

GANESH MAHENDRANATHAN

Forging Success

WORDS BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN
PHOTOGRAPHER: BARATHAN AMUTHAN
VENUE: FOUR SEASONS HOTEL KUALA LUMPUR
HAIR: ANAGEN
MAKEUP: SAYAP REPUBLIK
STYLING & WARDROBE: STYLING @ R.YOGASH

Ganesh Mahendranathan single-handedly catapulted himself to be the successful entrepreneur he is today from hard work, sheer determination and the desire to be great. He helms several startups under his belt and is currently the head of innovation at RHB Bank. For the November (Deepavali) issue, we invited this friendly and energetic persona to share his success story and inspire others while also learning about his Deepavali traditions, interests and more.





WHAT IS A MOTTO THAT DRIVES YOU ON A DAILY BASIS?

My motto is built on my key values which consist of gratefulness, resilience, achievement, candour and empathy. I believe that the pursuit of self-mastery is key to maximising one's utility out of life. In my opinion, self-mastery is synonymous with being in "flow". Having a morning and evening ritual is crucial. I start my mornings by defining my intention for the day (the what and why), writing my daily affirmations (to reinforce habitual change), highlighting things I'm grateful for and to reflect at the end of my day. With the constant distractions, I sometimes have to remind myself during the day to stay in the present to allow for action and awareness to merge. Combined with intrinsic motivation and intense concentration, this allows me to strive to make the most out of each day. Have I achieved an optimum flow state? Far from it but every day is a step in that direction.

YOU ARE QUITE THE BUSINESS TITAN. WHAT IS YOUR RECIPE TO SUCCESS?

I wouldn't call myself a titan but rather a lifestyle maven as my interests are extremely diversified and I strive to achieve competence across many different areas. As for my recipe to success, I think it's down to two factors - making mistakes (you don't repeat them) and putting myself in uncomfortable situations. For the latter, I achieved this by involving myself in a multitude of projects across various industries (sports, education, agritech, events, real estate and banking). I don't believe that one requires years of experience to start or work in a business in a completely new field. I aim to be an expert generalist as it will allow me to understand deeper principles that connect these fields and apply them in a creative and agile manner while also building a host of new connections.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO GET INTO ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

I view entrepreneurship as a creative enabler to pursue meaningful projects in an autonomous fashion, to provide the lifestyle and freedom to do the things I love. Ultimately, the key to financial freedom is moving from active income to passive income and entrepreneurship (if you get it right!) helps to accelerate that process.

I grew up in a fairly traditional background with my dad being a government servant and mum a housewife/superwoman. Growing up, my siblings and I were under immense pressure to get straight A1s, have co-curricular achievements and be active in sports as a means to securing coveted scholarships. I'll never forget the time I received my SPM results and scrolled down to see 11 A's and 1 B3. Most would have been happy with that but I knew deep down that the B would cost me an overseas scholarship. What frustrated me then was despite representing the state in chess, scrabble and cricket at the national games and achieving a host of other state/national level awards, overseas scholarship requirements were biased towards academic results over co-curricular achievements.

I had to say goodbye to pursuing Physics at my dream university, Oxford and instead enrolled for Accounting & Finance at a local university as they gave me a full scholarship. I went through the lowest point of my life for a few months. My parents were super supportive but I felt that they couldn't understand.

The tipping point for me was when I had a lengthy conversation with my brother one late evening. He had set a high benchmark

for my sister and I, having been the top student at school and a Petronas overseas scholar. He spoke to me and said "Ganesh, see this as an opportunity. If it's a small pond, just make sure you're the biggest fish." He told me to apply what I had learnt from the 4-Hour Workweek by Tim Ferriss (which I had read prior to starting university) and added that I should just focus on achievements that will make my resume stand out. In the next three years, I was elected as the youngest Student Council President, got into the Malaysia Book of Records, represented Malaysian youth delegates at international conferences and ran three businesses in university, generating RM60,000 over three years which funded my first ever month long Europe trip! That was the beginning of my entrepreneurship journey!

WHO IS YOUR ROLE MODEL?

I don't have a particular role model but I draw inspiration from people like Carl Sagan, Tim Ferriss, Ray Kurzweil, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Steven Pinker, Jeffrey Archer and Michael Crichton. From a day-to-day standpoint, I would model after Tim Ferriss. He doesn't take no for an answer, refuses to accept conventional norms and is always finding creative and more efficient ways of achieving results. He runs tonnes and tonnes of experiments on himself mostly, documents his findings, forms new insights after synthesising the data and proceeds to validate it with experts in the field. He's what I would call a scientist of life and this is something I'm passionate about emulating and hopefully one day, improve upon.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY LEARNINGS YOU HAD WHEN ESTABLISHING YOUR STARTUPS?

The most notable one was the importance of having difficult conversations early on. This would include formalising partnership agreements before launching a business and ensuring proper check and balance to avoid fraud. There were two instances I had naively trusted the wrong people (who were close friends at one point) to get into partnerships with. In one case, my partner had closed the bank account and taken all the money out of it without my knowledge and proceeded to set up a competing company. In another instance, my partner had delayed formalising the cap table structure for more than a year despite several reminders every so often. As we were in the validation and product development phase, I rationalised that it was fine only for a dispute to occur once we had secured funding. I'm thankful to have made these mistakes early on instead of learning it over multi-million dollar deals! Another key learning would be knowing when to quit when ideas don't work. It's crucial to not get too emotionally invested in your ideas as you might lose objectivity. There were many mini projects I had worked on that despite being very cool conceptually in our heads, did not resonate with our target customers.

HOW ABOUT SOME PROUD MILESTONES IN YOUR CAREER?

