
## Guest

Nandan Nilekani is a leader who has worn several hats though his illustrious career. He was part of the founding team at Infosys and held several leadership roles with the company including being the CEO and Co-Chairman. In 2009, he moved from Infosys to serve as the Chairman of UIDAI and in the five years there, enrolled about two thirds of the country. He subsequently contested the 2014 Lok Sabha election and post that have moved onto a portfolio of initiatives that includes his work with EkStep Foundation and other philanthropic initiatives, India Stack evangelisation and working with start-ups.

In this conversation, he shares his perspectives on leadership especially in a start-up and a scale up context. He also shares his insights around what it takes to transition effectively across different domains and why he has done what he has done at various points in time.

## Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 11th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast series where I talk to people from different walks of life on topics around Leadership, Transitions and Careers. I am Deepak Jayaraman, the creator and curator of this series of conversations. My objective from this podcast is to have "Learning conversations" with a range of people and share those curated insights with you. I am really excited to introduce the 11th guest of this podcast, Nandan Nilekani. The Paradox here is that the man needs no introduction. From being a member of the Founding team at Infosys to playing a key role in growing it to USD 3 Billion, Going back to Ground zero and driving the UID project with the Government, Moving on to becoming a key catalyst in the Fin Tech Ecosystem and much more. I can't think of too many other people who have reinvented themselves several times over like he has. In our conversation we spoke about his early years in school and college, lessons from starting up and scaling up at Infosys and UID - two very different environments, lessons he learnt from contesting the elections in Bangalore, how he thinks about his current portfolio of work and more. We also spoke about why he does what he does how he has approached the various transitions in his life. Without further ado, over to the conversation.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Maybe a good place to start is having a sense of what your pie chart of time looks like today. What all do you do today, and more importantly, why do you do what you do?

Nandan Nilekani (NN): Sure. Maybe to answer that question, I'll just set some background. I have really been, for a significant part of my career, focused on one large objective. So, I spent close to 30 years in Infosys and at that time, I did Infosys with single-minded passion. I didn't do anything else. I didn't invest in other companies. I really was completely wedded to the Infosys dream. Then, when I worked for about almost five years in the government, I was completely focused on making the Aadhaar project successful. Then also, I didn't do any investments and so on. It's only now I've tried to follow more of a portfolio approach to my activities.

So, let me just give you how I break it up. I still spend the bulk of my time on what I would call public-service activities. There is no business involvement in that, that is, I spend about 40% of my time on essentially promoting the Aadhaar and India Stack ecosystem, because I believe that the future is how businesses, governments, innovators use the unique technology we have in India, to transform the way they do business, to reach more customers, to reduce cost, to deliver government services better. There are lots and lots of transformational possibilities and what I've realized is that evangelization of that is hugely required, because you can build something but unless everybody understands the power of what you have done, it doesn't get used. So, 40% of my time goes in activities related to that. Cashless for example, when this whole demonetization happened, I played a role in how their digital, cashless economy could work. So, that's 40%.

Then, the other big thing which happened was after I came back to Bangalore, I was looking for something to do which was impactful and my wife [Rohini] helped me to find a challenge, which is the challenge of literacy and numeracy for children. India, as you know, is a country, where there has been huge progress in getting children to go to school. Enrolments in schools have gone up but teaching outcomes haven't improved in the last 15 years since the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan was launched. She and I were in Boston, in Cambridge, one day, visiting edX which is a MOOC set up by Harvard and MIT. The people who're on edX are friends of mine, Anant Agarwal and Sanjay Sarma, and they talked about how online education is going to transform higher education.

DJ: This is different from HBX, is it?

NN: Yeah. HBX is the Harvard Business School's MOOC. They may be using some of the technology from edX, I don't know. But this is a joint venture for a general, classical MOOC, for all universities.

DJ: OK

NN: So, then, she said, why can't we do the same for the kids? If you're going to do this for learning differential equations or business strategy, why can't we do it for people to learn how to read and write, which is India's problem. And I asked her, what's the size of the problem and she said, 200 million kids. So, I said, that sounds like a huge problem to solve, because after the Aadhaar experience, I was looking for large problems to solve. So, that's how we set up this organization called EkStep, which is co-founded by Rohini, Shankar Maruwada, and me. We're seeing how we can use the latest technology to deliver personalized learning and education to millions of kids on a phone. So, we use smartphones, tablets, PCs, TVs; it doesn't matter what devices, it's an infrastructure. We are working with partners. Partners create different kinds of content, and other partners are deployed in the field. The deployment could happen by governments, by NGOs, by private players, doesn't matter to us. So, the idea is to reach millions of kids in a very short time. So, that's 20% of my time.

