

YOU
DON'T
NEED
A GODFATHER

CREATE YOUR OWN SUCCESS

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Elango R.



Tata McGraw Hill Education Private Limited
NEW DELHI

McGraw-Hill Offices

New Delhi New York St Louis San Francisco Auckland Bogotá Caracas
Kuala Lumpur Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan Montreal
San Juan Santiago Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto



Tata McGraw-Hill

Published by Tata McGraw Hill Education Private Limited,
7 West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008

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This edition can be exported from India only by the publishers,
Tata McGraw Hill Education Private Limited.

ISBN (13): 978-1-25-900281-6

ISBN (10): 1-25-900281-0

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Typeset at Text-o-Graphics, B-1/56, Arawali Apartment, Sector 34, Noida 201301 and
printed at Rajkamal Electric Press, Plot No. 2, Phase IV, HSIIDC, Kundli, Sonapat,
Haryana - 131028

Cover Printer: Rajkamal Electric Press

Cover Design: Shinto Kallattu

Illustrations: Bijoy V

For

*My little guru and
seven-year-old son,*

Agastya

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Introduction

WARNING! READ BEFORE YOU JUMP ...

Often success, failure, or mediocrity is attributed to genetics, education, divine intervention, lines on your palms, circumstances, luck and even godfathers.

I don't agree. The path to success is unnecessarily mystified.

I know that "we" are responsible for our own success and not the perfect alignment of celestial bodies or earthly godfathers.

This is based on my own journey from the cubicle to the corner office, which has been filled with epic failures, boring ordinariness, and spectacular successes – from management trainee to now, the Chief HR Officer of MphasiS, a billion dollar company with over 40,000 people. As CHRO, I have the vantage point to observe and coach people across the spectrum of their careers from the fresh, wet behind the ears graduate who thinks he can change the world, to the jaded manager who hit the glass ceiling midway through his career, along with star performers and successful executives thrown in.

You Don't Need a Godfather is a practical, conversational, jargonless book packed with interesting stories, humor and a bit of sarcasm.

As you read, you will catch yourself nodding, thinking of times when you were in the same situations as the characters in this book. The stories and lessons will resonate because they are not off-the-shelf theories or based on dated research or back-seat driving. These people and challenges exist! These are everyday incidents and learnings from the bustling workplace where competition, envy and aspiration run wild.

And in true movie style, there is a twist in the tale – Agastya, my little guru and seven-year-old son has helped crystallize some of the greatest lessons in success

by peeling away the emotion, jargon and attachment that we sometimes have to face in the name of office etiquette. Through his uncluttered perspective, you will be able to define and refine your success.

His childish utterances and observations will provide you with the clarity that only a child can. For example,

“What did you do in office Appa?”

“Oh, very busy day, I had meetings through the day.”

“But what work did you do?”

Uhhh!!

Or his anguished cry “Appa, I hate Ireland!” which resulted in the famous ‘Ireland Syndrome’.

Over the next few hours, you will be taken on a roller coaster ride. So here are the instructions before you strap yourself in ...

- ❑ View Section I as an induction to the world of success and realize that the creator of this new world is YOU.
- ❑ Need a guide to the commonsensical essentials to survive in that realm? Move forward to Section II. What you should do, what you shouldn't ... all you knew but didn't pay attention to.
- ❑ “*You can run, you can hide, but you can't escape.*” With the previous section building foundation of essentials, Section III gives you the master key to success – execution!
- ❑ After paying your dues, Section IV will unlock the secrets of the corporate world – get trapped, learn to manage, and don't forget to laugh.

Good luck and have loads of fun as you map your success.

And don't skip (as many of us tend to do) the foreword from Jerry Rao – banker, wine maker, software mogul, poet, art collector and now, low-cost housing champion. He made the journey that this book charts many years ago and many times over. I couldn't think of a better person to flag off this discovery for you.

Elango R.

Foreword

I have often wondered why business schools do not pay more attention to teaching their students how to ‘manage themselves’. Elango has now come up with just the right book to help young professionals plan and manage their careers and in some measure even their lives. He brings to his text the delightful insights of Dilbert without the attendant cynicism. He uses mini-cases in the style of business schools making it easy for today’s professionals to relate to them. He introduces his son Agastya as a principal character. And we know that true wisdom sprouts from the mouths of children.

Elango is ideologically opposed to whiners who blame the environment, the boss, colleagues, or even bad luck for their distressed situations. He is convinced that we can and should pull up our socks and control our destinies without looking for external succor. I, for one, believe that he does underestimate the importance of randomness and luck (good or bad) in matters involving the human predicament. But this is done in the good cause of putting down whiners and dissuading them from getting into a self-fulfilling downward spiral, which they easily can.

Elango does not claim to have the right answers for every situation. His approach is to encourage people to examine their own reactions to situations. At the end of the day, we have greater control over what we think, say and do rather than over the hazy environment in which we have very little say. This is fundamentally the managerial approach – or at least it should be the approach, of a good manager.

Risk-taking, awareness of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, the ability to discern and avoid traps in one’s comfort zone – these and other themes are explored and revisited in different guises. The book becomes a good descriptor of journeys undertaken by others who have been there and done that. In the

process it succeeds in holding a mirror up to us which we can use to navigate the “endless ocean” of meetings, conference calls, presentations, memos, emails and even more meetings, which is the collective fate of modern managers. In fact, Elango even recommends the physical act of looking into a mirror as a useful initiative and has much to say on trying to look at ourselves through the eyes of others.

Career planning has been too often relegated to a one-hour annual discussion with a defensive boss or a bored Human Resources professional, with the session entirely devoted to pleasantries and inane doses of ‘*gyan-giving*’. It is important for the young managerial aspirant never to forget that it is his or her career that is being talked about – not that of some abstract disembodied entity. And there is no one who has a greater interest in their career than themselves. I have come across two kinds of careerists (and let’s not be coy – we are all careerists). The first category manager feels good because she got promoted, she became the youngest V.P. in the company, she made it to President in record time and so on. But if you ask her what she achieved in terms of market share, customer service, technological innovation, morale-building and so on, she is silent perhaps because rightly she has little to say. The second category manager is not oblivious to promotions or job titles, but she sees genuine objective achievements, e.g., increasing market share, improving customer service, introducing progressive innovations and other such actions as her direct contribution, which would then as a corollary lead to promotions and other career rewards. It is my hope that Elango will write a second book soon, and he will devote attention to how each of us can work on becoming a Manager of the second category.

For now, enjoy this funny, unpretentious, and lucid book. Read it in a hurry and then re-read parts slowly to savor the words.

Jerry Rao

Chairman, Value and Budget Housing Corporation

Founder Mphasis

Acknowledgments

I promised myself not to turn this in to an Oscar acceptance speech, thanking everyone including my neighbor's dog. But this book would not have been possible without many people pitching in, so here goes the speech ... minus the dog!

Arathi – my wife, friend and coach – without her patience, unquestioning support and gentle reminders, this book would not have seen the light of day.

Amma, Appa – thank you for the wonderful education and for instilling in me, strong work ethics and values.

Karthick – my brother and first disciple.

The four girls who balanced their day jobs, the book, and their families.

Suraksha – my only supporter in the team and protector from the other three.

Shalu – confidant, sparring partner and friend who gave me that extra push and shoulder.

Mamta – brain trust, source of stories and the first to believe this book could happen.

Shubhraa – keeper of the manuscript editor and one who set standards high.

Vijay, Sumeet, Aadya and Jyoti – for spending all those weekends alone while the girls worked on the book.

Ganesh Ayyar – for being a rock of support, P.A. Krishnan – for introducing me to Tata McGraw Hill and Dinesh Venugopal – for being my sounding board.

Acknowledgments

Jerry Rao – for being a mentor, guide and supporter.

People who made the writing real – Bandu Jayaprakash, Pradeep Jayaraman, Amuleek Birjal and all the others who shared their stories.

Team from Tata McGraw Hill – Patrick Chan for helping me wade through the publishing waters, Vibhor Kataria for the steady hand and Noaman for seeing me through.

Arathi Menon – for the title, Uncle Sastry and all the editors who took the time to read and provide feedback. Bijoy V for the illustrations.

Sudhir Sarnobat – for the title research, marketing tips and for always being there. Mahavir Chopra for taking us online.

Ester Martinez and the ‘People Matters’ team for all their support, especially Shinto K. for the cover design.

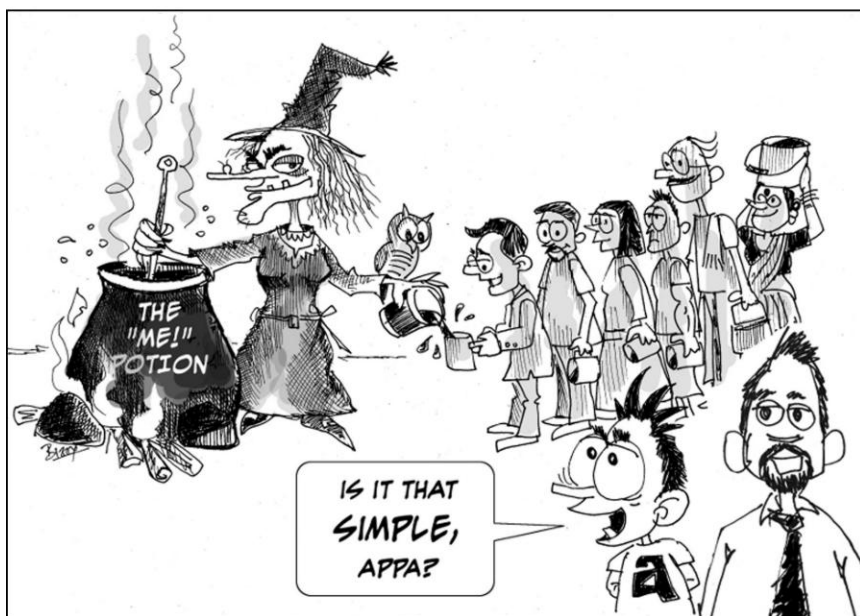
Siddhartha V.G. of Café Coffee Day for putting his heft behind the book.

All my blog subscribers and column readers – your comments and feedback were where the seed for the book was sown.

And finally, a special thank you to all Mphasians – you are my inspiration.

Elango R.

SECTION I: I Make ME



*Learn to fail, watch a cricket match, and say "I will know."
While you are at it, bust some common beliefs, build your core
and reinforce your inner compass.*

Chapter 1: Appa! I Hate Ireland!



Get ahead of the 'Ireland Syndrome' – Winning and losing have one thing in common...

2pm, March 6, 2011, Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bangalore, India

It was Agastya, my seven-year-old son's first outing at the stadium for a cricket match – the ICC World Cup 2011, Group B Match playoffs. India was playing Ireland, who had started the series as an underdog, right after they beat England and shocked everyone. Agastya was really excited, this being his first experience in competitive sports. He was cheering every ball bowled – wicket or no wicket, and fell silent with the crowd with every boundary. My wife and I were happy watching him have fun.

Then the Indian team came out to bat. Seeing Sachin Tendulkar at the crease, he started running up and down the aisles, unable to contain his excitement. Suddenly things took a turn for the worst. Sachin was out, runs were tough to come by, and soon another wicket fell; it looked like India would lose. Agastya went silent, curled up in his seat, face cradled in his palms, looking dejected with the tears threatening to overflow.

Seeing Agastya upset, I put my arms around him to comfort and tell him that the game was not over yet. With tears in his eyes, really angry, in his childish naiveté he said, “Appa, I hate Ireland!!”

“Why Agastya? They are playing well.”

“Yeah, but India may lose!” He was gritting his teeth and some choice words from a child's vocabulary were thrown at Team Ireland. He was upset with Ireland – Big time.

Fortunately his mood lifted when Yusuf Pathan smashed a few sixes and India managed a win. Phew! That is more stress than any seven-year-old should have to handle.

However, his “I hate Ireland” pronouncement stayed with me. Why had Agastya focused on Ireland as the cause for India’s bad play? Why blame Ireland for playing well? Shouldn’t he have been upset with the Indian team?

Come Monday, I walked into our quarterly business reviews with the CEO. All business heads were presenting their team’s performance for the last quarter. The teams that were doing well were patting themselves on the back, explaining how they overcame tough situations. They were full of praise for themselves and their leadership. Even HR and Finance were included in the glory roster. It was pure joy.

The teams that weren’t doing well were a study in contrast. Everything and everybody didn’t measure up except themselves. They tried hard, pushed for results but, “you know marketing did not generate enough leads, clients did not forecast well, recruitment didn’t get people on time ...” the blame list was endless!

That’s when the penny dropped and it clicked. Wasn’t this like Agastya’s reaction to the India vs Ireland match? These teams were blaming everyone else. Their Ireland was marketing, recruitment, clients ... and they did no wrong.

Lulled into a daydream by this barrage of blame, I was reminded of my conversation over tea with Senthil, a graduate I had recruited a few years ago from campus. Curious to see how he had fared, I invited him for tea. WOW! What a conversation! It was Ireland all over again.

Senthil started pouring his woes out, “I am still doing what I was doing 4 years ago. My manager does not promote me, he does not give me a client-facing role, I haven’t been allowed to travel at all. No one is supporting me ...”

So I asked how others whom we had recruited from his college were doing. “They are doing well. They have good managers who take care of them. They have received promotions and good client exposure. It was my bad luck that I got assigned to production support in my first assignment, had a bad manager ...”

I thought that one good deflection deserved another, so I asked him what he had done differently these past years to get that promotion he so wanted?

What training (company sponsored of course), what reading, what stretch roles had he signed up for to show that he could handle responsibility at the next level?

Silence, coupled with a look that clearly said, “This HR guy is just being difficult. He is on my manager’s side!” So we finished our tea and went our way.

I was broken out of this daydream by my colleague nudging me to indicate that the next bakra (sorry business) was on the review chopping block. This business wasn’t doing well, so I was getting ready to doodle and plan some really mean ways of punishing those recruitment beaters, but boy was I surprised to hear Kanika, the business leader.

Kanika stood up and accepted it was a bad quarter. She took ownership, explained why things went the way they did, what she would do to fix it and while she would not be able to turn things around overnight, she provided clear milestones and measures that the CEO could hold her accountable for. Clearly ‘Ireland’ was not being blamed for ‘India’s’ bad play!

Curious about this outlier reaction to failure, I caught up with Kanika after the review to ask what made her take this path as opposed to what her peers had done. Her answer was simple.

“When I realized I wasn’t making my numbers, I was angry and upset just like the rest. I looked around – recruitment had not delivered the right numbers, my managers had not forecast the volumes right, sales had agreed to some crazy timelines ... sure they all messed it up. But what was I doing? I am supposed to be the boss. What am I paid for? Once I conceded to that, my plan for the review was clear.”

I guess that is the attitude and approach that my CEO had also discovered when he put Kanika on the high potential list a few months earlier.

Kanika is clearly an exception. ‘Ireland Syndrome’, as many of us have started calling it, exists from top business leaders to recent college graduates, you and me included.

Do we look at our lives and the outcome as the result of our efforts or do we attribute it to others? I hate to generalize but it is true. When we do well, we all look inwards. When we fail, we look everywhere else!

Failure forces us to deflect and not reflect!

That brings us to the question, how do we stop blaming 'Ireland' and reflect instead of deflect?

Here are some interesting lessons that worked for me at different phases of my career.

Lesson 1: Don't Look for Opportunities, Make Them

Just like the employee who volunteers and stretches his role, don't wait for things to come to you. Go after them. One employee complained that he did not get the opportunity, did not get the training, and did not get a number of other things to make him successful; the other went and got them. Some leaders complained about the environment, other teams and lack of commitment; the other took ownership for being the leader and made a commitment to improve.

Lesson 2: Make the Most of the Opportunities You Do Get

I recently spoke to a manager who was reflecting on his earlier days. He was forever landing in projects that seemed to be on fire – missed deliverables, yelling clients and the threats of pulling out. But now, as he looks back, he realizes that once he got over the "I am so unlucky – a victim of circumstances" attitude, he learnt more in a crisis because people were willing to take more chances, give more opportunities and even celebrate a small win! He is now a sharp shooter of sorts specializing in fixing projects on the edge, on every top talent program and is making a science of fixing a crisis!

Lesson 3: Focus on the Controllables

This is what differentiates the Kanika's of the world from the 'Ireland-haters'. The differentiator is their ability to focus on what they can influence and not worry about what they have no control over. Looking back at Senthil, he could not control whether his manager would promote him or not. He could not control the project he was assigned to. But he could control his learning,

Appa! I Hate Ireland!

increase his skill set, and network in other projects – all this leading to his ‘non-controllables’ reducing.

