

Swami (00:01.784)

Hello everyone. Welcome to another edition of the ContraMinds podcast.

In this episode, I have a very esteemed guest, Srinivas Venkatram. Srinivas Venkatram is the founder and CEO and lead researcher, Illumin Knowledge Sources, and he's also the founder director of Illumin Foundation. Srinivas has spent the last 35 years on one problem, which is information doesn't change people, assimilation does. He's an engineer from IIT Bombay. He's done his MBA from IIM Ahmedabad. And he's somebody who's actually done a huge amount of work on cognitive behavioral change frameworks, which is something unique for a country like India and his contribution to driving large scale change is something that I was fascinated about. And that's the reason I thought it will be a great idea to have a conversation with him.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:26.094)

Thank you. Thank you very much. It's always a pleasure to have a conversation with you, whether in a podcast or otherwise. Thanks.

Swami (01:36.719)

Thanks. Thanks, Srini. So Srini, I just wanted to kick off this conversation with a very interesting point that I saw in your career, which is you started off your career by actually building information products, right? Which you then sold to CRISIL and things like that. And then suddenly you also felt that information alone is not enough, assimilation is key, which is really what the last probably two decades of work that you have done now. So what was this interesting, I would say, inflection point that made you believe assimilation is more important than information?

Srinivas Venkatram (02:25.273)

So when I... was making these reports, these industry reports, et cetera. What I found was that the reports were the same, the knowledge or the information were the same. But the way the diverse we had, know, all the 900 clients, corporate and financial sector clients, the way each of these clients were using that information was radically different. So the first thing that struck me was that it is not the input that's important alone but it's also the way people process it. That was the first understanding. Then as I went deeper into this whole point, it struck me that it's not just about processing, it's also about what kind of value they create out of it and...and but there is a huge gap between the sublimity of the ideas and how much of it is actually assimilated or you know transferred into new behavior or the way people think etc.

So I started discovering that this problem which is there is not just a problem of a report being used differently by different clients, but the problem extends to education, the problem extends, I were to say, to society itself and to the way society assimilates, absorbs ideas. So it struck me that it was a really fundamental problem in our society. And I think that exact inflection point was with the birth of the internet, the internet was becoming more, if I may say, around 96-97. And that's when the boom started, the first round of boom. And then I realized, my own sense was that over the years, information would become less and less relevant. And it would be assimilation, is really the, if I may say the Khyber pass, where, know, and that would determine the rate of change.

Now over these years if you take the next 25-30 years and now when you look at the birth of AI and what AI is beginning to do and we are still in early years of AI I think this problem has only compounded n-fold...because even though information is provided, but also a lot of the processing of that information, AI is able to do, whether it is reasoning it out, whether it is converting it into products for you, structuring it, synthesizing it. So it has moved from information to knowledge processing. Both are being done by the

machine.

But what is still left is what you still do with that insight what judgments you make how does it transform the way you are as a person the way you think etc so that becomes you know that problem of assimilation is now only multiplied and four in terms of its importance.

I called it the last 12 inches problem, getting it right up to the, getting it to the, or to the screen was easy, is one level, which is the access problem.

But how does it go from there into the way you think and the way you act became a rest of the problem. I also want to make another comment that the deeper I have gone into this problem of assimilation, it appears to me that assimilation represents, if I may say, the critical driver for the rate of evolution of systems. So that's what its importance is. One is its rate of assimilation of knowledge into a system. But from that knowledge, if the system has to evolve, whether behaviorally or socially or psychologically or in any other way, that evolution depends upon how much of that knowledge is transformed into human change or human insight.

Beautiful, beautiful.

Q2

So one question that kept coming back to me as I read about your background and the work that you have done and the phenomenal, I would call this scale of human change that you're attempting and you have attempted. You are a typical IITian, you're from IIM. What made you not think of a traditional corporate ladder? Because this is something that I was very intrigued about.

Srinivas Venkatram (09:34.714)

So there are two stages of that decision making. The first stage was right in my last three months at IIM, where it struck me that it would be more interesting to try out something on my own. And...and I remember having a conversation with my father at that time as to, you know, asking him what should be done and this is what I want to do.

So he made an interesting comment. said, look, once you take up a job and enter into it, you will be in a golden cage. You'll find the cost of exit will go on increasing. So if you want to experiment with your life, then why not do it with a couple of degrees, your IIT and your IM degree behind you, and see where it takes you. So the first journey was one of experimenting with entrepreneurship.

But when I started Illumin, which was after the previous company got sold, it was that I saw it less as an entrepreneurial venture, as a startup. And I saw it more as a lab which was experimenting and trying to solve a deep rooted problem which at that point in time I identified as assimilation So the second one was a lab orientation and the first one was a startup orientation. So Illumin is organized like a lab. But as a, I can call an action lab or a living lab, which is not really about publishing papers and trying to be like an academic lab, but one which experiments with human systems, experiments with various types of problems and builds an understanding of what that solution might be.

Swami (11:32.44)

So.

Swami (11:39.918)

Hmm.

V01

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Q3

Swami (12:02.392)

So many people in your own batch would have gone to become corporate leaders or senior leaders or whatever. And you have taken a path which is, in my mind, I would call you a contra mind, right? Which is really somebody was away from the typical corporate ladder. if somebody were to kind of think about a path like what you're doing, what is it that they should be ready for because it's not like you are being promoted every year. It's not like you're getting increments every year. It's not the traditional, we'll come back to some of the frameworks that I'm reaching there, but clearly, what is it that they should be ready for if you have to take a path like what you have done and what should be the key acceptance that they need to be ready for?

Srinivas Venkatram (12:59.051)

I think the most important driver I think has been an insatiable curiosity about the problem. You know Swami Vivekananda says that if you take one problem and make it your life or you take five ideas and make them your life, then you will have more knowledge than a whole library.