Then, I do spend 20% of my time on my various philanthropic initiatives. I co-founded a proposed university for urbanization called Indian Institute of Human Settlements, which is looking at urbanization, which is one of India's huge challenges and we just don't have the intellectual capacity of people. Also, urbanization is a very multidisciplinary problem; you have to understand many things. So, the idea is to create a multidisciplinary urban program, so that's one of the big things I do.

 

The other big thing is, I work with a foundation called eGovernments Foundation, which Srikanth Nadhamuni and I started some, more than, 10 years back, which is building a software platform for cities. My goal is to reach 2,000 cities by 2020. These are again scale benefits, because if every city's technology is on a much more sophisticated platform, then things will improve. So, that's 20%.

The final 20% is the only 20% where I actually engage on business, because I do believe that I should have some foot in the business world, mainly because the kind of skills that you need to be successful in business require different muscles to be used and I want to make sure that they don't atrophy. So, I work with about 10 or 15 start-ups where I am an investor and help them to scale up. So, broadly 40% on evangelization of the India Stack Aadhaar UPI and so on; 20% on EkStep, literacy and numeracy platform; 20% on philanthropy like IIHS and eGovernments Foundation.

DJ: Avanti [Finance] would be in this bucket of 20%?

NN: Yeah. It's more a philanthropic effort. And 20% is start-ups, which is actually working with young companies to see how they work. That's my time allocation.

DJ: And if I may double click on that and understand the design principle behind how you came up with this pie chart? Any criteria? One is clearly scale and impact.

NN: So, scale and impact is very important to me, because whether it was Infosys or Aadhaar, it all was about scale and impact. At the same time, I thought the time had come for me to have a broader palette of things to do rather than doing one thing, which meant I didn't want to go back and take a role in government, I didn't want to go back and run a company, and nor did I want to be on the boards of companies, because I didn't think that was the way I could add value. So, scale and impact and creating a palette of opportunities, creating this multiprogramming approach. It was a conscious choice.

DJ: I am curious about what the things those happen in early years are, which get baked, which drive people and which plays a role as they grow. So, if you had to reflect, are there three-four things that got baked into Nandan by the time Nandan turned 15 or 18, which still form a core part of who he is?

NN: Well, I think, there are three or four things which will stand out. One is, of course, that I have grown up to be a fairly independent person. I think the reason is that when I was 12 years old, my father had a job in Bangalore. He was a mill manger and then he had to leave in his career, he had to move to multiple small towns for short periods of time. My parents were concerned about my educational continuity, so I went to stay with my uncle in a small town called Dharwad, which is where I did my schooling and my undergrad, PUC, before I went to IIT. So, I spent about six years there, from the year 12 to 18. I think that at an early age being independent of my parents and essentially having to manage gave me a strong streak of both independence as well as ability to manage new situations. I went from school in Bangalore to school in Dharwad, big city to small town, parents to uncle. So, that was one thing which I think helped or rather shaped me.

The second thing is that my family has been very public spirited. My father was very active, even in his old age, doing lots of social work. My uncle was a member of a party called Radical Humanist, which was started by M N Roy, so he was very idealistic. So, we grew up in a family where the conversations were always larger than about ourselves, about social change and all that. I think that was the second thing which has influenced me and which is also why I choose to spend the bulk of my time on public service.

 

The third thing, I think, was dealing with the transition of going from a small town to an IIT. Because in those days it's not true today but '80s, '70s, most of the kids who went to IIT were from urban India. They had gone to the top schools either in Delhi or Mumbai or wherever and they would go to some Agarwal Class and join IIT, and I didn't do any of that. So, for me, it was a culture shock, going from a small town to IIT Mumbai. Again, understanding how that worked and getting acclimatized was another big learning experience.

Finally, I think the experience I got at IIT was on how to navigate in some sense, because I was active in some social activities, I was a general secretary; I was active in cultural activities. So, I learned how to work with diverse people and get things done. I think all these have been shaping influences.

