

## SUCCESS MANTRA

### Ten lessons from life

*Excerpts from the convocation address by Azim Premji, Chairman, Wipro at the 37th Convocation of IIT Delhi on August 12, 2006*

The funny thing about life is that you realize the value of something only when it begins to leave you. As my hair turned from black, to salt and pepper and finally salt without the pepper, I have begun to realize the enthusiasm and excitement of youth. At the same time, I have begun to truly appreciate some of the lessons I have learnt along the way. As you embark on your careers, I would like to share them with you. I am hoping that you will find them as useful as I have.

Economically India is among the two large economies (above \$700 billion), growing above seven per cent. Also, India is possibly the only country in the world where those aged less than 25 years are more than half the population. Both these represent tremendous opportunities. Yet there are fundamental challenges in the country including education, basic infrastructure, water, health and hygiene which need to be addressed. But then, challenges as much as opportunities, bring out the best from talent and youth.

#### **Take charge**

This was the first thought that came to me, when over four decades ago, I stepped into Wipro factory at Amalner. I was 21 and had spent the last few years in Stanford University Engineering School at California. Many people advised me to take up a nice, cushy job rather than face the challenges of running a hydrogenated oil business. Looking back, I am glad I decided to take charge instead. Essentially, leadership begins from within. It is a small voice that tells you where to go when you feel lost. If you believe in that voice, you believe in yourself. You can either amplify the voice to make it the purpose of your life or you can discount it and turn it off. Similarly, when you face a great challenge, you can run away from it, push it on to someone else, or just plain roll up your sleeves and face it head on. I have always chosen to take charge. In the long run, I have found it the easiest option of all. Similarly, when it comes to choosing your careers, you have to take charge of your own destiny. I believe that at the end of the day, our destiny is too precious to leave the choice to someone else.

#### **Earn your happiness**

I have learnt that a Rupee earned is of far more value than five found. In our interviews, when people are asked to narrate their most memorable achievements, they usually recount those which needed maximum effort from their part. It is almost as if the pain they faced is now an integral part of their pleasure. In my own life, I have found that nothing gives as much satisfaction as earning our rewards. In fact, what is gifted or inherited follows the old rule of come easy, go easy. I guess we only know the value of what we have if we have struggled to earn it.

#### **Success from failure**

Next lesson I have learnt is no one bats a hundred every time. Life has many challenges. You win some and lose some. You must enjoy winning. But do not let it

go to your head. The moment it does, you are already on your way to failure. And if you do encounter failure along the way, treat it as an equally natural phenomenon. Don't beat yourself for it or any one else for that matter! Accept it, look at your own share in the problem, learn from it and move on. The important thing is, when you lose, do not lose the lesson.

### **Willingness to learn**

Humility is important. There is a thin line of difference between confidence and arrogance. Confident people are always open to learn. A recent survey of executives in Europe showed that the single most important quality needed for leadership success was the willingness to learn from any situation. Arrogance on the other hand stops learning. It comes with a feeling that one knows all that needs to be known and has done all that needs to be done. In a dynamic world, the rules of the game are always changing. Complacency can dull the senses and prevent us from knowing what is happening around us. That is the first step towards failure.

### **Always a better way**

Partly as a corollary to what I have just said, we must remember that no matter how well we do something there has to be a better way! Excellence is not a destination but a journey. Continuous improvement happens when we believe it is possible and when we are willing to work for it. Sometimes, we reach a plateau in our climb for perfection.

That is when we need to look sideways. Creativity and Innovation sometimes need inspiration from other disciplines. It is probably not a chance that Einstein's interest in music was as much as his interest in Physics. Bertrand Russell was as much a mathematician as a philosopher. Excellence and creativity go hand in hand.

### **Respond, not react**

There is a world of difference between the two and in terms of success and failure. The difference is that the mind comes in between responding and reacting. When we respond, we evaluate with a calm mind and do whatever is most appropriate. We are in control of our actions. When we react, we are still doing what the other person wants us to do. In youth, rebellion is a fashion. I remember myself being a rebel without a cause many times. But rebellion as a reaction is conformity to something else. Disagreement and bringing about change as a response has led to challenging the status quo and useful, sustainable social reforms.

### **Stay physically fit**

It is easy to take health for granted when you are young. But when you enter the 24 by 7 schedule of your work, it is important not to succumb to time pressure and sacrifice the time needed for physical fitness. I have found that exercise not only improves the quality of time but also reduces the time you need for sleep. The truth is that stress will only increase in a global world. You must have your own mechanism to deal with it. There is enough literature to support the finding that exercise effectively reduces stress. That is another benefit of remaining physically active.

### **Do not compromise**

Mahatma Gandhiji often said that you must open the windows of your mind, but you must not be swept off your feet by the breeze. One must define what you stand for. This is not difficult.

But Values lie, not in the words used to describe them, as much as in the simple acts. And that is the hard part. Like someone said, "I could not hear what you said because what you did was coming out far too loud".

### **Play to win**

Playing to win does not mean playing dirty. Playing to win brings out the best in us and in our teams. It brings out the desire to stretch, to achieve that which seems beyond our grasp. It is about aiming for the maximum, a passion to do our best and having the hunger to be the best. However, it is not about winning at any cost. It is not about winning every time. It is not about winning at the expense of others. It is about innovating all the time. It is a continuous endeavour to do better than last time. It is the Spirit of fortitude, the Spirit of never letting go - ever.

### **Give back to society**

I mentioned in the beginning that while India has made tremendous progress, we also have significant challenges. All of us have a collective social responsibility towards doing our bit to address them. Of all the challenges, the key to me is education. We have a paradoxical situation, where on the one hand we have jobs chasing scarce talent and on the other, rampant unemployment and poverty. The only way to bridge these two ends of the pole is by providing Quality education that is accessible by all.

At Azim Premji Foundation, we work towards universalisation of Primary Education. We are convinced that the only way to create a just and equitable society is by addressing it at the grass roots.

Without education, it will not be possible to correct the past and prepare the society for the future. We also believe that no matter what, every child has a right to childhood. I wish you all the best in your life and career. I hope you achieve success in whatever way you define success to be.