I will not make it simple by saying it is attitude that counts; it is a lot more than that. It is about focusing on what we can control, watching the environment to pick cues, acting and believing that we are masters of our destiny.

From “I hate Ireland” to “I am the master of my destiny” – what a fantastic journey.

But this is just the beginning.

In the Reality Bites section read an interesting story of a person who in many ways reinforces all we read about in this chapter.

Reality Bites: Story of BJP

Now – before you start imagining that this is a story of the political party Bharatiya Janata Party let me hasten to clarify that BJP is the acronym by which the hero of this story goes by. I don't know his political allegiance but thanks to his parents choosing to name him Bandu Jayaprakash he is stuck with this moniker.

I don't think BJP, or 'Bandu', as his friends call him, has any complaints. Actually, that is one of the first things that you realize about BJP. He seems a happy camper. For instance, he and I had scheduled to meet at 3 pm. I got pulled into an urgent meeting so I asked if he could come early to which he said "sure". He came in early and I realized I had to go for a team lunch at that time. So I invited him to drive with me and stay for lunch. "Definitely", he said. I looked for signs of irritation, having messed up his schedule and continued to still change his plans. There were none; instead, at the end of the lunch, he stated, "I am glad you invited me. I now have a lot of HR contacts!" That is BJP for you – ever sunny, looking for positives and willing to make the most of what is presented rather than whine. He seems to create opportunities in situations where others would complain.

Over lunch, as I heard more about Bandu's early life, I realized that this is the same spirit that BJP displayed while walking with worn out rubber slippers 9 kilometers away to a government Telugu medium school. I said "Wow! That must have been tough!" expecting a nod. Instead, he looked at me and said, "You know I was amongst the lucky few who at least had a worn out slipper; there were many others who had none." Ouch! Look at me wondering how tough it must have been.

A few quick minutes with Bandu and one would realize he still has strong traces of his Telugu schooling in his English accent. When I asked if that bothered him particularly now that he is in the Sales team and lives in the U.S. (I hastened to request that he not take offence as I was just being curious). Instead of getting conscious of the accent and becoming defensive, Bandu laughed and recounted an incident from his school days.

There was no English teacher in his school, but knowing that this language would give him an edge, he used to walk an additional 8 kilometers every other day to take lessons from a teacher in a neighboring village. Although this meant less play time and aching legs when he got home, he just thought it was important. As a result, he became the model student at school and actually coached other students. He became the Ace in English in his village.

Imagine how surprised this English ace was on his first day of college, when one of his urban seniors rattled off English that he could not follow. BJP recalls that his jaw dropped and he was in awe to hear somebody speak in English non-stop for 5 minutes.

BJP knew at that moment he had to start all over again. After his initial tongue-tied embarrassment, he enlisted that same senior as his mentor and started learning again. Today BJP is a successful client manager living in the United States, doing all his business in a language that had him shaken. And I know from performance reports, he is well respected by clients.

So much for our obsession with the English language and accent. I sometimes cringe at our fixation on accents and language. But somehow in his positive go-getter company, even this thought seemed out of place so I just banished it and focused on our hero.

My next question to him was, “Are you happy in the US?”

“You know Elango, I so wanted to go on an overseas assignment but for some reason everybody around me was getting that opportunity and I was being passed up.” He openly shared that, during that time in his career with MphasiS, he was dejected and was contemplating quitting but rationalized that there must be a greater good behind this rejection. Soon enough, he was offered the role of an overseas coordinator as the current one wanted to return. Initially, he was reluctant because he did not want ‘an administrative job’. He wanted to do coding work. But he accepted the job. “Looking back”, he said, “I am glad I took that job because it allowed me greater access to seniors within our company and our client company and in the long run helped me make the transition to client relationship management and eventually to sales.”

I asked him if he felt bad at that time as he was probably being offered this job because no one else took it. I waited for the fists to come flying at me,

but instead, Bandu replied, “Well ... it did occur to me, but I wasn’t going to say no to an opportunity because of pride, or because somebody did not think it was a great role. I was confident that this would open doors to bigger things ...”

“And guess what? A lot of my friends, who took the prized development jobs are still coding and want to get to client management and sales but are not able to.” He actually asked me if I could help one of them to get back to MphasiS!

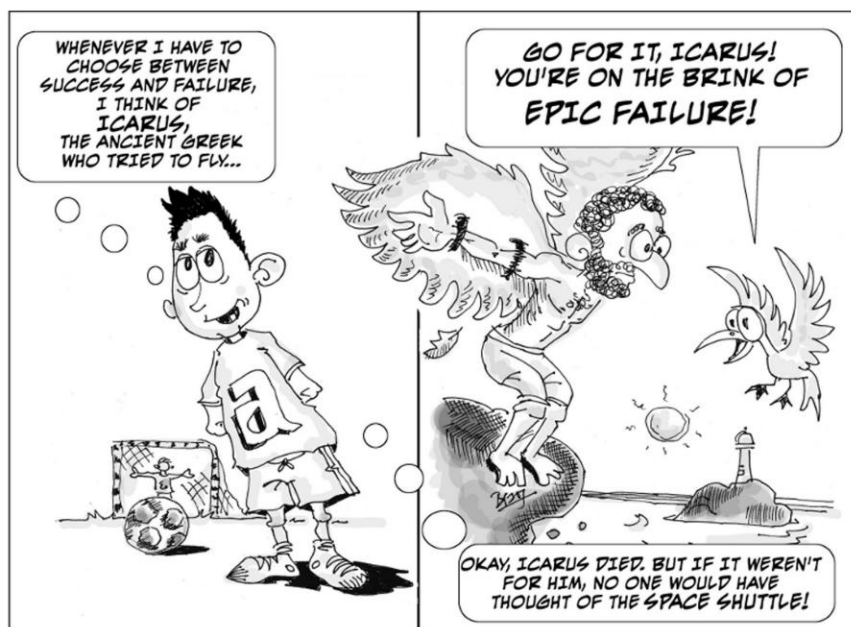
Today BJP is married, with two children, living in Dallas, managing a large client relationship for MphasiS. He shuttles between Dallas and Bangalore, not just for work but also to take care of his brother and parents as he believes they are the bed rock of his success. He is contemplating pursuing an executive MBA from Chicago Booth as well because, “You know I got to learn for my next role ...” was his parting shot.

I had spoken to many people during the course of writing this chapter to find a person that symbolized the learning from ‘Appa, I hate Ireland!’. We all look for that ‘X’ that made someone successful. BJP’s story, I am sure, will give you many Xs but the most powerful are – making the most of what you have and not carrying baggage: creating opportunities within your control and taking ownership for ‘Me’. He had many ‘Irelands’ – village school, lack of facilities, classmates with better schooling, managers who passed him up for overseas opportunities ... But he chose not to let them derail him.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ Remember the Ireland Syndrome – Reflect, don't deflect. Take responsibility and move forward.
- ❑ Don't expect opportunities; make them. Hold yourself accountable for making things work for you.
- ❑ A bird in hand is worth two in the bush – Make the most of what you get.
- ❑ Focus on the controllables – Don't panic about the weather when you can wear a raincoat.

Chapter 2: Play to Fail



Prepare for epic failure – cherish those battle scars and wear them as badges of honor.

One afternoon I accompanied Agastya to the park for his playtime. I noticed him do everything to avoid running a race with his friends, or for that matter, any physical activity such as the monkey bars. In his own childish ingenuity, he found ways to scuttle the race. I was puzzled with this behavior. When I shared this observation with my wife, she confirmed that this was a regular occurrence. I joked that he had not inherited my competitive gene!

I was in for a big surprise when that very evening, he was all too eager to challenge his friends to a word game and a reading session. That is when I realized, this wasn't about competition; this was about survival! He was drawing on some self-preserving trait, hard wired in his brain, to minimize his chances of losing. He would rather challenge someone to a word game because he knew that was his strength and that there were fewer chances of him losing!

Is there anything wrong with that? Come to think of it, how many of us like to lose? I definitely don't. We are wired to avoid failures and maximize wins. In the dark recesses of our brains, winning is GOOD – failure BAD.

This was reinforced the very next day in a meeting I had with Uma K to offer her a new opportunity. Uma was a highly successful employee I was mentoring. I was sure Uma would be delighted to grab this new opportunity because it would keep her visibility high and also allow her to build experience in managing a business in entirety.

I was stunned when Uma refused flat out. Her answer, "Sorry Elango, my strength is managing projects, not running a business and I don't want to take a chance."

I went on to offer her a safety net. Her response, "Failure is not an option. I have tasted success for too long. Thanks for thinking of me Elango, but this is not something I would consider."

As I walked back from that meeting, it struck me that Uma was doing the same thing Agastya did last evening. It wasn't child-like behavior. It was some primeval instinct that seemed to be kicking in and pushing us to play to our strengths and minimize losses.

However the truth is, playing to our strengths and staying in our comfort zone will very quickly send us down the path of frustration, glass ceilings, limited career options and other such things that come with limited success and growth. We will be seen as a 'one trick pony'.

Many times colleagues, friends and mentees have come to me in despair telling me that they have been doing the same thing for 15 years. They realized too late they should have stepped out of their success when they had the chance to learn new things. Who knows, maybe they would have been good at something else too!

This forced me to look back at my career and some of the bold (some call it 'crazy') career moves. Did I play to fail?

Let's see ... I was trained to be a hotelier, hired as a management trainee and grew to run a large 150-member team. I gave it up and started off as a trainer with nobody to call a team member, doing all the work on my own. And then I did the unthinkable and moved from Bangalore to the then Bombay. No friends, no home and absolutely no family. I fainted when I first saw the crowds at Dadar station! And the final move from a 1.2 billion dollar conglomerate to a 10 million dollar start up! Everybody had written me off.

I know it sounds cool and sexy but that was far from the truth. There have been days when I didn't know if I would have a job when I got to the office, but still dragged myself to go to work fearing what would happen next. What if I was humiliated in front of my team? What if I got fired? What if I had to return to my parent's house to live off them?

I would love to tell you I was wise, took those decisions consciously and as a result, was able to rise to the top. I did rise to the top but I know most of

those decisions were made when I didn't have a choice, had my back against the wall or got pushed towards it.

What if I did not have that lack of choice or push? I shudder to think of what would have happened!

Is there a way we can engineer our decision-making to use the same instincts that kick in when our back is to the wall, rule out all choices and play to fail? I think so. Here is how we can BOW to failure and reach success.

Back against the wall – Make the situation a ‘do or die’ one

Many years ago, Vishnu, a young professional I was coaching, was offered the Chief Marketing Officer role (CMO) in his company. He had never done this in the past and was scared of failure. His friends and family echoed his thoughts saying, “Are you mad? What do you know about marketing? Don't be stupid!” But he took the job, with no safety net, with just the fear of failure to drive him forward. Vishnu confided that his reason to take the job was the realization that this chance would not come again.

I wish I could tell you that he succeeded wildly. But this is not the movie and Vishnu is no Shah Rukh Khan. His marketing stint was TERRIBLE! The only reason he didn't quit was because he didn't have another job offer. But what he learnt there, set him up for something bigger and better and most importantly landed him a job he loved!

Today, he runs a small company of his own and is doing quite well. He believes the CMO move set this trajectory in motion.

Own the result – Take the risk

A very successful business leader once approached me for a role in Human Resources (HR). Huh? A business leader moving to HR? This is not an occurrence that people normally experience. So I requested his peer to confirm if he knew what he was getting into. Here is what they had to say:

The business leader wanted to move to the next level, but knew that it would take forever. He saw that the chances of growing in this new role would give him global contacts and networks that his current business role would not. The change to an unknown area was to achieve focused goals.

But the risk was calculated; he had a clear objective which would lead to defined results.

Wear it like a badge – Make your risks and failures known

Failures are indicative of our capabilities, our knowledge, our weaknesses and it would do us well to treat them as signposts, read the signs well, reorient and move on. Wear them as battle scars. A colleague with whom I was discussing this idea actually said that we should ‘relish’ failure, ‘savor’ it. Profound, a little hedonistic maybe, but there is truth in it.

What is the Worst ... Apocalypse?

Ask this, at the end of the day, what’s the worst that could happen? We’ll just be more aware of what works and why. Many of us get so wound up with the ‘what-ifs’ that our minds over-exaggerate the consequences.

A colleague recently returned from sabbatical and confided in me that before he decided to go on his sabbatical, he was so worried about his job – how they would manage their monthly bills and what would his mother-in-law think of him. He realized a month into the sabbatical that his fears were unfounded. His mother-in-law still thought her daughter was nuts to have married him and didn’t really need a reason for that judgment. His daughter made up for it up by saying she loved that her dad was with her all the time. When he finally did return to the ‘daily grind’ and succeeded wildly, he credited it to this – he no longer worried about losing his job and sitting at home. He had been there, done that and enjoyed it!

While I start planning my sabbatical, start your success journey with bravado, for “only those who dare to fail greatly can achieve greatly.” Throw choices out of the window and take a BOW!

And while you are practicing, here are some signs for when to know that it’s time to take a BOW:

1. When you can do your job in your sleep, there is no new learning for you.
2. When you can’t think of doing anything else, you are in a self-imposed comfort zone.

3. When you anticipate the questions before they are asked, know the solution and all the reasons why your way is the only way that will work.
4. When a new opportunity comes your way and the only thing you can think of is the security you have now.

Time to play to fail, there are newer ports to be seen, newer skills to learn and another point to prove!

Over to Pradeep's story in the reality bites section for reinforcement and ideas from somebody who played to fail and succeeded.

Reality Bites: Pradeep's Badge of Honor

When I reached out to people and asked them to share some of their failures so that I could publish it in my book, even I thought I had gone crazy. Several weeks and many follow-ups later, one brave soul stepped forward ... The brave soul is Pradeep Jayaraman, who heads sales for UK, Middle East and South East Asia at Ozone Ltd., a digital marketing start up in Bangalore. His story as narrated by him ...

When Elango called me and asked if I had failed, I laughed and asked, "Do you want today's failures or are you looking for my 'greatest hits' collection?" Then Elango told me about the book he was writing and about this chapter – Play to Fail. By the time I was halfway through reading the chapter, I knew that I had the story Elango was looking for ... but was I really that crazy to share it for all to read? I guess so.

The Blessed One

Early on in my career, I had the fortune of working with one of the key players in my company's Marketing Analytics team. Through some plum assignments, I became the fast-tracker that people raved about. Very soon, I was leading the biggest team with high customer satisfaction scores, the lowest employee attrition, and numerous customer awards; to top it all: three promotions within a span of three years. Due to the relationship that I had built with the customer, I was being called in for any 'tough job'.

The Fallen Angel

Amidst all the tough ones, there was this huge project of setting up the account for a new customer who was into media and advertising. This would be our first client in that domain, and frankly, it was a tough one. It meant that I had to split my big team into parts and leave them to be managed by next-in-line managers. My new assignment took me away from home.

I had left my wife and kid, hero-worship that I had become used to and, in hindsight, my success, behind.

What was going wrong? Here I was, in the US, trying to learn the new domain, and manage the customer while trying to understand the new team I was saddled with. All of them were new to the job, did not know much about the customer's domain, and did not know me either. I was suddenly the boss who kept calling at the wrong time (it was not me, just the time zone – my team was in India!) with some *gyan* about what the customer wanted. We missed a few deadlines, and the blame-games started with the result that I had escalations for the first time in my career. I had fallen.

Reality Really Bites!

My family was wondering why I was graying all of a sudden. I was left wondering how I could salvage my pride out of this. I did not want to be at a place where I was failing. It took me a lot of courage to stand there and complete the set-up of the account. I had missed about a year of my son's growing up – that was the worst for me.

It's Not So Bad

When I came out of it, I was able to transition the project to the next-in-line without feeling bad like the last time. In fact, I was happy to hand it over to them. I had learnt how setting up a new account is very different from managing an existing account. Career Lessons 101!

Now, I am with a start-up media company, leading sales for Europe and APAC. I deal mostly with new businesses every day. My past experience has taught me things that I won't forget in a hurry.

Watch Out!

For those of you who are preparing to 'Play to Fail', remember this: the toughest part is going from teacher to student. Coming to grips with not

being the one in the room who knows everything, has the best quips and confidence of been there – done that.

Thanks Elango for letting me share my story, and for those of you reading, I urge you to take the leap as well. It will be tough, will require you to make sacrifices and let go of the comforts you are normally used to. But just knowing that you dared to do it, will make success or failure irrelevant.