DJ: And moving forward you joined Patni Computers in 1979 and in a couple of years you and six others set up Infosys. So, give us a sense of the genesis of starting Infosys, how did that come about?

NN: Well, first of all let me explain how I ended up going to Patni. When I came out of IIT, I didn't really have a plan and most of my generation was busy doing GRE and GMAT and going abroad and all that stuff and somehow, I didn't feel like doing that. And I missed my IIM exam because I was not well, so generally I was at the loose end and that's when I walked into this office of Patni and met Mr. Murthy who offered me this job. And that's how I ended up joining Patni. And then it was a wonderful experience because that was the first era of mini-computers. If you were to go back in history, you know, India was dominated by IBM in the mid-70s and they would sell these 1401 computers in India but then they had a different opinion with the government of the day George Fernandes and so on so they left India in 1977. And at the same time the U.S. was developing this mini-computer business and Data General were one of the leaders. So, I learned a lot about this. So, what I, I think, it enabled me to see the first of many technology shifts, you know, 1978 79 was a shift from mainframes to mini-computers and then there were other shifts PCs, LANs, the Internet. So, I think, each of the shifts is a very interesting opportunity. So, that opportunity got created and I learnt a lot and very happy working with Murthy and other colleagues. So, then under the leadership of Murthy we felt, you know, this is really a people business and it's about skills, about technology, it's about capabilities, it's not about capital. Therefore, it really this industry deserved a company, which was very professional, owned and run by the professionals and that's how we all left and started Infosys.

DJ: Given that now you work with multiple start-ups, any lessons from that journey [setting up Infosys] on how entrepreneurs should think about figuring out who they should work with as co-founders?

NN: I think the choice of co-founders is one of the seminal choices of any start-up for multiple reasons. First is that you must share common vision, you must share a common value system, you must share a common desire to postpone your gratification for another day. Because building companies, especially building companies to last, is not a sprint; it's a marathon. So, if your partners are short-term oriented, your partners want quick rewards, if your partners have ethical issues, it doesn't work. Everybody should say, OK, we're willing to defer reward for a decade. That's a big ask. So, I think the big lesson in Infosys was and [N R Narayana] Murthy had done a great job in assembling the people the fact that all of us were united in a common vision to create a global company. All of us were united that we want a very ethically run company with clear standards of ethics and corporate governance, and that we were willing to defer gratification for decades, if required. That was the binding glue and the fact that we put the vision above any of us. So, I think, getting the right co-founders is very important from a vision, values, timeframe of gratification point of view.

 

But there is a second dimension, which is that founders require complementary skills, because everybody is not good at everything. Somebody is good at technology, somebody is good at finance, somebody is good at marketing, and somebody is good at strategy, whatever. Therefore, one is to make sure they have the same values and so on, but second, they also should have complementary skills. The best companies have founders who have complementary skills. In our case, together we covered all the bases, in some sense. So, I think, both these things are very important.

DJ: Persisting with the theme, reflecting on the journey, what have been your lessons in terms of what it takes to make it work?

NN: Obviously, there is the business side of it: having a good strategy, having a good business model, being able to respond to the market. So, there is the whole business side, but equally important is the value systems and delayed gratification side of it. In Infosys, we lived on very small salaries for a long time we started in 1981 and went public only in 1993 more than a decade. So, I think, making sure that everybody was there, and whenever there was a conflict and there will be conflicts when there are so many people and it's over 10 years making sure that the conflict resolution was the solution that was in the best interests of the company. Then, that became the tiebreaker, in some sense. I think the third thing is the passion to build a long-term thing. Because building a company is going through ups and downs, going through highs and lows, going through successes and adversity. So, being able to ride all those waves and still keeping together is very important.

DJ: The Infosys journey in about 20 years, you built Infosys, you went public and then you became the CEO. What were the key inflection points from a leadership standpoint, if you reflect on your personal journey as the company grew?

