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STRATtalk

Today, Kiran says he is very different from what he used to be. From a global marketing communications role, he runs a company that bridges the access gap between small town companies and metro-based enterprises. Mentally, he's much more positive, much less skeptical, and far more open to admitting that he doesn't know something. "I've learnt to get rid of intellectual arrogance and become 'aggressively curious' again," says Kiran.

Whether they admit it or not, the habits Kiran is attempting to unlearn, are traits that many CEOs share. In his latest book, *Unlearning: 39 Post-Requisite Lessons for Achieving a Successful Future*, author and unlearning guru Jack Uldrich urges CEOs to 'develop a healthy dose of unconfidence'. "Most people — especially many entrepreneurs and most experts — think they know more than they do," says Uldrich, "Unfortunately, there is a huge discrep-

ancy between what people actually know and how much they think they know." Quoting Alan Greenspan and his understanding of the global financial markets prior to the fall of 2008 as a perfect example, he adds, "The solution is to become more intellectually humble. Give more credence to individuals who disagree with you; and actively seek out dissenting points of view."

This is especially important since failure is not an easy pill to swallow for someone used to the high life. "When you achieve a certain degree of visibility in the corporate world, you start thinking people are interested in your life. So the fear of failure is always there in the back of your mind. That's why it is important to be driven not by money, but the urge to create something. If money is the only motive, you may not go too far," says Prakash Bajpai, founder, Tikona Digital Networks. Prior to Tikona, Bajpai was president and CEO at Reliance Communications, where he was responsible for the Broadband, Enterprise, Data Center, PCO and DTH businesses.

After 8 years as head of Maruti Udyog, Jagdish Khattar was one of the most well-known faces of the Indian auto industry. But the man who took the auto major's market share to 50% says that the job gets to you after a while. "I don't know how people can remain CEOs for decades," he says, "You end up doing the same things day in and out."

The former bureaucrat had a few things going for him when he started Carnation. He was staying within the auto sector, albeit on the maintenance and servicing side instead of the OEM side. Plus, his personal brand equity en-

sured that there was no shortage of people wanting to work for him.

However, starting life afresh with Carnation meant that Khattar, by his own admission, had to set his corporate experience aside. He says, "You have to get beyond jargon and strategy maps and learn what works on the ground." So when Carnation realised that pre-owned cars were going to be big, they got into that. With ecommerce soaring in the country, it has launched the option of buying and selling cars on its website. Every decision was urgent and immediate. Long-winded meetings went for a toss, as did the luxury of giving directions to people.

Khattar says, "When you're in a corporation, you strategise and think on a larger scale. When you're forced to be hands-on, life is very different. You have to understand what motivates the person at the end of the chain — something I picked up watching dealers at their jobs."

Like Khattar, for Pune-based Ashwin Deo, entrepreneurship was a chance to do something radically different, while staying in the same field. Deo, who was earlier managing director of Moët Hennessy in India, quit his last job as South Asia CEO of Asia Pacific Breweries 3 years ago to start Trinity Vintners in April 2011. His aim was to broad-base wine consumption in the country. Deo says he has been fortunate to have experience in launching new products or divisions in the past, which helped him develop a sort of startup mentality. However, now that he has his own company, Deo adds that the perfectionist tendencies that come with years on the job are still hard to let go of. "I have to divide my time between working 'on' the business and working 'in' it. You can't get too involved in operations at the cost of strategy and expansion."

For some executives, the transition in-

volves more basic unlearnings and learnings. As CEO of Bharti Teletech, Sunil K Goyal would delegate tasks all the time — from recording the details of meetings to creating spreadsheets and email accounts for employees. Now, at the helm of YourNest Angel Fund, he does all those things himself, at the end of every working day.

But as most leaders will admit, the biggest constraint involved when turning entrepreneur is financial. In his earlier avatar, Goyal was responsible for getting PE money into Bharti. That hugely influenced his decision to get into the VC industry. Now, as a startup, the relative lack of funds has necessitated certain changes. "Earlier I used to have a specialist for every role - legal, regulatory, operations, etc. Today I am running a startup and cannot afford to hire consultants for everything," admits Goyal.

Uldrich says the main challenge is that people are too mentally invested in their old knowledge and unlearning sometimes becomes extremely painful. "It's like driving on a freeway and missing your exit. You need to drive to the next exit and then double back. In this way, every mile you go in the wrong direction is like a two-mile error."

However, there are ways to expedite the unlearning process. Goyal of YourNest recommends taking a sabbatical and getting mentally involved well in advance before starting up the new venture. "The process of unlearning should start 2-3 years prior to starting up your own company," he says.

Kiran adds, "Be open to learning from everyone, especially younger people and create an open company. Entrepreneurship is an opportunity to create a vibrant company instead of one weighed down by systems and processes."



Ravi Kiran



Jagdish Khattar



Ashwin Deo



Prakash Bajpai



Sunil Goyal



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