Shiv Krishnan

The Cyclical Nature of Success

Though he's now a successful entrepreneur living the American Dream, Shiv Krishnan will never forget the man dressed all in white who arrived one day at the door of his modest house in Madras, India. At twelve years of age, Shiv was surprised to see the 6'2" tall man suddenly fall to his knees at his grandfather's feet in a gesture of respect. Shiv's grandfather had dedicated sixty years of his life to the education of over five thousand of the city's impoverished children, and this man had been one of those kids. He had just gotten a call from the Prime Minister of India appointing him Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the man immediately hopped in his car to come pay homage to the elder who had changed his life.

"*That* is the power of education," Shiv proclaims today. Now the Founder and CEO of INDUS Corporation, an information technology (IT) solutions firm servicing the Federal government, the topic remains paramount to his life philosophy and philanthropic pursuits. "In education, you don't impart money; you impart opportunity," he explains. As someone born and raised in a part of the world where both resources and opportunity were oftentimes so scant, Shiv could discern from an early age the true magnitude of the idea and has since held it as paramount in his mind.

Shiv's father was the finance director for a large engineering and power generation equipment company, a job which required constant relocation to remote areas of India with little infrastructure and few educational opportunities. When Shiv reached the age of five, his parents decided to send him to live with his grandparents in Madras, where he would have access to education and stability. Life remained relatively calm for him until he attended college

and had the opportunity to meet a new cast of people that would begin molding him into the man he is today.

It wasn't long before Shiv befriended a fellow student whose grandfather had been a poor boy peddling newspapers but grew up to build the largest newspaper chain in India—an empire that spanned the entire country. "I was taken with the work ethic; with the singular focus; with the energy involved in building an enterprise and creating that sheer volume of jobs and opportunity," he marvels. His entrepreneurial flame had been sparked, and to feed it, he organized an entrepreneurship seminar at his college, bringing in speakers from small businesses to teach about the process of founding a company and the governmental support available for such an endeavor.

After receiving his Bachelors degree in Chemical Engineering, he immediately relocated to the U.S. to commence graduate school at Clarkson University in upstate New York in 1979. "My initial thinking was to return to India after a couple of years, but it's all about exposure," says Shiv. Taken with American society's unparalleled attitude of openness to new ideas and entrepreneurship, he accepted a job at the Commonwealth of Virginia upon receiving his degree. It was here that he first practiced the idea of using computers to write programs that might increase productivity. After noting initial work by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop computerized models to predict dispersion of chemicals polluting the atmosphere, he started utilizing his own coursework and Chemical Engineering background to do the same. He supplemented his efforts with computer courses and started using computers to solve problems at a time when few others had begun to do such a thing.

Shiv then left the Commonwealth to assume a position with Versar, Inc., an environmental consulting company servicing organizations like the EPA and American Management Systems (AMS), a premier IT and systems company at the time. He later transitioned over to AMS and assumed employment there in 1984, the same year he married his beloved wife, Meena. Then, in 1987, Shiv received a particularly interesting offer from an acquaintance who owned a research and development company with about a hundred employees consulting to NASA. The man wanted to expand into the Washington metro area and thought Shiv was perfect for the job. Leaping to the challenge, Shiv launched the Washington branch from the spare bedroom of his apartment. Three years later, he had grown the branch to a hundred people and was doing $5 million in revenue, later establishing offices in Boston and North Carolina as well. The company, however, did not like the stress and inconsistency associated with consulting projects and decided to focus on NASA R&D—a confinement that didn't jive with Shiv's intuition and entrepreneurial inclinations.

As technology continued to evolve and present new tools for him to leverage in providing solutions to various companies, Shiv began to consider starting a business of his own. Meena had a solid job at Bell Atlantic, which would later become Verizon, and the two reflected on how they were truly living the American Dream: a nice house in the suburbs, two cars, and a beautiful daughter with another on the way. Recognizing that the risk would be harder and harder to take the more they succumbed to a daily grind, and with Meena's support and encouragement, he took the plunge in 1993, and INDUS Corporation was born. Three years later, he bought the business he had been working in previously, bringing INDUS's size to about sixty employees. After participating in a number of commercial contracts, Shiv then decided to target government contracts instead, leveraging earlier relationships to make the transition. INDUS has since evolved exponentially, now bringing in $100 million in revenue annually.

