

“Dot to Dot: The biography of an ordinary Renaissance Man”

He wakes up bright and early as mornings are his favourite time of the day. He is the leader of an unofficial laughter club where friends meet for morning tea and togetherness. He believes in reaching work before his employees. He leads by example – if his employees are working on the day of a festival, he too will be at work with them. He is a manufacturing man – not afraid to work with his hands on the shop floor. If he demands exacting standards from his employees he demands much more from his sons and he makes sure that he understands those exacting standards first himself. He is more than sixty years in age but hasn't stopped learning. Let us call him Raju.

Raju as we will get to know him was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and was the apple of his mother's eye. The first boy born after 3 girls in a rich business family in India in mid-19th century, he was destined for all things good that life had to offer. His fair looks only added to his personality, he was a charmer. Having done his graduation in the field of Physics from the then small town of Pune he went to London for a higher education in Materials Science. Apart from being a man of science by education he is a man of varied interests. His passions include aero-modelling, wind surfing, para gliding, sailing and golf. If you can call being a people's person an art then he is an artistic man. His words are master brushstrokes on the canvas of a person's mind. An interaction with him will leave you elated, just like viewing an exceptional piece of artwork.

At the young age of 25, with a new wife and two small children Raju was left stranded. By stranded I mean deprived of all that had been promised to him. He had to make a fresh start. While his easy going attitude may have fooled most people, it is the people closest to him who realised what a daunting task stood in front of him. Suddenly, he had no family wealth and no family business or support. Did he stumble and fall? Yes, he did stumble occasionally but with each fall he stood up and walked taller. What was it that kept him going? What was it that helped him the most in these trying times? It was not his education, his friends or his savings. It was his approach to life. An attitude. He says, “You can learn new things at any time in your life if you are willing to be a beginner.”

He was willing to begin. Not once but again and again. He learnt by reading, he learnt by doing, he learnt by talking to people and he learnt by travelling not only to faraway lands but also much closer to home - to remote areas in the Indian hinterlands which hold far more wisdom than we could've imagined. As time passed his two boys grew up to be fine gentlemen. His own brainchild – his body of work, which he had nurtured as much as he had nurtured his sons, grew. After about 20 years had passed since his “restart” in life his oldest son joined the family business. Today, about 30 years after his “restart”, his business which runs on his philosophies supports the livelihood of about a thousand people. It is a growing business house today which threatens competitors and attracts foreign partners. I would like to term this “restart” in Raju's life as the renaissance. It was the renaissance that brought about the realization of change. What we term in today's day and age as disruption. And with change came the need to unlearn, relearn and keep learning. Such disruption is a part and parcel of all of our lives. It is a part and parcel of every living and non-living entity. Disruption is the harsh truth which many organizations today refuse to face. By ignoring it,

the change will not go away. Thus, drawing on the example of Raju if we embrace the change, if we consider it as an opportunity to learn and grow it will lead to greater accomplishments.

What are the traits that led Raju to become an achiever?

1) Initiative

The simple act of doing something because it needs to be done and not because someone is watching.

2) Willingness to learn

Yet another example of Raju's willingness to learn is when at the age of 62 Raju was invited to join the Board of Directors of a popular commercial bank in India. Banking and Finance was a field he was less familiar with. But he forged ahead to learn what he did not know. He fixed weekly tutorials with experts and every evening found him sitting with his laptop reading and decoding financial reports.

3) Curiosity

A questioning attitude where he would not rest till he understood what, where, how, why and when of things. In today's information age with all the knowledge made accessible through the world of internet it is much easier to feed this thirst. He was not only naturally curious but imbibed this curiosity in all those who came in contact with him from his family and friends to his employees.

4) Goodwill

Raju never befriended anyone with the intent of profit but as life would have it his winning personality and genuineness endeared him to everyone who came in contact with him. The goodwill he earned helped him in his business as well because it is ultimately people who make the difference. His leadership was not so much about authority over his employees, suppliers or customers as it was about empowering and leading by goodwill.

5) Empathy

Raju was known to be a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. And his was a heart of gold. He could feel for his workers and often put himself in the shoes of others while dealing with a problem.

6) Humbleness

It has been said that true vision is when you have your head in the clouds but your feet planted firmly on the ground. Such is the case of Raju. Keep achieving but do not let the success of those achievements become bondage which keeps you from reaching your magnum opus.

These are six major traits which became the ruling philosophies on which Raju based his management style. He is a leader with initiative, willingness to learn, curiosity, goodwill, empathy and humbleness. These qualities of his inspired his employees to become followers.