So if you dive deep into any one idea, and it doesn't matter, this was the idea I was curious about. But I'm sure that if others took up an idea that they were deeply curious about, and were willing to follow that path of curiosity, but the consequences are many, because it means that your driver is not valuation, your driver is not scale in itself.

But your driver is a problem which society faces and your driver is finding meaningful solutions to society for that. Because frankly, no one person can say that I'm going to change society. At least I don't think that that's a... that something that's anyone person can do. But what you can do is to truly be, to try to contribute in some fundamental way in one area. And I think that would be interesting.

I think I pursued a problem in a different format because the problem needed the interface between knowing and doing and the interface between knowing and becoming. And I think people have to be ready for going through a journey where you have to live in that middle space and balance it these two ideas that ambiguity that uncertainty there is ambiguity there is a difficulty of explaining to people because people want to put you into slots

Swami (16:29.804)

Hmm.

Swami (16:39.49)

and you've got to be ready to accept that and still fight against it. That's what really, so the resilience that you talk about is really what is critical is what you, what I understand, right.

Srinivas Venkatram (16:51.757)

Yes, absolutely. Resilience and also a willingness to find new metrics for yourself. Because ultimately, all of us want some metrics by which to judge whether we are doing well or not. Whether you are an artist or whether you are a businessman, they use different metrics.

Swami (17:05.87)

Hmm.

V02

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Srinivas Venkatram (17:20.161)

So you still need to design new metrics for yourself. So what are your metrics for success? What are your metrics for progress, if I were to call it? Not success, but progress. These become questions which you have to answer.

Swami (17:33.997)

Nice.

Q4

So one of the most fundamental contribution of Illumin Foundation and the knowledge resources as a company that you started was this thinking of contribution thinking, right, which is work as a contribution. And can you elicit why this is critical in the context of where we are today in a company and as India becomes a developed country, why work as a contribution is critical for professionals to succeed.

Srinivas Venkatram (18:13.955)

So let me first start by trying to define contribution. So contribution, to try to understand contribution, one way is to locate it within Indian culture itself. So you have the idea of duty, 'kartavya' - idea which is very prevalent in India but duties are becoming a way of starting the which is determined from outside based on your fixed set of constellation of roles in society. But the society has changed, are changing, role expectations are changing. But that's why kartavya is all understood in that fixed frame of structure of how society works and in that sense duty in India has been seen as rather onerous or as something which is you know on the

<<BANG SOUND>> other hand you have with you the other end which is the Bhagavad Gita ideal in India which is really one which says that I have to look at work as a means for self evolution work as a spiritual practice - karmayoga - that we have and the idea is non-attachment to work the idea is that you need to be selfless etc. now this Bhagavad Gita ideal though it is very known in India it is a very high ideal which people cannot necessarily reach they cannot necessarily live that very easily in the midst of their day to day life...

Now, if you look at it, is a gap, there is a space in between where you can operate with what I can call where two, three reconciliations take place. First of all, can I work not only for outer impact and results, but can I work along with that for inner fruits or for inner development.

One of the ideas of contribution is to say that contribution is that work which makes a positive difference outside and which is also going to in some way create a positive, create positive meaning and fulfillment within your own self.

This is fundamental, this idea for example is fundamental in the modern workplace. Like there was a recent Gallup study which shows that the only 26 % of India's, you know, of the people surveyed seem to be engaged with their work. 74%, that means three out of four people are not engaged. And one of the reasons is that they don't find meaning. They don't find the meaning at work. They are not finding that fulfillment at work. So this is one of the dimensions of contribution, which is very important. The second dimension of, and the second dimension of contribution is that if I want to do that, contribution is a choice that I make. The purpose of contribution is really about awakening my own possibilities as a person besides just getting rewards.

So therefore, this idea that you need to have both the dignity of the individual and the value of the institution. Both are necessary. Similarly, both meaning inside and work outside. And also in our relation to

V03

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society, how can I expand my scope of contribution not only to self, but to institutions and to society. So if I see contribution in these terms, we can see it as a work ethic, which in a sense coming from India, but which is also trying to answer a problem of work, which is solved globally

Swami (25:38.261)

Okay.

Swami (25:43.649)

Hmm.

Srinivas Venkatram (25:44.256)

It is actually saying that Indian culture actually offers a modern format which is addressing the ills of Western notions of work, but it does not mean that it denies the value of many of the things which is productivity, efficiency, discipline, quality. All of these are wonderful values that you can have, which is effectiveness dimension of things but you combine that with the intrinsic values which are talked about in Indian culture that combination of east and west is maybe what is the work ethic with the world needs today and not just simply one idea and that is the centerpiece of the notion of contribution.

Swami (26:30.839)

interesting.

Q5

Swami (26:38.132)

Okay, so really, really deep and the dimensions that you kind of uncovered is very interesting. Is it relevant and applicable? And where have you applied this framework in a context of a large corporate or say, a massive scale of change that you wanted to apply contribution to work thinking? Can you give us some examples of the impact of the change?

Srinivas Venkatram (27:10.733)

Yeah, and let me kind of first, we've kind of applied this in multiple contexts. So we've, for example, applied this in corporates, large corporates. And we've applied it in different shades of the same idea.

Swami (27:20.461)

Mmm.

Swami (27:30.83)

Mmm.

Srinivas Venkatram (27:31.652)

For example, the first time that we applied it was with State Bank of India. During the tenure of Mr. O.P. Bhatt, who was the chairman at that time, and he was responsible for a major turnaround in SBI. So at that time, Illumin was the partner with him for the human transformation agenda and he used business consultants to come in for some of the other work but for this transformation he brought it and we called the whole thing so the first phase he called Parivartan and then it was called Citizen SBI thereafter...