Much of the company's success stems from that pivotal decision to switch the focus of its clientele, and it's no mystery why. The U.S. government is perhaps the largest conceivable customer there is, spending approximately $525 billion per year on a vast array of products and services. Close to $100 billion of this is spent on IT alone. This figure is steadily increasing as the tremendously competitive economic climate tends toward more efficient and intelligent methods of work. Technology, in turn, stands out as the best and most cost-effective option in terms of improving productivity and solving problems. Thus, the U.S. government's focus on technology has helped to keep it at the forefront of leadership and innovation.

Shiv remarks, however, that beyond its sheer breadth and the complex rules and regulations involved in the bidding process, the government is no different from any other client. "The conversation is simple," Shiv says. "What are your business challenges?" He then analyzes these challenges and considers the possible technology and solutions, whether available or conceivable, that might increase productivity or cut costs, allowing them to better serve the citizens of the U.S.

But what allows INDUS to distinguish itself and carve a piece of success from this industry? The company is rendered so unique, first of all, through its specialization in particular technology areas. Because IT is so broad, they focus on the areas in which they excel—namely, geospatial and data management. "We are very good at managing the enormous amounts of data coming in and then converting it to meaningful information that can be further distilled into actionable intelligence for our customers," Shiv explains. INDUS further stands out from its competition to the degree that it assists in managing the software assets of their customers when they lack the skill sets required to do so themselves. These services are further enhanced through its ability to advise and implement security solutions, safeguarding their clients' infrastructures against the escalating threats and vulnerabilities plaguing the cyber landscape today.

Beyond expertise, INDUS is known for its excellence in customer service, which is critical in the government contracting world where past performance plays such a vital role in establishing credibility and winning future bids. Their reputation is further confirmed by their achievement of the latest international certifications for quality processes and standards and overall industry best practices, and they maintain the credentials that are very specific to

their particular areas of expertise within their industry. "These certifications let the government know that our service is of the highest quality and that they can put a lot of faith in our company," Shiv explains. "But still, at the end of the day, our quality is based on our ability to attract and retain the best people," he concedes. INDUS currently employs a workforce of approximately 450.

"My biggest success has not been building a $100 million company," says Shiv. "Rather, it is being able to impact so many peoples' lives in a very positive way and being able to have an impact on the overall community as a good corporate citizen." Keenly cognizant of the symbiotic relationship existing between company and community, he stresses the give-and-take of the dynamic. "It is important for a company like INDUS to give back to the community in terms of time and funding so that the community can continue to enhance itself," he explains. "A vibrant community will attract talented and fulfilled individuals, who will in turn provide a good hiring pool for companies like INDUS. High-quality companies are thus attracted to the community and compelled to invest in it, perpetuating the cycle."

In advising young entrepreneurs today, Shiv's primary tenet is to follow your passion. He follows up on this with an urging to identify one's strengths and to continue to practice and hone these talents. "If you can create that kind of focus in your life," he says, "you can achieve tremendous things." The relevance of this advice cannot be underscored enough in this age of unparalleled noise and distraction, all of which threaten to clutter one's focus with extraneous considerations.

In achieving this level of excellence, however, one must also seek to understand the paramount importance of risk. "You gain a lot by giving up a lot," he explains. "People think that if they give up something, they lose control, but it's to the contrary." Nowhere is this truth more evident than in Shiv's own experience, most notably when he and Meena signed the paperwork for a $250,000 credit line for INDUS. He can still recall the look on Meena's face, as she can recall the look on his, after they left the meeting in which they signed over their home and everything they had worked for throughout the past seventeen years, thinking, "What have we done?" Were it not for their strength of mind to assume these

types of risk, INDUS would not be the company it is today.

Through Shiv's advice, the cyclical relationship expressed between company and community is in many ways replicated across generations—an almost poetic truth demonstrated in many ways by his own daughters. After a family trip to India, the two young ladies were struck by the very same poverty that Shiv's grandfather had dedicated his life to overcoming so many years ago. In characteristic Krishnan fashion, Preeti and Priya have since launched their own foundation, called "Save a Child Now." As executive directors of the enterprise, their impact has already begun to form. Through Shiv's example, then, we are compelled to re-conceptualize of the measure of success, casting it not in dollar signs but in compassion, in community, and in the creation of a better future not only for ourselves and our children, but *through* ourselves and our children.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area*, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and Gordon's Blog.*