If I were seated in front of a panel of directors being interviewed for a job, this is how I would phrase my achievements:

- Hosted KL's Largest Startup Party through Drinkentrepreneurs with my partner for two consecutive years with 600+ in attendance and getting featured in The Asian Entrepreneur, Digital News Asia and World of Buzz
- Launched Found8 in Malaysia and achieved above industry average metrics with sales conversion rate of

26%, <1% monthly churn, NPS score of 50 and hosted 20+ key tech events

- One of four startups selected from 728 applicants for the Brinc Accelerator in Bahrain and was also invited by MaGIC for ASEAN's Next Great Idea at Uber's HQ in my tenure at plantOS
- Drove the regional rollout in Indonesia for SportsFix and garnered 200,000 new users with 88,000 monthly active users within the first quarter
- Recognised by top leadership as a high-potential employee to represent the Asian Football Confederation at a UEFA course in Baku, Azerbaijan

On a personal level, I'm most proud of:

- Realising the potential in people regardless of their background. Even though we preach the importance of being street smart, no one actually practices it. In Asian culture, we are obsessed with seeing one's alma mater and experiences before hiring. I personally never discount anyone until meeting them. In fact, one of my best hires was a piano teacher who had zero corporate experience and now she's one of the highest performers in the company as a corporate innovation analyst. I choose to see people beyond paper qualifications and strive to understand what motivates them, how they communicate and the energy they bring with them.
- I've learnt very early the importance of asking for help and admitting when I do not know something. This led me to build a huge network of amazing professionals, some of whom are now my career mentors. Learning from them and also drawing from my experiences has allowed me to pay it forward. Nothing beats that cathartic feeling of seeing someone you've helped succeed.

HOW DO YOU STRIKE A WORK-LIFE BALANCE?

I believe in work-life integration as it allows me to shape my own day with maximum flexibility. It's important that I allocate time to important areas of my life.

On a daily level, I place emphasis on the following:

- **Relationships** - check in daily with my loved ones
- **Fitness** - anything from weight training, running and indoor cycling to football and racquet sports
- **Health** - I'm vegetarian twice a week and generally eat wholesome meals the rest of the week (unless I'm on a chocolate binge). My fasting routine is typically OMAD and occasionally a 42:6 protocol (I'm relatively flexible on weekends though)
- **Mindfulness** - Daily breathing exercise (wim hof) and a combination of yoga and guided meditation on weekends

For my other interests, I try and integrate the following:

- Hiking, trail running, scuba diving, skydiving and travel - most memorable trips were in Brazil (attending the World Cup 2014), Mexico (diving in the cenotes), France (sneaking into Roland Garros '11 and travelling all over France during the Euros 16'), China (first business trip!) and Cuba (having a drink at Hemingway's favourite bar)
- I'm a board games fanatic who's ranked in the top 1% globally for Chess, Scrabble, Risk and Settlers of Catan. I enjoy casual poker and it's something I'd love to be a semi-pro at some time in the future.

IF YOU WEREN'T HEADING UP INNOVATION AT RHB, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'D BE DOING CAREER-WISE?

It's hard to imagine at the moment as I've just joined the bank and am 100% focused on my current role which is to deliver value through innovation initiatives. However, If I wasn't here, I'd imagine I'd be working on a new startup venture that I believe would contribute towards a sustainable future for the next generation. I'd like to be part of the solution instead of the problem.

HOW IS DEEPAVALI CELEBRATED IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD? DO YOU HAVE ANY TRADITIONS THAT YOU OBSERVE? WHAT IS ONE MUST-HAVE DISH DURING DEEPAVALI, IN YOUR OPINION?

Every Diwali is pretty much the same. In the mornings, we would have idiyappam (string hoppers) with sothi and chicken curry. As for lunch, my cousins and friends would come over to enjoy a massive feast consisting of the usual - amma's special fried chicken, mutton curry and varuval, fried fish cutlets, Kathrikkai Paal Curry (Brinjal milk curry), long beans and cucumber salad. In addition, there's usually a fair bit of drinks, board games and charades played.

WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING, HOW DIFFERENT DO YOU THINK DEEPAVALI 2020 WILL BE?

I think it'll just be a private family affair this time around.

FOUR FUN QUESTIONS WITH GANESH

1. ARE YOU A DOG PERSON OR A CAT PERSON? WHY?

I love both! But if I had to pick, I'd lean towards a dog as they just love you unconditionally! My dog Coco pees out of excitement every time I come back from work. It's not fun cleaning up after her but it just makes me love her more!

2. WHAT IS YOUR ALL-TIME FAVOURITE MOVIE?

This is tough! Well, if I had to pick one, I'd have to go with Interstellar. The production, music and cinematography were just mind boggling. It was made sweeter as the scientific narrative was developed by Kip Thorne, a Nobel Prize winner.

3. IF YOU COULD DINE WITH ANYONE LIVING OR DEAD, WHO WOULD IT BE AND WHY?

Carl Sagan. I first read Pale Blue Dot at 16 and I remember telling my dad that I HAVE to meet him only to find out that he passed away in 1996. His writing was imaginative, inspiring and gave me a deeper appreciation and understanding of evolution, genetics and the universe. He's by far the biggest influence in my intellectual journey and gave me hope that I too can make a difference in advancing the human race by embracing the values of humanism in particular empathy, curiosity, hope and humility. One of my favourite quotes by him is "The cosmos is within us. We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself."

4. FAVOURITE GUILTY PLEASURE?

Chocolates (Nutella, Amicelli, Kagi, Milka, Lindt, Hanuta, Kinder Bueno, Ferrero Rocher) Ice cream (Haagen Dazs Choc Almond and La Cremeria Vanilla Cashew Delight) Waffles with any of the above!