So Citizen SBI was the, which involved two lakh people, right from the chairman to chaprasis. That's how we called it. Everyone had to go through a new understanding of their own work. And where we asked

ourselves, because the problem that he came with when we discussed it was, he says that I'm working, that here is a public sector organization. What am I going to... you know, how do I incentivize them? can't incentivize them. So what can, how do I, how do I then get them to be interested in serving customers? So then we said the incentives can come from within. That's how this idea of Abhyudaya and Nisreyasa comes, which is that there's an intrinsic incentive to work. There is a joy of work, you know, there is the joy of quality, the joy of creating something. All that is intrinsic values of work. So that is how we applied it there. And after we applied it, we applied it into the branches to ask how it can change contribution to customers.

And so this idea was applied in State Bank and the impact was, of course, they had an independent study done by XLRI where they found that there was a jump which was, at the end of the whole thing, it reached a point where more than 75% of the people who were interviewed, employees, citizens, etcetera, between 70 and 80, showed a significant shift in their understanding of how to think about work and how they should see service to the customer and customer orientation. So that was an example of SBI.

But after that, and that was one example, and he himself said that the more deeper impact of that was that new energy started flowing through the bank that is what he said and that consequently we will have told us from the state bank thereafter that actually in a way was a turning point because we started by saying that you are a great Indian bank rather than saying that you are a second rate private sector bank you see what I mean so that shift itself because we are citizens and we are people who are serving the country is a very important idea that came from that.

Similarly, was since then we applied it in the government in more than 2 million government services. 2 million across in the last four years because we collaborated with the capacity building commission and we worked with them. We worked with the Indian railways to look at how frontline staff can improve the whole quality of service. see the problem for frontline staff is that they have a lot of discretion. This discretion cannot be taken away. *So you see most organizations, they try to create processes for frontline staff. But frontline staff processes means that you are saying that you will dumb down your work and you can escalate anything that's smart. But what customers want, what citizens want is discretion. They want him to use his powers, use whatever his insidership in that system to find solutions for you. This happens even when you talk to a call center. In a call center, you call them, you expect them to respond positively and find a solution rather than escalate it to some person upward. Which means that you need discretion, you need intent to serve. Yes, agency, intent to serve, you need that sense of responsibility, you need that sense of ability to have that human touch in that interaction.* Demonstrate empathy towards what I am doing. Have the solutioning capability to find a solution for what I am doing. Understand my role itself very differently and say my role is not limited to just doing the work, but it's actually finding answers. So there is a whole lot of change that has to take place and they have to move in the sense from duty which is a process or rules, view of my work to a role and contribution view of my work where I understand that I am a role, these are my stakeholders and this is how I contributing to all these stakeholders. So that model that is there was applied in railways for example and when it was applied there, the measure that we used was an interesting measure. We wanted to check that what happens if people are going to use their discretion and are going to respond to customers and find solutions.

And we found that what will actually change will be the number of flashpoints from the citizens will come down because there are a lot of hidden flashpoints that take place in a day. Some of them may be visible, but there are subtle or tacit flashpoints taking place. So right from when a person buys a ticket right to the point when he gets off the train, there can be n flashpoints that can take place in terms of when they stand in the station, they use the facility, they get into the train, they are using the train itself you know when they are asking for tea coffee whatever in the train at every stage right down the line whether a train reaches on

V04

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time there are n flash points. So we said can we measure these and see whether flash points can come down so we use the different metric to find whether there is improvement because of discretion or behavioural change and then answer that we found there was that the flash points came down by nearly 40 to 50 percent. So that was very huge.

We're now working with Maharashtra government for the entire frontline staff.

So there has been a huge, subtle movement which is there. And everywhere the message is, how do we contribute instead of getting trapped into rules? How do we contribute to citizens? Contribute and that... you know, try to get things done faster. Cut the paperwork. Stop actually being barriers but being enablers along the way. Start looking at citizens as people who can be our, you know, as the reason for our service rather than, as Mahatma Gandhi put it, rather than as, you know, as people who are obstructing it in some way.

So this entire transformation which has been taking place, which is still going on, is contribution-thinking as applied on a massive national scale in the government.

Swami (37:45.519)

Very interesting.

Q6

But tell me, the challenge here is measurement, right? So there is nothing called a citizen satisfaction index, right? Which is like saying that, you know, in a company they do CSI, they do a net promoter score and things like that, where they look at whether you're an advocate or whether you're a detractor, but there's nothing called a citizen satisfaction index. So these remain programs, but the change is very very, I would call it low impact, right? Would you agree with me?

Srinivas Venkatram (38:20.717)

I wouldn't... because I think there are three levels at which I want to kind of bring this up. First, let me answer the question. For us, the idea of Citizen Trust Score is, for example, the measure we use. Whether we are looking at flashpoints, Citizen Trust Score, for example, in Maharashtra, we have identified seven schemes or seven different initiatives of the government as our test bed. We are doing it across the board, but we're saying in these seven services, the quality of the service has to, citizen trust has to improve. When we say citizen trust has to improve, what must happen. For example, there we are in Maharashtra, the measure that we are going to be using is an app-based evaluation of whether the people were available to solve them, whether their problems were heard, whether people were able to, they enabled them to solve the problem or whether they were able to teach them about the scheme or about the service and so on and so forth. These are points, citizen touch points have become the measure for citizen trust score. So the citizen trust score, what it has not yet happened is citizen trust score has not become the dominant kind of measure like NPS.

Swami (39:36.974)

Mmm.

Swami (39:46.402)

Correct.

Srinivas Venkatram (39:47.578)

the second point is that you need to think about what are the sustainability measures that you bring in because if you just have a training program... yes, a training program can be very valuable. Again, there are two levels at which training programs take place or learning programs take place. The first level of a program is when there is conceptual learning. This is where assimilation comes in. If I do conceptual learning, then it is subject to memory and it's subject to decline over time. but it is fundamentally different from what you can call transformational learning. So transformational learning is a learning where I where you do not just change what we know but you change who we know who knows.

