

"If you want to be a successful person, you should be able to deliver without a manager in place"

It was a fascination for train engines during his school days that led **Rajeev Ramachandra**, chief technology officer, **Mistral Solutions Pvt Ltd**, to become the co-owner of a leading Indian product design and systems engineering company operating in the embedded domain. In a candid conversation with **Samonway Duttagupta** of *Electronics Bazaar*, Ramachandra shares some inspiring vignettes from his life

Hobbies

Listening to classical music and writing poems act as major stress busters for me. They keep me grounded as a person.

What I want to change in myself

I would love to go back to being the sportsman I was as a youngster.

Education

Graduation: 1984-89
Computer Engineering and Science (CES) from Bangalore Institute of Technology (BIT), Bangalore University

How I spend my free time

Read novels, read up on my own subject area, write poems and remain active on social media

My favourites

Music: Kannada classical

Singer: M.S. Subbulakshmi

Films: Kasturi Nivasa, Aamir Khan movies, Tamil movies by Kamal Hassan, science fiction movies, action movies like James Bond, Schindler's List, etc

Books: S.L. Bhyrappa is my favourite Kannada author. I love his books. I also like books written by Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov

Pastime: Poetry and wildlife

Holiday destination: Any beach destination

Actors: Aamir Khan, Kamal Hassan and Rajkumar (Kannada)

Actresses: Rekha and Shabana Azmi

Role models: In literature, it is Bhyrappa because of his ability to create stories. In sports, it is Rahul Dravid. I simply like his humbleness and how he puts the team ahead of everything else. I always quote him in my training sessions.



Family

I am an only child from a middle class nuclear family. My father was a journalist with the newspaper, Deccan Herald, and my mother was a school teacher who retired as the principal of a school in Bengaluru. I have two sons - the elder one is studying for his engineering degree and the younger one is in the eighth grade.

My wife Priya is an engineer but she has chosen to take care of the family and run the house efficiently. That acts as a major strength for me to work freely in business, as I travel a lot and give most of my time to my work.

Inspiration to become an engineer

Looking back at what triggered my dreams of becoming an engineer, I can recall a very interesting phase in my life. I remember that there was a railway line right opposite my school in Bengaluru where a train used to come and stop, every day. This coincided with the school's lunch hour when we were allowed to go out and play. I used to stand there and watch with keen interest how the suspension would compress and expand, and observe the spring that connected everything and every other minute detail of the train's body. I used to get fascinated by the way the bogies would be pulled—the power batteries and the engine required to pull so much of weight.

Becoming an engineer

I was the first science student in my family, the members of which were into literature. It was only much later, after me, that some of my cousins opted for subjects like medicine and engineering. In school, I had a lot of interest in physics and chemistry. I loved doing those chemical

mixes in the laboratory with smoke coming out.

When I was in the 11th grade, I remember that computers had just entered India. So I was one of those lucky engineers to go through this phase. Besides, my father was a journalist covering the information sector and thus had access to a lot of classified information related to the field. He had read enough about computers and as a result put me into a training school. That was the turning point of my life. I got hooked on to computers and by the time I was in 12th grade, I joined another course that taught me how to design basic electronics. This is when I decided to become a computer engineer. I joined the Bangalore Institute of Technology in 1984 – ours was the third or fourth batch of the college and probably even the third or fourth batch in the country to do computer engineering.

“ On all our products, we have a logo that says, ‘Designed by Indians’ ”

Making a choice

When I graduated in 1989, I faced a typical dilemma. Seventy per cent of my classmates went to the US. For a brief period, I was influenced by their decisions. Eventually, though I had appeared for the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and got selected by a few universities, somehow, the idea of going to the US did not appeal to

me too much because I saw that my parents were not too happy about sending me away. As a part of our curriculum in college, we were supposed to do some projects with the industry, and I did these in the R&D division of Wipro. The manager who took me in, later offered me a job. So after my graduation, I had two options—either to do my higher studies in the US or take this job. Somehow, the idea of studying did not excite me so I took up the job.

How Mistral Solutions was formed

My first project in Wipro R&D was related to defence electronics. It was for the Akash missile. I was hooked on to defence electronics since 1989. In 1993, I partnered in a business but quit eventually. My business partner, Anees Ahmed, and I started Mistral Solutions in 1997. We were both from the same college.

Making in India

In our time, we used to make fun of products ‘Made in India’. That phrase had become a taboo. We wanted to change that mindset. On all our products, we have a copyrighted logo that says, ‘Designed by Indians’. Even the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) has acknowledged this, and we have been applauded for our vision. We have always had a target of making high quality products in India.

