

PAPER: THE STAR (MYSTARJOB)

DATE: 23 NOVEMBER 2013

PAGE: 5

CHASE YOUR DREAMS, SAYS UNILEVER CHAIRMAN

FROM SALES TO GENERAL MANAGEMENT, RAKESH MOHAN EMBRACES THE JOURNEY

By CINDY YAP
mystarjob@leaderonomics.com

MAKING a career change in life can be daunting, but those who want to make this leap of starting down a whole new career path in pursuit of their passion can draw inspiration from Rakesh Mohan, chairman of Unilever Malaysia and Singapore.

Trained in mechanical engineering, Rakesh started his career working in a factory, but quit after eight months when he realised that the environment of manufacturing, production and night shifts didn't work well for him.

Rakesh then moved to sales, with first stint at Electrolux, where he sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door for six months. He went around on a motorbike to offer demonstrations of the items. Reminiscing on the challenges of door-to-door sales, he shares that on a good day, he got to do two demonstrations.

Though he went on to a 22-year long career with Unilever Nepal, Bangladesh and recently, Malaysia and Singapore, venturing into marketing and general management, Rakesh says his experience in sales in the initial part of his career remains valuable.

"Many aspects of our lives contain the element of selling, be it selling oneself in an interview or selling an idea in a negotiation," he says.

Through this experience, the MBA-holder says that he learned the importance of:

- (a) **Persistence:** Knock on the next door despite rejections, as the next door might be your next customer;
- (b) **Hard work:** Each call is a chance (albeit small) of closing a sale; and
- (c) **Negotiation:** Meet customers face-to-



The
Leaderonomics
Show



face, demonstrate, convince, take the cash and deliver.

When *The Leaderonomics Show* asked for some useful sales tips, Rakesh generously offered the following:

1 Grab attention

1 Think of what you need to say to attract their attention. Look out for signals while presenting what you have to offer.

2 Objection is not necessarily negative

"A question or an objection raised is a signal that the person is interested," he says.

Objection shows that the mind is thinking of what could be the potential problem with the product/service.

The more questions or objections raised, the more engaged the person is in your product. Resolve the issue and seize the opportunity to move in to close, Rakesh adds.

3 Counter with a 'trial close'

Each time a question or objection is raised, attempt a "trial close."

For example, ask questions like "what's your preferred method of delivery and payment?" or "Are you keen on deferred or instalment scheme?"

APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

As a leader, Rakesh finds it essential to engage, be it individually or as a company, with the community.

"How you engage with people will give you credibility and likeability," he says.

According to Rakesh, total success depends not only on how well you do in your profession, but also how socially acceptable you are.



Every year, he spends time meeting consumers and understanding their aspirations, problems, challenges in bringing up their children and how they manage their budgets.

He then ascertains their need gaps and how to design products that fill those need gaps.

"You can make a positive impact in whatever spheres of influence you have, by positively influencing different people around you in different stages of your life.

"It could be just helping people along in their lives, in their careers, providing them guidance or merely leaving behind a trail of nice memories. As a leader, if you do that, naturally people will love you for it," he adds.

As a company, the chairman adds that Unilever adopts the same approach when engaging with the community, considering elements such as environmental impact and genuinely improving the lives of consumers.

Embracing the learning journey and the inevitability of mistakes is another element Rakesh acknowledges in leadership.

At Unilever, "we encourage people to make mistakes and make decisions on their own, so long as there is no major impact to the company.

"Although they only get it right seven out of 10 times, it is still a good record. Even I do not get it right 10 out of 10 times after looking at business cases!" he guffaws.

When asked about his role models, Rakesh shares that certain people in his life gain his admiration for having qualities which he wishes to emulate.

"There is something to learn from everybody. None of us are perfect!

"One of my bosses was technically very outstanding in knowledge and wisdom – he made me realise the need to know your job well to gain the people's support.

"Another had a considerate disposition – which made me realise the type of behaviour you need to display to be well-liked," he says.

Rakesh explains that he doesn't rely on market research data to have a profound understanding of his consumers, but believes in personally reaching out to consumers' households.

A CAREER IS A MARATHON

Rakesh believes that one should always give his/her best shot and not worry about the outcome, which is influenced by many factors beyond one's control.

"Don't let these factors affect you and keep working at it. Persistence, hard work, honesty and having good values pays off in the long run."

Rakesh attributes his success to having the stamina to run this marathon.

"A career is a marathon and not a sprint, where you take a short cut to get to the top.

"It's about how you enjoy the journey to the top. So enjoy the work that you are doing, and you will excel and progress in your career.

"The more you fail, the more you should keep trying and you will become stronger. Perseverance is all about not giving up," Rakesh says.

He has a simple piece of advice for fresh graduates: "First, figure out what you enjoy doing. You are likely to succeed in what you love doing. It is about finding what excites you."

He advises against picking a career solely based on suggestions or to please another.

"You need not necessarily be running a company or be a doctor or an engineer. You can succeed in anything that you enjoy doing."

Chase your dream, pursue your passion and you will be successful in life, he concludes.

■ To view Rakesh Mohan's interview and interviews of other inspirational leaders, visit www.leaderonomics.tv

