



# Making the **Right Choice**

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The world is changing dramatically. The challenge for people going into the future is to stay relevant and pivot with the new learnings. If you truly focus on doing what is right for your company, you'll resolve any number of challenges.

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I woke up one morning in the year 2000, to see an article in The Hindu's Newslines about all those who were going to be the next set of CEOs in India, with my name at the top of the list! I was surprised because I had never thought of myself on those lines. And then I started thinking that maybe I could be a CEO.

And two years later, I became a CEO! It made me realise that other people have a very good sense of who you are and what you can achieve. Having said that, I would like to clarify that the CEO role is one that looks glamorous and all-powerful from the outside; most people think that all a CEO has to do is to issue orders and things get done, but that's not true at all. The only way you will leave a legacy is to always think about what's right for the company, and then, doing what's right for the team.

The average tenure of a CEO is about five years in America, and about four years in India. It's a high-risk job, in the sense that if you don't do well, that's the end of your career. So, one has to face the CEO's job doing what's important, but also signalling the future.

In the pandemic, we had web calls running day in and day out. Most CEOs attended all the calls, and hence, were on the information loop on everything, and naturally, in the decision loop on everything. Post the pandemic, CEOs have to sense what's happening in their company

and their ecosystem. I call this ‘micro-sensing’ as opposed to ‘micro-managing’. When one micro manages, one gets lost in details, and never builds the bridge to the future. Post the pandemic, CEOs have to be integrators, show empathy, and partner efficiently in the ecosystem.

The average citizen now wants more from CEOs than ever before because they feel that they can hold the CEO accountable because they give the company their hard-earned money as business. CEOs will therefore be held accountable to a higher standard on societal issues and environmental issues going forward.

## **A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE**



### **a) At the Entry-Level**

Join a company where the culture and the learning are good, and spend at least three to five years. Don't keep changing jobs for the sake of small hikes in your salary.

## **b) At the Junior Manager Level**

Ask yourself, 'why does the role of the junior manager exist?' As per a general job description, a junior manager fundamentally exists to execute plans. So, he or she must become very good at execution. At the same time, they must state the roles that they would like to do in the future, and display their adaptability to them, and show their manager and the company that they can take on a higher role.

Only when they do that, will they get accepted in the company, and people will give them higher roles. Being from a reputed institute alone does not guarantee them those roles. It is the results which matter, not the degree.

## **c) At the Level of Middle Management**

Middle managers are the key people in every organisation. I have always said "show me a company with weak middle management and I will show you a company that is weak in execution."

Middle managers are like half backs in football, they collect the ball from the back, and pass it forward for people to win. Equally, they block competition by intercepting. Middle managers are the guardians of the processes and governance in a company. They know what's happening, both right and wrong, and it is their job to signal this to the senior management.

Great middle managers are adept at representing the view of the rank and file to the senior management, interpreting what the senior management wants, and distilling that back to the junior levels.

One of the challenges of the PE-led company model is the denuding of middle management. I feel this is not a good trend.

## KNOW WHEN TO PIVOT

The world is changing dramatically. The life of a company in the 1960s was 60 years; today, it's less than 20 years. On the other hand, life expectancy of individuals has gone up from 60 some decades ago, to 70 in India now, and 80 in many parts of the world. If you go back 50 years ago, there were not many industries in India. A number of industries have come after the 1991 liberalisation.

If one lived till 80, then one is looking at a career of 40 years at least. So in the past, we had a company manage a career, now the individual has to manage it on his own.

**While navigating this dynamic landscape of new jobs and industries, you must ask yourself certain questions.**



**W**hat do you bring to the role?

**A**re you willing to learn?

**A**re you willing to work hard to learn the practices of the new industry?

Replicating practices that you were used to is not going to work for you. But more than shifting to an industry, you must ask yourself

What do I do after that ?

Every individual specialises in a function, from sales and marketing to finance and legal. The average CEO or leader has at least a dozen people reporting to him or her. So they must be good at their basic discipline as well as have working knowledge of at least six other functions. At the same time, they must be excellent at managing people.

If they don't have that, then it is unlikely that they will add value to the team. The challenge for people going into the future is to stay relevant and pivot with the new learning. If you promise to stay relevant, you will have a broader choice and a broader appeal.

## **DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR THE COMPANY**

You can have any number of challenges-personal, company, family. But if you truly focus on doing what is right for the company, you'll resolve a number of challenges on your own.