Thank you Pradeep for sharing your story for the book. I owe you for this.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ Genetics tell us that winning is good, failure bad. But for success, we need to play to fail, explore our weaknesses and focus on the learning and not just on the outcome.
- ❑ BOW – Back against the wall; Own the risk; Wear it like a badge – Focus on weaknesses and not just your strengths. How else will you discover your true potential?
- ❑ Knowingly, venture into the unknown path. ‘Know’ what you might achieve, ‘Know’ that you will be out of your comfort zone, ‘Know’ always being successful isn’t necessarily good.
- ❑ Ask the question, “What’s the worst that can happen?” And go for it.

Chapter 3: YIPPEE! Nobody is Watching Me



*The timeless option, the newspaper headline
and our insurance policy.*

I darted across my office and offered a box of tissues to the young man sitting on the couch, who was shedding copious tears. I looked at him – in his mid twenties, a graduate from a premier management school and amongst the most promising of our new talent. But what had to be done had to be done. He finally regained his composure, completed the formalities and walked out of the company, shoulders down – defeated. I rarely hate my job – but this was one of those times I wanted to chuck everything and run to the Himalayas.

What did this young man do? He was caught passing personal expenses as client entertainment expenses and claiming reimbursements from the company! That was a violation of our Code of Business Conduct and he had to be terminated.

This was just one of the many episodes I was privy to – from giving proxy attendance to submitting fake certificates and fudging expense reports; the spectrum of transgressions is as wide and varying as the color spectrum itself.

And the common theme amongst these transgressions is that these are all avoidable, have negligible materialistic impact (don't make anybody rich!), but will leave us with irrevocable, tragic consequences – the after effects of which will linger throughout our working life.

Then why do we do what we do?

The day passed but my heart remained heavy. I got home late that evening, wanting only to put my feet up and vegetate in front of the television. But Agastya had different plans for me. As soon as I walked in through the door, he pounced on me, animatedly telling me about his class project. The project

required him to list the favorite things of his best friends, parents, etc. After confirming mine, he wanted to call a friend to find out what his likes and dislikes were. Given the time of night, I tried to reason with him that it was too late but to no avail. Frustrated, I finally told him, “Why don’t you just make it up? Your teacher doesn’t know your friend anyways.” Pat came the answer, “But I will know that I made it up!”

Wow! I wasn’t going to negotiate or debate that; it was a clear message. Sagely at seven! It also helped me understand why we do what we do a lot better. That night I jotted down what I think drives our behavior:

1. I don’t think I will get caught.
2. If I get caught, will I be able to manage the consequences?
3. “I will know” it is right or wrong, and therefore, I will or I won’t.

1 and 2 have their limitations but 3 is timeless – a guarantee that we will never have to hang our heads in shame.

This is what we adults call the ‘Inner Compass’. Inner Compass is that voice in our head or heart (depending on what you believe) that guides us to make the choices. All of us have one yet, why does it fail some of us? Is it because it is not strong enough? Or that it is not working well? And who defines the settings? And what is it influenced and shaped by?

The two big influencers of our inner compass are:

1. The need to fit in
2. Path of least resistance

1. The need to fit in

I remember, at school, the first time I ignored a friend’s request for an answer in a class test when the teacher stepped out. My classmates called me a sissy, chicken and what not during the break. On the other hand, my parents were clear that failing a test was acceptable, but being caught cheating will lead to dire consequences. I was torn between what my parents were telling me and the need to be part of the social group at school.

This scenario gets repeated again and again – the first time I smoked to be part of the ‘In’ crowd – peer pressure to be accepted started building in college and would follow me all the way into my professional life.

Clearly, this is our strong need to fit in, to be with the crowd and not be isolated.

2. Path of least resistance

We have to constantly make choices. Our choices are not just dictated by the need to fit in, but we also gradually move to choosing the path of least resistance. From trying to please our family, colleagues, boss to just simply trying to lead a happy life for ourselves, we take decisions that will keep us on the path of least resistance, in hopes of avoiding unnecessary confrontation or disagreement.

Our inner compass is shaped through the years, by our choices and decisions, people we meet and reactions we see.

Now that we understand the inner workings let us look at how we can assess our inner compass, strengthen it and keep some quick tests handy to never land in the soup the young man in the beginning of the chapter did.

Assess Your Inner Compass – Who am I?

They say true character emerges when no one is watching. What will you do when you know 200% you will not get caught?

Do you know who you are? Will you recognize yourself without the mask; say if you met yourself in a crowded elevator or in a traffic snarl? How do you react to situations when you know that your actions have no way of finding themselves back to you? Watch how you behave in a hotel room all by yourself, or in a chat room with an alias and you will see the real you. Enjoy the discovery, and whatever you find, don't be alarmed. I believe everyone is naturally inclined to self-destructive behavior because instant gratification is most alluring. The beginning of any change is self-awareness and once you know, hopefully you will do! This is where the egg breaks to make the omelet. We will talk about it in a subsequent chapter 'Walk Like a Baby.' For now let us move onto strengthening the compass.

Strengthening the compass – Building compass muscle

Discovery is great but how do you strengthen it? Here are some suggestions. You will have to personalize them, modify them to suit your style and needs.

Role models – To mirror or not to mirror: We all do this, from our parents, our teachers, to our first manager, celebrities, neighbors, anyone. An acquaintance once said she stopped submitting fake bills for tax exemption because she did not want to be seen in bad light by her CEO, whom she held in high regard. She knew it was wrong, was aware of the consequences but until this CEO, who was her role model, made it clear he despised people who did it, she thought nothing of submitting fake bills.

Role modeling is a powerful tool, but has its limitations because the same role model can influence you to do the wrong things or worse still, fall from the altar you placed them on. Use them, but use them with caution.

Professional and global vs family and local: Confused? Let me explain by sharing the story of a colleague. A fellow HR head for a fairly large company had upset his father because he did not hire his sister's husband's brother! The father's peeve? "What will I tell your sister's in-laws? Can't you do this for your family's sake? What is wrong with what I'm asking for? I am not asking you to cheat the company. All I am asking from you is to give him a job!" This went on for over a year!

If you think about it, they were both right. His father came from a generation in which the family trumped everything else. Allegiance was to the family and every other value stemmed from that. My colleague is from the generation of corporate ethics and governance – one that recognizes professional relations, not family bonds (in the corporate setting anyway) and one that holds us accountable for every action, with no filter to family values.

This is an important understanding to strengthen the compass to take those decisions that will definitely conflict our personal and professional lives.

Code of Business Conduct: Another important resource is the Code of Business Conduct. Most companies today have this. It's a good place to start understanding what the company you work for, holds valuable and the behaviors they would want employees to demonstrate. Sure, there will be many motherhood and apple pie statements, but it gives you a lot of

information. This information will strengthen your inner compass at least at your workplace.

As you can see, these are complex and tough decisions – right vs wrong, values vs real world, and a thick book on conduct to boot!

Making the Right Choices – The Tests

At the cost of simplifying it too much, here are some tests that can help you make the right decisions and do the right things.

Today's Headlines: I'm sure that most have heard of the 'Headline Test'. If you have doubts about what you are doing – hopefully, not yet done – see how it would read as a headline in a major newspaper. It is much like consequences. If you have doubts on how this may impact your personal credibility or on how it would impact your family or organization, then you need to rethink your actions.

Ask somebody else: No, this is not the free city service. The 'Ask Somebody Else Test' works. If in doubt, postpone it, talk to somebody, not one but many if required. Never come under pressure or be pushed to take a decision in a hurry.

Can I tell my son: I use this often. Will I tell my son about how I went to office smelling of alcohol? Will I tell my son I took friends out for lunch and claimed the expense from the office as business lunch? Will I tell my son that I told my boss I met the client when I did not? You can replace son with spouse, father, mother, girlfriend, boyfriend or even guru! I find this the most powerful check.

Find your own way to build the inner compass; align it for all occasions, strengthen it and test it to insure you will always be proud of YOU. History is replete with examples of one silly mistake, one bad decision or one crossroad where the inner compass was ignored.

You don't want to be another. Read this once more if you wish but don't forget this ever. This is the bedrock of lasting success and a good night's sleep every night (or day – if you work in a BPO!).

You Don't Need a Godfather

To provide some comic relief after a heavy read, here is a list of ways to lose your livelihood in our reality bites section. It may not be very comical if you are in it though. Have fun and hopefully your inner compass will keep you away from all of them.

Reality Bites: Silly Ways to Lose Your Job

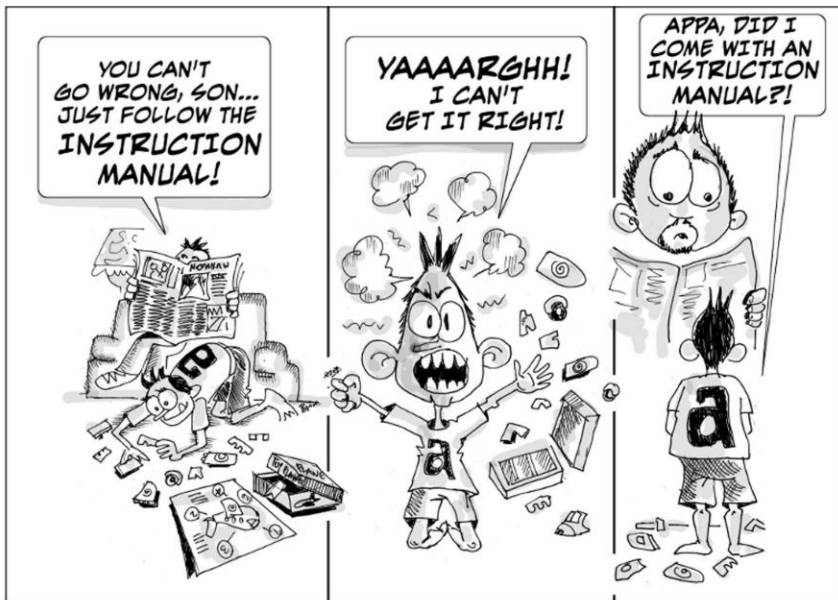
I had published a blog of the same title. From the endless list, here are seven silly ways of losing your job:

1. *One for the road* – Last night's party may have ended this morning but should not continue at work. Sleep it off at home not in the office.
2. *'Hot' mail can land you in the cold* – Forwarding explicit or lewd email, text messages and thinking that people will see it in the same light as you is a big mistake.
3. *Faking it never ends well* – From fake petrol bills to facials being claimed as physiotherapy, the story will always result in dejection.
4. *"Treat this as your own company"* – May be a great catch phrase to motivate, but it is not license to print 1500 invitations to your daughter's 'arangetram' or take notebooks for your kids' homework.
5. *Working on the side* – May seem like an enterprising way to earn some extra cash but when your side-business is the same as your actual job, there is a conflict and that conflict will usually end in you losing the higher paying of the two.
6. *When sharing is not caring* – As good as it feels to be 'in the know' of critical and sensitive information, it feels equally bad when you let things slip and get dismissed.
7. *Facebook and Twitter status can influence work status* – You may be tempted to let off steam and criticize the boss, the leadership or the whole 'system' but keep it off the airwaves – better to speak to someone in private than to air dirty laundry in public.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ The best guide in the world is your inner compass. Listen to your internal warning signals before conceding to external pressures.
- ❑ Build your inner compass muscle through positive role models and experiences.
- ❑ The decision criteria for your workplace and family life may be at odds. You need to be able to straddle both and keep your compass intact.
- ❑ Ask yourself – Will I be proud of doing what I am doing? Can I tell my son (or parents)?
- ❑ Get to the timeless ‘I will know’ – the best insurance policy.

SECTION II: It is Not so Commonsensical



What you knew you had to do but didn't know how, or thought you were incapable of. This section brings together key elements such as networking, staying relevant and communicating.

Chapter 4: Slit Chilies on the Rocks



*Understand the power of the personal brand
and learn how to build it.*

Ah! If you are reading this, you survived the previous section and hopefully, enjoyed it as well. I trust you are now all set to pave your own destiny, built on strong values and driven by your personal power.

Now allow me to tell you of interesting orders at the bar, figuring out how you earned the class joker label, decoding the manager's favorite and learning how to build a powerful personal brand.

Venue: Office party, when I was still a young lad

Time: 8.30 p.m.

My friend who just a few minutes ago had asked for Vodka on the rocks with a slit chili in his drink, quickly removed the chili, threw it aside and merrily diluted the vodka with an aerated drink. Foxed, I asked him – why? Why, when he ordered it so specifically, would he remove the chili and add the mixer!

Instead of responding to my question he asked me what I ordered at the bar. I held out the almost fizzed out soft drink I was nursing for him to see. Smugly he asked, “Who do you think the barman will remember – you or me?” Not waiting for my retort, he continued, “You got to be different man for people to notice you and remember you!”

I laughed it off then but I felt the impact of what he said a couple of hours later. The party was winding down – my boss, his boss and a few of us lackeys were at the bar politely laughing at their silly jokes. Just then, the bartender came to take last orders for the night. When it was my friend's turn, the bartender said, “Your regular, sir?” The limelight was his and when his drink

came, the big bosses wanted to know what his 'regular' was and the rest of the evening he got undivided attention. I am sure my boss was delighted to showcase good talent to his boss! My friend's regular drink soon became all of ours, in our attempt to be different! Ha! Ha!

The moral of the story is not to start drinking (and that is my disclaimer for this segment), but the concept and power of having a personal brand – what are you known for, what makes you stand out or blend in.

Ever wondered why someone got that prized assignment over you or why you are not the boss's favorite, why your mum still blames you when something is broken at home or your spouse claims you are working too much? It all boils down to your personal brand!

When I mentioned personal brand to one of my friends, she reacted indignantly. "What do you think we are? Products to be branded!" With this initial 'encouragement', I nearly gave up my belief in 'personal branding' until I heard my wife fret and fume that our son was being blamed for everything in class, even when he didn't do it! The first thing that rang like a bell in my mind was 'personal brand'. Poor fella, in his early days in school he was in the middle of a few naughty pranks and now he is branded as the naughty one!

I am sure you remember the 'class joker', 'nerd', 'cool chap', 'absent-minded' tags that your friends got through college! These are personal brands in action.

Personal branding is powerful and goes a long way in influencing our success. It can either open doors or send us up the proverbial 'creek' without a paddle.

Here is my homemade recipe for starting you off on designing your brand and success. And since brands are built on experiences, here are the three senses that influence your brand:

1: What Others See?

They see your clothes, your gestures, your walk – all the aspects that form your visual quotient. For instance, I would like to project a youthful, irreverent image. Therefore, I deliberately go for conferences and industry seminars in jeans and a T-shirt. This also differentiates and increases my brand recall amongst my peers who come suited and booted. However, I will always be

in a full suit for our company board meetings. Unlike in public seminars, here I want to be seen as a serious contender and experienced leader. One of my colleagues who achieved success very early, now sports a moustache only to add a few years to an otherwise boyish appearance; even at the cost of it making him look like he stepped out of a horror movie.

You have to design what others see keeping in mind the brand you want to believe and portray. I spoke of clothing and mustaches, the same goes for gestures and walks.

Watch a video of yourself – you’d be surprised at what you pick up. It is a deliberate attempt to influence perception.

2: What Others Hear?

You can go dressed all dandy but open your mouth and ...

The words we use are very powerful signals. Phrases like, “I think”, “maybe” give the listener an impression that you are not convinced. On the other hand, phrases that begin with “I am convinced ...”, “I believe ...” clearly indicate strong conviction and confidence.

Once a person I was coaching came to me fuming. Her peeve was, “I work my backside off for my boss and I get feedback that I delegate too much and am indecisive!” Delving deeper, we figured that she was a good manager who liked to consult with her team before making a decision. This was great, but every time her manager asked her for a decision she would say, “Let me check with my team and get back.”

I know you are already rolling your eyes ... “Is brand all about such material things? – What I wear and what I say.” Before you strain your eyes any further let me move on to the core of building a personal brand – what others experience!

3: What Others Feel?

While a lot of what you heard earlier starts the brand perception, what makes it enduring is what people experience regularly.

At work there are always accusations of favoritism. How somebody always gets the plum jobs, the important presentations, how managers played favorites, etc.

It is true. Managers play favorites! Why? To ensure their own success.

As a manager, I will always give urgent assignments to team members who never miss a deadline; I always assign a particular team member to deal with my boss and so on. I had, in my mind, perceived each one to be a brand of sorts. And this was based on what I experienced regularly. Once I figured this out, I realized what it takes to be a favorite! Deliver and deliver consistently.

What are you known for? Dependable, trustworthy, diligent, undependable, gossipy, lacks attention to detail – is all about what you do or don't. And it is not all about standing out, being recognized and being in the limelight. I know many folks who deliberately want to be low key, out of the limelight and are still highly regarded and counted on.