This is again ties back to our contributor idea. It is not enough to know how to contribute. It is important to become a contributor. So there is a dual change that we are attempting. We are not attempting a single change. The change in the person and the change in the work. Now when you change in a person, the fact is no program, no hook, nothing on earth can change a person. The eye of the person changes because the person feels to change. So the important thing here is we have to help people perceive that choice. And they have to perceive that I can be a different person. I can decide to be just a Karmachari or I can decide to be a Karmayogi. So that choice is in me. And this is the value of being that for myself. This is the intrinsic value. You see, is how the contribution ideas flow in. Because the choice of making, of trying to be a contributor, is an intrinsic choice based on my intrinsic work. So that's my second point.

V05

Third point which is there is now if I want to make these choices, what proportion of people will make that choice? Will 100 % make that choice? The answer is no. That's why for us ultimately impact has to be assessed in terms of a curve. There is a bell curve. If the bell curve shifts even 20 % to the right, that's a huge shift. Think about it. There are nine to 10 million customer interaction, citizen interactions with the railways every day. A 5 to 10% change in that means that nearly one million people are going to have slightly better service. It still means eight million are not getting it, but one million are getting that service. And that's how you start looking at change.

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So you don't look at change as a 1-0 game where either I've got a perfect solution or I've got a that I have no solution at all but you look at it in terms of how the percentages start stacking up in front of you and that is very very important so that is the thing so you need to bring in this kind of a transformative change.

You see whenever you do a program like this you need to architect change in that sense. So it's not just enough to do a program you also need to give them tools for continuing to respond differently to customers. You have to give them for example simple things like what you can call what we call a flashpoint app. For example, we first tried it in Mumbai Police for example...more than every day that are more than forty there are you know thousands of flashpoints between citizens and customers between policeman and citizens now these flashpoints are taking place when we did a study we found that beneath all these flashpoints there are only 120 flashpoints that repeat themselves.

If you are able to take those flash points and empower these people to start responding better to the flash point through an app or through other tools, as a sustainability to the cognitive change. So you combine cognitive change with the capacity to handle respond to changes then you are sustaining it or the capacity to design answers then you are sustaining it so you have to have sustainability in the whole thing as an architectural element

Swami (45:53.731)

Very interesting.

Q7

So, you talked about the importance of transformational learning in memory and one that doesn't decay, right.

<<DELETE SWAMI COUGH>> So how do you do the interventions for transformational learning? Because you've also done it in schools. I can see that you've hit huge number of millions of students in schools. So how do you really build the intervention for transformational learning? Because it's very critical in actually addressing the basic DNA of a behavior, right. So how do you do the interventions for transformation learning?

Srinivas Venkatram (46:40.633)

if you modify cognition then chances of behavioral change is much faster. So if your behavioral change goes unit by unit, one behavior at a time, if you change one mental model or one shift in the architecture of thought then the consequences can be on many behaviors simultaneously and the deeper you go into that the deeper you go into the cognition... cognition itself is not one thing you can have simple heuristics as cognition that means simple rules of thumb you can go deeper into cognition when i am looking at it in terms of some mental models for some situation. You can go even deeper and you can have mental models about yourself and axioms about yourself which are even deeper and which are even stickier. Then there are identity level axioms about yourself - who am I, who I stand for... So it is not that mental models are one big mass of it's actually many levels and many grades of cognition. The trick is that if you transform the cognition at whatever level to that extent, you can see behavioral shifts taking place much easier, which is not to say that you don't need environmental enablers. We've always held that along with the change inside you need external enablers. Having said this if you have enablers without the change then the minute the enablers go away the change will come back. The change will revert. But if you have brought about this cognitive change then if the environment is even slightly favorable then people will move in that direction. So there is the word

Swami

So can you give me an example of how you did this intervention in say a company or in a, know, so just give me an example so that how did that cognition effect happen? That's very important, right? Because, yeah.

Srinivas Venkatram (49:13.081)

I'll give you an example. I don't want to name the institution, but we were working with one government institution which had both a service role and an enforcement role.

Swami (49:18.539)

Yeah, sure.

Swami (49:28.684)

Mmm.

Srinivas Venkatram (49:30.938)

Now in that enforcement role, many of the people, nearly 65 to 70% of the people within that institution had a mental belief system that citizens are thieves or citizens... not citizens but let us say you know whether dealing with them they are all to make money and they are not to be trusted and their main pool is to actually enforce the law and not to make not do business easier or not to make ease of business better you know increase ease of business.

Now that's a fundamental mental model. So even if you have the top most people in the country saying that, we need to improve ease of doing business, if these people who are actually enforcing it on the ground are engaged with various stakeholders, are going to have the idea that they are really adversarial view of the people they are working with then nothing is going to change. So one of the metrics that we used in the intervention was that can we bring about a measurable shift in this mental model. So we measured the mental model before and how many people are which was 65% plus and then we measured it thereafter. And then we found that it had dropped from 60% to about 30-35 % at the end of the whole process. Now the minute it falls to 30-35%, the people who believe that citizens are adversaries are a minority in the system. Earlier they were a majority. And because they were the majority, it kind of became the dominant idea. But the minute it became a minority, it became the dominant idea became that it is actually citizens are not our adversaries, but it's our job to make life easier for them. Once that happens, the cycle of change starts. So there is a new discourse that starts in a system. And that discourse is what is transformative.

I'll give you one more very interesting example. We were working with a European NGO. Again, I don't want to name them with a client, but this European NGO, very large NGO, and we were working with their team to look at diagnosing their, you know, how they were kind of, how they were supporting various initiatives in various countries. They were in some 15 countries etc.

The core mental model or the core frame, I wouldn't call it a mental model, it was deeper, it was more than a mental model. The core frame was that need to, that resource is our key contribution. But if you really looked at their activities, resource was a useful and very powerful enabler. But they had two other critical contributions which they had to make. One of them was setting outcomes. And then they found that they wanted to set sustainable outcomes where communities could sustain change. Exactly the question that you're asking. Rather than intervene with resources.

