

Chapter 17

Interview with Kumar Damania, Managing Director of IT Operations at United Airlines

Peter Miller

University of Texas – Dallas, USA

Alicia Therneau

University of Texas – Dallas, USA

Marthe Haile

University of Texas – Dallas, USA

1. Where did you grow up? Do you think that it has any impact on your life's work?

I grew up in Bombay, India. Growing up in India certainly made me appreciate the struggle that many people have to go through just to survive, while most Americans take the same things for granted.

2. Where did you go to school? Why there?

I graduated from California State University in Fresno. It was one of the best experiences of my life. California has a lot to offer in terms of nature,

although on my most recent visit to the Los Angeles area, I could sense the pollution in the air.

3. What did you do after your first degree (if second degree, where was that done, what did you do after that?) How did you get into your first major area?

After graduating from CSUF in 1994, I returned home to Bombay to join the family business. My father had just received government approval to set up a brewery in his home state. Government approvals, especially for alcohol-related industries, were extremely rare and difficult to procure during what is referred to as the “license raj”. This basically refers to the high levels of bureaucratic “red

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tape” that was prevalent during that period, having since given way to a more capitalistic and open market economy. I initially took responsibility for the construction and installation of equipment at the brewery. After production commenced, I took over the day-to-day operations at the brewery with a workforce of about 120 people, before returning to the US in 2000. In 2009 I received my MBA from University of Texas at Dallas, with a focus in Finance.

4. Have you had any particularly significant mentors in your career?

My most significant mentor was an old friend and former boss who passed away due to cancer. Peter Kaczprazak was a Polish immigrant who had moved to the US after the Cold War. He had some very interesting stories, especially about his days as an engineer in Poland. We connected on many different levels, and what I learned just by being around him was invaluable.

5. How has your career evolved?

After my father sold the brewery in India, as well as his oilfield supply business in the Middle East, I decided to move out from under the shadow of the family business and return to the USA. As many people can agree, working in a family-run business can be challenging. Returning to the US meant starting from scratch with only my degree in Industrial Engineering to bank on. After a few years at various manufacturing companies, I joined Atlas Copco in 2006 as an Industrial Engineer. I transitioned into purchasing in 2010 and felt that supply chain was where I wanted to be.

6. Looking back, what do you feel is your biggest contribution?

I get satisfaction from knowing that I worked hard to give back to my parents. Even as I was leaving

the family business, I was party to negotiations for the sale of the company. I feel that my involvement in the negotiations and my ability to bring in counteroffers from competing bidders ultimately resulted in the best possible price for the company.

7. What do the next 10 years hold for you?

I hope to grow within the Atlas Copco family and at some point be responsible for the P&L of a business unit.

8. How has your view of leadership evolved over the years?

As a very hierarchical society, Indian business owners, especially in the past, tended to look down on employees or people below their own economic or social status. They do not accept criticism and end up being surrounded by “yes” men. Many family-run businesses fail primarily due to this reason. Many of these businesses have now brought in professional managers to run their companies. These managers should not only be able to listen to criticism, but also respect their employees without looking down on them. An attitude of “working with” rather than “working for” someone goes a long way toward motivating employees to make positive contributions.

9. What problems or hurdles do you perceive in your area of work? How do you overcome/ combat those problems/hurdles?

Being a large conglomerate with over 30,000 employees spread across the globe, I feel that the biggest challenge is motivating all to work towards the same goal. Different parts of the company tend to work towards what may sometimes seem like competing goals, even though we are all working towards one ultimate goal – to be the “First in

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