We started Mistral Solutions with two primary goals. The first one was that we would be happy to call the company Indian, we would design the products in India and make the company accepted in India. Even though our



Ramachandra on a holiday with his family

company is not only about design since we manufacture as well, we still use the 'Designed by Indians' tag on every product.

The second aspect of our vision was to make customer satisfaction the prime driving force in the organisation. Customer retention only happens with customer satisfaction. We have developed products for international clients, the defence and automotive sectors, among others. Everywhere, Mistral's designs are considered to be of a really high class and high quality. That culture is embedded in our organisation.

Be a sportsperson first!

I was a state level swimmer for Karnataka. And I also played cricket. In my opinion, if you want to be an entrepreneur, be a sportsperson first, because

sports teaches you to work in a team. Sports teaches you how to work towards success and how to accept failure. The qualities required in business, including problem solving, taking risks and decision making, have come from sports. If you look at any entrepreneur, anywhere, that person will be good in some sport or the other. In India, this is even more important because our basic education system does not talk about teamwork. The ability to fight and to push yourself comes only from sports.

Inspiration to become an entrepreneur

While working in Wipro, I was fortunate enough to work under a manager who used to encourage a lot of creativity. Even though I was one of the most junior em-

ployees, he used to allow me to speak freely. I hence made a lot of suggestions and some of my ideas and suggestions even got implemented. That somehow encouraged me to think that I could do something on my own.

The qualities in people that I like the most

One shouldn't become an engineer just to get the high scores and a good job. Good engineers are passionate about whatever they are doing. The ability to fix a problem is what makes one a complete engineer.

Another quality that I really think is important is the right attitude. One must be passionate about continuous learning. The obsession with money hinders learning.

I like people who have a single-minded focus, are dedicated to the project and are loyal to the customer.

An environment where all are equal

I like a work environment in which anybody can speak freely. When we conduct meetings for a project, we always say that there are no designations. Even the junior employees argue with me because the only thing we are all focused on is the project. Ultimately, what matters is delivering a high quality product and that can only happen by being loyal to the project.

Major contributions to the industry

Making in India is our big contribution to the industry. What we deliver by making in India is of high quality and is comparable to something that is manufactured anywhere else in the world. This is what we also make our engineers believe in.

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Management style

I believe in giving a lot of freedom to the teams. The decision making system in Mistral Solutions is very simple.

Ideals I live by

My personal ideals are dictated by the lessons taught in the Bhagavad Gita. I don't believe in any socio-cultural boundaries while choosing my employees. In fact, I pick engineers from rural areas. I go to various locations where people don't get any exposure. I have got some brilliant engineers from these areas. In India, we have a culture in which we believe that if you cannot speak good English, you are not respected. I don't believe in that. All that we need is good communication skills. Sometimes, in these remote places, we interview people in their local language just to make them feel comfortable.

Advice to budding entrepreneurs

I believe that rather than individual brilliance, it's the team that succeeds. So get involved in the problems of your employees. If you want to build an organisation, build up the people and the people will build the organisation for you.

A lot left to achieve

Success is a relative term. There is a lot to achieve. I am not satisfied. I believe that the day you are satisfied, you should retire. That is the end of passion.

Defining success

Success is not the goal. It is a path on which you walk. It is a continuous process, a journey. Reaching the top of Mt Everest is not success. The way one climbs defines suc-

cess. There is success in failure as well if you learn from it. The day you stop learning, you stop succeeding. I ask all employees in my organisation to write their resumes every six months. If they are not able to do that, I ask them to leave because in that case, the person is not learning anything from the organisation. If you want to be a successful person you should be able to deliver without a manager in place.

Social causes

I support and believe in the *Swachh Bharat* campaign. We should care about the cleanliness of our environment. In the area where I live, I am a part of a community that practises waste management and educates people. Besides, we support some government schools under the company's corporate social responsibilities (CSR) programme.

The way I want to be remembered

The education imparted to the next generation should be better. Today, it is a money-making business because the government education system has fallen apart. Everyone should have access to education, which is what can improve everything in India. So I want to be remembered as someone who provided good quality education to people in this country.

The future

I don't know about the immediate future but I want to retire as a teacher. I have a passion for teaching. I can teach a very complex subject to anybody. I have made some data entry operators and secretaries the top engineers in my company. I want to bridge the gap between a good engineer and a good employer, by teaching. ☐