So now that recognition was a very important recognition. And the second recognition after that was that our role is those of being enablers to them who have, because of our financial clout and because of our influence, we will be able to time multiple stakeholders to help that particular agency perform better on the ground. So then they found that giving money was the third most important contribution that they can make. And there were two before that, which is setting the right outcomes or enabling the NGOs they were funding and working with to set the right outcomes and number two also how they could enable them to perform better. Now that resulted in a dimensional shift so to speak in their thought process. So cognitive change at a deeper level and especially with leaders can have deep consequences on organizations.

Swami (55:13.87)

Mm.

Swami (55:18.082)

No, beautiful.

Q8

I think I heard you speak in one of the, you know, lectures that you are giving in one place where you said, even if you take a large organization, only three to 4 % of the employees really contribute the balance are all, you know, they just come and do the tasks. So if that is the problem of a CEO, how do you really change it, Srinivas? Because you said that's really the data that you have. And therefore this whole thing of cognitive enablement that you talk about, is deciding your own identity as a person working in the organization, your own vision, your own ideas, your own cognitive capacity, your own knowledge engagement. I think the levers that you speak about, right? How do you bring about because that's the real challenge that as you scale an organization, it becomes a problem because if just three to 4 % contribute and the balance, you know, 96% are just passengers, then how do you really enable that change and make them think work as a contribution?

Srinivas Venkatram (56:28.515)

So here I want to now introduce a new concept. See there are two levels of mind. One is when you use the word cognition, one is the individual mind. Where it is about my goals, my aspirations, my desires, etc. Which is highly individualized. So if I look at an organization only as a bunch of individuals, then it looks like an unsurmountable problem because each individual comes in with absolutely different viewpoints, et cetera. And then it appears as if all you have to do is to impose a structure on top. And that's the only way I can get all these people to work together. But our own research has shown and our own work has shown that there is you might call a space in between the individual mind and what you can call just the organization as a whole which I call the collective mind. The collective mind is a set of shared models of thinking, shared alignments, shared vision... shared appreciation of what is going on that shared aspirations of that collective or group together becomes the collective mind that everybody chooses to subscribe to which is why we enjoy working in some organizations or we enjoy committing to certain goals and we don't enjoy being part of some others because that collective mind doesn't appeal to us. And if you find organizations with very strong cultures are those who have a very strong collective mind or who have a well articulated collective mind. So that's our first starting point of change.

So the first thing to do is to diagnose that collective mind.

Swami:

But when I recruit, I don't use all these metrics, right? I just look for a vacancy. There is a slot. There is some experience. There is some, you know, degree that I look at and I have to fill it at the fastest pace. I don't really look at this collective mind as you call it. And therefore I recruit the wrong person. It could be a leader or it could be the person on the last leg who's implementing things. So which means that there is no application of the collective mind in a hiring process itself.

Srinivas Venkatram (59:01.433)

So I'll give you the example of my own organization. So while we might go through a regular interview process, we've also designed the contributor test. and that contributor test is a go / no-go test for us so that is a test which actually measures for example whether the individual who comes in has the right orientations which are linked to being a contributor in a system like this now and some of those things for example however competent that person is I'll give an example - one of the measures there is trust conduct. Now if someone doesn't meet the measure of trust conduct however competent the person is we will not hire that person. So for us competence is less important than alignment to the collective mind

So even in that case at the hiring level you need to bring in this kind of you need to bring in the notion of the collective mind into it. That's the first place where you need it. The second place you need it for

example in what I call the Bigfoot problem. So the organization is a Bigfoot. It is walking in one direction. But that Bigfoot is actually comprised of many small feet of all individual employees. Now if all the individual small feet are all moving in different direction then the big foot will find it very difficult to move forward. And if some feet are moving in the opposite direction it's even harder. There is a hidden resistance or a drag in the system. So I need to realign it and I need to align those small feet along the lines of the big feet. That alignment is also one of the interventions that I need to bring about. So one is I need to know how I hire I need to know how I align people third think about how you run the company.

Suppose you running the company what are the things what are the if I may say what are the levers you use you use structures you use measures you use processes these are the three levers that you use but we find that deeper than that there are other levers. What about helping people look at expanding their roles? What is today being called role crafting can be taken many levels deeper. And looking at role crafting as an arena for visioning your own contribution.

The protocols that I use with each other in how I collaborate, how I work, which means that I have to think of win-win as a collective mind idea rather than win-lose or one-upmanship. If you have a highly competitive environment where one-upmanship is central in the collective mind, then you are not going to have win-win behavior. Which means that there will be silos, will be satraps, there will be systems where people, that organization will not be able to respond fast. So you need to have new protocols. So institutionally you need to bring in these protocols, you need to bring in these, and third is you need to give people tools - tools which are not just IT tools which are simply about automation but tools that enable these people to behave differently and act differently like that flashpoint tool which I talked about it's a tool that enables a person to respond better or to serve a citizen better. Now so you need tools that actually promote the right behaviors in the system.

And if necessary, go one more deeper level into the shared ideals, which is what OP Bhatt did, for example. Bhatt for example, his whole idea was he said our ideal is citizenship. Our ideal as a bank is that and it's not an ideal I gave. It's an ideal that they had that if you can awaken that ideal in that system, then they are the people who will bring out the highest in themselves. So I think that you can do a lot towards architecting an organization towards becoming a contributor organization and building a contributor work ethic.

Swami (01:04:10.286)

Hmm.

Swami (01:04:27.308)

Very interesting. Very interesting, very interesting.

Q9

I also want to deep dive a bit on the motives framework that you talk about and because many a times as an employee, I have conflicting motives, right? What I believe in, what the organization believes in and what the organization believes I don't believe in, but I have to work every day. Okay. So how do I reconcile this conflicting motives that I have to go through every day.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:05:00.493)

So, you know, the other day I was having a conversation with somebody, a senior from the government, who mentioned that many years back when there was a, you know, when he was in one of the states or somewhere, there was a change in...there was a change in government and a change in party and power. So somebody asked him that you know now that there is a change in power how will you function, it is going to affect your work everyday. And he made a very interesting remark - he said no that's not how it is, it's actually that 90% of our work is anyway connected with citizen services and improving life of citizens. That is agnostic to any opinion or party.