NN: I think there's a very important message, especially for founders who want to remain at the helm of their company for a long time. We see that often today, even in India, in start-ups the founders often lose their role to professional CEOs; even in the US, it's quite common. Apart from having vision and all that stuff, [what you need] is the ability to understand that you need to reinvent yourself at every point. That's very important. So, for example, up to the time we went public in 1993, we were a private company and we all did everything. That model was fine when the company was still just a few million dollars. But as we looked at going public, initially in India, in 1993, we realized that this model was not going to work. Secondly, we realized that as global competition became more intensive, we couldn't be just a small unknown company. We had to be visible. It required a change in strategy and that also meant that we had to bring in talented people from the outside. That meant that we had to change our role. It was less about doing anything ourselves, it was more about creating a structure, the strategy, getting the right leadership team, empowering them properly, and so on. So, I think the first transition happened in 1993, when we went from being a private company to a public company. Also, when we took off on our growth curve. So, that was one transition, going from a bunch of founders doing all the things to creating a professional management and creating enough space to attract high-quality talent and give them the empowerment to perform. That's very important, because if founders bring in people and then don't empower them, then it doesn't work.

I think the second transition was in 1999, when we became the first Indian company to list on NASDAQ. That brought us to a whole new level of visibility but also accountability you know, the level of detail that US analysts look at your company it was a whole new experience for us. So, we realized that we had to raise the game even further, which means a very high sense of corporate governance, very good predictability of business, being able to explain business good and bad, to analysts, all new skills had to be learnt. That was, to me, the second big transition.

 

Then, I think the third transition was after the crash, in 2001, when we realized that we had to really make our products and services even more value-added to attract customers. Then, I think, when we crossed the billion-dollar mark, because after billion, we said how we go to 10 billion, which Infosys reached recently. So, I think these are all the major transition points.

DJ: When you get key talent from the outside, what's been your experience in terms of what it takes to empowering them and helping them succeed?

NN: I think it's to realize that they are not going to do everything the way you do it. So, there's no point in saying why are you not doing it the way I did it. But making sure that as long as they have the right intentions, they have the right talent, and they have the right skills, and then giving them the space to operate. Be very clear in your strategy, your articulation, your future direction, your rules, your budgets, everything. Reduce ambiguity; reduce unpredictability, because professional managers often get rattled by volatility of decision-making. Putting a structure in place that gives them continuity of purpose, and empowering them financially, empowering them in decision-making, and visibility, making sure that they also become recognized in their field. All these are important things.

DJ: In terms of your transition, when you took on the Infosys CEO role from Mr Narayana Murthy, two things there: one is taking on leadership when someone else has been a leader so that sort of style transition; second is that's probably a time when you were probably leading some of your other co-founders and may be some of them were technically reporting in to you?

NN: All of them were, yeah.

DJ: So, what are the lessons to be learnt on managing that transition?

NN: Fortunately, in Infosys, we had that discipline that whoever was elected the leader, the others would follow him. So, that was one good thing. The second is again, give enough space, and give them enough room to do their jobs, give them enough visibility and so on. I think I also very consciously said I will spend my time on building the global aspect of our business, which is how to become a global brand, how to become internationally recognized, how to do rainmaking with global customers. That was what I did. So, that was required to take it from 600 million to 3 billion. It had another benefit that a lot of the roles inside the company still had to be done.

DJ: So, it's also about carving out a piece which is different and distinct and fit for purpose given the company's evolution?

NN: Yeah.

DJ: A start-up is often going through turbo-charged growth. From the Infosys journey, how do leaders scale up the leadership muscle to stay relevant?

NN: So, I think that's a very good point. The leadership style at one million is different from the leadership style at 100 million; it's different from one billion, different from 10 billion. I think being able to recognize that each of them are different scale, require different leadership. It's not doing it but getting it done from others. It's about visioning better, it's about empowering better. These are all very important skills. I mean, if you look at Amazon's journey, it's 20 years now from going public. It's grown from nothing to this massive corporation, because Jeff Bezos was able to reinvent himself as the scale goes up.

DJ: And how did you grow as a person? If you had to decode how you grew?

NN: I didn't have a coach like you. So, we had to learn it by ourselves, everything was on our own. None of us had an MBA degree, none of us had worked in a large company before, and none of us had classical management experience kind of thing. I think, once you have a goal and if you do it very logically, you can actually say, OK, with this goal, this is what I need to do.

DJ: You moved on from Infosys and took on the UID challenge. How did this come about?

