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Context to the nugget

Venkat speaks about how he transitioned from Sony to running Eklavya. He refers to Prof Sunil Handa (who takes the popular course LEM – Laboratory in Entrepreneurial Motivation) sending him a concept note leading to him and Sridhar Rajagopalan quitting their jobs and starting Eklavya. He also refers to the research and the groundwork that went into setting up Eklavya. He also speaks about some of the early challenges involved in setting up the school and in convincing people to send their kids here.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And maybe just curious about four years at Eklavya and you were running it for about two-and-a-half-years and then you decided to do something else. Could you talk a little bit about those four years and also your choice to move on to do something else? How did that come about?

Venkat Krishnan (VK): So, couple of things. One is of course, we even spent a year-and-a-half researching education, we spent a lot of time understanding what is a good school and I mean that's, you know, hats off and credit to Sunil Handa for the kind of first principles approach he takes to everything he does. And that's been a big learning that will stay with me for the rest of my life and the other thing about him is the extent to which he is well organised, right? So you can have a conversation with him today and if there is an action that he has to do three months down the line, he won't forget it, he had something called Divisoflex that he used to maintain, I don't know whether he has moved it to digital devices now, but I use Google Calendar like crazy now, right? So, even if I have to remember to buy coconut tomorrow morning, at 6:30 in the morning Google Calendar will remind me.

DJ: Understood.

VK: That's something I learned from him.

DJ: What is the mechanism you mentioned? I didn't quite catch the term.

VK: Google Calendar.

DJ: No, that he used to use?

VK: He used to use something called a Divisoflex. A Divisoflex is basically a file with separators in it.

DJ: Okay.

VK: So, he used to use separators for different entities he used to work with, right? So, his business Corrugated Packaging was one entity, so that was a separate section, Eklavya was a separate section and a bunch of other stuff that he was you know he used to have separate sections. Within a section he had a separate page for each person. So, there was a page for me, there was a page for Sridhar and there was a page for everybody he worked with.

DJ: Okay. I am curious this notion of critical but not urgent, I have a huge respect for people who can follow through on those pieces especially in today's time.

VK: Yes.

DJ: So sorry, back to you. You were talking about...

VK: Yeah. So, basically, we had a phenomenal year just learning what it takes to run a good school, what a good school means even and stuff like that and then we set up and we were running this school, great experience. A bunch of things, one of course views on how it should be run and stuff like that. At the end of the day Sunil Handa was the owner so, you know, one has to make way for that. So, that was definitely one of the factors but the other factor of course that was playing in at least our minds was how is this going to scale, how it's going to create impact on a much larger scale in society, right? So, you can build islands of excellence like the IIMs and Doon schools and stuff like that and it was not to discount the value that those add to society but how but how do you scale something like this to create impact on a much larger number of people's lives was an annoying question in our own minds. So, we kind of moved out at different points of time depending on what was right for each of us. Sudhir was one-year junior to us, he was also at Eklavya. So, Sudhir moved out first, then I moved out, then Sridhar moved out and we actually... once all of us had moved out we got back together and started a company called Educational Initiatives.

DJ: Got it. And the other piece I am curious about Venkat, is you also call this your closest brush with failure, The Eklavya School.

VK: This experience, yeah. One of the closest brushes with failure and now I think today I have far more daily brushes with failure than I did when I was young. But yeah, I mean, we were starting the school, we had done a really lot of good work preparing up for it and building up to it etc. In hindsight when I go back and think of those days, I can't imagine anybody else having prepared as much to build a good school as we had, it was ridiculous amount of investment of time and energy and resources to set up a good school. So, we were kind of almost arrogantly confident ki boss this is like an ultimate school that we are going to build, right? And in those days, you didn't have preschool notion, so getting admission used to be like a huge challenge for parents.

DJ: And this was in Ahmedabad? The school?

VK: In Ahmedabad, yeah. I remember us thinking, you know, we wanted to start with three classes, 20, 20 and 24, so 64 kids is what we wanted and so we were speculating a week ago, a week before when we started admissions that how many people will apply, if we get 3,000 people, how will you shortlist, how will you select, we had actually reached out to KPMG and got them on board to conduct a random draw of lots for selection of admissions and will that random draw of lots be done almost that kind of stuff. And so, I am not sure of the exact date, I think, it was the 27th of March or something like that in 1987, when we opened out for admissions and we were expecting... so, we are going to start at 9 o'clock and we thought the queue will start building up from 7:00-7:30. And so, you know, at 9:15 Sunil Handa actually came with a handycam to try and record the queues and all of that. And that whole day we got two enquiries, right? And we were expecting 1,500+ or

something like that. Massive shock for us that only two people were interested in even listening and neither of them even decided to take admission. So, we tried to extend by a couple of more days, and we got 13 admissions, finally with a little bit of effort. And I remember we were sitting on the terrace of Core House, which is where the office used to be and late at night 10:30-11 o'clock and all dejected and wondering what to do etc. We then asked ourselves karna kya hai? Shall we even do this or we just wind up and go back to our lives etc. And we said, terah hai, can we do something with these 13 kids, do we want to give it a shot, let's go ahead. And, Sunil Handa said, boss if you guys are ready, I am happy to back you because the money was coming from him for this, right, we were not going to breakeven with 13 kids. So, we said, chalo, karte hai. And, so then for the next two months the three or four teachers we had hired and the three of us, it is difficult to believe this, we went door to door, like shampoo salesmen, you know, knocking on doors in Ahmedabad, at least a thousand houses we would have gone. And we knocked on people's homes and introduced ourselves and explained what we were trying to do and all of that kind of stuff and school of hard knocks literally but a brilliant lesson. We wound up with 34 kids when we started in June and we got 21 admissions through door to door sales. For something as important as education people were willing to trust somebody who came and knocked on their door and that was amazing. Started with 34 and we went to 51 by a few months and then we decided to not take more. The next year we wanted a 180 or so kids we got more than 450 applications and we wound up taking 200+. Thereafter never looked back.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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End of nugget transcription

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Venkat Krishnan - Nuggets

- 63.00 Venkat Krishnan - The Full Conversation
- 63.01 Venkat Krishnan - Formative years
- 63.02 Venkat Krishnan - The IIMA years
- 63.03 Venkat Krishnan - Early career choices
- 63.04 Venkat Krishnan - Setting up Eklavya
- 63.05 Venkat Krishnan - Eklavya to GiveIndia
- 63.06 Venkat Krishnan - Misconceptions around giving
- 63.07 Venkat Krishnan - Giving time versus Giving money
- 63.08 Venkat Krishnan - Our relationship with money
- 63.09 Venkat Krishnan - Raising “Giving children”
- 63.10 Venkat Krishnan - Giving over the long term
- 63.11 Venkat Krishnan - Dreaming big
- 63.12 Venkat Krishnan - Givers that inspire
- 63.13 Venkat Krishnan - In Summary - 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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