It sounds simple, but you and I know in life anything that sounds simple always has a catch! And the catch here is that most of us don't know who we want to be!

A classmate of mine once complained that he was very upset that people were making fun of him and he really wished they respected him. I was surprised because he was the joker in class, constantly cracking jokes, poking fun at himself and getting all of us to laugh. What I realized much later was that he liked to be in the centre of attention and therefore, played the joker. At the same time, he wanted to be treated with respect. He had to be clear of who he wanted to be and fashion his behavior accordingly.

Once you know who you are, the next big catch is do you know how people perceive you? If you believe you know, you are in for a rude surprise!

How people perceive us and what we think of ourselves can, many a time, be polar opposites. I had a rude awakening a few years ago, when my wife asked my son to imitate me. He immediately pushed out his chest, kept one palm against his ears, the other hand behind his head, paced up and down

saying, “Yes, ok ... hmmm, good ...,” paused, look down, and said, “not now Agastya, I am on a call!” I thought I was a new age father, who spent a lot of ‘quality time’ with my son and here, the impression he carried was that I was too busy to talk to him.

Not everybody is that lucky. Most people don’t tell us what they really think because they are scared of upsetting us or don’t care. And if they do tell, how many times do we really listen? Again, how we act or react will define what perceptions people carry.

Try and get a few people in your immediate circle whom you can trust to tell you the truth. The best way, but also the most difficult, is to watch for people’s reaction to you. A few years ago, people avoided me unless absolutely necessary. What was the issue? I was a gregarious, jovial fella! Well that seemed to be the very issue; I was cracking jokes at everybody, which mostly everybody laughed at but were scared of when I would turn on them.

Your personal brand is also influenced by the company you keep – who you are seen with! I am leaving that for you to figure out. What is the fun if I didn’t leave something for you to discover.

I can wax eloquent for a few more pages, but I would like my brand to be ‘crisp’ so let me wrap my recipe for building personal brands with the final ingredient – dollops of confidence.

Make this brand recipe your own!

Which ingredients you use to shape your brand are all there in this chapter, but the secret sauce is how you use them – what quantities, in which order. It all starts by understanding what you want to be – the center of attention, the quiet collaborator, the subject matter expert or the generalist. Once you know this, you know how to use visuals, experiences, understanding and others to mould your character. And then consistently, whip that experience for others. And if you want to know what your brand is, read on, have fun and figure out who you are.

Reality Bites: Brand Dip Test – Knock-Knock Who's There?

I had a few friends do a test-read of the chapter 'Slit Chilies,' hot off the keyboard to gauge reactions. Even before I could ask whether they liked the chapter, what they thought etc... whoosh came the question:

"So tell me, what do you think my brand is?"

Now you don't want to get into that trap with your friends! Every word will be assessed, analyzed and repeated at every future event. Worse, I did not want them to be conscious around me. I blustered my way through, got them to focus on feedback, but some persistent friends did not let me go! As any guru worth his flowing beard would do, I promised them a simple test that will help them figure it out themselves. The test was an instant hit – so here it is. If you don't like it don't blame me, blame my friends.

The Knock-Knock Test

A friend from your original 'gang' announces on Facebook, that he is in town. Another friend responds, 'let's do dinner'. Now ...

Knock 1 – You will ...

1. Jump in right away and take the lead in planning the logistics and keep everyone updated.
2. Cancel all other plans and confirm availability.
3. Indicate availability and make your preferences and restrictions known.
4. Cancel because of prior commitments.
5. Don't respond.

Knock 2 – Once all 'yes' are in, you ...

1. Have a list of restaurants you have visited and list out the options.
2. Indicate that you are open to eat anything as long you are together.
3. List out those restaurants you would only or never go to.
4. Cancel because you don't like the options.
5. Don't vote.

Knock 3 – First battle won, its now time to meet the group at the decided venue. You will ...

1. Plan to arrive in time but have few errands to run on the way.
2. Be the first to reach so that you get a parking spot.
3. Arrive as the clock strikes the hour.
4. Cancel because the car wasn't free that evening.
5. Wait for a personal invitation.

Knock 4 – Post customary greetings, the maitre d' approaches your table with a copy of the menu and waits patiently as you decide. You are likely to ...

1. Request him to describe most items on the menu.
2. Ask for the 'Chef's Recommendation of the Day'.
3. Order the same dish you order every time.
4. Share someone else's dish.
5. Ask someone else to order for you.

Knock 5 – Good food, great conversations with outstanding company and three hours later, the bill for the meal is placed on the table. You will ...

1. Jump at it quickly and place your card in the folder without second thought.
2. Shout out loud, try snatching it away, ask the waiter for another copy.
3. Pull out your calculator so that the amount can be divided equally across all.
4. Proactively place in the folder the exact amount for what you ate.
5. Watch the chaos ensuing around.

Scoring key

Mostly 1s – Your brand: Fevicol – the organizer, the one that pulls groups together.

Mostly 2s – Your brand: Bata chappal – low maintenance, goes with the flow, no fuss, no demands.

Mostly 3s – Your brand: Maruti 800 – dependable, predictable, set in your ways.

Mostly 4s – Your brand: Popular PC Operating System (I don't want to get sued). Its always a guessing game with you; never know what will tick you off and what will hang at the most inopportune moments.

Mostly 5s – Your brand: A Ceiling Fan – low profile, like a phone on silent mode. You don't notice a fan do you? Yet, you can't survive summer without one.

None of the above – Your brand: iPhone – a different paradigm, challenges all conventions and makes their own path.

(If you have to wonder how this option came up, then you are not this option.)

I know you are shaking your head thinking, "Silly fella! How did they let you write this book!" Or you are nodding your head in agreement and already labeling friends and colleagues!

My friends reacted the same way – some nodded and started labeling, some questioned the questions, some got angry with the labels, some just retired to a corner ... but everybody had a reaction. And the fun continued as we started taking the test on behalf of each other.

All of us agreed to the fact that perceptions existed, our actions determined our brand and we all had tags. A friend at the end said, "You know, we are the CEO and CMO of the company called 'ME'. We can purposefully build our brands, refresh our brands and evolve our brands!"

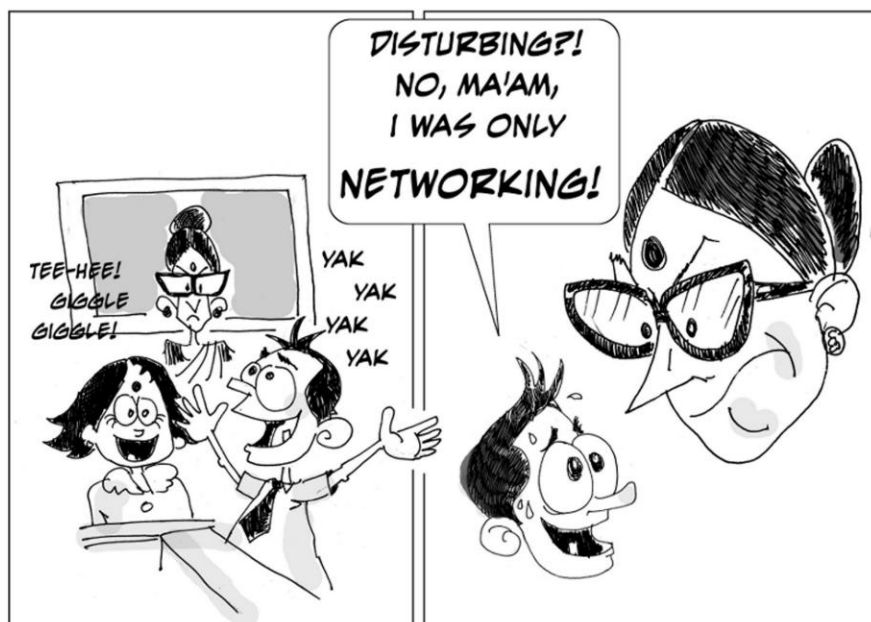
Couldn't have said it better!

Good luck as you decode your personal brand using what you read in the chapter.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ You are a brand too. Know the messages you are sending out.
- ❑ Your brand is the confluence of others' perceptions. Actively influence what others see, hear and feel.
- ❑ Don't be afraid to ask what your friends and colleagues think of you. It is the first step to understanding yourself.
- ❑ Create that personal brand that will further your success – you are the CEO of brand 'ME'.

Chapter 5: The Card Collector



Bust the "I am not a networking person" myth.

Hey Elango, heard you're in Pune on Monday. I took the liberty of fixing time with you while you are in town.

This was the message I got on my cell phone, the day before I was leaving for Pune. My first reaction was, "How on earth did she know I am in Pune? And how the hell did she manage to fix the meeting time so quickly?"

Intrigued, I probed further to find that my colleague had connections in the travel team that kept her well informed; she then checked my calendar online and cajoled my assistant to fix this meeting!

While I knew there was no way I could wriggle out of this, I wished I had more people like this – creative and connected. What a network – spanning from the booking agent to the boss's secretary. Something that I am always envious of is how people have the knack of picking up a conversation with someone and making a lasting connection.

A strong network allows us to get things done faster, gets us at the right place at the right time and makes us invaluable to our organizations. When I started to examine some of my great successes, they all came from knowing the right people. Even this book is an outcome of my network in some ways.

"I am Not a Networking Type"

At the Mangalore airport I ran into an ex-employee. Vidhya Rao had worked with us in the staffing team but our interactions were limited to staffing updates and escalations. We never interacted socially. Now, we were on the same flight back to Bangalore and so we got talking. With at least a decade between us, I was hard pressed to find a topic of common interest. But my

worry was unfounded. Soon, this 20-something-year-old had me talking about everything; from antiques to the finest scotch. How she was able to not only find the right subject, but also know enough about it to keep pace, was incredible!

Watching Vidhya in action I found common threads, which I realized, I had in me too! Surprise! Surprise! Many things that I enjoyed doing – learning about people, sharing stories – is what ‘networking’ was all about!

That is when it hit me! There is no such thing as an introvert. Nor is there truth in saying, “I am not a people person.” Networking is one-to-one, personal not public and immensely doable.

Here are a few small, simple but significant things we can do to make ourselves better connected, if not masters of the networked world.

Connect and be connected – See every interaction as an opportunity

From the gates of your child’s school to the security check at the airport. From the lunch queue to the smokers’ corner (not for me though, I prefer to live healthy and longer), opportunities are everywhere.

A reader shared her networking story on my blog on a similar topic. She runs a small enterprise and was worried about her inability to find somebody to expand her Bangalore office. Around that time, stranded at the airport by a much delayed flight, she struck a conversation with a fellow stranded passenger and by the time she boarded the flight, she had found her new manager! Today, her Bangalore office contributes 15% of her revenues. Wow! This is what I call the power of talking to someone next to you.

Establish common ground – Initiate common interest conversations

Just as Vidhya had floored me by uncovering common ground between us, Murali Soundar, a colleague at work, did the same. While speaking to a senior official in Sri Lanka, he established that the person was in the Sri Lankan army, connected to his (Murali’s) Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) posting

in Sri Lanka. Bingo! In a few minutes, they were in an animated conversation figuring out common friends, incidents and the next meeting.

Of course, prerequisites to discover common ground are to have varied interests. In the middle of the FIFA World Cup, while waiting for my spouse to pick me up from the club, I bumped into a professional contact. In an attempt to make conversation, I asked him which team he supported. He gave me a look that said, “FIFA who?” Suddenly I remembered that I had to pick up a book at the library. Whether you love football or cricket; movies or books, it pays to stay current – this is the best conversation warmer you can ever use.

What's your treat? – Bring your uniqueness to the table

By ‘your treat’, I mean ‘your value’. You must have something to offer – knowledge, perspective ... anything. This is the KEY – you have to be a ‘contributing’ member to the network. For instance, my contribution to my network is my day job as the CHRO of MphasiS. I could open many doors in MphasiS for fellow networkers. The travel team member, who had earlier helped my colleague learn that I was in Pune, has access to information such as employees’ travel destinations as her treat to offer.

Each of us bring our own value, however, we have to constantly update this. We are in trouble if we are viewed as ‘a one trick pony’. Treats need to have diversity and long-term sustainability. Sustainable value is skill, talent, traits – something more intrinsic or internal; any value based on association with role, company, and person – extrinsic value – is short lived.

By way of example, being available to people to hear them out, playing mentor, and advisor to network, is my intrinsic value and easily sustainable. The CHRO role is value by association and can change anytime. Intrinsic or extrinsic, we have to constantly update and stay relevant lest we slide in our ‘treat quotient’.

Nurture and develop – Build relationships and maintain them

Make time to build your network. Attend meetings, go for lunches, make and take calls – yes, it does take time, but it’s all worth it. I know someone

who had this personal discipline – he would call people on his way to office and back – one call and have a good conversation. Could be a past manager, acquaintance, vendor – just a simple shout to find out what they are up to and let them know what he was engaged in.

A part of developing your network is returning favors. I had a colleague, who would call, ask for favors and advice all the time but strangely the minute something went wrong, chose not to use this relationship to sort things out. Instead he would start sending nasty emails, escalations and speaking to everyone other than me. I remember thinking to myself, “The least you could have done is call and warn me of the issue, use me to fix it – just like the other times.” You must escalate if things don’t happen but sometimes you need to give the person a heads-up and ensure you don’t compromise your relationship. You can’t be seen as a fair-weather networker.

Be authentic

You have to network because you like people, are genuinely interested in them and are willing to help. If you do it as a check in the box you won’t get too far.

Stay the course

Going out and talking to strangers, finding common ground, being authentic isn’t easy. You will wonder what on earth you are up to. Stay the course, it is worth it. The best way to do this is to weave it into your schedule and start enjoying it.

The biggest hurdle to networking like anything is ourselves. Most people I spoke with, even the great networkers say, “Oh! That’s not me; I can’t do it.” Only question is, do you have the desire?

If you don’t still have the desire ... hear this! The best jobs, the plum assignments, the cool projects, the surprises come through networks. Though I said I am not a networker, I realized many of my big turns in life happened because I had a mentor, friend or well wisher who gave that nudge. All my job moves have been through personal contacts.

Don't get me wrong, nobody did me any favors, but what they did do was let me know of opportunities out there. Even if I wasn't looking, when a new challenge came up, they thought of me as a likely suitor.

As you start action on the tips above, one thing to be mindful of is being genuine and authentic. Here is one 'to do' and one 'not to do' to start your way.

Know your network well – *Focus on the important links*

Mindless networking will not get you anywhere. Earlier, I spoke of value you bring; you should also be aware of value of other people in your network. There are some links in the network that provide you access to people and areas you could not otherwise have accessed. It is these links you need to nurture and keep alive. They give you access to opportunities, people, etc.

Don't be just a card collector – *Learn to benefit from each other*

Just one request – don't do what a young man did in a session with me. When I speak at forums, I enjoy the after session conversations with delegates. You walk off the dais and you have people walking up to you, either saying they enjoyed your talk or don't agree with a certain point. Interesting sparring, some amount of self promotion and card exchanging happens.

After one session, a young man walked up, said hello and asked for my card. I handed it over; he took it and stretched his hand asking for another. Half curious, mostly irritated, I pointed out that I just gave him one. He blithely replied, "Oh that was for me, I want one for my friend who didn't attend the session." Sure ... can I give you one more for your neighbor?

Please don't be a card collector – strike up genuine conversations, learn and hopefully you will mutually benefit from each other.

I wouldn't do justice to this chapter, or worse still, lose a fair section of my readers if I don't give my take on the power of digital networking. It's no longer about generation X, Y or Z – anyone who has the slightest motivation to connect beyond their immediate circle of influence is out there!

My jocular (and bordering on sarcastic) take on networking in social media follows in Reality Bites.

Reality Bites: Social Acceptance

Having addressed the ‘brick and mortar’ version of networking, this chapter would be incomplete if we didn’t pay homage to ‘Social’ networking.

I was not exactly an early adopter of all these platforms but I did eventually join the bandwagon. At first, all the people I found – long forgotten classmates, colleagues from past companies, and even an old drinking buddy or two – overwhelmed me. It was great! What was even greater (not to mention a huge ego boost) was the number of people who wanted to be my ‘friend!’ Wow! Of course, I went on a spree of accepting requests and reaching out to all that I could.

I had over 73 friends and some 200 connections. And then reality came crashing in. There was a reason I had lost touch with many of these folks – we didn’t have anything in common! There was also a reason why so many people wanted to connect with me – they were ‘connection collecting!’ And here I was thinking I was so popular!

This was more of a popularity contest and advertising avenue. “Need a job? Need an intro? Need a reference?”

