped to becoming help. From receiving dignity to building it for others. Making the second curve not just a theory, but something lived, seen and passed on¹.

And today, when I glance at my reflection, I no longer just see someone who survived. I see a steward of second chances, shaped by disruption, refined through resilience, and committed to lifting as I climb.

Framing the Journey: The ASCEND Framework

As I reflect on this journey, from rupture that redefined everything I knew to a reinvention that shaped who I am today, a deeper realization emerges. While the path was uniquely mine, the arc of transformation I followed feels uncannily universal.

Over time, I began to see not just a story, but a pattern. A model rooted in lived emotion, yet resonant far beyond the personal. That realization became ASCEND, a six-stage framework that distills how individuals and institutions can move from disruption to renewal, not just to survive, but to serve.

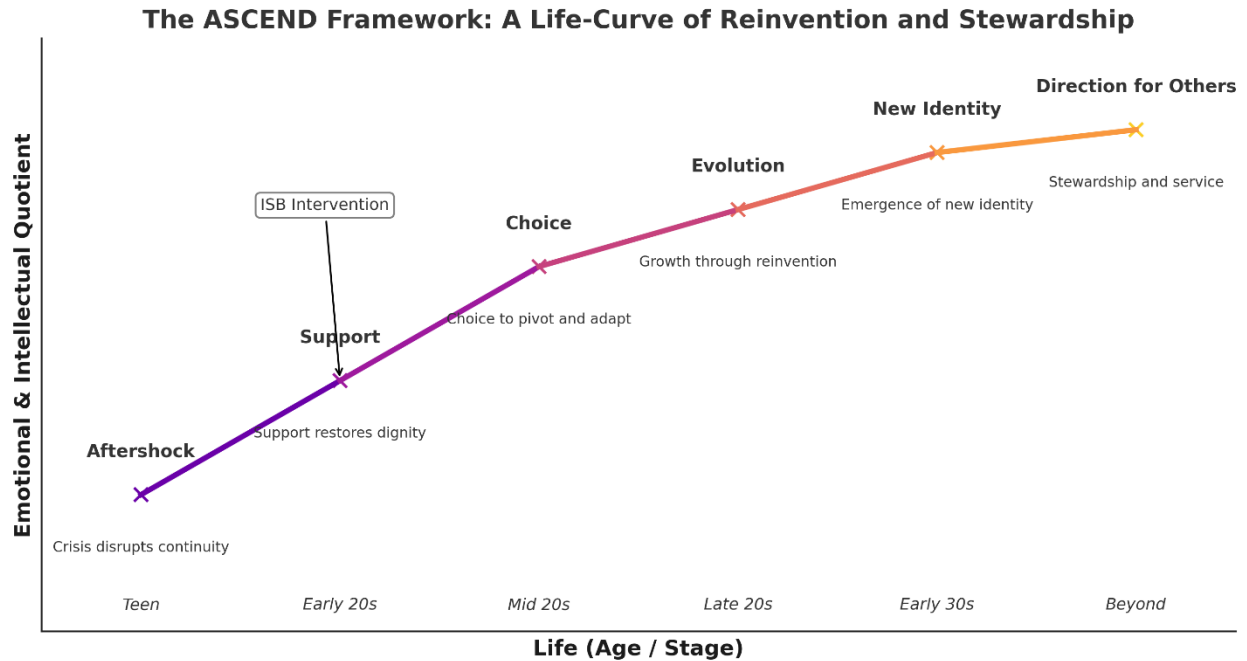
ASCEND does not follow a straight line. It represents a deliberate, reflective ascent, mirroring the way real transformation unfolds: uncertain, iterative, yet ultimately elevating. This ascent progresses through distinct but interconnected stages, each representing a step in the journey from rupture to reinvention.

The six stages of this framework are:

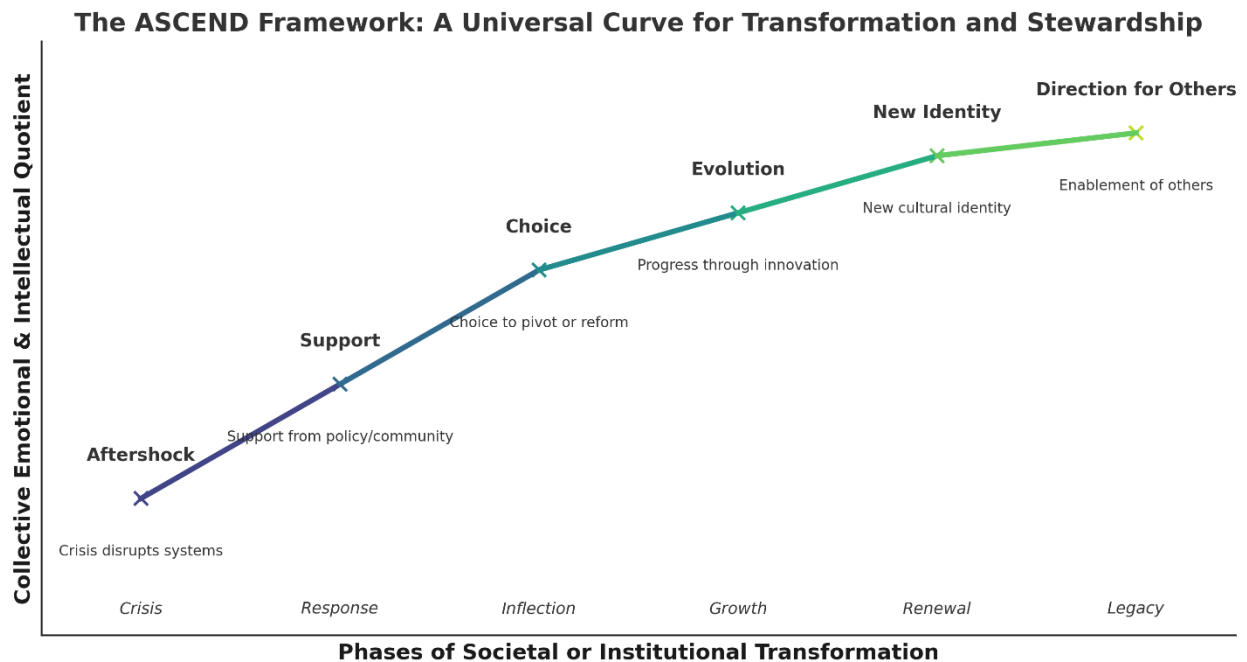
- **Aftershock:** The destabilizing event that shatters continuity and demands reorientation. For an individual, it might be a personal loss. For a society, it could be a pandemic, economic collapse, or a crisis of identity. In either case, it marks the end of the first curve.
- **Support:** Catalytic interventions that restore possibility and dignity. This support can come from institutions, mentors, policies, or communities. In my case, it was ISB's human response. At a systemic level, it is a call for compassion by design, the proactive creation of social structures that cushion disruption before it escalates into a systemic breakdown.
- **Choice:** The inflection point, whether subtle or bold, when one shifts from passive endurance to active authorship. At the societal level, it may take the form of reform, grassroots movements, or national redirection. This is where survival becomes reinvention.
- **Evolution:** The long and iterative process of rebuilding. Not a single leap, but an accumulation of new mindsets, capabilities, and direction. For institutions, this may mean upskilling, reform, or cultural revitalization. At this stage, resilience is transformed into lasting change.
- **New Identity:** The emergence of a self, or a society, no longer defined by what was lost, but by what has been learned, reimagined, and rebuilt. This is not a return to normal, but the creation of a more purposeful and clarified future.
- **Direction for Others:** The culmination of the second curve, when personal ascent becomes shared elevation. At the individual level, this is stewardship. At the societal level, it manifests through service, policy, or mentorship, enabling others to activate their own second curves.

To bring this path to life and make it not just understandable but actionable, I visualized the ASCEND journey through two distinct representations:

- A. **The Personal Curve**, which maps the emotional and intellectual evolution across my life stages, rooted in lived experience.



B. The Universal Curve, which presents a broader model for societal or institutional transformation, illustrating how second curves can scale across systems.



Unlike static models that treat change as linear or procedural, ASCEND is dynamic.

It recognizes that real growth is emotional, strategic, and often nonlinear. This approach draws on Charles Handy's *Second Curve*¹, is animated by Drucker's insistence that *management is a liberal art*⁵ and is sustained by the stoic conviction that *what stands in the way becomes the way*³.

Disruption does not end the story. It reveals the leader within.

GenAI Prompts used

1. Check for grammatical errors.
2. Check the word count.
3. Create a professional, stylized curve graph titled "The ASCEND Framework: A Life-Curve of Reinvention and Stewardship." The x-axis should represent Life (Age / Stage) and include labels: Teen, Early 20s, Mid 20s, Late 20s, Early 30s, and Beyond. The y-axis should be labeled Emotional & Intellectual Quotient. Plot a smooth upward curve segmented into six distinct stages: Aftershock ("Crisis disrupts continuity"), Support ("Support restores dignity"), Choice ("Choice to pivot and adapt"), Evolution ("Growth through reinvention"), New Identity ("Emergence of new identity"), and Direction for Others ("Stewardship and service"). Include a callout annotation at the "Support" stage labeled "ISB Intervention" with an arrow pointing to the curve. Use a gradient color scheme starting with purple at Aftershock and transitioning through pink, orange, and into gold at Direction for Others. Style the graph with a modern, professional aesthetic.
4. Create a professional, stylized curve graph titled "The ASCEND Framework: A Universal Curve for Transformation and Stewardship." The x-axis should be labeled Phases of Societal or Institutional Transformation and include the following sub-labels: Crisis, Response, Inflection, Growth, Renewal, and Legacy. The y-axis should be labeled Collective Emotional & Intellectual Quotient. The curve should rise smoothly from left to right, segmented into six distinct stages—Aftershock ("Crisis disrupts systems"), Support ("Support from policy/community"), Choice ("Choice to pivot or reform"), Evolution ("Progress through innovation"), New Identity ("New cultural identity"), and Direction for Others ("Enablement of others"). Use a gradient color transition from deep blue at the beginning to green at the peak to symbolize the emotional and intellectual ascent. Include subtle icons or markers at each stage and ensure the design is clean.