That is connected with the intrinsic role itself. So it is not impersonal, it's transpersonal. It is trans anything. I'm arguing that in organizations, there are many aspects of your role which are exactly like that, that you don't have to necessarily have ideological conflict every day it is about if you have to serve customers or try to improve the life of customers whether or not you like the political or social or even the strategic leanings of one guy if you are finding that you can contribute or serve better in that space then that itself becomes a very that itself becomes an agnostic space or a space of a zone of indifference where you can work perfectly fine. That's my first point.

There is a second very interesting point which is there are people have also asked this question that my boss doesn't allow me to serve. My boss doesn't allow me to contribute. But what our research has shown is that every single person has what you can call a zone of freedom. There is a zone of freedom around that person and if you can identify your zone of freedom and contribute within the zone of freedom that would be enough. If you have a great boss he will widen your zone of freedom. If he is a tough boss he will reduce your zone of freedom but your zone of freedom will be there.

Swami (01:07:54.157)

Very, very interesting.

Q10

And talk to me about the 12-inch last mile gap that you talk about and why is that very important between thinking and acting, right? Because typically the think, act or knowing doing gap is really this 12 inch gap. And talk to me about the levers of the 12 inch gap that is there, right?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:08:24.505)

So if you think about this gap which is there, what is deeply rooted in that gap? One of the things which is deeply rooted in that gap is first of all, it starts with my own - "I know" instead of "I learn". So my own identity with which I come in is itself the biggest gatekeeper on one side. So it actually starts, so this is the one gatekeeper on one side. The other most visible, the most superficial gatekeeper is language or access. In between this access and identity lies the whole 12 inches gap.

So if I start from one side, I will start with simple things like saying that I need to translate the subject, I need to make it more interesting, I need to bring in animations, need to bring in things like that. So that'll be my first solution. Then I'll find that's not enough. Then I'll say I need to design the content, I need to chunk it, I need to organize it. Then I will say, that's also not enough. I need to be able to present it at the right time, group it into small parts, all these are best practices which people have come out with then I will go then I will say okay I have solved that problem then I will go deeper and say there is no alignment between the knowledge and that person's requirement

Learning problems includes how do I comprehend it, which is Bloom's taxonomy, is the most famous learning comprehension framework that is used. Or I could go even one level deeper and say, OK, I can understand what it's doing, but it's not touching me. It's like a bright guy who understands everything, who understands suffering but cannot feel it. And there are many, you might have, who understands all the, who can analyze the problem but who cannot therefore be motivated to do something about it so all that is actually at the level of thinking feeling so as you go deeper and deeper you move from the realm of comprehension and knowledge delivery to the realm of cognition to the realm of thinking to the realm of how thinking has to be done and each level each of those blocks becomes one block which can stop the whole journey at least till then you solve the cognition problem then from a cognition problem it goes into capability problems.

I do not have the capability to think I've not been trained to think that's for example now a vital problem facing our society. We do not know how we could not know how to think We are not taught in our schools on a large basis. mean, so how do you get me?

Swami (01:11:41.998)

Hmm.

Swami (01:11:55.171)

You

You really think so that we have a large part of our society has the problem of capability to think?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:12:07.127)

Because your education system is based on rote learning, because your education system is based on regurgitation of set answers. So it is based on what people have been measured on. It's because teachers have come in and kind of laid out information on the board. So they have been in the business of parlaying information or conceptual learning. So there is no effort at even the next level of thinking, which is critical thinking, et cetera. So that becomes a problem. So that's also one of the areas. Mental models and becoming self-aware about my own mental models and changing them becomes the next problem.

Below that, you get into empowerment.

Do I have the agency? I have the self confidence to learn? Do I have the self confidence to do what I have learned? Do I have the ability to solutionize it means translate what I have learned into action. So these are all, you know, problems of, bridge problems of how do I transform information, transform it, transformational problems of transforming knowledge into change into oneself. *That's one set of problems then there is a problem of identity and who am I if I think of myself for example if a software person thinks of himself as a coder he is going to find himself limited in the current world he has to think of himself in some way as a solution designer or as a person who is actually using code as a means for creating value and solving problems rather than simply building code or building products which are there. So he needs alternative identities which will empower him to use AI as his friend rather than something which is going to finally take his job away.*

Swami (01:14:47.928)

Correct. If that identity is a problem, then he doesn't see AI as a friend, but he sees AI as a bottleneck because his identity is that of a coder and not a solution designer.

V09

END

Srinivas Venkatram (01:14:59.295)

Exactly and if he doesn't have agency if he doesn't have that sense of agency that confidence what I call cognitive agency the confidence to use his mind. Then is depending on process - what happens when I keep using process you take the discretion problem that I told you you want to build discretion in people you want to build capacity to respond at the front line of your organization, but if you don't give them cognitive agency the self confidence to find answers themselves. If you are going to second guess their answers all the time then they never going to find answers. So you don't have to get into a vicious loop where you will say that you anyway can't do it or you don't have the confidence. So you have to get them into positive cycle so cognitive agency itself becomes part of the 12 inches problem.

There are people we have encountered who don't believe they can learn. By learning in the sense of comprehending, diving deep into it, they believe it is meant for someone else. Because they've been told by teachers that they are dumb and that they cannot learn. So you see, now you think about the range of problems in the last 12-inches problem.

I don't know, I might find some problem beyond identity. But right now, this is where we have seen that identity itself can be solved.

Swami (01:16:10.03)

Hmm.

Swami (01:16:33.314)

Very nice.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:16:33.665)

And now I'm realizing the deepest problem that I see today is the problem of asking that, I ready to evolve at all?