Now don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t all downhill and disillusionment. I did find some really smart people through the LinkedIn forums and learned of crazy things people are doing in life. For example there was this girl who quit her desk job and travelled the world over, paying for everything through wages she would earn picking up odd jobs in the country she happened to be in. I connected with family members who I would never have called (What do you talk about with cousins you haven’t met in 15 years?) and was able to say a simple “Hi” and share a picture or two. I was able to see how their families had grown without the overlay of commentary on how little Ajay was now potty trained. I met intellectuals who could explain to me in simple terms what ‘cloud’ can do (other than block the sun on my beach vacation). And for all my ranting, I even found some really good people to hire.

But that is a very limited use of these wonderful networks. If used well these can be a very powerful tool to build useful connects, facilitate thought-provoking conversations, leverage professionals all over the world and just

plain LEARN. So, if you are just a silent spectator or an avid connection collector, I urge you to make your 'social' life a little more interesting. And here are some things that helped me and will hopefully help you too.

Know Your Place

Keep friends and family on Facebook and professional relations on LinkedIn. No need to publicize the pictures of you lounging in your boxer shorts at Friday night's party to your colleagues and boss. And definitely no need to let office folks know that you are, "bored out of your mind, waiting for the paycheck to cash."

Know Your Reason

Before accepting or requesting a connect, know why. Don't just blindly invite all the alumni from your college onto your network or people from your workplace. This might sound conceited but unless you know who you are letting in, you don't know how your information might get used. There is still no guarantee, but at least you minimize risks.

Know Your Image

For goodness sake, put up a decent picture of yourself (at least on LinkedIn). While your dog is cute and you carry off that "I ate too much" look well, please please be sensible (and no sun glasses, just a personal peeve).

And on that note, complete your profile. The information you share will help establish common ground and interests. It's like a first date – make a good impression, who knows where it could lead ...

Contribute

If you are part of a network, participate. Comment on people's status, answer a question, offer some help, or just press 'Like'. Isn't that why you first got on – to reach out? And don't limit yourself to individuals. Join the groups

that you are interested in. Log on to the networking connects, respond to the blogs and thoughts that people are sharing. Be active, else it's just a waste of the money you're paying for wireless and data connectivity on your cell.

And remember, once you post something on the net, you have no control, there are no secrets. As a parting gift, here are some true stories that my network shared with me ... I call it my "BUSTED!" section:

- *Dutiful parent* – A friend once posted a picture of himself on Facebook, drunk at a bar, when he was supposed to be at a PTA meeting! Bunking at this age?
- *Life of the party* – A buddy was tagged in a, let's say "naughty" picture on Facebook, which made it to the office grapevine. Secondary skills?
- *Honesty is the best policy?* – A colleague once changed his Facebook status to, "It's too bad stupidity isn't painful ... This meeting would be over by now!" He forgot that he had accepted his boss's friend request, who was also the presenter at the meeting he was referring to. Time for a career change?

Your online presence is your brand – think about what you read in 'Slit Chilies' and make a conscious decision about what you want to be known for. Don't let mishaps and unintended consequences decide for you. Have fun being 'socially accepted'.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ It's all 'give and take'. Build your base to 'give' so you can 'take' when the time comes.
- ❑ Make the effort to remain connected – this is not a fly by night exercise and will need constant attention.
- ❑ Tune your networking ability to be a natural skill, not an action item.
- ❑ Authenticity is above all. Don't bother to 'try' to be genuine. You either are or aren't.

Chapter 6: Gone in Sixty Seconds



*Communicate for results in the age
of nano-second attention spans.*

This was it! Days like this made me wish I could dispense with the polite niceties and hurl my notebook at the speaker. The presenter in a meeting I was in, was droning on about something and the rest of us, including me, were like a group of school children waiting for the bell to ring so we could rush out of the class – shifting in our seats, checking our watches or just plain day dreaming.

The ordeal finally ended but the irritation and anger of an hour wasted stayed. Worse, the presenter did not get what he wanted from us. Was that an isolated incident?

Looking back on that day, or the week for that matter, all I saw were countless emails, meetings and phone calls. I remembered some of the conversations; emails that came in but majority just seemed a blur ...

And if this is the impression I carry of my interactions with others – with just a few that made impact, what about me? Was I making the impact I needed? Was I making myself memorable and keeping myself relevant? Will whomever I spoke to remember me or was I too disappearing in a haze that takes over all of us around 5 p.m. every evening?

Our ability to communicate, to get things done is critical for our success. From the simple approval for a project to a client proposal, to making an impression when you run into your CEO – these conversations, emails and communication determine what we get done and how quickly.

Communicating for results is an absolute must have in our armory to battle our workplaces and emerge successful.

So let us start with the '60 second' mantra.

Why just 60 seconds? In today's corporate world, this is all the time someone has to make an impact! We are expected to juggle meetings, calls, emails and actual work all at the same time. All these mediums are fighting for the same one minute. And what or who we pay attention to will be the one that conveys a crisp objective and makes it most relevant to us.

That is all well and good, but how do I make my 60 seconds count more than that of the next guy? How do I win the battle against all the other distractions I have to compete against?

Here is a 60 second trailer on how to use the **ESCAPE** route to attention:

Establish attention: Thirty to sixty seconds is all you have. A sure fire way to get attention, is to get on the path of relevance and say what is important to the listener, not YOU. Let's assume you are seeking approval for business related travel. Don't say, "I need your approval to travel"; instead say – "our project is behind schedule, I have initiated a recovery plan, part of this is to travel to Timbuktu. Please help!"

Simple: Avoid jargon, abbreviations and technical words. By way of example, use 'difficult' instead of 'challenge', instead of 'failure mode evaluation analyses', try 'we could fail'!

Crisp: Not necessarily quick to the point but straight to the point. Qualifying a statement is good, but there's no need to recite the encyclopedia. Having said that, if the person you are addressing asks you to qualify your statement, you know you've got their attention! Mission accomplished right there.

Action: Focus on what you want to achieve, not on what you want to say or how you are treated.

Presence: Watch, listen and adapt your approach. There is a lot of literature on body language. For instance, I listen best with my hands crossed but I am given to understand this gesture shows defensiveness. Don't go for simplistic signals like this; watch your receiver closely. Be on the lookout for stifled yawns, quick glances at the watch, pulling their blackberry out ... people will tell you without telling you. Are you listening? Or better still are you watching?

Exit: Close quickly with decisions. Never leave it inconclusive, summarize for the benefit of all and never forget to say 'thank you', whatever the outcome.

Like anything, throw yourself at improving your ESCAPE at every moment and opportunity. The best practice is when you are negotiating with your child; watch them play you effectively. Trust me on this one; they are the ones effectively negotiating you!

But, there a few traps that you have to watch out for. One that most of us end up falling into, even with the best of intentions ... Being too connected to our own objective.

Don't Boil The Ocean – Focus on The MUST, GOOD and IF YOU CAN

I learnt this while participating in an acquisition we were preparing for – an atmosphere fraught with anxiety, tension, competition and adrenaline. Most teams throw a cajillion questions, request for tons of data fearing that they may forget to ask something. Recently one of our board members coached us that we are better off prioritizing and focusing on what we absolutely need. That way, we make productive use of the target company, our time and better still, gain the respect of the target company management. So we classified all requests as MUST, GOOD and IF YOU CAN. The effect was amazing and focused all our efforts on the MUST.

Not only that, when we go in with blinders on what we want, we forget to consider what others can realistically give us. It is rare that you will get everything you want, unless you are three years old and negotiating with your parent. So always know what your 'must have' and 'let go' stands need to be.

Recently, I had to negotiate an investment budget with my manager. We had a tough quarter; I knew any investment request would be a tough discussion. 'No' was not an option because that would mean a major deviation from the promised yearly objective; so I had to be clear with what was negotiable and what was not. I had an economy, premium and luxury option clearly established in my head. I presented the luxury option but my walk away was the economy. It clearly gave me options to play around with.

We all have these moments everyday, pausing a moment to think through will help us walk away with what we want.

So What?

I learnt the 'So what?' check from a colleague Raj Patil, a consummate salesperson. Everything you say, present, sell, or communicate, ask yourself 'So what?'. You will be surprised at how crisp and relevant you will get. For example, you are saying that the sales figures show a pattern, ask yourself 'So what?'. You should state the same in a way that makes sense to the audience. Remember you are not providing information, you want action ...

Channel Distortion

Finally a well-crafted message avoiding all the pitfalls can fall flat if we don't pick the right channel. By channel I mean email, text message, in person conversation ... whatever.

I had a colleague once who would never respond to email. At any time, he had over 1000 unread mails in his inbox. But pick up the phone and talk, he always came through and was willing to support. Here the means of communication made the difference. Just because email is quicker for me, is not what should matter. What is convenient for my audience is what takes priority.

Likewise, delivering an emotion-laden personal message on email is virtually impossible; an in-person meeting will be better. The nature of the communication and the recipients both determine the channel.

Communicating for results is a science and when mastered will provide us with a huge boost in our work place.

Learning from Movie Trailers

Think back to the thousands of movie trailers you have seen. Do they talk about the countless crores that went into making the movie (that is all the producer cared about), or the tantrums the movie stars threw (surely the woes of the director)? No! They all address why you, the movie goers, should come see their movie. They showcase the plot, the scenic locations, the action and adventure (or comedy as I prefer).

That is what we have to learn to do:

- Figure out what response we want (have people go see the movie).
- Distill what our audience wants to hear or cares about (great plot, awesome locations).
- Communicate to them in a manner that is familiar to them (TV, radio, email).

Using this as a guideline, hopefully all our meetings and conversations will be akin to blockbuster releases and not bedtime stories.

But don't get too serious. Take a while to unwind and read the reality bites sections to figure the last lesson in communicating for results ...

Reality Bites: The 'Ha-Ha' After the 'Ah-Ha'

Before you start taking yourself too seriously, over-practice and under-deliver, here is one last word of advice.

You have heard of the 'AH-HA!!' moment, but take some time to enjoy the 'HA-HA!!' moments as well. Here are some ways to get you thinking of when your own foot was in your mouth.

A colleague recently dialed a well reputed pizza delivery service to order pizza. The norm on these calls is that they will pick up and ask you to wait while they get your details from their system. This time was no different except that the person on the call asked my colleague, "Could you please bare me while I get your information?"

Unmatched in its humorous quotient is the misplaced 'a' in reminder transforming it to remainder. This is an almost only email phenomenon. Recently I received a note which said, "How many more remainders should I send you?" To which I promptly responded, "Thank you but please don't send me remainders of anything I have enough of them from last night's dinner."

A favorite pastime of mine is to count the fillers, 'you know?', 'Right?', 'Mmm', ... 'ahhhh'. The most I counted was 766 'you know's in an interview I recently conducted! I am serious! I did not know most things this person said at the end of the interview because the 'you know's distracted me so much!

When I recounted this to a friend of mine, she pointed out that I end every statement with 'right no!' Gosh I must change it right now!

Good luck! I am sure you will have your own bloopers. Write them down here for a funny blog some day. Ha ha!

Parting advice – Don't get too caught up with your accent, grammar the words or the PowerPoint; instead focus on what you want, tailor your message for that and ESCAPE from the humdrum.

Memory Bytes

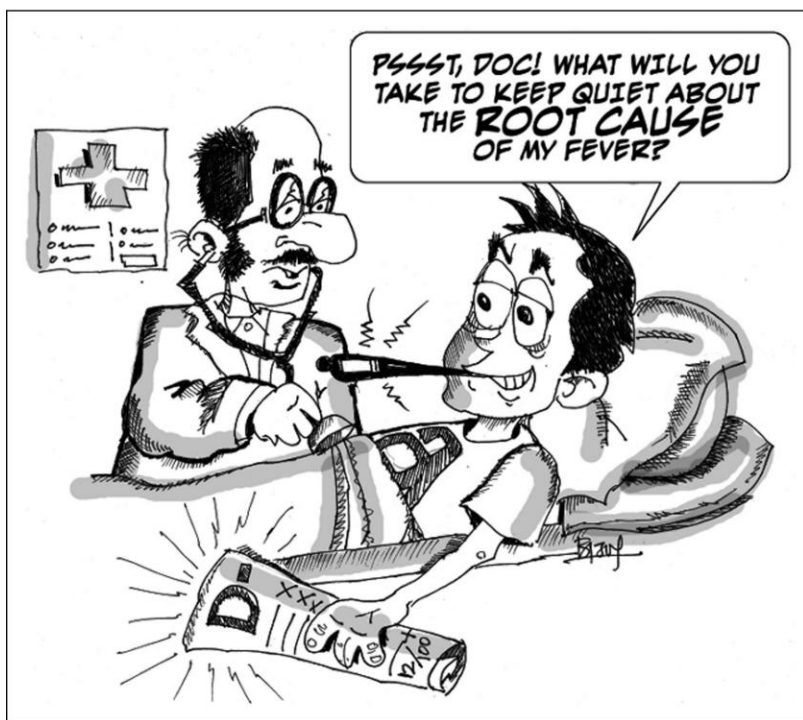
- ❑ Your biggest impact for results will come by communicating effectively, keeping your audience and objective in mind.
- ❑ Learn to ESCAPE – Establish quick attention / keep it Simple / keep it Crisp / focus on Action / lookout for Presence / Exit with decisions.
- ❑ Ask ‘So what?’ for every message that you send out.

SECTION III: Making it Happen



Knowing is not doing! Doing is doing!

Chapter 7: Walk Like a Baby



The mid book reckoner for cynics and converts.

Right about now, roughly halfway through this book, you're probably saying to yourself ... "I love all the great ideas, but let the author get out of his fancy corner cubicle and all this will go right out of the window!"

Interestingly, that is exactly what I heard from my readers a few months after I started blogging. "It is easy to preach but on the ground, when it actually happens, it is very difficult to manage." Friends and colleagues asked with similar eagerness, "I loved your blog, it makes so much sense, my neighbor loved it too, but how *BEEP* do I put this *gyan* into action?"

I love these questions because it makes my writing real. Writing is hard but taking the leap from knowing to doing and then sustaining it, is even tougher. And it gets tougher when you don't know WHY you are making the change.

Phew! Time for a coffee break! (or tea if you are like me).

Ask yourself two simple questions as you walk to get your cuppa ... Half-way through a book on success, what is the change that has begun niggling at the back of your mind?

And WHY do you want to put yourself through the hard falls that may come along with the change?

And as you sip your cuppa listen in on a conversation with three of my co-conspirators: Shalu, Suraksha and Mamta. This, I am sure, will give you some ideas and maybe even set you up on how you can action on your learnings.

Get to know my three co-conspirators

Shalu – editor, punching bag, critic, and the team's moral compass! Her day job is running a complex shared services operations, in addition to bringing up a daughter.

Suraksha – book's marketing manager, efficient organizer and my only supporter in this team! Her day job is talent management and PMO. She is the face and voice of the young in our team.

Mamta – team's brain trust, entertainment factor, reality check and our window to all those stories. Her day job is in learning and Line HR. Terrific facilitator.

I was nearly finished with the book and wanted to see how some might use it to their advantage in the workplace. So, I roped in my courageous colleagues and the result is the conversation below. The conversation seems mature but trust me, it was a riot and it took us over two days!

The three girls read through the work-in-progress chapters, each picking the one that they found most relevant. Shalu

had picked Section I, Chapter 2 – Play to Fail, Mamta's choice was Section II, Chapter 4 – Slit Chilies on the Rocks and Suraksha chose Section II, Chapter 5 – The Card Collector.

The session began with Shalu focused on looking at each failure as a stepping stone to success. My question to her was, "What is that one area you think is your biggest weakness and that you want to play to?" *Wow, was I glad I didn't have to answer this question considering whatever is said would be published in a book for posterity!*

But Shalu, being the bravest of the lot, answered without a bit of hesitation "Meeting timelines – that's my biggest weakness today."

After a few probing questions, we realized that this so-called weakness was just a symptom while the underlying cause was her inability to say 'no'.

We all agreed that Guide Post 1 is: **Get to the root of the situation. Don't solve for the symptoms.**

A fever is never the cause but a mere symptom of an infection and if long term cure is the objective, it is important to treat the infection while keeping the fever in control.

Any doctor worth his salt would recommend a battery of tests to single out the infection and treat it in a tailored manner. Going after too many things to fix, only reduces the chances of fixing anything.

Having identified the ‘cause’ of Shalu’s challenges, we moved to getting her to BOW. For B (Back to the wall), we told her to start putting herself in situations where the deadline was unmovable – start small, like volunteering to help bake something in her daughter’s school function. The deadline was unmovable, but even if she didn’t make it, the consequences were not devastating (she could always buy something) and then gradually increase her stakes. That was one, but on the other hand, she needed to start saying ‘No’ ... and I won’t let out that solution ... you will have to read Section Three for that!

