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MOINAK MITRA

PEPSICO'S MANU ANAND ON KEEPING EMOTIONS OUT OF DECISION MAKING AND MORE

Pep Talk



PepsiCo India's Manu Anand

SOCRATIC debate

There's no hype, no hoopla — just a Spartan corner office with some teleconference equipment and a PC. The windows stare out as a dull day unfolds. By no account does PepsiCo India Region chairman Manu Anand's fifth floor fiefdom in Gurgaon's DLF Park seem enviable. But Anand is not complaining. The plainspeaking 53-year-old came back from a three-year stint in Thailand as PepsiCo's South East Asia boss to take over the mantle from Sanjeev Chadha. Prior to that, he turned around the company's foods business in India and was the key man behind the popular 'Kurkure' brand. But he's the last to take credit. For in India, Anand seems to have his role cut out with a people-first policy. A student of physics from Delhi's St Stephen's College, Anand went on to serve Ferguson's as a chartered accountant. In PepsiCo for the last 17 years, he's grown beyond poring into the P&L account. It's more about people, policies and performance now. Excerpts:

Describe your job.

It's fun. It's a very exciting job with a lot of opportunities to be innovative, and more importantly, to lead a bunch of fantastic people. It also allows me to be entrepreneurial: the part I enjoy the most.

Hands-on or hands-off?

Hands-on. In any business today, you've got to have your ear to the ground. You don't have to be doing everything yourself. By hands-on I mean knowing the mood of the people, and most importantly, the consumer and ensuring they're always in touch with our leader.

What's the difference between leaders and managers? Managers have more to do with the details and leaders provide the direction, vision, inputs, the right resources and most importantly, the right coaching to get there.

What do you consider yourself — a coach or a player? There are times when you've got to be both. But in my position, it's more coach and less player. I'm not an active player anymore but that doesn't stop me from playing once in a while.

Any role models?

Leadership is about situations. So role models are situational. In the rapidly-changing business scenario or in life, things change so fast that I don't think one can say any single person handled everything perfectly or was the ideal person for every situation.

Any business mentors?

Certainly, a lot of them within PepsiCo. The company spends a lot of time investing, coaching and building leaders of the future. The ability to build business leaders has become as important as the ability to build businesses and business results. My current boss, Saad Abdul-Latif (PepsiCo CEO — Asia, Africa and Middle East) is a phenomenal mentor and so is Indra Nooyi (CEO, PepsiCo) in her own way, though one doesn't get to meet her that frequently.

When do you start work and when do you finish?

You start and finish. It's 24/7 (laughs). I'm in office by 9 and I'm normally out by 7. But I don't consider coming in to office as part of work. We're switched on 24/7.

Hasn't your work made your personal life suffer?

It's very difficult to draw a distinction between work and personal life after a point of time. Beyond a stage, our work and family life tend to blend with each other: But when you do get an opportunity to switch off, I tend to use family time to the fullest. It is the quality of family time that matters, rather than the quantity.

What is your guilty pleasure?

Food. I've just come back after spending three years in Thailand and I just love Thai and South East Asian food.

What is the smartest business idea you've ever had?

I think it was working with a team to build local food innovation products like Kurkure in 1998.

Your brainchild?

No, my child. I wouldn't be giving credit to a lot of people if I said it was my brainchild.

What is the biggest mistake you've made in business?

Mistakes come more out of omission — not doing things rather than doing things. When you look back, you can say our foods business could have grown much faster, could have gone national much earlier; things like that. Or maybe, wrong investment decisions, wrong fit in hiring, etc. When I go back to my days at Frito Lay's, I can say that there are certain products that didn't work out right. For instance, 'Chaat Street' didn't give us the delivery we thought it would. Or, when we launched fabricated chips in India, it didn't do well and we had to withdraw it.

So what learnings do you draw from such mistakes?

When you go back, you must check the radar of your decision-making, whether you made the right decisions with the right data, did you ask the right consumer questions, did you think through the full end-to-end business model — those are the things that you have to reflect upon at the end of it all.

So does that make you more prepared for the future?

They do make you more robust. But does that mean you won't be taking any bad decisions in future? Doubtful. The very nature of entrepreneurship and business is going out there and taking risks. You can't play safe always.

How important is money to you?

Important, certainly, if you want to maintain a certain lifestyle and plan for your kids, etc. But to me, there are certain aspects of my job like the people I work with, the kind of ethics and values we operate within, that are as important, if not more.

What keeps you awake at night?

What I think of is whether I've done the right thing by building the right culture or value system. One thing I always think about is whether I've communicated the right messages about leadership to our people about our values, about our code of conduct, about our ethics. When you're more than 6,000 people-strong and have about 500-600 people joining every year, you've got to ensure everybody has the right value system ingrained in them.

What is your solace in time of trouble?

Falling back on my values and belief system. And, of course, the family is always there in times of trouble.

What is your current state of mind?

I'm excited about the future of this company and building true scale in India. Being in the right country, right business in the right time heralds very exciting times for us.

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