

Razor-sharp success

I recently met with Mr Ajay Bindroo, Group CEO of Super-Max. Super-Max is the second largest razor blade manufacturer in the world and is a trusted brand in over 140 countries spanning five continents. Ajay, who started his journey at Super-Max nineteen years back with a dream to take the company where it is today and beyond, is one of the youngest Group CEOs in the MENA region at age 39. Operating out of a warehouse when he first got here, Ajay today works out of a state-of-the-art office in Jebel Ali Free zone and drives a Ferrari Scagletti. Bindroo kindly agreed to share his inspirational story of his journey to the top.

Shane: Ajay, you are truly an inspiration. Your early days were tough, starting out with your family farm in Kashmir being burned to the ground. How does one bounce back from such a travesty?

Ajay Bindroo: *I spent my childhood in scenic Kashmir on an apple farm. Unfortunately at the age of seventeen, my care-free childhood came to an abrupt end when we were forced to flee the state due to regional unrest and we lost everything. It was a new beginning for us, but in the face of adversity, a positive attitude and fighter-spirit helped us regain more than what we lost. Like the phoenix, I believe in rising from the ashes; all one needs to do is focus on what 'can' be rather than brood over what 'could have' been. After finishing university, I came across an ad in the newspaper inviting applications for entry level marketing associates. I immediately responded to this ad and the rest is history. nineteen years later, I am the Group CEO and have grown the business many folds. The secret is to be able to see an opportunity and never lose sight of it, and then go after it with everything you've got. That's what I did.*

Shane: Today I deal with so many executives who are discouraged by



Ajay Bindroo, Group CEO, Super-Max.

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the financial crisis, but you never get discouraged, what's your secret?

Ajay Bindroo: *In the 90's when I landed in Dubai, I was a man on a mission. The mission was to open the region for Super-Max. While we enjoyed a good brand presence in the Indian markets, we were largely a "souk" brand in this region. The vision was to go from a souk brand to an efficient, scalable and consistent brand; and while chasing this goal I simply refused to quit. I was relentless and I knew every "no" brought me that much closer to a yes. We didn't have the luxury of a highly staffed office and were operating out of a warehouse. An aggressive team of multi-taskers, we did everything right from understanding the pulse of the market, gauging consumer insights, meeting and appointing distributors, securing orders, executing them and ensuring everything*

went as per plan. We started from Oman, where we labouriously worked on building a strong partnership with our distributor and putting together all the essential tools required to execute an immaculate "Go to Market" strategy. In less than three years, our business model proved successful and we emerged as the market leaders in Oman.

To maintain this market leadership we lived up to our motto of innovation and introduced the world's first Triple Blade disposable razor in 1999. Apart from reinventing the disposables category we actually changed the way our customers shaved! If you ask me what's the secret, I think Sir Winston Churchill captured it best when he said "Never give in, never, never, never, never... never yield to force, never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy". Today I am challenging the world's biggest FMCG companies.

Shane: How did your personal vision begin to take shape?

Ajay Bindroo: *Over the years, my association with Super-Max gave me opportunities to travel around the world, understand what drives markets and consumer behaviour across geographies. This breadth and width of exposure helped me to develop a mature perspective of looking at the larger picture, aiming for bigger things and constantly striving to grow beyond imagination. So, if I was to describe my vision in one word, I think "growth" is the word that captures it best. My vision has always been to grow beyond borders, grow against odds and grow even in the face of gigantic challenges. That is also the vision which drives Super-Max. Today we have revolutionised the disposable razors category completely and our focus now is on how Super-Max can further grow and leverage its current strength and geographical reach to get into the league of Top ten FMCG companies globally.*

Shane: Who was the biggest influencer in terms of your

professional development?

Ajay Bindroo: When I was a child my father used to take me to the fruit market and we used to auction our apples. Watching him navigate the buzz of the bazaar was my first lesson in business. So my dad was obviously a big part of my development.

Professionally my mentor is Rocky Malhotra (RM), the chairman of Super-Max; he has been an immense source of inspiration to me apart from being a friend and colleague for more than nineteen years. I remember, during my early days in Dubai, RM called me one day and said I've arranged for you to have a meeting with a distributor in Guatemala and you need to get there in the next 72 hours and close this out. That's it! I had never even heard of this country but I flew to Guatemala and spent nine days in a foreign country only to come back with the deal closed. I always knew I am aggressive and agile, but by pushing me against the wall, RM helped me realise how to use these traits to my advantage and deliver concrete results.

Everyone knows that the best of clay could fail to transform into a beautiful sculpture, unless it gets the magical touch of a good sculptor. That is what a good mentor does to a promising new recruit and that is what

RM did for me. This is what inspired us at Super-Max to develop a rigorous one year 'Training and Development Programme' and a 'Mentorship Programme' for all our new recruits.

Shane: Do you have any principles or mantras which you hold sacred to your success?

Ajay Bindroo: My mantra has always been "Take that first step". It is easy to prepare a list of '100 reasons why it can't be done' but there is only one right way of knowing how it will be done, and that one right way is actually making an attempt to do it! We employ our energy and focus on what we 'can' do rather than brooding over what we 'cannot'. We believe that what you 'cannot' do today can be changed to what you 'can' do tomorrow and this transition from 'cannot' to 'can' has to begin with 'that first step'. For us growth is not a destination, it's a journey; and every achievement is the beginning of a new target, a new vision. Thus at every step "Take that first step" has been my success mantra.

Shane: In closing, what advice do you have for the up-and-coming executive?

Ajay Bindroo: My advice to up and

coming executives would be to continually evaluate the agreement between their personal and organisational goals and work towards aligning the two. Congruence between personal vision and the organisation's vision goes a long way in taking one to the top. Never make the mistake of taking your current success for granted and going into a comfort zone. One must always strive to learn more, absorb more and remember that knowledge can come from all aspects of life.

While it is good to be competitive, one should not be hesitant about giving someone credit when it is deserved and taking the blame on yourself when you're responsible for something that doesn't go right. And since we're talking about competition, I'd like to end this interview by saying "Being in a constant state of competition with your own self is what eventually helps you beat the competition outside of yourself".



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