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WHAT MAKES INDIA'S
TOP LEADERS TICK -
THE SECRET BEHIND THEIR SUCCESS



“I gave it all up for a purpose.”

Sahil Dharia founder of Soothe Healthcare gave up his green card and came back to India to help bring about a change by making simple and affordable healthcare products for the masses. He wants to prove that purpose and profits can work together. He shares with B&E his unique and inspiring journey. “I gave it all up for a purpose.”



her. Not just did she take a pay cut she later on even bought stake in the company with an investment. Today she is one of the shareholders of the company. It was situational you see. The company needed her and I knew we could not do without a brand ambassador like her. I took my chances and it worked out fine

B&E: How are leaders keeping themselves relevant especially in today's fast changing environment? How do you keep yourself abreast with all the new developments happening around you?

(SD): A leader needs to be a constant learner. To be that he needs to be humble and willing to learn. If you are not humble and if you stop the process of learning the world will pass you by. When I quit my job I was at the peak of my career, I was the king of the hill, the Global Head of Investment Research at Thomson Reuters, a young fellow running a large business. I could have remained there but I thought to myself “If I am so damn good then I should be able to build another Mount Everest and not sit on one for the rest of my life.” The urge to learn something new forced me to pick up a whole new set of skill sets that I never would have learnt wearing a tie and sliver Tiffany cufflinks. So in a nutshell being a constant learner, looking out constantly for new challenges and not being complacent with what you've got and a deep sense of humility is what will keep you ahead in the game.

B&E: How important is it to have a mentor?

(SD): I think mentors help. In the end we

Conflicts are essential for growth. Conflicts create arguments for better outcomes

are what our mentors want us to be and for me my mentor is my old boss the MD of UBS Investment Bank, Mr. John. He was my boss 15 years ago. He is my mentor and was the agent of change in my life. At 32 I told him I am bored of this job and I want to do something on my own. He said “I have been waiting for this call for years. Start something new and tell me how much money you need”. So I guess if you have the urge to do something different from within then it's a mentor who can galvanize the action.

B&E: The most important quality of a leader?

(SD): If you ask me what is the one thing and only one thing that a leader needs then I would say it's the ability to see something in a different way or visualize something the way it could be rather than the way it is. The greatest of leaders have gone ahead and done just that. What others thought was impossible they went ahead and did it. I never thought I could quit my job and my salary with all those zeroes in it and start a factory. I never in my wildest of dreams thought I could do it. So while many may look at a situation as a problem the leader sees it as an opportunity and that's where the difference lies.

B&E: You think leadership can be taught?

(SD): It can be taught provided one is willing to learn. Here I would like to add that leadership needs to be redefined. Leadership is not always about running a Rs 5,000 crore company. Leadership is everywhere. A mother at home is a leader and it's these everyday leaders that we need the most in India.

B&E: Success stories are mostly written by a one-man army or is there more to it?

(SD): It has to be a team effort because people need to bind themselves, to believe in the dream and be ready to give their life for it. Even today we like to call ourselves a start-up and we realize the importance of building high performing teams. Money is not a problem really –there is a lot of 'start-up' money running around. In fact today money is chasing a good investment, good businesses. So it's

not really money but what's most essential is high performing teams. The easiest way to do that is to build complimentary teams. It's not about me and people like me rather it's about people who think differently from me and who can bring different competencies to the team. Therefore a team is required as I can't do everything myself.

So if there are two things that are the most important in any success story it would be 1) Complimentary teams 2) and Conflict management. The moment you have a complimentary team they are going to fight, there is going to be conflict and you need to resolve that conflict. These are the two things I would consider as essential. Conflicts are essential for growth. Conflicts create arguments for better outcomes. If everybody agrees to what is being said at the table then nobody is paying attention. There are so many board meetings where you see everybody nodding.

B&E: You have grown so much so fast, you are managing so much stuff – what is your time management secret that makes you accomplish so much in such a short span of time?

(SD): I admit I also have challenges here and I too wish I could manage my time better- this is still a development area for me too, but if there is one thing that actually helps me is (and I don't necessarily think it's a good habit. It could just be a bad habit) the first thing I do is actually visit my calendar, and that is also the last thing I do at the end of the day. The first question I ask myself is “What is it that I want to get done today? What are the one or two things that I must get done today?” That drives me and helps me to avoid the numerous distractions that come along during the day. So it's not about getting a whole lot of things done rather it's about getting the right things done. The things that move the needle.