Guide Post 2 clearly is: **Diagnosing the Single Most Impactful Cause and working through it till you get to the core and can dig no deeper.**

The ‘Own and Learn’ art of the conversation flowed and we moved to Mamta.

We asked Mamta to share with us her self assessment on reading ‘Slit Chilies’.

She aspired to build a brand of subject matter expertise in her current field. All through the chapter, she had at the back of her mind the image of her erstwhile boss who was her role model and had contributed immensely to building her foundation during her first few years off campus. She listed five qualities specific to her role model, that she aspired to build for herself, and we critically assessed her against these qualities. Our feedback allowed her to understand the perception she carried and compare it to the one she carried of herself. (It was quite an eye opener).

She led us to Guide Post 3: **Setting a Benchmark of Behavior and doing a Gap Analysis to determine the next few steps**

Conversations steered towards a mix of strengths that she must continue to capitalize on, behaviors she may want to change and others she could adopt afresh.

We had reached Guide Post 4: **Identifying your Personal Traffic Light (Behaviors to stop-start-continue)**

By now, Suraksha needed very little prodding to articulate her next few steps. She needed to stop hanging out with only her immediate team, start meeting people in the larger organization and beyond, while continuing to invest in relationships that could provide long term benefits, leading us into the chapter she chose.

Unfortunately, this propensity didn't last long. Shalu, pensive by now, was concerned about a critical weak link. She said, "You know Elango, you can do all of this but if you do not have a support system to back you, it will most likely get nowhere".

Very true indeed ... If you are eager to make that change, you have to get your family, peers, team members and your manager on board so they don't derail your actions.

We initiated Suraksha's ecosystem that day itself by working on her concern of not knowing anyone beyond her team. Mamta offered to get the ball rolling by inviting her to the next team outing and introducing her to 10 or more unknown faces. Small steps towards a larger goal! Suraksha, on her part, would pick up diverse interests to help with establishing common ground, working on her treat for the network, identifying those key connects in the network and nurturing them.

And each step got us closer to Guide Post 5 – **Building your Support System**

This discussion that spans across a few paragraphs actually took us a good part of the weekend to get through. The openness required to share their vulnerabilities was draining but the energy that this clarity left them with was contagious. We were eager to get started on our actions and as they began packing up to leave, my supervisor instincts kicked in.

I wasn't going to let them off that easy – my barrage of questions to them:

When will you start?

What will you do differently and by when?

If I followed you around, how long would it take for me to notice the change?

Hmmmm-ahhhh-uhhhhh ... soon next week ... next full moon? That wasn't good enough and we all knew it. I urged the group to initiate their Traffic Light as early as the next day, and stick to it for 21 days so that it could become part of their DNA.

That's the only way they could move past Guide Post 6: **Defining Milestones and Timelines**

We agreed to meet three weeks later to see how we did over another cup of coffee. (They made me promise to fund it since this was research for the book!)

However, the journey still felt incomplete. The guide posts seemed good ... yet something was missing. I slept over it and as always when you sleep thinking of something you have your solution. “Walk Like a Baby” – a blog I had posted some months ago – the missing piece. Here is an excerpt that will help put the complete picture together:

Sometime in 2010 when every flight was delayed, I was stuck at the airport yet again, with the battery dying in my laptop, likewise with the mobile, and with no book in hand. I had no choice but to distract myself watching people waiting around the airport for their flights. Amidst the crowd, a woman and her baby caught my eye. The baby was about a year old and was attempting to get on her feet. She kept falling but wouldn't give up even when some of the falls were bad. Many times I found myself lurching out of my seat to catch the baby, but the mother didn't seem like she would appreciate it, so I stayed firmly rooted to my seat. Finally the fighter that this little one was, she dragged herself to one of the seats slowly held the leg, pushed herself up one step at a time and finally stood up! She gingerly left her hand and tottered a few steps and then came the loud resounding boom! She fell yet again! I thought she would stop but no she got back to repeating the process again and again. I continued to watch on and realized 15 minutes later that this baby had crystallized what my readers had been asking for months!

For this little tot, the WHY was all about come-what-may, I have to get to my mom. Nothing else seemed worth her attention and crawling was just not an option! So she was obsessed with walking, the hard falls did not deter her spirit and she was quick to take the support of the chair to stand up and totter the first few steps.

As you move on to execute and convert thought into action remember Guide Post 7 – **Practice, Practice and Practice more!**

But don't do what Agastya did! Agastya suddenly stopped playing cricket with his friends in the park. Reason? He was frustrated with his inability to strike the ball with his bat while his friends were merrily smashing it around.

He tried hard, practiced in his own way but it didn't work. He kept swinging his bat day in day out expecting to somehow strike. And finally gave up.

It took us a while to get him to understand that, "*if he did what he did always, he will get what he got always.*" He had to try something new. Once he got it, he practiced the time tested trick of hitting a stuffed sock hanging from the door frame rather than just swinging wildly hoping for miracles to happen. I am sure he will start striking the ball in the park soon.

Please remember this Agastya lesson as you practice ... and flip over to the following chapters on learning to say 'no' and follow it up with the proverbial twist in the tale.

Memory Bytes

- ❑ Distinguish the symptoms from the cause and treat the cause – don't take the easy way out.
- ❑ Once you've identified the cause, take one step at a time, keep your goal in focus, tweak some 'start-continue-stop' patterns, define timelines and DO.
- ❑ 'Practice makes perfect' is not just some conjured phrase – you need to practice everyday till it becomes behavior.

Chapter 8: Yes Sir, Yes Sir, Three Bags Full of Bitterness and Busy Weekends



Say no, say it well and stay in the 'No' zone.

I had to get it right this time! I was going on a much deserved vacation and was updating my manager on 'who would be doing what' in my absence. Casually, he stated, "You will be available on your mobile, right?"

"aaa...err.....hmmm..." My head buzzed, and I heard myself say, "Yes, of course!"

Damn! I walked out of the meeting feeling like a child. Why couldn't I have just said, "No, but my assistant knows how to reach me in an emergency." Hadn't I rehearsed that before the meeting? Then? What happened? The strange part is my boss wouldn't have minded if I had said no!

I realized I often end up saying 'yes' when I really want to say 'NO'.

I didn't want to get on that 10 pm call.

I didn't want to take that extra assignment.

I didn't want to speak at that weekend conference.

And eventually I end up doing all of them – all because I couldn't say 'NO'.

This difficulty which usually starts with authority figures eventually gets embedded into our DNA and soon saying 'NO' becomes a challenge, even when all sensibilities urge you to do so. It's almost an epidemic. Have you noticed how it feels like when everybody around us is working late nights, weekends and stepping out of conversations to take that *all important* call? Have you noticed how all of them are irritable, tired and look crazed?

You are probably thinking “But so what? Isn’t that the mantra for getting ahead?”

You’re even wondering why I’ve dedicated lines of text to saying ‘NO’, that too, in a book that is supposed to focus on success.

Here is my logic, if we are constantly saying ‘YES’ to all assignments, never turning anything down where will we ever find time to learn, discover or simply re-charge?

I went through the same cycle and I saw this happening with friends and co-workers. So, I took a stab at understanding what drives our ‘Not saying NO’ behavior. I listened to blog readers, met people, recalled occasions when I said no ... I even tried a survey!

Three distinct drivers (reasons) emerged from all of these:

Driver1: What If ?

“If I say no, what if one of my peers gets the job?”

“If I say no, what if somebody else does a better job?”

These are *genuine* insecurities (I prefix genuine because for some reason most people consider insecurity a bad word). Let me narrate a true story that could be about any one of us.

Nikita, a team member, announced to me that she wanted to quit. I was surprised, “Wasn’t she a top performer, the one who always led client negotiations and was a bundle of positive energy?” I dug deeper and was amazed to find that Nikita had a young child at home and her constant travelling had strained the relationship with her husband. I was shocked only because she never mentioned her responsibilities at home and always seemed glad to travel and take on more. When Nikita and I spoke, she declared that she had been facing these problems at home for a while now but was hesitant to talk about it because she feared that if she turned work away, she may lose the ‘favored’ status.

She is not alone; there are many of us who are insecure about being disqualified from the rat-race if we say 'NO!' This is the 'what if driver'.

Driver 2: Want It All?

"I want that promotion and want to spend time with my daughter."

"I don't want to travel and I want to be Region Head."

Greed, ambition or just plain drive. There are times when we get covetous and want it all – the plum projects, the visibility, the exposure.

Meet Vijay, the 'go-to-guy' for the boss – the star performer who won every imaginable award and of course, the 'boss's favorite'. Now he was getting ready to quit and met me to ask for a reference. A little surprised to hear from Vijay that he was thinking of parting ways, I asked him why.

"I don't find the work challenging any more. There is no learning for me."

I didn't let it go at that; after an interesting conversation that lasted an hour, I figured Vijay's main grouse was that he was not getting those prized assignments but was still slogging the hours. The boss seemed to favor others more than him. Worried, I met his boss to hear his side of the story. And here is what I heard:

"Vijay is one of my best guys, but seems stretched and is dropping the ball. His issue is that he wants to do everything, doesn't delegate and hasn't been able to make the transition from an individual contributor to a manager. I am deliberately not giving him more work because he is already working 80 hour weeks and his health is starting to suffer."

Then it all fell into place for me. Vijay was unwilling to make the trade-offs. He wanted all the plum projects, wanted to retain control and therefore, did not build a strong team that could help him succeed. He micro-managed the team he had because he wanted everything done his way. Obviously, Vijay had no time for new projects! Even the current projects were suffering because he wanted it all – the control, the quality, and the accolades – and was unwilling to make the trade-offs.

Driver 3: Want to be Liked

“I want to be approachable.”

“I want to be seen as dependable.”

“I want to be part of the inner circle.”

The need to be accepted and wanted is so strong that we derive our validation by continuing to say ‘yes’, when we should be saying ‘no’.

No more stories about others ... Here’s my own story ... Many, many moons ago when I was a young lad, I was at the pub every other day with my boss. I wasn’t a big drinker, didn’t enjoy the smell of smoke, but there I was, night after night, politely smiling and ‘going with the flow’. All this because I wanted to fit in, be liked and be seen as someone that my boss could relate to.

At the end of the day, this became a strain on my health, my other relationships and my meager earnings. Sure, for a while, it was nice. I got some great projects, was the high riser at work and success was mine. And for all the hard work I did on those projects, the impression people carried of me is that I got where I was because of drinking with this bloke. Then one day my boss got transferred and guess what happened to my career ? And my personal relationships? What relationships? They were long gone!

Unqualified ‘Yes’ because you want to be liked or need to fit in always leads to bitterness and anger. This is a universal truth – think of it next time you say ‘Yes’ because you want to be liked.

I know you are saying, “I get it; now show me how to manage these drivers.”

If you look at the underlying theme, it is our inability to prioritize. Over the years, I’ve learnt some workable ideas that can help prioritize and manage these drivers better.

- *Golden Rule rules* – A friend of mine has always been clear that weekends are for family. No travelling, no assignments, no calls. He is fine with working 80 hour weeks, but weekends are clearly off limits. Guess what? He is a Regional Head. His golden rule made it easy for him to prioritize and over a period of time, everyone at work molded their requirements and working style to his. I have emulated this to some extent – I want to build a network, I love to speak in seminars and forums but will not do it on weekends.

This means missed opportunities but the choice is clear. This same friend did not take a larger role because it violated his golden rule. The role would have meant a larger region and greater visibility but would also come with more travel. Maybe when his children don't need him, he will, but right now the – Golden Rule rules.

- *Make the trade-off* – You have to give some to get some and you can't have it all. A couple of years ago, I was a little nervous prior to a performance conversation with one of my directs. I had marked him a 3 (on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the highest) and wasn't sure how he would react. He was a good performer, but when I stacked his results against the others, he was just about achieving expectations. I shouldn't have bothered getting anxious because he accepted the performance score and thanked me for the support. Surprised, I asked whether he was upset and his response was, "I had to balance my family and work. So, I decided to prioritize for my daughter. It was a conscious decision and I am happy!" He had said 'no' to a few extra assignments but had delivered flawlessly on his core role. He is a rare breed amidst most of us, who is willing to make those tough trade-offs and live with the consequences.

So what is your Golden Rule? What trade-offs are you willing to make? Write them down, get them framed and display them so that you never lose sight of them.

Not saying 'NO' because "I don't know how!"

Now that we know why we shy away from saying 'No' and how to decide when to say 'No' lets move on to the tough part.

Where the rubber meets the road is ..., "How do I say it? *How* do I make it *real*?"

Here is a cheat sheet to help you practice. Since every instance, every interaction, every recipient is different and having implemented this consciously, this cheat sheet helped me with fail-safe responses:

- *Can I think about it and come back?* – Instead of providing an instant 'yes' or 'no', this response gives you time to think. It also has the

advantage of letting the requestor feel that the need was not being rejected outright or accepted without thinking.

- *Can you help me understand why you want me to do this?* – This question helps you see the big picture. It also allows you to make the decision by getting the details. It may even be a precursor to the first response.
- *I would like to do it , but currently my plate is full. Can you help me prioritize?* – Especially when dealing with your seniors, this will validate your list of urgent and important things. It also helps the person asking understand what your current responsibilities are.
- *Why do you think I am the best person to do this?* – You may not need to ask this question aloud only because answers to the second and third questions from above will give you this much needed perspective. Having said that, you must know this question will play a crucial role in your decision. You may just figure out that someone else could possibly take it on or help validate your ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.
- *Here is what I think and feel* – Have the other person know your stance and whether you agree or disagree. Careful – this should never be your first response. Always take the time to understand the other person’s perspective. It will make your argument a lot stronger.
- *How about considering XYZ?* – Give solutions; it softens the blow.

And most importantly, if you want to say ‘No’, don’t cook up a story or lie! If your wife asks you to go to the grocery store, don’t say you have some urgent work and get caught snoring 30 minutes later. Or if your boss asks you to stretch that day, don’t say you’re busy and be seen at the mall, lining up for the matinee show! State your real reason, it hurts in the beginning, but builds trust and credibility in the long run.

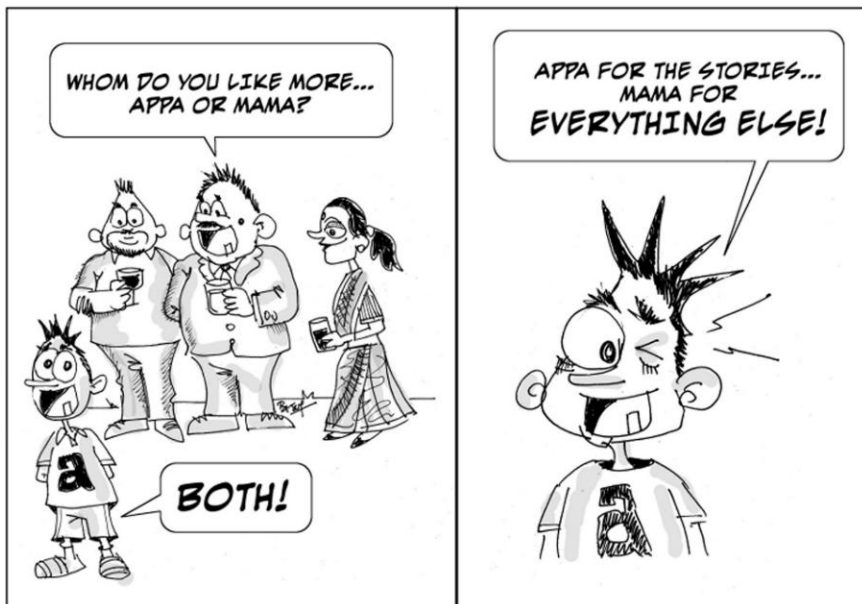
You must remember that saying ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ are like credit and debit notes for your relationship account. Make sure your cheque doesn’t bounce with too many ‘No’s and don’t say ‘NO’ for the sake of it!

All of us have this affliction in varying degrees – from the acute to the mild – and it probably varies through life’s stages. It is a choice we make and one WE can make. I am not a pro but I am definitely getting better at this. Just the fact that I was able to dedicate time to this book means I had to say ‘No’ to many other asks! Finally YOU make the choice. Are you ready? Flip over to the next chapter before you make those choices.

Memory Bytes

- ☐ It's alright to say 'No'. Select your priorities and all decisions will become easy.
- ☐ Remember the 'what if', 'want it all' and 'want to be liked' drivers.
- ☐ Saying 'No' will play a big part in allowing you to stay healthy, manage relationships and most importantly, stay sane.
- ☐ Don't say 'No' just for the sake of it. Make sure your reasons are sound and your approach does not alienate others.

