

FOREWORD BY
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THE RIGHT CHOICE

RESOLVING 10 CAREER
DILEMMAS FOR
EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS

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In his first book, 'The Right Choice,' Shivakumar discusses 10 commonly faced dilemmas, providing a perspective based on his experience and his interviews with CEOs and his colleagues.

Mr K Mahalingam, Honorary Treasurer, MMA delivered the welcome address. The book, "The Right Choice" was officially released at MMA by Shivakumar and copies were given to the guests of honour.

Excerpts from the discussion:

Asha: Is the first job a very important one—a sort of make or break in a career?

Shiv: The first job is an important one but I wouldn't say it is a make or break. You can do a lot more beyond the first job.

I have seen that 50% of MBAs from a batch tend to change their job in the first year. I have asked myself as to why this happens, having been on the board of IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Udaipur and XLRI.

One of the reasons is that campus placement turns out to be a lottery. In placement, you're allowed two options. It is like a T20 match where you have to

take two wickets or give away just two runs in the last over. But it does not happen. That is why, many MBAs tend to switch jobs in the first 12 months after picking something. It is not that they are job hoppers.

You have to ensure that there is a learning opportunity and the culture of the company is good. The multiplier effect of that, years later, is humongous. Many think that they should join a company that gives the highest salary.

When is the first job important? I have seen a direct correlation between the cynics in the organisation and their first boss. When they had a bad first boss or joined a bad first company, they tend to become very cynical. It takes a lot of effort to change their mindset.

Balaraman J: During your college days in IIM-C, you were the institute secretary and played for IIM in cricket, football, hockey and tennis. How difficult is it to pursue this interest once you join a job? What should be the balance?

When you are in college, you have a very clear routine. You go to class and come back at 4:30 pm. Then you go to the basketball court or football ground. When you start work, there is no such routine. If you are a junior or middle manager, you are asked to do many things and you may end up with many hours of work.

So while in a job, it is very difficult to find time for sports activities. Many young managers put on 20 to 30% extra



weight in their first two years of service as they work extra time and do not exercise. The rhythm that they had in college completely goes off.

You must take very good care of your health. If you are not physically fit, you won't be mentally alert in a meeting. If you don't go to the workplace with a spring in your step and hope in your heart, you are not going to make it in your workplace.

You have only 24 hours a day, so you must make sacrifices. Now I don't play any sports. I run on the treadmill. I don't watch movies. In my spare time, I read books or reply to emails. There is no alternative. As English Captain Nasser Hussain said, only a genius like Brian Lara can score 400 without

following practice and discipline; the rest of us need discipline and practice.

Balaraman J: When you were in Nokia, you were one of the prime sponsors of the KKR team owned by Sharukh Khan. Tell us about your experience.

Shiv: In 2015, Pepsico terminated the contract with IPL as the title sponsor. From 2008 to 2015, for 8 years, I was one of the very few people involved with IPL. IPL is a fantastic concept. But for IPL, Indian cricket will not be where it is now. It has brought more women to watch cricket and it has made Indian cricket players fearless. IPL has transformed the mindset of players.

In Nokia, on August 14, 2007, we

had an absolute crisis with BL5C (battery) recall. We put out 12 things to address the crisis. Point 12 was that if all else failed, we would get a celebrity to endorse the brand. Internationally, Nokia had never used a celebrity.

We resolved the crisis and roped in Shahrukh as our brand ambassador. I had worked with him in Hindustan Lever. When I approached him, he said, "I use a Nokia phone, so I will be happy to do that." We did a great ad with him, with the theme of Shahrukh and his 10 years with his Nokia phone.

Then Shahrukh won the bid for KKR and suggested Nokia to be the sponsor for KKR. We agreed. The first two years of KKR in the IPL was a disaster. In the first year, they finished



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at 5th or 6th place and in the second year in South Africa, they finished last. Shahrukh called us and offered to give us two days of his time, free of his cost, for any ad campaign, recognising the poor performance of KKR and the hit that Nokia had taken as a result of that.

I told Sharukh, "That's very generous of you but our deal is with the KKR team and not with you. The team has failed and that is the risk Nokia has taken. So, let's stay friends." We continued and KKR won the title in 2012 and 2014.

One of the things I like about Shahrukh is that he gives the sponsors his full value and goes the extra mile. He is a very bright, smart, razor sharp and very humorous person. I am absolutely certain and I have said this many times that if Shahrukh had not been a film star, he would have been a CEO somewhere.

Shahrukh taught me many things. We did 50 odd media conferences together. He taught me how to look at

the camera, if there is a battery of photographers in front of you, how you go from left to right and this ensures that you are not caught in the wrong angle. Only a master can teach that.

Asha: In the age of social media, how do you ensure that you don't let your guard down? How much has visibility changed you as a person? What does this have to do with repetition and authenticity?

Social media is both a boon and a curse. Boon because you can network with anyone across the world. If you don't know how to use it, then it's a problem. Young people and some middle to senior managers unfortunately don't recognise that. It does not have an erasable hard disc. So think many times before you write something on social media.

In 2013, I wrote an article in The Hindu Businessline on the Bharti-Walmart split. I argued it was bad. There were many positive comments. But one comment said, "This is an article

written by one MBA for other MBAs.'

