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Do You Have IT in You?

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BY RAJENDRA S PAWAR

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I must admit, I enjoy the sound and feel of the word entrepreneurship. It has an energy about it, a sense of power and purpose that in a manner defines the entrepreneur. "Entrepreneur," borrowed from the French lexicon by the English language, was coined around 1800 by economist Jean Baptiste Say. It is said that upon reading Adam Smith's free market masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations*, Say found in it a key flaw—it omitted and overlooked the enterprising businessman—the entrepreneur!

Usually translated to mean "adventurer," entrepreneur has now come to mean a person who conceptualizes, nurtures and assumes ownership of a unique idea and its risks and impending outcomes. Typically, such a person has an eye on the horizon, and as management guru Peter Drucker has aptly said, "Predicts the future by creating it."

As someone who helped bring into the world a "first-of-its-kind" organization, a business that spawned a new industry and new ventures, I have enjoyed the experience of being an entrepreneur many times over. The heady, dizzying excitement that accompanies the germination of that first thought. The passion, determination and commitment that goes hand-in-hand with every step. The life changing incidents and the blood, sweat and tears that become part and parcel of that one big, evolving idea. When you set on the path of entrepreneurship, nothing is ever the same again.

Much has been written about the birth of NIIT, a company that my friend from IIT Delhi, Vijay Thadani and I founded in 1981, with active support and mentoring of our good friend Shiv Nadar. In those days, the Indian IT industry was still finding its feet, and as a nascent sector, experiencing initial hiccups. One of the key challenges the sector was facing was a paucity of skilled resources. It was

this need, this gap that became the inspiration for NIIT, and shaped its dream and vision. We were quick to realize that the absence of this vital fuel—trained manpower—would actually jeopardize the growth of the IT sector going forward. NIIT was launched with the express goal of "bringing people and computers together, successfully."

NIIT's primary agenda was to provide computer training that would build a pool of professionals that could be harnessed by the IT industry. At the same time, we wanted to help organizations make optimal use of IT investments, and offered them consultancy services alongside training for their personnel, including the CEOs themselves. These activities became the foundation for our two primary businesses in later years—IT education and software services.

If I recall those early days, all I can remember is the brainstorming, the focus on innovation and the obsessive desire to build a robust team. Innovation, in fact, was at the core of everything we did. It defined our content, learning methodologies, and delivery management. It was this culture of innovation, that we consciously fostered in the '80s, that enabled us to attract like-minded individuals—brilliant professionals who were drawn by NIIT's powerful vision and DNA of innovation. The way I see it now, NIIT was a great idea—an idea whose time had come.

We had managed to perceive a new opportunity and seize the moment. NIIT captured the imagination of the industry as well as young India. The organization enabled thousands of graduates, facing an uncertain future, to build careers in the sunrise IT industry and become the pride of their families.

At the same time, we stoked the fire of entrepreneurship among other first-time businessmen as well, using our revolutionary "franchisee

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model" to build NIIT into a national, and later, global brand.

I have often been asked about what really inspired us—whether it was a desire to join the exclusive club for millionaires by creating a revenue juggernaut, or something that went beyond the yearning for numbers. While I admit that an important goal of business is to achieve financial objectives, it is also about the sheer joy of playing the game. When NIIT got off the ground, our aim wasn't to make the first million. Rather, it was to unleash an idea that would touch and transform the lives of people. We believed in the old adage, "when batting in cricket, keep an eye on the ball and not on the scoreboard." That was our driver in the early years, and continues to be our motivator even today. I have always believed that entrepreneurship is all about creating challenges and overcoming them. I would advise entrepreneurs to go out and actually seek difficult problems that they can solve, in order to make the journey exciting, invigorating and worthwhile.

This fact is getting reflected in NIIT University (NU), our most recent initiative in the domain of higher education. I personally consider NU, a not-for-profit university located in the sylvan Aravalli hills in Neemrana, Rajasthan, our dream venture. NU is a sustainable campus that provides seamless learning and spurs original thinking.

With NU, the cycle of entrepreneurship has come a full circle for NIIT, and we have set off on its unbeaten path yet again. NU has all the hallmarks of an entrepreneurial enterprise, which by its very nature is packed with complexities and difficulties. Grappling with these issues—whether related to maintaining environmental friendliness or acquiring high quality faculty—involves us using creativity, problem-solving skills and most importantly, team work.