NN: I had spent 30 years at Infosys. I had done a lot of stuff, I had been the CEO, I was the co-chairman, and then some of our other colleagues became CEO. So, at that time there was this offer to come in and work in the government. This again goes back to what I said earlier, that I grew up in an environment of public service. So, it was something which was in my blood, in some sense, and I had seen the model in the United States. In the US, it's a very common tradition for successful business executives, at some point, to do public service. I mean Thomas Watson Jr was the US ambassador to Russia, after being chairman of IBM. And, of course, Goldman Sachs has a long tradition, from [Robert] Rubin to Hank Polson going from Goldman Sachs to becoming secretary of the treasury. Even today, the current secretary of treasury is a former Goldman Sachs guy. So, the US has that tradition. Robert McNamara went from Ford to the Johnson administration. So, there is this tradition. I thought that in that tradition I could also contribute and I got a very good offer from the government of the day.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invited me to join the government to a cabinet rank position and it was an important project. We had an informal rule in Infosys that you can't leave without everybody agreeing, because we were all in it together. All of them were very nice to me and said that 'Yeah, if there is an opportunity for you to serve in public life, you are contributing to the country, and then it's OK if you leave Infosys'. So, I got that permission also. It was also a new challenge for me, because I was moving from the private sector to government. Though I had worked on the fringe of government I'd never worked in government. I was going from Bangalore to Delhi. And, in some sense, I was going from a corner office overlooking a golf course and 100,000+ employees to a start-up, because I was employee number one in this new start-up. So, it was a triple transition for me, from government to private sector, from Bangalore's culture to Delhi's culture, and from running a large company to doing a start-up all over again. It was a triple challenge, but I thought it was sufficiently large enough to excite me, so whatever reservations I had, I overcame them and plunged into it.

DJ: And reflecting on that transition, once again in terms of what CEOs could learn when they are transitioned from very different cultures, if you reflected on the first 100 days or six months, in hindsight, what were the lessons to be learnt?

NN: I think there are some lessons that you have learnt that you can continue to use, but there are some lessons that you also need to unlearn. So, I think, its one thing to transition from running one company to another company. I can be CEO of company X and go to company Y and even though they may be in two different industries, the business thinking is similar. Because in both companies, it's all about increasing revenue, profit, market share, all that stuff. But when you go from business to government, where the parameters of success are very different, you have to readjust the scale. So, what I took from Infosys was the bias for action the focus on timelines, accountability, being transparent about decision-making, and so on. What I had to develop, though I had that thing in Infosys, was how to do consensus building, how to get a bunch of people who have different ideologies, different priorities, how to get them all to align on one goal. That skill, while I had it in

 

Infosys, that skill had to be developed 10X when I went to government. So, I would say that somehow my learnings were valid but some new learning had to be done.

The other very important thing is that you have to be all in. So, I left Infosys and I got off the board and become an ordinary shareholder, because I wanted to be fully doing this job. Not only that, I gave up all my other private sector roles. I was on the board of the World Economic Forum and I was probably the first Indian on the board of the World Economic Forum in Geneva, which runs the Davos thing. It was a very, very prestigious thing for me to be there, but I said if I am going to be in the government and then if I am in an international body. I want to make sure that everything is fine. I was on some international boards, I quit them. So, I gave up a lot of things, because I wanted to be all in on this.

DJ: Was that about creating mind space in your head or was that about signaling commitment to the others?

NN: It was both. Mind space, so that I could focus on what I was doing with no distraction. Second, conveying that I am fully in, I am not a bird of passage. I am not hedging bets, I am not having one foot in America, my green card, none of that. I am fully in, I have given up everything and I am doing this for a living. Thirdly, also to make sure that there are no ethical conflicts, because I didn't want someone saying, oh, you work on that board and now you are a cabinet rank. I didn't want any of that.

DJ: How do you even set a goalpost, when you have a start-up with such an ambition? How did you think about what good would look like?

NN: Actually, it was just a shot in the dark. I was very clear that we were going to make a public commitment though a lot of people said you are crazy to make a public commitment in the government system because you don't have control over so many variables. I felt, making a public commitment and sharpening everybody's mind towards that was more important than the potential loss of face if I didn't meet it. So, the tradeoff, on balance, was to make a public commitment. I said I will make a public commitment of how many people will be on the Aadhaar platform by the time I step down. My initial thought was about 400 million and 400 million is a lot of people, but it didn't look good enough, so at the last minute, I changed that to some 600 million. So, when I went to the government, we made a public statement that we will enroll 600 million people in five years actually, we did it in four-and-a-half years; we did it faster. So, having a public commitment that was learning from Infosys. In Infosys, you always set ambitious goals. When we were a 100-million-dollar company, we said we will be a billion-dollar company in X years, which we reached. When we were a billion-dollar company, we said we will be a 10-billion-dollar company. So, what I learned from Infosys was that, if you want to stretch an organization, wherever you are, you need to set an ambitious goal from there. So, I was using that philosophy in the government, though it's much more high risk, because number of actors who can just stop you is many more. But that helped, because, everybody on the team knew what the goal was, and therefore, it sharpened everybody's sense of urgency and also helped to dissolve internal conflicts.