Swami (01:16:41.303)

Hmm.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:16:43.297)

Am I willing to let go of what I have in order to create something new, especially in the world of AI?

Swami (01:16:51.736)

Very nice. So.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:16:53.579)

And if I can't let go, I'm not going to get.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:16:59.161)

So you are going to have organizations and institutions spending huge amount of time clinging on to what they have and trying to adapt it. So in my word, adaptation is going to be the greatest enemy of organizations. Because I don't think they can adapt. They have to evolve.

Swami (01:17:14.658)

Mmm.

Q11

Swami:

So if I were a 25 year old, what should be my measure instead of salary and title?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:17:31.499)

I think that the biggest measure is power to contribute. If I can look at my zone of contribution. So one of the projects that we did, we mapped out careers, we remapped careers from hierarchical journeys into journeys of state changes.

Now, within that state, you can go on widening and enriching your role. So what we said was that careers will start looking like state journeys in the next few years rather than simply journeys of position. Notice position is an outside term. It describes your place in the world. While a state journey represents your state of evolution.

For example, if you are a leader of a small organization, let's say in some large group like the, say, some large industrial group, and they ask you to then become the MD of a big company in the group. Your state change again has to change because the complexity has transformed. The stakeholders have transformed. The stakes have transformed. So it's not a set of skills that you are transforming, that you are taking from one place to another. You are bringing about a state change that you are bringing. So my argument is that organizations will see that if you have the state necessary to be in a particular level that state you can then use AI use all the tools around you to enrich yourself and grow rapidly in that state and build yourself and make yourself capable of living in that state.

Q12

Swami (01:20:12.814)

So how do I measure state change? Because normally my KPIs are very very transactional, right? So therefore state change is a little more esoteric in my view and therefore how do I measure this person actually has already or is capable of a state change?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:20:34.595)

You know simplest external measure is position worthiness or full worthiness. Actually thousands of, I mean in every organization, in so many situations when you are deciding on the promotion of somebody, the back of your head what's playing is, is this person promotion worthy? If it was simply a case of years spent or degrees attained that you know as any leader who has run any organization that does not make people position-worthy.

Swami (01:21:36.194)

Very interesting.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:21:37.923)

So actually the most intuitive measure, now okay how are you going to metricize it, we can talk about it. But the metric actually is position worthiness.

Swami (01:21:45.218)

Perfect.

Swami (01:21:50.446)

Very nice.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:21:53.002)

and if you are position worthy or promotion worthy that means you ready for the next state. I would tell a young person prepare yourself for the next state.

Q13

Swami (01:22:23.234)

Beautiful, beautiful. So I just want to end, Srinu, with a couple of, I would say, rapid fire questions. So the first question is, what does success mean to you?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:22:39.595)

I think success means inner evolution, A, and B, it means greater capacity to contribute outside.

Swami (01:22:51.64)

doesn't have to do with designations, positions, nothing.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:22:57.721)

I've never had a promotion all my life.

Swami (01:23:03.234)

Very interesting.

Q14

V10

The second question that I have is what is your advice to an 18 year old in a university today and what do you think is critical for that person to succeed in the next 50 years?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:23:30.649)

Shift from knowing to becoming.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:23:37.344)

Every day ask yourself am I becoming? Am I becoming something bigger? Am I becoming something wider? Am I becoming somebody? That means focus on how you are becoming both in terms of expansion to include others, terms of becoming, terms of capabilities, becoming in terms of my vision of my life.

So it is focus on becoming rather than knowing or achieving or coping. These are things that will keep going on. The quality of what you achieve, the quality of what you cope with, the quality of what you respond with will transform depending on what you become.

END

Swami (01:24:16.707)

Mm-hmm.

Swami (01:24:20.27)

Very nice. Very nice.

Q15

What's one piece of advice, I'm sure you would have got a lot, you know, in your, you know, in such a long career, one piece of advice that you continue to, you know, think about, actually look at it again and again and something that you can never forget, which you continue to apply even today.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:24:48.793)

I think the one advice was, I think was my Guru Swami Rangnathananda whom once I have met and he casually mentioned and he says that we need to make ourselves grace worthy rather than seek grace.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:25:17.805)

So if you make yourself grace worthy, then whatever the grace the universe has to offer, will offer.

Swami (01:25:25.218)

Beautiful, beautiful. It's almost like the example that you said position worthy was this.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:25:31.127)

Yeah, derive from this idea.

Swami (01:25:33.656)

Yeah, it looks like that. So fantastic.

Q16

And my last question to you is what is one thing that which you believe in, which others don't really agree with you?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:25:56.537)

By others, who do you mean?

Swami (01:25:58.923)

anybody who you work with, your clients, you believe in infinite possibilities, right? But when you go into such rooms, you realize that I miss giving you a...

Srinivas Venkatram (01:26:04.525)

Yes.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:26:10.071)

i think that you know feel that the problem is that people what do you think what is it but they don't accept what i say the people that i think he said so it's a subtle disagreement i feel like if i thought of a different potential of the nobody's going to say no... but it's not going to change anything so it's again the simulation problem at stake.

Swami (01:26:16.462)

Hmm.

Swami (01:26:24.397)

Yeah.

Swami (01:26:34.326)

Yeah. So is it the patience of, you know, the rewards versus the impatience of a reward? Is that the real, I would say, conflict that, you know, you are unable to contend with because what you have said is really deep, the mental models, but the patience versus the impatience, is that where people really, you know, disagree with you?

Srinivas Venkatram (01:27:03.351)

Yeah, think that's a great insight because I think many people have questioned that why can't I simply monetize at every level? Because at every stage there was a possibility to monetize and to move out of a lab mode and go into a growth mode or to create multiple things and to apply that and to... and I think that's why I think I... I think that's why the essential curiosity and the essential desire to evolve and I think the team who's with me shares that vision with me. That collective mind is one about evolution and contribution. And I think that contribution is to help others evolve and contribute.

Swami (01:27:41.87)

Mmm.