Chapter 9: A Twist in the Tale – the 'And' Factor



Only the 'AND' will survive.

I am sure you spent some time reflecting on the last chapter and are just about ready to declare that you can say 'NO' and prioritize.

Well, here is my version of the 'twist in the tale' ...

It is good to be greedy and want it all.

It is good to say 'yes' all the time.

It is good to stretch and work those crazy hours.

Huh?? Wondering if I have lost it? Humor me and read on, you will see that this twist also has a lesson to be learnt ...

Agastya (yes our little guru is back), asked me the same, "Have you lost it?" question or a politer version of it in a conversation while driving back to Bangalore from Chennai. Here is how Agastya came to the conclusion that I had lost it.

"Ags, you should try different things. It's good to be a good reader, but you should also learn different sports and languages and musical instruments. You should not shy away from new things."

"Ok, Appa. When we get back home, I will start learning the drums, the keyboard, and the guitar. I will go swimming AND to science camp!"

"Hang on, son. Don't get distracted by too many things focus on one maybe two."

"What Appa! You just said I have to learn many things and now you are saying 'focus'. I am confused."

He was right. While on one hand I was asking him to learn different things, I was also asking him to focus. So he was right and I was right too! And I say this because while I wanted him to pick many new skills, I knew if he did pick all at the same time he would not master even one, would lose interest and end up never trying again! Both of us were right but how do I explain this to a seven year old!

This is the same dilemma I am presenting you with. In the last chapter, I waxed eloquent about why we should be saying 'no' and in the very next chapter I am saying you must say 'yes'. I call this *creative tension*! Being at both ends of the spectrum at the same time, balancing one with the other.

Not easy ... there will be conflict, there will be confusion ... boundary lines will not be clear. But we don't have an option. 'OR' doesn't exist – only 'AND' does. Unfortunately for us, we grew up learning that answers were either right or wrong. We didn't have the option where an answer was both right and wrong. It was always OR, never AND.

But sometimes, AND is the right option. The key is to know when. Let us define 'when' we need to say 'YES' even when we want to say 'NO'.

1. Career starting off – When you are young, footloose and fanciful ... 80-hour weekdays, crazy deadlines, wanting everything and saying 'yes' is perfectly ok. This will build a rock solid foundation and allow you to build skills, reputation and relationships that will come in good stead when you are no longer young, footloose and fanciful.
2. Career changing – A new job or a new assignment is not the time to think of what you will say 'no' to and think of work life balance.
3. Career in crisis – You do what is required and don't ask questions.

However, before we go any further we have to remember this. *None of these can be a forever situation; these have to have an END date.* Else, all that we discussed in the last chapter will happen and forget about success, you will be lucky to come out alive!

Now, just saying that we have to say 'yes' doesn't mean that other variables go away. We still have deadlines, working weekends, families and health to manage.

So now, let's explore the 'what' that will help keep us sane through some of the insane decisions we are taking with our time, energy and efforts.

How do you fit everything in once you have said yes?

Walk in With Your Eyes Open

It is important you do this consciously; this is the only way you will prepare for the times ahead and not get into a downward spiral. When I took on a new job five years ago, I knew it was way above my head, was complex and required 25 hour days. Thinking through this and consciously accepting this reality helped.

Involve Your Family

Prepare your family; it is important you have that conversation and agree on what they can expect. No vacation; will not be back to put child to sleep; weekends will be travelling ... don't just inform. Sit down and talk about what the consequences are. For instance, my wife and I had to decide that if I were to be so busy, she would stay at home. Now, that means we had to think through some lifestyle changes because our monthly income would drop. That is the level of detail you have to get into.

Golden Rule Still Rules

Despite all the above, agree and commit to what will not change – that one family vacation, will drop son to school while in town, dinner will be always together. A friend has this golden rule – whatever happens, no compromise on the morning one hour at the gym. I have the 45 minute yoga and meditation golden rule. Health is an important part and you must have a golden rule that takes care of this.

Build a Strong Team

If your job requires people management, get the best people around you; if they are better than you, *even better!* Once you have a great team, learn to work with them and not do everything yourself. It means you have to spend time coaching and supervising their work. But in the end it will save you a lot of time and effort and ensure quality of work.

Remember Vijay from the last chapter. If he picks this up, he will get back to his days of glory. What surprises me most is when managers tell me they don't have time to hire their team. This is as illogical as not filling an empty fuel tank, saying you don't have time to stop!

Leverage Support System

Ask for help like mad. Activate your networks, look for mentors, supporters, advisors and well-wishers. You will need a lot of them to help with quick decisions, extract you from tough situations and sometimes just for air-cover. The first few years are crucial for building this support system. It is important that during non-crisis times we actively build this support system.

In June 2007, my manager informed me that I have to present to the Board in August. My initial reaction was, "what do you want me to do – my job or prepare the presentation?" His response was "Both" and he politely walked out. I was at a loss; I was working 20 hours a day, all my leaders were stretched and I had no clue what the Board wanted. July 15th... no progress, I received a notification that the first dry run was scheduled for July 25th ... could I send the material in please? I panicked, not knowing what to do, mentioned this to my other manager (I had two managers). She offered to help by talking to the board and locking down expectations. Seeing me work late one evening, one of my leaders offered to stay back and soon, I had an army of people assisting me. The presentation was a runaway success and set the foundation for me. I really owe it to all those folks ...

I learnt this lesson accidentally but I am not going to forget it in a hurry.

Tell

Many times we don't tell people what we are doing. That, we are saying 'yes' though we should be saying 'no', that we are in a crisis, that we are in trouble. You will be surprised at how many people will want to help you out of the jam. This will also help you set the stage with the right people – that this is only a temporary phase and working those crazy hours, always being 'available for a meeting' will not be in perpetuity.

Focus on the Vital Few

When you are racing against time, avoid the temptation to do everything. Focus on the few that will get you maximum impact. It is true that if you are smart, you will find the 20% that will provide you 80% of your results (Pareto).

Get out of the excellence trap. Find out what is the right amount of quality that will get you by and only do that. Remember the three variables – quality, cost and speed ... the right amount of all three is what will make you the winner.

Don't Get Overwhelmed

While studying for my twelfth standard board exams, being a typical Type A personality, I was trying to cram a year into a week. My biggest hurdle was not the timeline but just my overall sense of “my gosh, so much to do.” Until my parents stepped in, broke the textbook into smaller milestones and helped me focus on smaller chunks. This has come to my rescue many times, including while writing this book.

Stretch assignments, 80 hour weekdays, working weekends and extensive travel are all part of the success package. You can't run away from them. But all in the right doses; keep the above ideas in mind and you will survive and thrive.

However, if you see you are not able to get out of the hole or if the demands on you continue past the end date you have set yourself, “Get Out of It!” It may mean loss of face, failure, finding a new job – take the temporary setback and get out of it while you still have yourself intact. Trust me NOTHING is worth sacrificing your health and your family life.

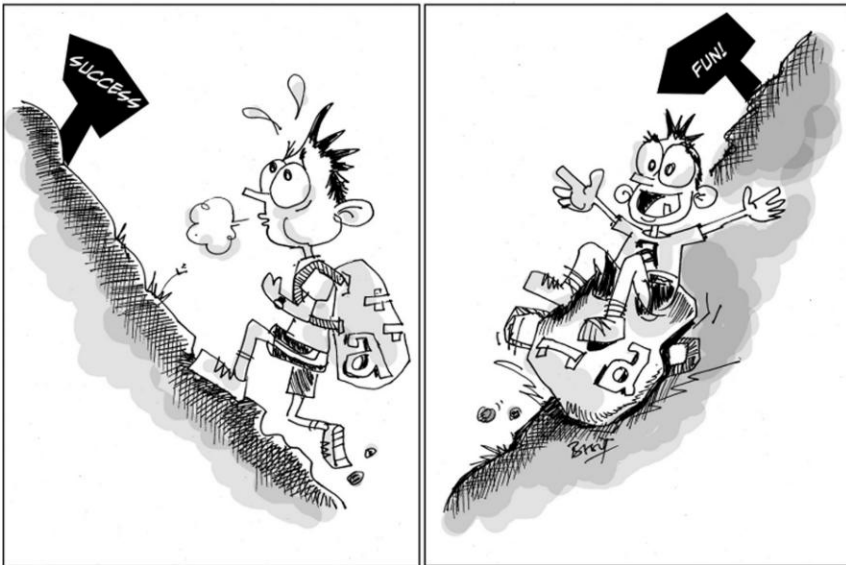
Saying ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ are our choices and we need to know when, in what amount, with what consequences we are willing to make them. Also keep in mind what your non-negotiables are.

By the way, Agastya is focusing on his drum lessons along with his swimming and cycling but has given the guitar lessons a miss. He has made his choice, and is living with it ... What about you?

Memory Bytes

- ❑ Say 'yes' when the situation demands it. Don't blurt out 'work life balance' when the company walls are falling around you.
- ❑ Keeping yourself sane through the 'yes's by consciously knowing what you are stepping into and keeping those around you informed and involved.
- ❑ Know when to get out. Have an end state and date in mind.

SECTION IV: Staying Sane, Staying Successful



*Success has its baggage, take it lightly
and carry your boss along.*

Chapter 10: Monkey that Ate Ginger



What do all of us have in common with George Bush Sr?

25 questions in 30 minutes! Phew! After addressing close to 1000 employees in a town hall, I was ready to give the rest of humanity a miss for sometime. I needed some quiet 'ME' time. I headed straight out to the cafeteria, managing to dodge the stragglers who wanted to ask more questions, I grabbed a quick lunch and plonked myself at a quiet table that also seated an employee who looked even more eager to escape from reality than I was.

After wolfing down half my meal, feeling a little better, I noticed that the girl was really down. She was almost willing herself to disappear into the wall. She caught me looking at her and gave me a wan smile. I slowly engaged her in conversation and went onto ask why she looked as if, at any moment, she would break into tears.

She admitted she was upset. Apparently earlier in the day, she got a mail from her manager on some escalation. She was upset and wanted to vent some harsh feelings so she forwarded the note to her friend and wrote a few lines on how disgruntled she was. Or so she thought ... instead of sending it to the friend she had inadvertently marked it to someone else. It landed in another colleague's inbox and he ribbed her about it in front of other team members. She hadn't written anything offensive nor was there any confidential data in the mail, but just having it out there discussed in public had embarrassed her.

I smiled, reminded of when a friend of mine had done the same. A few years ago in a company sponsored management program, we had to do a project on branding. My friends, who were perpetually late turning in assignments, this time too, fell behind so decided to do a 'copy-paste' job from the net.

When one sent it to the other for a final review, the friend wrote in his mail, "Here it is. Let's hope the professor doesn't realize it's all thanks to Google." You guessed it! Instead of marking the friend, he sent it straight to the professor's mailbox!

So, going by the adage that 'misery loves company', I proceeded to share my friend's faux pas with her. Our conversation and lunch ended. She left feeling better and I left, ready to let humanity back in.

We have all been there, haven't we? Gaffed like this and wish there were some technology that made us invisible. That evening, while searching for ideas for my weekly blog, this incident played up in my mind. Is the world around us so mean that they can't tolerate some silly mistakes? Do we take ourselves so seriously that we can't take a few jibes? I thought, let me find out and I wrote my blog on bloopers and shared some from my 'Greatest Hits' collection ...

- We were a few minutes away from going on air for a webinar. One of my colleagues in the room, in preparation for the meeting, announced, "All of you now put your vibrators on!" Shock gave way to relief and loud laughter when we realized she meant for all of us to put our phones on vibrate mode! We had a good laugh, and fortunately she laughed with us ...
- Then there is me. I started my career in hospitality. When I was still green, one day my manager came to me and said that there was a very big client hosting a party at the hotel and that I would be in charge. The manager would measure me on how well I was able to handle the event. So I pulled out all the tricks, went totally out and by the end of the evening, the client was eating out of my hand! He was so impressed that he actually pulled my manager aside and complimented the work I had done. Beaming, I stayed at the event till the last guest was gone and even walked the client to his car and saw him off. As the car pulled away, my boss pulled up and congratulated me on a job well done. His next question was, "Did you settle the bill?" HUH??? What bill? Was I supposed to give him the bill? The next day, scared and upset that I let such a fundamental point mar my perfect event, I went to the client to get the bill cleared. Of course he paid, but I felt like an idiot! It was a Hospitality 101 lesson that I messed up!

Monkey that Ate Ginger

- This was one of my most viewed and commented on blogs. I realized that there were bus, boat and shiploads of people who walked around like they just had eaten a sack full of ginger (this is a literal translation of a Tamil phrase “you look like a monkey that ate ginger” meaning – you can’t take a joke). Sensitive, worried and just not ready to laugh at themselves or anybody because they were taking things so seriously. This blog was an outlet for all of them to share their ‘ginger eating’ stories ...

I decided to make this a weekly tradition and kept publishing bloopers. My worry of not having enough material were put to rest when I saw that everyone was willing to put themselves out there ... just goes to show, you will find what you are looking for ... you look for sorrow, you will find it in bucket loads, you look for bloopers, you will find them in bus-loads! I almost felt like I had released people from years of baggage (yeah I am exaggerating), but some stories like the one below shows there was an impact!

A long lost roomie of mine, who cooked the most amazing food when we were bachelors admitted he had given up his culinary interests. What happened to our Ace Cook, who created great dishes even when we were smashed? Well, when he got married, to impress his wife, he volunteered to cook for her and her friends. To show his creativity, he decided to rustle up beetroot soup from left over rasam! And the ‘Yan Can Cook’ didn’t bother tasting before serving. Your guess on what happened next is exactly what happened. The dish bombed and his wife fumed! As a result, he got all knotted up, conscious and gave up, never ever to enter the kitchen again! When he read this blog he wrote to me saying that reading other’s bloopers provided him the much-needed release. Now he is back in the kitchen whipping up his next masterpiece. I am happy, as long as he sends me some of the ‘tried and tasted’ food.

None of us are perfect. We will make mistakes. We will be incredibly embarrassed. But we need to be able to laugh at ourselves. We need to be able to take things in our stride. We can’t carry around baggage. To be successful, it is important to accept the good and the bad about ourselves, to be able to move on and let go of the embarrassments.

People around us will laugh, poke fun and speak behind our back. But what if we decided to laugh with them? Maybe life will be less stressful and lot more joyful.

What helps is having different ways to cope, let go and laugh. Here are some that work for me:

Laugh with the crowd – Sure it's embarrassing and sure you are uncomfortable. But it's the best form of closure. Knowing that you have been made fun of, that you have accepted it and can look back and laugh will help you get over it a lot sooner.

It can't be worse than Bush Senior – Let me refresh your memory. It was January 1992 and President Bush (the 1st one) was at a formal diplomatic dinner in Japan hosted by the Prime Minister of Japan. At the dinner, President Bush fell ill and vomited all over the Prime Minister and then fainted. This was televised for months, made into comic skits on TV shows and mimicked across continents!

Now, think about what you are embarrassed about ... can it really be THAT BAD?

Remember, people are only laughing at us as long as we are not laughing. Once we join in, then we all are laughing together. This may also save you the next heart attack!

Here's to many more bloopers and many many more laughs!

Memory Bytes

- ❑ Don't get too bothered about your goof ups. Chances are others have already forgotten what you still cringe at.
- ❑ To be successful, it is important to accept the good and the bad about ourselves. And don't forget to do the same for others.
- ❑ Learn to laugh with people and at yourself.

Chapter 11: Managing Monster Inc ... or R.I.P.



*The critical relationship in our quest, the hero(ine)
or villain, depending on how you manage it.*

A h-ha! That is an interesting title isn't it? Especially seeing a Rest in Peace (R.I.P.) notice after advising you to laugh and let go. Let me break the suspense before your heartbeat quickens or worse, you tear the book!

I am speaking of the monster that can make or break our professional lives. Any guesses?

Bingo – you got it – it is the BOSS! The omnipresent, or not present, knowing or not knowing but powerful factor. A popular adage goes that people don't leave companies, they leave their bosses!

It is true; the boss, manager, supervisor, leader, whatever moniker they go by, are very influential in our professional lives. They dole out assignments, send us on training programs, decide on our worthiness to be promoted, rank our performance and decide how much more or less we should earn.

They are the ones who will support us when we play to fail, reward us for attitude like in 'Appa, I hate Ireland', recognize our value system, influence those perceptions in building our brand, provide important connections for the network and coach us.

Hate them, love them, curse them – they are a constant (unless you start your own company). How we manage them (yes, they don't manage us) will determine our progress to a large extent.

Before we get to figure out how to manage these monsters, sorry bosses, let us look at the different kinds that inhabit the different office premises.