DJ: Running a start-up in a government setup it's fascinating to notice the two extremes in terms of culture. So, what can large organizations learn in setting up an entrepreneurial culture in a part of the organization, if you had to reflect on that experience?

NN: Actually, a lot of this I have addressed in my book, 'Rebooting India,' which I have co-authored with Dr. Viral Shah, where I've talked about startups in government. So, clearly the challenges of a startup in government are similar to, or probably a little more complex than, the challenges of a startup inside a corporate structure. But it has some of the same issues, because when there is a certain way of doing things, whether it is in a large company or the government, and you have a startup which has a new way of doing things or is a potential disruption or in the case of business, it cannibalizes existing revenues, then there is a lot of reaction from the system. So, in a corporate, the reaction is because it threatens existing income and revenue streams and business leaders, and in government, it's also threatening if you want to disrupt or disinter mediate somebody. So, same issue.

First of all, you need good sponsorship, whether it's in a company or government. Fortunately, I had good sponsorship from the leaders of the government to make this happen, because when you are a fledgling thing dealing with established, strong, incumbent institutions, the balance of power is with them. So, somebody has to give you air cover with them. Similarly, in the corporate situation, if your startup is trying something new, it's the CEO's responsibility to make sure that that startup is protected from all the guys who earn the money and say why we are wasting money. So, that's one thing. And there are lots of other lessons. How do you create allies? How do you create coalitions who favor what you are doing? There is a lot of strategy in how you create a positive coalition who wants what you are doing. Because the fact that there will be a negative coalition is understood, that's a given. So, then how do you create a positive coalition?

DJ: You had a diverse set of people in the team running the Aadhaar project. You had government officials, consultants, volunteers, and people on sabbaticals, interns. How do you create a culture in a company with such diversity of thought and backgrounds?

NN: The challenge I had in the government situation was twofold. In a business, if I have to make something successful, I need two things: I need the right talent and I need the money to make it successful. In government, both these things are fundamentally not under your control, because in the government model, you can't choose who your team is. You have to use the guys that are given to you or allotted to you, so there's no choice in the human capital. And if you are going to spend the money, you have to do it in a particular way that meets all this A, B, C, D, E, F, all this stuff. So, when you neither have control over your money nor over your people, then it's difficult to get anything done. The way we sorted it out was by saying that we will create two things. I was fortunate that. And aside I will tell you are, when you make such a transition, you can use your existing track record to get a seat at the new table, but then you have to earn it all over again. This is important to realize. So, the fact that I had been the CEO and Co-Chairman of Infosys and I had built a big company gave me the credibility to land a job, get a seat at a table at the level of a cabinet minister and all that, but that's all it did. It only gave me the entry ticket, but having entered that table, I had to prove myself all over again.

DJ: And what does it take to build that credibility in that system?

NN: So, you have assumed that you are back to day one again. A lot of people don't understand that. So, when they make their transition, they get the new role on the strength of the old achievements but they don't realize that now they have to prove [themselves] all over again. So, that's one. The second lesson is that whatever halo effect that you have from your transition lasts only for six months. There is a certain halo effect for six months because you are new and different and all that stuff. So, whatever you want to get done, get it done during the halo effect. That's another lesson. So, one of the things I was very lucky with was that I was able to, in the initial days, select my team from the government. Later on, that thing was taken away from me. So, my initial core founding team from the government, they were all people that I was able to actually say I want this guy, I want this lady whatever. So, the core team we had Ram Sewak Sharma, Ganga, Srikar, Ashok Pal Singh, Rajesh Bansal all from the government, were actually handpicked.

 

DJ: And what did you look for when you were staffing up the team?

NN: Actually, it was interesting because it was a self-selection. What I was doing was high risk and most people in the government system are actually risk-averse, so the guys who came to me were, in some sense, the mavericks who were willing to take risks. So, I think, in that sense, there was some element of self-selection happening. And I, of course, looked for people who were willing to take risks, who were innovative, who were outcome oriented, who were willing to work hard and who were passionate about what they were doing. So, that was my choice.

