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Make The Dream Turn Real

The anchor of the Best Business Book of 1999 is in town on a holiday. Sumit Das Gupta meets the 33-nothing management guru who's in a tireless race for higher goals

In polo-neck suede shirt and faded jeans, chatting on about management and mishti doi, poetry and patriotism, dreams and dollars, Subir Chowdhury could well pass off as an aspiring man of letters. Instead, the man from Michigan has just anchored Management 21C, voted the Best Business Book of 1999 by Amazon.com, edging out a certain Mr. Bill Gates and his Business@speedofthought.

Chowdhury is the youngest executive vice-president of American Supplier Institute (ASI), one of the top management consulting firms in the world; the only Asian to win the Young Leadership Excellence Award from the Automotive Hall of Fame; he has been chosen as one of the 21 new voices of the 21st century by Quality Focus, the highest circulated 'quality' publication in the world; he is the youngest-ever chairman of the automotive division of American Society for Quality (ASQ).

Incidentally, he pockets \$10,000 a day as management consultant, and is now keen on collaborating with Calcutta.

All this, and he's just turned 33. "I am in a hurry, because I feel there is so much to learn, so much to do, and so little time," explains Chowdhury, back in Calcutta for a month after a gap of three years.

Chowdhury's journey from classroom to quality-management hall of fame began at Chittagong, Bangladesh. Though his parents set up base-and a pharmaceutical business-Subir studied on at Chittagong Government High School.

It was during on of his vacations in Calcutta that the 13-year old was fascinated by Tarun theatre, but failed to convince his parents to introduce him to the artiste.

Two years later, "after extensive research on the man and the actor", Subir wrote to Kumar, stating that for an "eminent person", the letter "doesn't mean anything but..."

The veteran actor's handwritten reply followed immediately, urging the young boy "never to feel that you are nobody". "I still treasure that letter because it convinced me that perseverance and patience pay off in the end," says Subir.

This conviction backed up by dogged determination and supreme inter-personal communication skills, that have paved Chowdhury's path to progress.

Following an aborted stint at Chittagong Medical College (to keep his father's wish). Chowdhury was IIT (Kharagpur:) -bound, where he graduated with aerospace engineering in 1989.

"Academics alone was never an issue for me. It was a well-rounded humanist approach that mattered. So, I brought out Panchajanya, the literary magazine that is still being published," states

Subir, with satisfaction.

Though it did cost him some academic points, the magazine (named by the late Sagarmoy Ghosh, and backed by the likes of Sunil Gangopadhyay) won Chowdhury the IIT Literary Order of Merit for 1989 (bagged by Raj The Blue Bedspread Kamal Jha the previous year) and honed his "leadership skills".

After a two-year stint with Apple computers in Dhaka, Chowdhury decided to widen his horizons. In 1991, he was off to the Central Michigan University for Masters in Industrial Management. In 1993, his thesis, sponsored by Dow Chemicals, won him the Outstanding Thesis Award.

By this time, Chowdhury had decided to plunge into the "automotive quality movement". First stop, General Motors, as quality management consultant.

But Subir soon realized that with this brief, he "could change GM, but not the world". He at once attached himself to ASQ "to try and make a difference".

Chowdhury's efforts paid off when he was chosen to edit QS9000, the first-ever ASQ conference, in Detroit, attended by 21 countries. This won him awards, applause, and acquaintances.

What followed was a roller coaster ride through the magic world of modern management.

QS9000 Pioneers, the first book on how much he co-authored with Ken Zimmer, was endorsed by heavyweights like Dr. Taguchi, the septuagenarian management master from Japan, and US quality management pioneer Philip Crosby. It clinched the prestigious Henry Ford Award and led to the Young Leadership Excellence Award in October 1996.

For this, Subir's parents were flown in from Calcutta. When they were initially refused a visa, Subir went on the warpath, ultimately forcing then US secretary of state Warren Christopher to intervene. "I would have declined the award, and given up my green card, if my parents had not been allowed to attend the function," he recounts.

By this time, Subir forged a friendship with Taguchi who, urged him to quit GM. Chowdhury joined ASI in order to "work globally". He also co-authored Robust Engineering, which rose to No.1 among technical titles in USA late last year, with Taguchi.

With the end of the millennium in sight, it was time for Subir to move on. "My vision was shifting from quality management to pure management. I thought, won't it be fantastic to tell Ratan Tata in India and Bill Gates in the USA what the future of management will be?"

The idea of Management 21C was born. " I remember walking up one morning and telling my wife Malini that a day would soon come when the names of the greatest management gurus would be displayed below mine. At first, she tried to tell me to slow down, but once she realized that I was serious, she supported me all the way," reveals Subir.

Drawing up a 20-hour schedule (10 at ASI, and 10 at the study table for the book), Chowdhury went about bringing "the management masters under one umbrella".

"Who the hell are you?" was the first question from most. But by the end of the day, they had accepted his "role as leader", often redoing their essays, urged on by Subir to "expound new theories", "explore new concepts". That is precisely what Chowdhury himself was doing with theories like "Return on Talent"

Published by Financial Times, and launched in October 1999, Management 21C is turning out to be a phenomenon. "If you read only one management book this year, make it Management 21 C"

says John A. Quelch, dean, London Business School.

Its stupendous success sees Subir besieged by invites from London, Harvard and every big B-school around, and requests from many management gurus to co-author books with them.

Chowdhury (who turns to both Rabindranath Tagore and Peter Drucker for inspiration), is enjoying a happy homecoming. But it's not just been "family, friends, food and fun" for him this time. He's busy with the groundwork for his upcoming projects; a book combining the works of P.C. Mahalanobis and Taguchi, the M-T Systems, due by the end of this year; a collaboration with the Indian Statistical Institute; a CD with a friend in Calcutta which will be a "comprehensive quality tool", and attempts to have M21C published in India.

According to Chowdhury, Talent Management System, based on inspiring the youth, must be given top priority in India.

"Search the dream, act the dream, make the dream real," is his motto for the millennium. "I will continue to try and shake things up, to make a significant contribution to humanity. And I never give up," says Subir, a look of steel in his bespectacled eyes.