With NU, we have decided that drawing rightly-skilled faculty, which is in very short supply, is currently more important than attracting students. First, get the infrastructure and faculty ready, and then the rest, that is our goal. NU is expected to take 10 years before it achieves full capacity. Until then, unsolved problems have to be addressed. It

must become sustainable over time, in order to become a symbol of entrepreneurship within the global academic realm.

Even though NU is one among the many schools of advanced learning in the country today, the way we have defined it, makes it a first. That according to me is the force of entrepreneurship—that it develops unique and enduring organizations and institutions.

Entrepreneurship and the art of organization building: For NIIT, organization building has remained at the heart of entrepreneurship. We have always believed that in order to build a great organization that survives the test of time, remain internationally competitive and come up with offerings that make them the first choice for customers, innovation is the key.

I remember a rather memorable session at the World Economic Forum at Davos, which was focused on innovation in organization building. At this session in 1999, I recalled and articulated how we had done organization building at NIIT over the two decades of its existence. Successful organizations, I believe, are the ones that have embraced a business model based on four vital processes—inspiration, aspiration, respiration and perspiration. Simply put, the first two relate to the heart, the third to the mind and the fourth to the body.

Having seen it work at NIIT, I can define inspiration as the part that has to do with the vision of the organization's leadership, the mission that guides the company and helps it outline its future roadmap.

It is this vision-sharing between the leaders and the followers that raises the aspiration levels within organizations. In order to sustain the euphoria created by the existing interplay of inspiration and aspiration, companies must create respiration, which is essentially about energizing employees through a conducive work environment, where people can think freely for themselves, and challenge their seniors, without the fear of rebuke or ridicule.

Respiration is about providing oxygen for the mind and encouraging employees to ideate in a completely open environment. As for perspiration, well, that's just about the toil and hard work that one must put in to ensure zero-defect execution. At NIIT, when we train

and prepare our young managers for leadership roles, we emphasize on certain crucial factors, which we feel will ignite in them the fire of entrepreneurship and innovation. There is a great commonality between these lessons and the pointers that I am providing entrepreneurs, as they begin their quest for success. My suggestion is for them to become problem seekers—people who are inspired by extraordinary challenges and new opportunities that push them to the very limits of their imagination. They must find and create an unmet need, describe it in the most graphic form which can then be articulated to the team.

It is from this intellectual churn that fresh ideas will emerge. It is these problems, with a high level of difficulty, which will enable entrepreneurs and their people to raise the bar even higher for themselves and achieve what appears impossible.

And when problems come, can solutions be far behind? My second suggestion therefore is for entrepreneurs to become problem solvers. This is the phase of respiration, where the mind couples with great team play to come up with the right answers.

The team, of course, is the center of the entrepreneurial universe. The team members must be selected carefully. Diverse and complementary skill sets are a priority for a business venture. Like-mindedness is not necessarily a great option. After all, it is dissent and conflict that generates light.

As the new ideas begin to flow, entrepreneurs must find ways to meet the identified need, and bridge the gap.

They have to use their creativity to come up with new solutions, products and services that are distinctive and differentiates them in a competitive marketplace. If required, people from outside the team can be involved to generate more ideas.

Once the solution is in place, it must be executed to perfection, using an extended team.

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This is the stage where we talk about processes and global quality standards which enable organizations to become zero-defect. In all this time, the role of the team leaders will become more critical. They have to build energy and excitement and ensure it infects their team as well. They have to inspire their peers to gather

courage and scale unbelievably high mountains. Finally, when the foundation is laid, and the brickwork begins, the focus must be on quick feedback at every stage. Testing and experimentation are important and leaders must be hands-on and on-location to observe the implementation process. They

must know instinctively what is going right and what is going wrong, and how corrections can be made, earlier rather than later.

Entrepreneurs have to ensure that their organizations are open to new ideas and new models of working. They have to create nimble and light-footed enterprises that can tune themselves to dynamic market conditions and changing client needs.

Entrepreneurs and their companies have to be unpredictable, inconsistent and highly responsive. In other words, they should be ready to swivel around and alter direction if the situation demands.

Patience and tenacity are the other big virtues of entrepreneurship. For companies that are in it for the long haul, these strengths are a must and will enable them to remain hopeful and optimistic, even during those brief periods when the going gets tough. Above all, the key factor that marks an entrepreneur is his/her die-hard optimism. ■

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