Then, I realized that this project could not be done only with government people, because there was lots of very, very sophisticated technology which I needed global talent for. So, we came up with a way to hire people from outside and the government had this thing called NISG, which allows you to recruit people from outside. Then, we had sabbaticals; where we got people from corporates to come in as volunteers, work with us for two years. Then, we had volunteers, who were people who had been there, done that, had been successful serial entrepreneurs that made a lot of money but wanted to give back. Then, we had interns to give fresh people… So, we created structures, all completely legit, approved through due process of government. Using these techniques, we were able to infuse this group with a lot of talent that is not normally working on a government project. Then, I had to blend the two worlds, the bureaucratic world and the private-sector-type guys and blend them together. That's where having a common mission which was extremely ambitious forced everyone to get to the table and get things done.

DJ: Fast forwarding that journey, how did you think about when to move from this project? And you went to contest the elections in Bangalore as the next step. I am curious about how you thought about that transition.

NN: What happened was, first of all, I had always said that I would do this thing for five years. It was not like a lifetime thing. I had promised that I would deliver the platform, build the tech, get it rolled out, get applications built like BBT, and we would reach 600 million people. I reached that stage in March of 2014, so that's when I stepped down, after I had fulfilled my commitments. What I realized when I spent that time in the government was that the potential of technology to transform India was not sufficiently internalized by the system, because people didn't come from that background, technological background. Very few people like me were there in the system. I was a big believer that technological transformation was the way to go because that's the only way you are going to fix a lot of India's endemic issues. Many times, I was not able to sell my ideas saying you can do this, you can do that. So, I was getting a bit frustrated with my inability to sell my ideas. Then, I said, maybe I should be one of them. Maybe, if I am a politician, then I will be the decision-making guy, and then I have a legitimacy to say this is the way to do it.

It was an intellectual choice actually to get into politics, but my experience was not very happy. And in that sense, I think that was one transition where I stepped too far, in some sense. It was way out of my comfort zone. After the election campaign, I realized that this was not where I want to be, that I didn't have the leverage, I didn't have competitive advantage in that area. I didn't think I would be very effective. So, I realized, actually, my effectiveness comes from being what I am good at, which is a technology-led transformation agent and use my talents and abilities to solve large intractable problems and make that available to anybody who wants to use it. That was my shift, and then, of course, I explained to you that I was looking for something to do and EkStep happened and then the whole portfolio approach.

DJ: And just back to that transition, for, let's say, leaders and CEOs who are looking for a career in politics or considering a career in politics, any lessons?

 

NN: Yes, so I'll tell you, it's very simple. A lot of my consensus-building skills, which I'd honed in the government, were obviously useful there. First of all, it's an extremely time-intensive activity, retail politics. There is always this so-called Rajya Sabha route, where you get nominated, but then you become beholden to someone and I didn't want to get into that situation. Then, I said, if I am going to be in this game, I should win an election. That's the rite of passage of that business. But then, it becomes very retail intensive, because in every constituency, there are millions of people. It's a B2C business, it's a B2C kind of thing and everybody wants real-time attention. You can't say, send me an email or call center or something. So, it's very, very time intensive. It's also lots of pressure groups, different castes, religions, this that, all that stuff. Also, I was hampered by the fact that I was not a good public speaker in any Indian language. I don't think you can win in Indian politics unless you are very good at it, being a public speaker in Hindi or Kannada or Marathi or whatever. So, I didn't have leverage. I quickly realized that I was not going to be effective in this.

DJ: Just a couple of questions to wrap up. If you really reflect on your journey and really think about what has enabled you to reinvent yourself so often and stay relevant and be of value to the wider society, what are the three-four things that you've learnt from your journey?

NN: I can tell you and everybody may not agree. For example, my wife doesn't agree with my strategy, so it's not obvious that it's like great advice, but let me tell you anyway. One thing is, I never look back. I never look back. So, whenever I embark on a new journey, I say, this is my life from now on. Of course, I'll have very pleasant memories of my previous life, but I am not going to keep harking back. So, that's an important thing: never looking back. My wife says that shows that you are incapable of learning from the past or whatever. It depends on how you view it.