Swami (01:27:46.926)

Perfect, the collective mind as you call it.

Swami (01:27:54.008)

Very interesting.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:27:59.586)

So you are simply sharing what you have or what you believe in with others. So that's the essence of our work.

CLOSING

Swami (01:28:08.61)

Very nice. Thanks, Srin, for this lovely conversation. think the contribution to work framework, the motives framework, the fact that the mental models that you spoke about, the work ethic that you spoke about. I really felt a lot of resonance with what you said and in an era where if you want to build out of India, large global companies, I think it requires a new architecture. You can't just take the Western way of building companies, but probably requires a different Indian way of doing it. And some of your mental models sound very, very powerful and it's about how people understand it, apply it, and then start to practice it. It's phenomenal the scale of change that you are trying to achieve in the most improbable places. And that is really what has inspired me out of this conversation. Thank you very much.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:29:14.401)

And thank you so much for having me and I really hope that you know and your point that you just made which is that how do you create organizations who are if you want world scale organizations of India then you also they also have to be world class.

Swami (01:29:32.396)

Yeah.

Srinivas Venkatram (01:29:33.465)

and we have to help them make both. I agree with you. But thank you again for having me here. And it is always a pleasure to have a conversation with you. Thank you. Thank you.

Swami (01:29:42.818)

Thank you very much. Thanks.

Episode 73 | Vertical-video selections

Purple = V01-V10. Blue = the previously chosen cold opening (unchanged). The transcript wording, deletions, timestamps and pagination are unchanged. Purple margin labels identify the exact beginning and end of each selection.

Target: roughly 1-2 minutes per clip. Ranges below estimate speech at 95-125 words per minute; they are not measured audio durations. Original timestamps locate the containing answer, not frame-accurate in/out points. Use the quoted first/last words to find each boundary, apply the already approved transcript cuts, and confirm the export stays under 2:00.

V01 | The golden cage of a comfortable job

Transcript page(s): 2 **Words:** 146 **Estimated:** 1:10-1:32

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 09:34.714 (Q2).

Start: So there are two stages of that decision making. The first stage was right

End: where it takes you. So the first journey was one of experimenting with entrepreneurship.

Why this clip: A personal story with a clear career trade-off: the longer you wait, the harder it becomes to leave.

V02 | Choose a problem, not just a valuation

Transcript page(s): 3 **Words:** 139 **Estimated:** 1:07-1:28

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 12:59.051 (Q3).

Start: I think the most important driver I think has been an insatiable curiosity about

End: which society faces and your driver is finding meaningful solutions to society for that.

Why this clip: Curiosity as a career compass, with a sharp contrast between solving a problem and chasing valuation.

V03 | Work should change you, too

Transcript page(s): 4 **Words:** 176 **Estimated:** 1:24-1:51

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 18:13.955 (Q4).

Start: One of the ideas of contribution is to say that contribution is that work

End: is really about awakening my own possibilities as a person besides just getting rewards.

Why this clip: A direct definition of contribution, followed by why meaning and fulfillment matter at work. Keep the survey attribution with the numbers.

V04 | Customers want solutions, not escalation

Transcript page(s): 6 **Words:** 135 **Estimated:** 1:05-1:25

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 27:31.652 (Q5), in the railways/frontline-staff discussion.

Start: So you see most organizations, they try to create processes for frontline staff. But

End: you need that sense of ability to have that human touch in that interaction.

Why this clip: An everyday call-centre example makes the case for discretion, responsibility and human service.

V05 | A small shift can improve a million lives

Transcript page(s): 8 **Words:** 129 **Estimated:** 1:02-1:21

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 39:47.578 (Q6).

Start: Third point which is there is now if I want to make these choices,

End: one million are getting that service. And that's how you start looking at change.

Why this clip: A memorable explanation of why improvement is not all-or-nothing. The railway numbers are an illustrative argument, not a newly verified result.

V06 | Culture is a collective mind

Transcript page(s): 11 **Words:** 150 **Estimated:** 1:12-1:35

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 56:28.515 (Q8).

Start: But our own research has shown and our own work has shown that there

End: have a well articulated collective mind. So that's our first starting point of change.

Why this clip: Explains why people commit to some organizations and struggle to belong in others.

V07 | Why competence is not enough to get hired

Transcript page(s): 11 **Words:** 130 **Estimated:** 1:02-1:22

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 59:01.433 (Q8).

Start: So I'll give you the example of my own organization. So while we might

End: person. So for us competence is less important than alignment to the collective mind

Why this clip: A concrete hiring test, ending with the importance of trust and alignment. Use the complete example so the competence claim retains its context.

V08 | The Bigfoot problem in every organization

Transcript page(s): 11, 12 **Words:** 125 **Estimated:** 1:00-1:19

Source locator: Later in the answer beginning 59:01.433 (Q8).

Start: The second place you need it for example in what I call the Bigfoot

End: That alignment is also one of the interventions that I need to bring about.

Why this clip: A visual metaphor for an organization whose employees are pulling in different directions.

V09 | Will AI threaten your job or expand your role?

Transcript page(s): 14 **Words:** 148 **Estimated:** 1:11-1:33

Source locator: Within the answer beginning 01:12:07.127; includes Swami at 01:14:47.928 (Q10).

Start: That's one set of problems then there is a problem of identity and who

End: bottleneck because his identity is that of a coder and not a solution designer.

Why this clip: The coder-versus-solution-designer contrast makes an abstract identity argument concrete. Retain the host clarification.

V10 | Advice to an 18-year-old: become, do not just know

Transcript page(s): 17 **Words:** 142 **Estimated:** 1:08-1:30

Source locator: Q14, following 01:23:03.234; guest begins 01:23:30.649. Ends before 01:24:16.707.

Start: The second question that I have is what is your advice to an 18

End: the quality of what you respond with will transform depending on what you become.

Why this clip: Includes the question and the full guest response, giving young viewers a complete, self-contained takeaway.