

Career of Ram*

R. Gopalakrishnan

Ram was born in 1912. At sixty, he retired as the chief purchasing manager of a multinational company. He felt that he had enjoyed a satisfying career though there were many ups and downs.

Every Sunday, one of his sons would visit the retired patriarch and they would talk about the family. One Sunday in (1989) Ram's eldest son visited him. Ram was lying down, relaxed and cheerful, but looked a little tired. Ram requested his son to pass him some medicine. Before the medicine could be handed over, Ram was gone.

Ram died on Sunday, June 18, 1989 at the age of seventy-seven. Ram left behind his wife and eighteen immediate family members, his children and his grandchildren. Every member of the clan managed to arrive in the city in time for the cremation. Ram moved on from this world with the fondest of farewells from each person in his large, happy family; he died in a trice without suffering or pain. Friends and relatives observed that Ram had died a contented man after a unique career.

But what was so unique or special about Ram's career? It was the story of every common person, the story of a small-town boy who made a career in the city. He was not a well-known hotshot who had been decorated by the government or had streets named after him. Surely those are the criteria that should determine whether a career is unique!

On the other hand, just as every human being is unique and special, isn't every career unique and special? Each experience teaches a person distinct lessons. Those lessons stay with him and remain uniquely his. To that extent every career is unique.

Overcoming Obstacles

Ram was born in a remote southern village into a family of modest means; life in the village was the way life was in most Indian villages at the start of the twentieth century-no electricity, no running water, a five-kilometre walk to school, a rich tradition of mythology, a vibrant culture of storytelling and a warm, caring extended family.

When he was young, Ram was afflicted with polio. Medical facilities were limited in the village but the elders had some home remedies. The women of the village recommended herbal oils, which were massaged into the boy's affected leg, his right leg. In due course, he would need to exercise his leg by walking long distances. It could provide some relief. If it did not, then it would be his fate and God's will!

With this being the only available treatment and with the family thinking positively, everybody felt that the child had a good chance of being normal. And, sure enough, that is what happened. By the time Ram was twelve, he had overcome his limp. He was able to resume his schooling, which had been interrupted.

By today's urban standards, his schooling was physically very strenuous. He had to walk a long distance to get to school. Ram undertook the walk diligently, because there was no alternative and also because it would help him get rid of the traces of a limp.

Ram harboured an intense desire to overcome polio. So he did whatever it took to eliminate its damaging effects. This fighting quality stayed with him throughout and perhaps that is what made him a person who wished to overcome any obstacle that arose. During his adult

* Modified and edited version of the Chapter 1 - The Unique Career of Ram from the book 'When the Penny Drops: Learning What's Not Taught' by R. Gopalakrishnan, Penguin Books India, New Delhi. Reproduced with permission by the Author.

years, Ram was an advocate and promoter of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the seeds of which had perhaps been embedded in his childlike mind. He could not take things as they came and he became intensely motivated to change the deck of cards that life dealt him.

Seizing Opportunities

However, overcoming obstacles is only one part of a career; the other is seizing opportunities.

Ram found that his career had been decided for him by his well-intentioned and anxious father. Since Ram was afflicted with a weak leg, his father decided that he would be the son to stay in the village and tend the family's small paddy farm. The more able-bodied brothers and cousins could venture out into the big city to seek a career.

Ram found this unfair. He had to do something to change the decision of his well-intentioned father.

Ram was gregarious, voluble and an extrovert, and these characteristics stayed with him through his life—often to his advantage, but sometimes to his disadvantage. In the small and close-knit village community, a talkative person was easily noticed.

In 1930 a group of elderly village widows was planning a pilgrimage to holy places all over the country. They approached Ram with the proposal that he accompany them on their train travels. Train travel had its own challenges in those days. The women were impressed by his capabilities as he discussed the plan with them. Perhaps his ready wit and gregarious nature appealed to the group weary of the austere village existence.

He offered to perform all the duties expected of him during the long journey; as for him, he had only two conditions: first, that they pay his third-class fare and expenses; second, that he get off at Calcutta. Would they please handle the last leg of their journey without him? They might not have been very excited by this proposition, but they nodded their assent.

"Apart from the religious angle, a pilgrimage possibly gave the widows a break from their isolated monotony in the village. They could hardly plan a holiday to a

hill resort, but a trip to Badrinath or Varanasi met with wide social approval among the village community.

Rail travel had its own hazards and challenges in those days. It took a couple of months to travel by rail to visit the major pilgrim centres of India. The widows would, of course, carry their own food rations for the entire journey, but the assistance of a young lad was always welcome to perform errands at railway stations."

Next, Ram had to persuade his stern father, who seldom demonstrated warmth or affection. He was known to be Spartan in his personal habits and unwavering in his decisions. How would he tackle his father? Unless his father was won over, the question of leaving the village would not arise. Ram needed a strategy, which he devised intuitively.

