



Sunday, November 13, 2005

Eternal optimist wants Metro area to stay confident

By Laura Berman / The Detroit News

Feeling down? I wish I could drop Subir Chowdhury into your living room.

He's a locally based antidote for the malaise settling more quickly over Michigan than you can say "receivership."

He breathes in oxygen and exhales enthusiasm in such an authentically American way that, predictably, he was born in a different part of the world.

But Bangladesh, and then India, couldn't contain him. An American he worked for told him he could become whatever he wanted to be in the United States. He listened. He worked -- and knew no fear. He enjoyed immediate success.

At 25, he was a low-level engineer at General Motors, a recent transplant to the United States with dreams bigger than the Texas sky and an ego to match. "I drew a list of the biggest names in management thought," he remembers, "and told my wife I'd be at the top of all of them."

Heads consulting firm

Now he's the chairman of Livonia-based ASI Consulting Group, a consultant to some of the world's largest companies -- including Hyundai, Chrysler and Caterpillar -- and the author of 12 books. He has become, as he hoped, "a thought leader."

When he wins an industry award, which happens with reasonable frequency, he doesn't stash it in his closet: He sends out press releases.

Chowdhury's on a mission to save America from its "national disease" -- chasing glitter at the expense of consistency. But he wants to pump us up -- rev up our rpm and stop us from being psyched out by China and India. "Americans have a China Syndrome," he says, "even though this is the greatest country in the world." He worries that his adopted country would sooner shrug and defer to being inevitably overtaken than change course.



[▶ Comment on this story](#)
[▶ Send this story to a friend](#)
[▶ Get Home Delivery](#)

For most of his career, Chowdhury has written complex books explaining technical quality theory. You can probably skip most of those.

But now, to get us all on the path to quality, he's written a charming, hardcover parable called "The Ice Cream Maker" (Random House, \$16.95). It offers a story about an imaginary ice cream company with a dispirited salesman who can't sell his product to the best stores.

Change in attitude

Voila -- he swallows his pride, listens carefully to his would-be customer at "Natural Foods," and convinces his fellow employees to change their attitudes and habits. Together, as a team, they vanquish mediocrity and sell more ice cream.

OK, it's a simple tale, deceptively so. Chowdhury is especially good at describing how mediocrity isn't easily identified or changed -- because everybody wants to believe they're already doing a good, or good enough, job.

Chowdhury's ascent has been fueled, as he tells it, by a willingness to approach his human gods directly and to never accept no as an answer. He pursues his goals relentlessly, hoping always to "convince others of my passion."

In that spirit, he suggests "The Ice Cream Maker" becoming a kind of Detroit Bible, at once raising our expectations and our self-confidence. That's bold self-promotion -- chutzpah -- a quality that our battered region could use right now.

Laura Berman's column runs Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday in Metro. Reach her at (248) 647-7221 or lberman@detnews.com.