The second thing is that I tend to be an optimist. Again, my wife says I am an irrational optimist. So, I always look at the bright side of things, which is very helpful when you are facing adversity, because you can always figure out some positive thing. But it also can be thought of as a form of denial, that you are not recognizing the problem. I don't know which one it is. I think this ability of looking forward and being optimistic provides a lot of the emotional drive for me to do new things. I think my willingness to reset my life sometimes, you get too much into a comfort zone and then you don't have the ability to say, OK, let me restart basically because I didn't really start my life with some huge ambition or anything. For me to restart in a completely new direction comes very easily, which actually I find is not that true with most people.

For example, one of the things I am doing now is I am working with this guy, my good friend Sanjeev Agarwal of Helion. We are setting up a scale-up coalition. What I learnt after working with startups for two years is that there are lots of startups but there are very few scale-ups. And scale-ups to me is what we did at Infosys, what Mr. Premji did at Wipro, or what Uday Kotak is doing at Kotak Bank, or what Kiran Majumdar has done at Biocon, or what Sunil Mittal did at Airtel, which is, over 10-20 years, build multi-billion-dollar large enterprises. I think there is an art of doing that, scaling up, and we have been there, done that. I have done it both in the government and in the private sector. So, I am actually creating a pool of capital, a 100-million-dollar fund, of which we are putting a lot of it ourselves and saying, let's work with companies that are ready to scale up and where they have a vision of building companies to last. And we'll help; we'll bring in the right thinking, technology, leadership development, and maybe coaching from you, whatever. That's a whole new role I am doing. So, I think, I have the advantage that I can enter a new role and am willing to gamble, whatever way the chips fall. So, that's probably another thing which I have and which enables me to do this. Finally, I think, for me, return on my time invested is very important. For me, the biggest opportunity cost is the cost of my time and therefore, I always make sure that whatever I do, there is a high ROTI, return on time invested.

 

DJ: And what dimensions do you measure the return?

NN: Impact! It should impact people, it should make a change, and it should move the needle on society, those kinds of things.

DJ: In summary, any one or two thoughts for people to play to their potential?

NN: I think most of us are vastly underplaying our potential. Finally, it's all inside you. It's in your mind, it's in your vision, it's in your value system, and it's in your ability, stamina, to run the race. It's all inside. I think most people I meet, including myself, are vastly underplaying their potential. So, I think, it's just you've to look inside and the sky is the limit.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The phrase "Sky is the limit" remided me of someyhing that came up in my conversation with my first podcast guest Vijay Amritraj the tenis legend. When I asked him the same question here is what he said.

VA: "*In one of my interviews, one of my guests on one of my talk shows was the second man on the moon, Buzz Aldrin, who was a friend of mine. I went to interview him at his home in Westwood, in California. You know as you look at all the various accolades like you've seen in people's homes, trophies and plaques and so on, very few things really catch your eye. You go through pictures and you go through this and that. There was one little plaque in a corner that absolutely caught my eye. I've never forgotten it and it always is very much in the back of my mind when I do things. It was stuck in a corner in his living room and it said… you know, how we always tell kids, as you grow up, if you fulfil your potential, the sky is the limit, and everything is always 'sky is the limit'? So, that little plaque said, 'Who said the sky is the limit, when I left my footprints on the moon.*"

DJ: As Nandan says, it's often the inner journey which makes a big difference in the long run. I hope you found the conversation as energizing and purposeful as I did. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations of the Play to Potential podcast series. For accessing some of the earlier conversations, please visit PlaytoPotential.com. Bye now.

## End of transcription

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Nugget from Vijay Amritraj that is referenced: In Summary.

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## Nandan Nilekani - Nuggets

- 11.00 Nandan Nilekani - The Full Conversation
- 11.01 Nandan Nilekani - Current portfolio of time spent
- 11.02 Nandan Nilekani - Early childhood wiring
- 11.03 Nandan Nilekani - Selecting the right co-founder(s)
- 11.04 Nandan Nilekani - Scale-up and transitions at Infosys
- 11.05 Nandan Nilekani - Infosys to UIDAI — A 3D transition
- 11.06 Nandan Nilekani - Setting a goalpost at UIDAI
- 11.07 Nandan Nilekani - Running a startup inside the government
- 11.08 Nandan Nilekani - Reflections on politics as a career
- 11.09 Nandan Nilekani - Re-inventing self and playing to potential

## About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work here.

 

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