B&E: Life is not just about the successes it's also about the numerous failures. How do you keep yourself motivated?

(SD): As an entrepreneur my answer to this is – “Why did I quit my job?”

I am one of the few guys who quit my green card to come back to India. I was teaching. I was a professor at a top University. I gave it all up for a purpose. It is that purpose which keeps me motivated. I started Soothe Healthcare for 3 reasons. First this company is all about being in the 'Blue Ocean' markets. I want to have vast and deep blue oceans otherwise it's not worth my time. Second we have to make money and third whatever I do has to be high in social impact. I could sell tobacco and missiles and make money but a sanitary napkin is a very high socio-impact product. It keeps girls in schools. Investing in a woman has the highest ROI. A strong sense of purpose drives me to keep

going on. While all my peers are doing the cool stuff with e-commerce, apps, digital etc here I am setting up a factory and we all know it's not easy running a factory in India. But I chose this because it was a purpose close to my heart. So in a nutshell –PURPOSE- you need a purpose to keep you motivated and that purpose should not be money then no matter what comes your way you are ready to face it. For me personally coming from a white collar MNC job to a factory has been a tough transition but my purpose to create a social impact, find my blue ocean and make money along the way has been sufficient to keep me motivated the last four years.

B&E: The secret to handling failure?

(SD): Success does not teach you anything. Failure is your best teacher. Remember that and just learn from it. Fail as many times as

If you have a purpose and you stay true to that purpose you get all the motivation you need

you can, for that's what teaches you the most. Success only makes you arrogant. Every time you feel you are the greatest just go and do a start-up and you will immediately learn your true value.

B&E :- Your secret to work life balance?

(SD): Frankly I am not very good at it. I wish I was better in this but I am working on it. Long hours are imperative for anyone in a high performing environment but one needs to pause sometimes too. I realize that and try to keep Sundays aside to spend more time with my family, play squash.

B&E: Leaders you admire?

(SD): Hillary Clinton, Michael Bloomberg, and Narendra Modi. Hillary for her poise and the grace she showed competing against Donald Trump. I don't know of many who would have been able to keep it together the way she had. She remained graceful under such pressure which is a great skill.

Michael Bloomberg. How he transitioned from being a billionaire businessman to a successful politician and became the mayor of New York. Unlike Donald Trump he is not brash and has successfully run Mayor for New York city and done good things.

Narendra Modi for all the good and bad he is

after all the first Prime Minister to have said clearly “ This is what I want to do. I want to make in India, I want to make things easier.” He has set a yard stick and no one has had the guts to do that. I laud him for his vision and his efforts to do that.

B&E: Words of advice to someone who wants to become a leader, wants to bring about a change?

(SD): I think if you have integrity and purpose a lot can be done. I was recently a part of this panel which was giving awards to a boy who was building toilets in India, as a part of the Swach Bharat work. He is not just creating social impact but he is also making money. I am not saying go and build toilets but what I am trying to say is there are many important problems we can solve in India other than being the next yoga company on the internet or being the next company that delivers medicines to you. There are many problems that India has to solve so let's think and try to solve those problems and as long as you have integrity and purpose in mind it can be done. I am making sanitary napkins. It's a simple product but it can create a huge impact.

B&E: What made you think of sanitary napkins as a tool to bring about a change.

(SD): I was a professor for leadership and management in Symbiosis and that's where I met my partner Dr Srinii Rao and he was telling me how we could put billions of dollars in India and build super hospitals and it would always remain a drop in the ocean because we have such a huge population. So I asked him “ What's your solution?” He replied “We want to take simple and affordable healthcare products to the masses. The key is to prevent issues from happening rather than treating the issues. So a sanitary napkin costs only two rupees yet today 75,000 women die of cervical cancer each year, 1,50,000 additionally are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year. A sanitary napkin can reduce those numbers. Sanitary napkin keeps a girl in school. If she is in school tomorrow she can get a job, if she has a job she can be productive. So it was nothing but simple economics that made me do what I am doing. It has high social impact, it has a blue ocean and it has money. It is this that also made me diversify into various other products. India has about 7 crore diabetics and another seven and a half crores are at a pre diabetic stage. So we are launching these 'diabetic kits' which make it affordable to make testing blood sugar in India. Just the way the e-commerce guys showed the world what could be done my work can show how purpose and profits can work together I am hopeful many more entrepreneurs will join in. I am sure India's best companies are yet to come. The next 10-20 years will hopefully change the Indian landscape. **B&E**