Ram decided to enlist the help of his uncle, his father's elder brother, who was the head of the family. The uncle listened to his spirited nephew's dreams and ideas and was moved. He blessed him and gifted him what was then a princely sum of Rs 100 with the advice that should he be successful in Calcutta, he should help his less privileged cousins and siblings. He undertook the task of persuading Ram's father to permit him to leave the village and seek his dreams in the big city of Calcutta.

And that is how in 1931 Ram, all of nineteen, found himself in Calcutta during the Dussehra festival, under a common roof with his brother and his cousin, ready to face the bustling metropolis.

Breaking Some Rules

Ram decided to become a stenographer. Stenographers were in demand among the mercantile offices in Calcutta. All his acquaintances had enrolled to take lessons, and so did Ram.

The initial years in Calcutta posed many challenges. Apart from learning new skills, he had to adjust to a strange city. He spoke Tamil, but the people in the city spoke unfamiliar languages, Bengali and a bit of Hindi. So English became his language of communication. Even after many years, his Hindi and Bengali were interspersed with generous doses of Tamil. The new city and its work environment brought forth novel challenges, and Ram had to contend with peculiar food

and patterns of dress. But he adapted and learned from his experiences every day.

After mastering stenography, he secured an office job for a salary of Rs 40 a month. This enabled him to become a contributor to the family rather than remain a dependent; he recalled later that it boosted his self-esteem and built his self-confidence. It also encouraged him to think independently about what would be good for his career.

Soon he made an iconoclastic resolve. He decided to change his hairstyle from the traditional tonsure and pigtail to the normal city haircut. To a traditional person in those days, this was a revolt, totally against social sanction. To his parents and relatives back in the village, this was an early sign of the 'rapid deterioration' in the standards of their dear son. To others, it was the first sign of the different character of this boy.

For an extrovert, sitting in an office for several hours was boring. After a few years, Ram made his second iconoclastic decision to quit his job. Those were days when no middle class lad quit a job. He landed a job in the sales organization of a tobacco company called Carreras, which was a predecessor to today's Imperial Tobacco Company (ITC).

His job was to sell cigarettes in Orissa (now Odisha) and Andhra Pradesh. This act of quitting a safe and steady job for an unknown job was further evidence to the family that the lad had set out on a risky path. A brahmin boy selling cigarettes, soon they would even smell strange odours emanating from his breath!

What cigarette selling did to Ram was to build in him supreme self-confidence. He met different kinds of people: distributors, retailers, competitors' salesmen, company managers and many more. As a newcomer, he had to do some jobs himself; but for some jobs, for the first time, he relied on others like the distributor or the clearing agent or his coworkers. He began to learn that getting work done through others is at the heart of a manager's job.

Ram travelled widely and observed customs and beliefs that were quite different from those he had learned at home.

He had to discuss and solve transactional business issues such as orders, payments, logistics and merchandising. While travelling, he also got to observe his bosses at close quarters, all their ingenuity, all their frailties and the fickleness of human nature. Such travel and field selling brought with it the uncertainties and insecurities of field work, but he would not trade them for the more comfortable atmosphere of a staid office in Calcutta.

After a few years, Ram decided it was time to return to Calcutta. With a contemporary hairstyle and the confident gait of a successful and ambitious salesman, Ram came back to do something different, but he was not sure what that different thing would be.

Ram met an older friend, who advised him to become a GDA. He said that it would offer great opportunities to earn money steadily. What was a GDA, Ram asked. Soon he enrolled for the Government Diploma in Accountancy which was a predecessor of the Indian chartered accountancy qualification. This chance encounter with a friend set Ram on a completely different course. A foreign insurance company announced that it had a vacancy in its accounts department. Ram decided to have a go at it.

His ready wit and grasp of numbers endeared him to the foreign bosses. He began a steep climb up the organization. He became a member of the clubs in Calcutta. Soon, he could hold his drink at a party and enjoy the company of those who attended the mercantile socials that were common in the Calcutta of those days. The very middle class Ram was on his way to becoming part of the upper echelons of Calcutta.

Sense of Compassion and Empathy

Ram developed a great empathy for the less fortunate. He treated them with compassion and alleviated their problems whenever he could. It is possible that his early physical difficulties nurtured this sense of compassion in him. His altruism manifested itself in his response to the terrible Bengal famine of 1943.

The Second World War was on and Indian troops fought alongside the Allies. Yet a strong feeling spread in Bengal that the British administration had mismanaged

the distribution of food, as the rest of India did not face a famine. Estimates of deaths in Bengal ranged widely from 4 million to 12 million.

Ram set up a kitchen for the poor in south Calcutta, where he lived. He donated money and collected more from others. More important, he gave of himself by cooking and serving the afflicted and the starving. He derived immense satisfaction from setting up his famine kitchen, a constructive step towards alleviating a grave problem. Years later when Ram died, an observer wrote to the family about Ram's selfless service during the Bengal famine.