That was at least humorous but another episode was even worse. I have a habit of summarising books that I read and post them on my LinkedIn page. I read Rajat Gupta's book, 'Mind without Fear' and summarised it for which I got so many hate mails. I was trolled and bashed. That did not stop me from summarising the next set of books. Gaining trust in social media is very difficult, for which you have to be authentic.

Asha: What about friendship as you progressed in your career? How can you stay as friends without success getting in the way?

You should never see your peers as competition. Beyond middle management, people see their peers as competition because that is when the pyramid becomes steeper. Sometimes the company or bosses place people against each other and it is a bad company to work for. We had this problem in Hindustan Lever with a boss, pitching four of us—colleagues—against each other. We four joined together to work for the common goal of the company and foiled the designs of this boss.

The mistake we make with friends is that we tend to reach out when we need help. That is not networking but a deal. You have to build your network systematically. I have built a network



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even with my competitors. Relationships should not be based on quid pro quo.

The last thing is: Do not benchmark your performance with your colleagues. Try to be the best version of yourself. Gary Kirsten became India's Cricket Coach in 2011. He realised Indian players are stars by themselves and they don't need coaching. So he said, "Practice is optional, but if you want to practise, tell us what you want to practise, we will prepare you for that."

It turned out that the player who asked for maximum practice was Sachin Tendulkar. He was the best batsman in the team, having played for 23 years at the highest level and he still wanted to do very well, benching himself against an absolute best. That is the mindset needed. If you are the best, the only thing that can stop you is bad luck.

Balaraman, J: How should one handle a bad boss?

It's a huge dilemma. I've had my

share of bad bosses. Draw a 2 by 2 matrix. On the one side of this matrix, place your strength and weakness and on the other side, the boss's strength and weakness.

The box where your strength is also your boss's strength, it is a 'Lose' box, because your boss will always say that he is better than you. The box where you have strength and boss has weakness, you have to be very careful in coaching him without meaning to coach him.

The next box is where you have a weakness and your boss has a strength. This is a fantastic box. You can learn from your boss and tell him that that he is damn good at it. The last box is where you and your boss both have weaknesses. In this case, it spells trouble for the company.

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can learn the most from such bosses and develop critical thinking. If your boss is tough but fair, work for him.

Balaraman, J: How do you deal with incompetent subordinates?

A bad subordinate is one who places him above his team. Then there are those who cannot give credit to people and have poor value systems. The third type of people discourage their team members from sending any information up to their superiors. If you come across them, engage with them and clarify your expectations. If they perform well, you can tolerate them. If not, you have to give up on them.

There are also people who have good value systems but their performance may be poor. You can coach them. One trait I always look for is, "Is this person a company person—which means that he/she places the company's interests above anything else?" If so, back him.

Asha: What about people who have made wrong choices?

All of us make wrong choices. If you recognise it is a wrong choice and come out of it, you can cut your losses. Getting into large debts is a bad choice. It happens because of hurried aspirations. Setting artificial and unrealistic targets like becoming a company's CEO or VP by the age of 40 is a wrong choice.

Asha: Can you talk about your mentor?



I am not a good entrepreneur. I am good at working for someone. You must recognise that.

If you become a mentor, coach and educator, we are sure that many young managers will get the benefit of your experience.

You cannot choose your mentor. The mentor has to choose you. He picks you when you show commitment to the company and show a degree of excellence in whatever you try to do. The reason is that the mentor does not want his choice to go wrong.

I met Ram Charan in 1996 when he came to teach us in the Unilever's Management Training Centre in Four Acres, UK. He has been my mentor ever since. The mentor tells you the toughest things in your interest. In December 2012, I bumped into Ram Charan in the Dubai airport lounge. We had dinner. He told me, "Shiv. I think you have to leave Nokia. It has no future. You have a career ahead of you. So please move on." I was stunned. Only a mentor who has your best interests will tell you that.

K.Mahalingam (MMA): How important and relevant is MBA today?

The MBA degree needs to reinvent itself. I am sure the system will change. Thanks to Ed-tech, the emphasis is now

changing to skill as opposed to a degree.

Insights from the Q&A session with the audience:

How can you choose your department or division?

Make use of your strengths. If the strength lies in sales and relationships with people, you can make use of this in any company. So, choose a department where you can showcase your strengths, learn and grow.

How long should one stay in a job?

At least for 3 to 5 years in a company. Then only you can learn the job and about the company.

Which will you choose—a good company with a bad boss or a bad company with a good boss?

A good company with a bad boss. Since fundamentally the company is good, there are good chances that they will remove the bad boss.

When should one become an entrepreneur?

Definitely not straight out of your college. Gain some experience. I am not a good entrepreneur. I am good at working for someone. You must recognise that. Even if you are teaming up with your friends for a venture, there has to be clear agreements. Friendship is different and business is different.

If my boss moves to another place and he calls me, is it advisable to quit my job and go with him?

It is not a good choice. It means you don't believe in yourself but in your boss. You need to build your own brand. The boss also sends a signal that he does not trust the people in his new company.

I have never taken people from my previous company. This system of taking people from the previous company may work well in the US where the boss is given the freedom to bring his own people. If the boss does not perform, his whole team will get fired. The US system understands this concept well but not in India.

If you are in a good job, should you respond to a headhunter?

Always return a phone call of a headhunter. You need not quit your job but it keeps you in play. Don't be arrogant when you do well. ■