



→ **Vinod Mahanta** ←

**S**tudying to be an academic, Ajay Srinivasan sat in the IIM entrance just because couple of cricket buddies convinced him to. And what the Srinivasan didn't know was that fate had intervened to lead him to the world of finance dashing all hopes of the young cricketer of being called Professor Srinivasan, from the Department of Economics. Thus started a career that has spanned over 25 years, across Asia and companies like ICICI, Prudential, Threadneedle, and of course Aditya Birla Group, where he now oversees all the financial services businesses. In a chat with CD, the Chief Executive—Financial Services, Aditya Birla Group, talks about his leadership style, managing time and of course luck. Edited excerpts:

**What is your leadership style?**

One of my favourite quotes is from Peter Drucker, who says management is doing things right but leadership is doing the right things. My leadership style is thinking big and thinking different. I have set up businesses right through my career, many of them from scratch. If you don't do both, you can't build an institution of significance.

**What have the financial markets taught you?**

I have seen lot of volatility and learnt that good times don't last forever but bad times don't last forever as well. You have to be able to see through the cycles.

**Are you a strategy person or an execution person?**

I always tell people that if you have vision and you don't have action, it's like day dreaming. And if you have action without strategy, it's a nightmare. You have to be able to have a vision, you have to be able to articulate a strategy, and you have to be able to figure out ways to make that happen.

**As a CEO of CEOs, how do you cope with boundary issues?**

It's a relationship that evolves. You have to build it on basis of trust and align it on the basis of what you want to do. Anything like that requires effort to be able to get people on the same page. If you are aligned in what you want to get done and how you want to get it done, then I think you have to let the CEO get on with the job. My job is more around asking the right questions rather than necessarily have all the answers.

**Do you believe in luck?**

There are a number of things that are driven by luck. But I also think that there are a number of

choices. When I finished my MBA, most of my peers were looking for jobs in multinationals. But I joined ICICI. With my background, I needed to get a broad view of the way industry worked.

**What would be the best advice that you've got in your career?**

When I was with Prudential, someone who was part of my team said the most important thing in life was to be happy. When you're building your career, you think about a number of other things. You don't think about happiness. You think about ambition, success, bigger jobs, empires. But as I worked through my career, I realised happiness is the biggest thing. If you focus on being happy, you will always do things differently for yourself and for people. Being happy means that you're in good health, you have everything in balance. When you push yourself too much to achieve, you lose perspective.

**How do you manage your time?**

I am big on lists because that's what gives me a sense of priorities. I have a list for what to get done in a day, in a month, in a year. Some of the lists are directional, some are transactional. It gives me a sense of what I have to do versus what I'd like to do and make sure that I go through that list and get the things that I want. Physical health is very important. When you have to take a decision you can't be lacking energy or be stressed. Often it's good to take a break. You can either postpone it to a time when you're better off or you do yoga or pranayam to get your energy back. I personally found both of them help rather than pushing it at a time when you don't have the energy. Otherwise, you end up taking decisions you never would've taken.

**What kind of decision maker are you: data-led or gut led?**

You get as much data as possible and then you have to trust your judgment. You have to be able to work the two. And you have to be able to trust people you're working with because they've given thought to it, they've given some analysis to it. And you take your call based on your own intuition. You don't have the luxury today to take decisions based solely on data.

**What are some of the mistakes that you've made?**

I think I've made the mistake of being in the financial sector for a long time. Decisions were made on something that looked too good to be true. So that made me realize

that something that looked too good to be true is probably not be true.

**What do you look for in a team?**

Diversity. I look at diversity because it is very important to get different views in the team. If you'll have the same view, then you might as well have one person. And that diversity can come from gender, background, attitude, from a variety of things.

**How do you ensure that you keep learning?**

The most important thing for a CEO is actually unlearning. You have to unlearn a number of things and then re-learn. Look at the digital space today. If you are not able to unlearn some of the habits of the non-digital world in the digital world, you won't get the right drift. The best learning comes from experience and keeping yourself open to signals.

**What advice would you give to those starting out in their careers?**

First, invest in yourself. That's the most important investment that you'll ever make. Second, find something that really interests and inspires you. If you can find something that gets you excited, gets you going, then it's not a job anymore. It becomes a part of your life. When it becomes a part of your life, the kind of things that you can do with it is completely different.

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**SOCRATIC  
DEBATE**

**HIGH  
PRIORITY**

**Why Ajay Srinivasan keeps to-do lists for the day, the week and the year**