They too started exhibiting the same traits. In a way this was Raju's expectations coming to fruition. He is a man of his principles and expected the same of his employees. Unknowingly Raju followed a leadership style which was closest to the popular "Pygmalion theory"¹. A prime example of the Pygmalion effect is Peter Drucker's "Theory X and Theory Y" management philosophy. In his book Management, Drucker's "Theory X" managers assume people are lazy, dislike work, incapable of accepting responsibility and are motivated by the carrot and stick approach. On the other hand "Theory Y" managers assume people are self-motivated, seek responsibility and want achievement. According to Drucker, "Leadership is the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations²."

I would like to quote an incident from my life here. I was an impressionable teenager studying in my 10th grade in a public school in the small town of Ahmedabad in western India. In India 10th grade is an important year which decides the future of a child's education. I was a hardworking and sincere student. I am not very mathematically inclined yet due to my diligent work I would score well in the exams. I had the fortune of having a teacher to whom I appeared like Michelangelo to Ghirlandaio. This teacher told me I had the potential to score a perfect 100 out of 100 in my mathematics examination. At first I felt shocked even elated, a feeling which soon gave away to worry and a determination to do my best. Lo and behold I not only scored 100 out of 100 in Mathematics that year but also scored a perfect 100 out of 100 in Statistics for the next two years of my schooling. Thus, all it took was someone's strong belief in me. My strong subjects were always English Language, Humanities and Management but never did I perceive that I would be able to ace the subject of Mathematics if I put my mind to it.

"Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you will help them become what they are capable of becoming³" was another quote by German thinker Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. Goethe himself if you read about him is a man of many talents – a poet, novelist, lawyer, statesman, playwright, scientist and amateur artist⁴. He was what you term as a "polymath" – someone with varied interests, wide knowledge and learning. It is no small wonder then that men with similar approach towards learning across centuries and continents tended to think likewise. Just as an ordinary man such as Raju was similar in his approach to learning to masters like Goethe, Michelangelo or Drucker.

1 J. Sterling Livingstone, January 2003, "Pygmalion in Management", HBR,

2 Drucker P.F., 1993, "Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices"

3 Von Goethe J. W., 1801, "Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre: Ein Roman", (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship: A Novel)

4 Britannica Encyclopedia updated April, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johann-Wolfgang-von-Goethe>

Thus, Raju too according to me has all the traits of a polymath. He had a variety of interests and an inquisitive mind. He learnt without knowing how this knowledge would add up to his body of work. But it did. For instance, in his earlier days of struggle Raju and his brother had set up a box manufacturing facility which had eventually failed. Little did Raju know that later this expertise of his would come in handy while designing boxes for his product which would take the market by a storm.

It was his ability to think in three dimensional, his eagle eye for proportions, his expert knowledge of material science, his doggedness at learning new softwares and an artistic bent of mind which helped him eventually design and execute successful product designing and packaging.

Like Raju you must have a holistic view of the world around you. You cannot view life's experiences in silos of being either art, science, humanities or commerce. If you end up restricting your drive to learn to the boundaries of a particular specialization then you will never be able to discover your true potential. For instance, if Steve Jobs one of the most revered modern polymaths that the world has seen had not studied Calligraphy when he was in college then he would not have been able to come up with the idea of using different typography for the first Macintosh computer⁵. His unknowing learning of an art not for any ulterior motive but for the purpose of learning, later helped to apply himself better to design what we now term as a part of computer science.

Life comes full circle if you live it in its full consciousness. Half-hearted attempts and lack-lustre learning are not the roads which lead to the pinnacle. For instance, it was Raju's goodwill and integrity in his dealings which landed him the job on the Board of Directors at the bank. Dot to Dot. All the dots of life are connected. We just need to find the right path. Visualize a three year old trying to connect dots from 1 to 20. It a challenging task for her. She might make a mistake of joining the wrong dots but a guiding hand and a patient mind will help her fix the problem. Her concentration, the practice of holding the pencil correctly, of drawing straight lines, of knowing the order of numbers will all add up to her success. As said by Leonardo Da Vinci, the polymath par excellence "Everything connects to everything else⁶."

Having introduced you to Raju – the polymath, the leader and the conscious man, I would like to make a couple of observations. There is a Raju in every common man. Every ordinary man has the potential for the extra-ordinary. It is only his attitude which decides his fate and his journey from ordinary to extra-ordinary. And I believe that a learning attitude can be cultivated from childhood. From the time he is a three year old a child starts making sense of the world around him. If the education system and the home environment encourages curiosity of mind, imagination and pursuit of one's passions then the child will become the next Leonardo Da Vinci, Goethe or Steve Jobs. So let's join hands to help each ordinary man of tomorrow connect the dots.

5 Isaacson W., 2011, "Steve Jobs" A biography, Stanford Commencement Address

6 Isaacson W., 2017, "Leonardo Da Vinci"