**“ Often, people want to do what is right for themselves and not what is right for the company. When you think like that, it is unlikely that you will leave a legacy, and it is unlikely that you will make the right choice.**

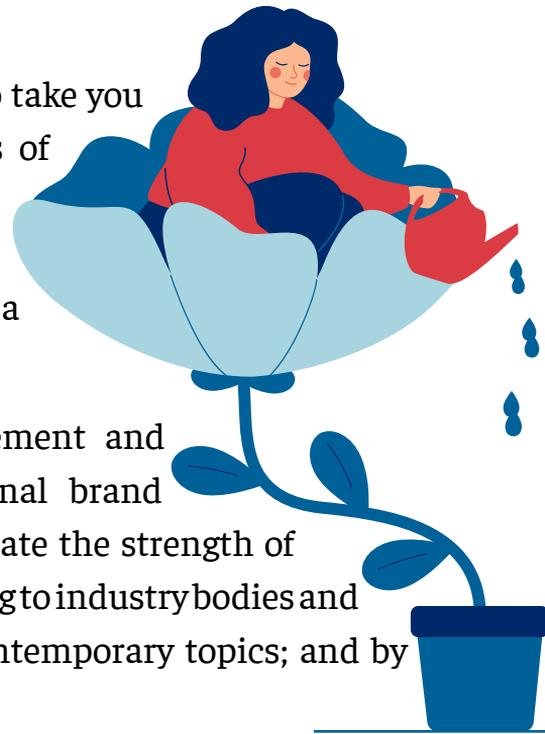
## **BUILDING YOUR PERSONAL BRAND**

We have the most energy when we're 25, and the most wisdom when we are 60. The ideal intersection of energy and wisdom is around age 40-42, and that's when the fast-track managers get their CEO break.

When you start your career, you have a degree, and a certain brand name of the institute you came from. It matters little once you start

work, because your results have to take you forward. For the first 10-12 years of your career, as an individual you have very little brand value, and the company's brand is really a strong one.

As you get into middle management and senior management, your personal brand starts developing. You can accelerate the strength of your personal brand by contributing to industry bodies and associations; by writing about contemporary topics; and by contributing to your alma mater.

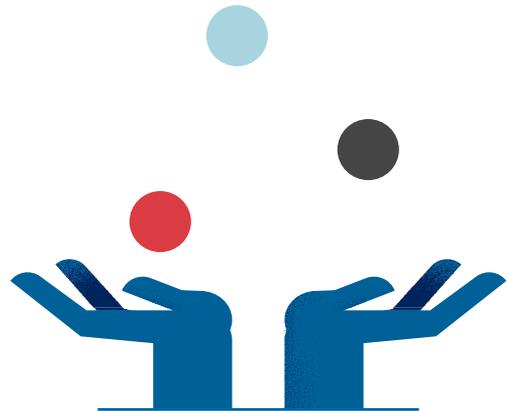


As a brand manager in the early '90s I used to write a regular marketing column called 'Business Warfare' for Business World. I used to teach at IIM Calcutta, and speak at industry forums even as a junior manager. A lot of people are plain lazy and don't give these activities enough time and attention. They cite time constraints as an excuse when it is really their unwillingness to stretch their time. Today, one has social media to build one's brand, and one must use it judiciously.

## **'DOING IT ALL'**

At the core of a successful career is being very good at whatever you do. There is no place for laziness or a slack attitude. You have to be the best in your field in order to advance. However, it is good to keep a few things in your mind as you embark on this hectic lifestyle and journey.

**Think of life as three glass balls that you are juggling. The first is a career ball which comes with the benefits of money, position, benefits, etc. The second is the family-and-friends ball, that provides the emotional anchor, and the third is your health.**



If you lose your job, you can get another one; so you can afford to let that ball drop.

If you drop the family-and-friends ball, then that's suicidal, since no one will be able to help you emotionally. Not having your near and dear ones to share in your successes and challenges could contribute to mental health issues, which will affect your overall health and well-being.

If you drop the health ball, there is no career, and no one can help you.

So, if you want a good career, maintain good health, and exercise regularly. Young first jobbers tend to put on a lot of weight in the first few years of their careers, basically because they end up eating a lot, exercising less, and eating at irregular times. So, stay fit and healthy, and have emotional anchors for a successful career.

Also, remember that priorities change as you move through life. When you start, you have very few things to worry about, except maybe paying off the student loan. When you go past 40, you are worried about owning a house, about children's education and parents' health etc.

## GO WITH YOUR GUT

One of the challenges throughout your career is being self-aware and self-reflective, something that people don't do often enough. To be your best, you have to do your best in all aspects of life. Even if it sometimes means disregarding advice you receive from others.

When I joined the technology sector from FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), everyone thought I was mad, and a number of people told me that I must play to my strengths, which was FMCG. I disagreed with them, because my strength was running companies, working with people, driving innovations and growth; and confining it to one sector would have been suboptimal. People told me that in good faith since they felt FMCG was safe, and technology was risky. But I went with my gut, and my drive to learn, and the rest, as they say, is history.

## THE POWER OF REPEATABILITY

Dreams don't come true if you simply talk about them. It is good to be ambitious, but you have to work extremely hard to fulfil your ambitions. I have found that having an everyday rhythm has worked for me, and for successful people. For this, develop regular habits, and practice them everyday; this is what people call 'repeatable habits'.

For instance, habits like time management, reading, returning emails and phone calls, writing notes, and so on, are all examples of positive habits, which when developed, will help you to get ahead.

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For more lessons on leadership and excellence in your career, look up D Shivakumar's newest book, *The Right Choice: Resolving 10 Dilemmas for Extraordinary Success*.