He evinced a sense of empathy when he stepped in to help needy relatives. Ram was forever grateful to his uncle for encouraging him to leave the village and also for parting with a huge sum of Rs 100 as a blessing. His uncle had said, 'I pray that you earn many times this amount during your career. Use part of that money to support your relatives, some of whom will be less fortunate than you.' Ram took the advice seriously; he would often recount his uncle's advice and how he unhesitatingly accepted the responsibility of educating some of his nephews and bearing the marriage expenses of some of his nieces. Like his brothers, he too shared the accident of his prosperity with indigent and needy relatives throughout his life.

When India became independent in 1947, Ram got an unplanned and unexpected break. Many foreigners left the country. Top-level vacancies within companies were now available to Indians. Ram was lucky to have joined a foreign insurance company where he had established a good reputation. As a result he was appointed to the senior role of Chief Accountant and Company Secretary, one of the three top posts held by Indians in the company. His salary was Rs 1500 per month, a magnificent salary in the early 1950s. Truly he had arrived!

Success and Bonsai Traps

It is axiomatic that precisely when you attain success, the seeds of your weakness begin to sprout. What was earlier a strong point now manifests itself as a weakness. When a strength becomes a weakness, it traps an individual. This is called a bonsai trap because the

person does not know that the strength has become a weakness. These manifest as dilemmas or problems which have to be solved.

The other top posts in the insurance company were held by two fellow Indians. Both were sons of wealthy top professionals in Madras. In fact, both had been to England for higher studies, were eminently qualified and had the right background in the perception of the European bosses. While in his own perception, Ram felt equal to the other two, he was unhappy that he was not regarded so by others.

It was not clear whether there really was a problem or whether Ram had worked himself into believing that there was a problem. By the mid 1950s, he had worked himself into a frenzy. He had convinced himself that he was not being accorded his due by his employer be it salary, respect or status. What bothered him was not so much the attitude of the employer as the inferior treatment meted out to him.

Ram discussed his predicament with close friends. He talked over the matter with his wife, who had uncanny common sense. His wife advised him to be patient and not to disturb the equilibrium of relationships. She felt that with six kids to be raised, family life was not to be disturbed under any circumstances. His friends gave him similar advice. But Ram continued to be restless.

He felt that as he was only in his mid forties, he should seek out a fairer future for himself rather than accept an injustice. At his workplace, his habit of questioning was viewed as intrusive and not playing the team game well enough. His iconoclastic nature and his extroverted, gregarious personality had served him well all these years, but now played to his disadvantage.

Soon after, he resigned from the company, with the supreme confidence that many would be waiting to offer him a top job immediately. He felt righteous about the act of resigning, almost triumphant. But subsequent developments posed many difficulties for him.

No acceptable full-time job materialized for four years. Potential employers seemed to note that he 'was not even a graduate'. Ram had never imagined that this would be a disqualification, considering he had over

twenty years of work experience. The lack of a college degree had not obstructed his career path in the insurance company, where he had joined at the bottom and worked his way up. Sure there were offers for a job, but with a smaller salary, lower status or at an inconvenient location.

With a large family to support, he dipped into his savings. Not having enjoyed higher education himself, he would not consider diminishing the quality or the extent of expenditure on the education and upbringing of his children. There was nothing to economize on except for minor domestic expenses, a few parties or movies.

The very attribute that had made him a leader for almost twenty years, self-esteem, now took a beating, bruising his ego and pricking his pride. The fighter in him stood him in good stead as he suffered through four years of uncertainty. Painfully but consistently, Ram's effervescence was eroded as he approached the age of fifty.

The Penny Drops: Learning What's Not Taught

Difficulties, hardships and dilemmas teach us the most in our lives. We learn from those experiences, but we learn only by unconsciously developing a personal learning agenda. When such learning occurs, we sense that the penny has dropped, and we get the 'aha' feeling.

For Ram, at this stage, the penny dropped. It was a terrifying but liberating moment. He realized that he had better stop trying to recreate his past. He had to

start afresh. He grabbed a job in faraway Bombay in a different industry in a different role and at a lower salary. He decided to make up for lost time in the final ten years of his career.

Luckily for Ram, his new role was in a pharmaceutical sales organization; all the field lessons he had learned earlier in his career came tumbling out of the deep recesses of his mind. Gradually he made his mark again. His personality was sobered by the adversities that he had had to encounter. His work was appreciated in the new company and he rapidly gained recognition. But one ambition that he had secretly harboured for years, to be appointed member of a company's leadership team and be designated 'Company Director', was never fulfilled. He retired as the chief purchasing manager, a senior management role, but not quite what he had dreamt of.

Before Ram died, it was a great solace to him that his sons were ultimately appointed company directors. Times had changed and it meant something quite different; nonetheless, he found it hugely satisfying. He could die with a smile on his face.

R. Gopalakrishnan is the author of the best-selling book "The Case of the Bonsai Manager". He has been a professional manager for forty-three years with a wealth of practical experience: thirty-one years in Hindustan Lever and twelve years in Tata. He has lived and worked in India, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, and has travelled extensively all over the world. He has been president of the All India Management Association. He is married with three children.