Disclaimers:

I have alternated the Ms and Mr with no bias. Please trust me when I say it is only to be inclusive.

If you are reading the book and were my boss at some point of time – “Boss, please trust me, it is not you.”

Mr Nice: Best manager to work for? No! Don't be under that impression if he is nice to you, the underling. He is in all likelihood the super boss' dumping ground and the football his peers like to kick around! So you will land up with all the extra work and because he is nice, you won't be able to say 'no'. He will not be able to push your promotion, that extra bonus and in all likelihood, won't tell you when you mess up because he is too nice.

Ms Pushy: Aggressive, wants everything done yesterday or NOW! Best boss to work for mostly. Hopefully, she is as pushy with her peers and boss. Just to verify, please make sure you hang around when they are dealing with their peers and managers. If it is a Ms Nice with peers and Ms Pushy with you – danger ahead.

If they are not, they are the ones who will stretch you, push you to your limit and challenge you to do more. You will learn and realize your true capability. Of course, you will kiss work life balance, vacations and other such nice things good bye! Not great if you have a family and a mortgage to pay; you can't even quit in a hurry. But they are also the ones who will push and get a larger pie of the bonus allocated and push the team promotions through.

Mr Know It All: If you are starting off, in your career terrific; but if you have some years under your belt, it can be slow death. Meetings will be long pontificating durbars. Every problem will have a past one they had solved! You will get so much gyan that you wish you had an out of body experience! The easiest to manage as long as you are able to listen to their gyan and boost their ego. Get invisible earplugs and a plastic smile in your survival kit.

Ms Never There: Also known as absentee manager. You will be left to fend for yourself with complete freedom. But be prepared to have no support to push through difficult decisions and projects. You will also have no clue as to whether you are doing well or not. A good interlude between a pushy boss and the next one, Mr In Your hair.

Mr In Your Hair: Will even track your trips to the washroom. Wants to know every minute detail and second-by-second updates. You will spend a lot of time preparing reports, status updates and reviews. Forget customers and real work! Managing Mr In Your Hair is itself a full time job.

Ms Connected: Knows everyone and everybody from the janitor to the boss' assistant. Can call on favors, get you those coveted assignments and overseas meetings. You will also get to fly business class because they will know somebody in travel. The catch is, since they will be only networking, you will be left doing all the work for them. And if you mess with them, you know the whole world will know and nobody will touch you, even with a 10 foot barge pole.

I know the character sketches are exaggerated (though some of my colleagues tell me otherwise) and in reality no one type of boss exists. They come with a mix of the above with one predominant style.

However, knowing your boss' style helps you manage them better. You can't choose two relationships in your life, your parents and your boss. So you might as well make best use of whatever the divine powers, in their infinite wisdom, have bestowed upon you.

While you are mulling the ways of the divine and what their lottery has designed on you, let me share a few practical tips sharpened over the years, to help you gain the upper hand.

- *Communication style* – Some like it in PowerPoints, some like emails, many prefer excel sheets, personal updates. Figure out what their style is – the reading, the visual, oral or number types. You present a PowerPoint to the excel type and you will be labeled a flaky chap and vice versa, you will be labeled a tactical chap who can't rise above the details!
- *Alignment* – No, not wearing the same color of clothes and visiting the same pub but aligning priorities; figure out what is top priority for them. That way, you don't bust your posterior working on things only to find that it doesn't matter to them.
- *Make them look good* – It is important you make your boss look good in front of their managers and peers. Not by buying them fairness cream but by doing a good job and not badmouthing them.

Be careful not to overdo it, else you will be labeled their acolyte when they fall from grace, you don't want that tag.

- *Remember they are the boss* – Just because your boss takes you out for dinner, goes drinking with you, puts his arm around you, don't get carried away. And while you are at it, don't overdo the compliments and the bent back – you will signal that you can be taken for granted.
- *Deliver-Deliver-Deliver* – There is nothing that works like results. Bosses are known to put up with tantrums and bad body odor if their team members deliver. Forget the tantrums, wear your deodorant, and focus on the results.

Deliver what you said you will, how you said you will and at the time you said you will. And while at it, please don't take offense at my body odor comment – my team (the one helping with the book) said I was becoming predictably nice, so I am attempting some cockiness!

Whatever the type and kind, this is an important relationship. Conventional wisdom is your boss manages you; new reality is you manage your boss.

And the 'by now familiar' twist in the tale ... don't just stop with your boss. Get your plan B ready. Ensure you know your boss' boss and his peers. This is your insurance but buy the insurance discreetly – you don't want to make your boss insecure.

Parting wisdom – I know I said you can't choose your boss; but if you have been in an organization for a long time, you may get this privilege. And if you have that choice, more than a good manager, pick up a manager who is on the rise and who has political capital. You will rise with them and you will find it easy to deliver on tough assignments; their political capital will iron out the wrinkles that come your way.

Good luck and when you become a manager don't forget what you underwent as a team member! Do unto your teams what you wished was done unto you. (Sorry Confucius!)

My biggest asset is that many of my bosses continue to be invested in my success much after I stopped reporting to them. If you get such a relationship, you are blessed!

This chapter is dedicated to all the lovely bosses I had. I have been blessed with some wonderful bosses. Parag Dutta, Shekar Pradhan, Bhupinder Singh, Azeem Shah, Rajeev Chopra, S.C. Mathur, K.R. Suresh, Srini Chakravarthy, Ramesh Padmanabhan, Bhaskar Menon, Jerry Rao, Avtar Monga, Vicki Spivey, Julio Manso, Rene Spero, Deepak Patel, Milind Chalisgaonkar, ARt Flew, Linda Chapin, Jeya Kumar and Ganesh Ayyar. Neeraj Khanna who was never my boss but a great teacher and R. Mohan my sounding board. Thank you ladies and gentlemen – you have made me successful in many ways!

Before you get teary-eyed, let me break the reverie with an irreverent, in your face list – the “What your boss will never tell you ... but you need to know” list! Flip over bravely and don’t hate me after that ...

Reality Bites: What your boss will never tell you ... but you need to know

1. Slogans are great on billboards but not on clothes – Recently sighted and still recovering – “Hot Stuff”; “Single and Looking”; “Kiss me”; “My boyfriend is out of town”; “Too hot to handle” – good for a chuckle, but not appropriate in the meeting room.
2. Prove that you work hard through results not body odor – No matter how small the paycheck, invest in a deodorant.
3. Adjusting is great for progress but that doesn’t extend to inners in public – Please adjust at home or in the wash room.
4. Kya karoon keh saala character dheela hai – if that’s your ringtone, you can kiss your clients goodbye. Recently heard on a CEO’s ring tone.
5. Stop digging for gold in those tunnels meant for breathing – And worse, examining their worth in public.
6. Nature’s call is more important than any other phone call. Don’t mix the two, the sound effects can evoke hazardous thoughts.
7. ‘Koochiepooh’ and ‘Honeybun’ are endearing terms for loved ones but the person in the next cubicle doesn’t need to know. Keep your voice low when taking personal calls in the office.
8. Water coolers are good places to listen, not to share.
9. Tell people what you are eating, don’t show them. And while you are at it, say it – don’t spray it.
10. When your boss asks for feedback after a bad review with his boss, “I told you so” is not what you want to say.

Memory Bytes

- ☐ This is a very critical relationship invest in it, manage it and make it happen.
- ☐ There are good bosses and bad bosses. The difference is the situation. Adapt to your boss' style and use them to your advantage.
- ☐ Take your boss along. They are always good to have in your corner.
- ☐ Be the boss you want your boss to be.

Chapter 12: Success Traps



Success + Success = Failure; Success + Failure = Success

In the beginning of the book we learnt how to BOW and play to fail. Many of you probably raised an eyebrow as to how a book on success can start with one of the first lessons as learning to fail! And now just when you are at the end of this book let me share the final words of wisdom. Success is the beginning of failure and the first step into the success trap.

Let me elaborate ...

You start off – new job, new assignment, start of career whatever – all hungry for success, focused on what needs to be done, looking ahead, willing to try whatever it takes to get it done.

You will buy this book, make notes, try the ideas and get to success faster (of course I am doing some self promotion; if I don't who will?).

You succeed, you get the recognition, the raise, the promotion, the office – whatever it is that symbolizes success to you.

You walk around like you have arrived!

Then BOOM! You fall prey to the success trap. And before you know it, you are tumbling down the precipice or get stuck in a job blaming bosses, companies and your karma.

“How did this happen to me? Why am I the victim?”

Success is heady and it intoxicates you. It slowly numbs you and where fire in the belly keeps you hungry, success satiates you.

Agastya explained this well a few days ago. On the ride back home from school, he blurted, “Appa, I wish I had never written that short story mama

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shared with everyone.” Taken aback, I asked him why ... “Appa, now everybody likes it and wants me to write another one and I am afraid I will not be able to write it as well” ... I could not have defined it better. Success trap is falling victim to one’s own achievements.

This is real and happens to all of us. To keep you successful and away from success traps, identify the changes in your behavior early:

The Before ...	→	... the After
You are driven by the desire to succeed	→	You are driven by the fear of losing
You focus on passing the person ahead of you	→	You watch your back noticing people who are behind you
You experiment and innovate	→	You tinker and fine tune
There is fire in your belly	→	There is success in your belly
You listen, learn and lead. Then unlearn to start the cycle again	→	You lead based on what proved to be successful and continuously reinforce the old learning
You value people	→	You value success

The signs are obvious for all to see except you, until the first fall from grace. (Remember Vijay in the ‘Yes Sir, Yes Sir ...’ Chapter?)

If we are lucky this fall will happen early and get us back to our senses. If we are unlucky it will happen too late and we will be beyond redemption.

Don’t wait for luck to deliver the early fall and instead watch for these traps. You have the diagnostic list, keep checking it ... and if you see any or all of the symptoms, you know what to do.

Swallow some fire to get the fire in the belly! (Okay, bad joke!)

Here are some other ways to get that fire without burning a hole in your stomach ... A new job, new boss, stretch assignment, executive MBA ... each of us has to define this for ourselves.

Whilst I can’t give you a one size fits all solution, I will introduce you to a gentleman who has successfully eluded the trap. He is not the poster boy you

read of in the *Economic Times*. He is like you and me (except for the long hair hiding under the turban) from humble beginnings made a lot of mistakes and was actually surprised that I would want to feature him in the book.

Meet Amuleek Bijral – a young, unassuming Sardar. He runs a chain of chai shops in Bangalore. His biggest worry today is will the samosa be as good as the supplier promised and get to the store on time. His motto is to recreate the chai shops of yesteryear.

I know you are wondering what the big deal is and thinking “I can introduce you to a few chai shop vendors myself.” That is what I thought too when the team proposed his name for this chapter.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that Amuleek is a Harvard graduate, was the youngest manager at Microsoft India and the youngest country manager at RSA.

So what on earth is he doing brewing chai?

Born in Jammu and Kashmir, he grew up in a joint family. He learnt his first lessons in leadership of sharing credit, trusting the team, providing feedback while listening to his father’s police tales (a highly decorated Inspector General) from the most notorious outposts of the country. Even today you can see these lessons in action in the way Amuleek deals with his staff and in his attitude towards work!

One of the things that strikes you about Amuleek is his restless energy, much like that of a sailor who always wants to set sail.

When he quit Microsoft to attend Harvard, his friends and colleagues thought he was stupid. He was doing so well, the ‘management’ thought he had sunshine beaming out of every body part. For Amuleek, Microsoft was a planned stopover. I asked him, “Weren’t you tempted by the success at Microsoft and didn’t you want to change your plans?” He accepted that success did lull him and the comforts of corporate life did seem tempting. However, that did not deter him (*a little like how the promised bliss and comfort of marriage scares some of us at the altar*). So he jumped and toiled through his MBA, as he had planned. The sailor at it again, this port explored, ready for the next one, even if it meant tiding through the rough seas with hardship. Only this sailor knew even before he set sail what the next port of call would be.

As we continued our conversation, I saw the pattern – he did not like being slotted. Status quo was his sign to move on. He had a plan and was executing it without letting short-term success or failure deter him. And that is what made him do the latest crazy act. He quit his role as Country Manager at RSA (the organization he joined post completing his MBA) and started the chain of chai shops (www.chaipoint.com).

I know it sounds rather charming but Amuleek is the first one to admit that the journey has been tough and all has not been hunky dory. There was collateral damage – every extra hour spent climbing meant that one hour not spent with family. Outings with friends gave way to team meetings and conference calls. And learning tricks of the trade took time away from partaking in hobbies, or just enjoying those lazy Sunday afternoons.

This was his ‘And’ factor (remember the Twist in the Tale chapter). Of course he has regrets, of course there are things he could have done differently, but Amuleek is not one to look back, but only focus on the road ahead.

So I asked Amuleek, what’s the next port of call? 50 shops? 5 cities? He shook his head and smiled. “Elango, it’s not about bigger but better for me. It’s about getting my employees to transition from being employees to owners. I want to make the guy who is making the chai, own the shop. How can I positively influence the work ethic of a community to value quality, commitment and service?”

Very benevolent my friend. Now I am following Amuleek closely to see what he will do when his dream comes true.

Breaking step every time, you fall in rhythm ... never letting success lull you into complacency. Thanks Amuleek for sharing your story and lesson of never letting success enthrall you.

Memory Bytes

- ☐ Success is heady and intoxicating. Keep the fire in your belly.
- ☐ Whenever things get comfortable and less challenging, it's time to re-evaluate.
- ☐ Set sail when the land gets familiar and comfortable.

And Back to ... The Beginning

I am both sad and excited as this book comes to a close. Sadness as this ends a fantastic year of self-discovery and working with a great team. Excitement because now this is out of my hands and into yours to create your own success.

As I close, I remember what people told me when I first announced, “I want to publish a book.”

“Are you mad, don’t you already work 18 hours a day, where are you going to find time?”

“Writing a blog is easy but a book is different – its 800 words vs 150 pages ... You really think you are capable?”

“Everybody and his uncle wants to publish a book ... do you even know a publisher?”

But it did happen.

The start of the journey itself had me humbled by all the people that came out in support of my dream. And now as I wrap up, I look back with nostalgia at all the experiences that lead to the belief – ‘You Don’t Need a Godfather’.

Here I was, facing my weakness of not knowing anything about publishing a book or anyone in the publishing world, overcoming my fear of rejection. The process of writing and trying to have the book published many a time played to all my shadows of doubts and weaknesses. Clearly I started off by Playing to Fail.

I was facing the world of unknown possibilities each time I had to mail my book proposal to a publisher. I was used to approving not seeking approvals. I had to keep pushing myself saying, “What’s the worse that could happen? Worst case you get no response right?” I kept telling myself, “Focus on what controllables I had and not worry about the non controllables.”

The controllable was of course, putting together a damn good proposal and talking to my network. Soon enough somebody knew somebody else at Tata McGraw Hill, a colleague who is also an author knew somebody in another publishing house, and from no response I had two to choose from! Card Collector in action!

With the publisher now on board, I had to figure how I would make time to execute this dream amidst my hundred hour weeks. I had to set the golden rules, accept to make trade-offs. All those lessons of prioritizing and making time in 'Yes Sir, Yes Sir' is how I was able to make time.

The twist in my tale was my book, the 'And' factor – or in my case the book factor. Consciously talking to my family and boss about this project, understanding the sacrifices I would make along the way and then committing to the same took its time but was well worth the effort.

Through this all, reading those early reviews, especially some of the not so nice ones and learning to laugh like I have shared in 'Monkey That Ate Ginger' is what kept me sane. Although I must admit, the one answer I still don't have is why on earth I remember that one nasty comment when there were nine other glowing tributes. Maybe next book will cover that or maybe you can help by writing in.

Above all, when the reviewers trashed my first few chapters, I realized early success and letting it get to your head is really dangerous. This was my 'Success Trap'.

Each time I was stuck, happy to just get words on paper, I realized I had to go and make it happen. The message that kept getting back was

'Knowing is not doing. Doing is doing'

Now that you have come to the end of this book, you will definitely have some actions, resolutions ... something as simple as learning to say 'NO' (I can see your "Oh! Sure Simple" look).

So go out and experiment. All that knowledge is for naught if we don't go out and experiment, fall down, get up, dust ourselves off and try again to finally taste success.

You Don't Need a Godfather

Remember you can play to fail and if you fail you have now learnt to laugh and if you succeed don't let that trap you.

And as you make that discovery, stay in touch. Tell me your stories, share your successes and failures or just say hello. Connect with others who have discovered 'They' can make success happen. Drop by at www.ElangoR.com

You Don't Need a Godfather – You need YOU!

Good luck and here is wishing you all the success you desire.