



[B-School Corner](#)

Apuurva Sridharan

‘Entrepreneurship is great, but few students want to take the risk’



Great Lakes Institute of Management Founder and Dean, Bala V Balachandran

Feb 14, 2017 18:35

Great Lakes Dean Bala V Balachandran talks about a ‘brutal’ world of competition, learning and more

There are some who dream of retirement even as they are working — chilling at home, having coffee (or something stronger, if you prefer) while leisurely watching TV or reading seems like a dream many youngsters yearn for. But not Bala V Balachandran.

At the age of 67, he started the Great Lakes Institute of Management, located around 10 km from Mahabalipuram. Within 13 years, it now consistently ranks among the top 10 B-schools across India. Fondly called Uncle Bala, and sometimes even referred to as the ‘Kabali’ of Great Lakes, the energetic Dr Bala agreed to a quick chat, which turned out to be quite a revealing conversation. Excerpts:

How many Great Lakers are opting out of placements to be entrepreneurs?

In the one-year programme, we have around 403 students. Unfortunately, only two opted out of placements. Everybody else chose to sit for interviews.

I can understand that because to start up is a great idea. But if you have borrowed, say, ₹18 lakh from a bank, and you come from a middle-class family, then you’re always thinking about how the heck you can return the money, right?

So, as a founder and dean, it is my responsibility — not a legal liability, a moral obligation — to see that everybody gets a job.

And I make sure they do. Of 403, 401 are looking for a job. Of which, probably 60 or 70 are on a sabbatical. They have an obligation to go back to their jobs as they are sponsored. But some people want to use this opportunity to find alternative opportunities. Say, there’s a person on sabbatical from TCS. We don’t allow them to go and sit for Infosys. But if they want a consulting job in Deloitte, or some banking job, because they’re not interested in, say coding, we allow them to sit for such placements. Of the other 350, 88 per cent have already been placed (as of mid-January).

How are you encouraging entrepreneurship?

We recently introduced a programme on technopreneurship in collaboration with IIT’s (Illinois Institute of Technology) Stuart Business School, in Chicago, US.

But despite this, despite Modi harping on entrepreneurship, start-up India and Make in India, it is all words. Not many walk the talk. Why? Because they are not willing to take the risk. They do have an entrepreneurship bent of mind, but they cannot afford to take that risk. Over a 10-year period, there have only been about 75 people who chose the path of entrepreneurship.

Is the situation really that bleak?

The world is brutal and it is going to get more brutal, I can tell you that right now. So very few take that chance. Now, I think the IT world is going to take a big hit because of Trump’s policies. If that happens, if Infosys, Wipro, Cognizant, and TCS decide to scale down their intake, or retrench a few people, we will surely have some hiccups.

This year is not going to be nice, and not just because of Trump and Brexit. I won't be surprised if in five months, Greece goes bankrupt. And if one country like that closes, you can expect a domino effect with two or three others.

So, where are we heading? I think the idea of entrepreneurship, the idea of creating wealth rather than consuming wealth, is fantastic. But the real question is, are we ready? Is the graduating class ready?

Things are looking better, however. I think for the first time, the government is making some efforts in this direction. It is creating facilities, even some incubation labs, and training and advising start-ups on how to avoid serious risks, telling them what risks they can take, how to mitigate them and how to create partnerships.

This kind of support is available only now. Hopefully, with incubation labs and 'angel' investors, more people will undertake risk and encourage some good business.

You said the world is going to become more brutal. How can graduating students stay relevant?

I will be 80 years old in about six months. And even now, I do not stop reading, learning, understanding and teaching. I think learning is a lifelong process. And you must remember that what you learnt has become obsolete. Even if you have learnt something five years ago, it has already become outdated.

Fortunately, today, if you want to study the latest in various topics, you can see on certain universities' websites lectures by the best faculty across the world! I tell all our students, "We teach you something and we are very good. But that's not the end of it. You go to Coursera, go to MIT and Stanford's website, where the latest knowledge in the world is available. And you bloody well read it when it is free."

Today, to stay where you are, you've got to be sprinting, not walking or jogging. The world is changing at that fast a pace. So you have to constantly read. Just because you got a degree or a PhD, it doesn't mean a thing. You cannot be jack of all trades also, so you have to identify the niche area you want to specialise in.

What about faculty?

I constantly encourage them to do research, because knowledge creation is better than dissemination. Teaching is also like that, but you cannot teach old stuff. Know full well that what you have learnt is not enough. Constant, current, continuous learning — there is no other choice.

Are you planning to introduce new courses next year?

Great Lakes is the first school which created a required course on business analytics. Now, we are talking about courses like integration of cloud computing, big data, into business intelligence and optimisation.

We are also considering a risk analysis programme. Technopreneurship is another. We are also creating a new university in Sri City, called Great Lakes International University, which will offer an integrated five-year programme.

Will you make a case for non-IIM business schools to give MBA degrees?

The NBA (National Board of Accreditation), which oversees the AICTE, calls the courses PGPM or PGDM, and we are very happy with that. But in my opinion, the following is the most important.

A free market test, which will tell who can deliver value. I think what they (students) get is not important. What they can do with what they get is more important. If the business world thinks that our students, even without an IIM degree, are better, they will come to us. A company is competing in the real world, and not with pedigree alone.

Having said that, if we can also award the MBA degree, we will be able to compete more effectively. We will be working on that continuously as well.

How are you increasing industry-academia partnership?

When students get a job, say, before January 15, the mentality is, “I have got a job now, and I can go to Mahabs and party”. If I hold a seminar or a conference and have industry folks come and deliver talks, a number of students will not be interested in attending it.

However, if I hold the same event in November, they will be there in full strength. There’s motivation (to get a job), and I have to understand that.

Our education has two innings, like cricket. The first innings ends with getting a job. The second innings are the real test — how well you succeed in your job. Because out there, you will be fighting with IIM-As and IIM-Bs, and you have to outperform them.

So how do I make sure that my students are best equipped? We bring people like Vinita Bali (former MD of Britannia), D Shivakumar (Chairman, CEO of PepsiCo India), TCS folks, and such personalities.

How you fight from the trenches in the real world, now that you’ve got the job, and sustain your success and grow is the real challenge.

So I give them experiential learning. I make students do trading — real money, real trading, in the stock bond and currency markets. Each one puts ₹25,000. There are 120 students, and five students make one team. If, say, the investment was made in January 15, we close it on March 28. Whoever makes maximum money, gets an A+ grade.

Then there are sessions with business leaders, who teach five-hour sessions; we give the students credits for the number of classes they attend.

Last, how do you have so much energy?

(Laughs) Well, if you are not mentally active, you are almost dead. If you are surrounded by young people with energy, then you automatically feel energetic. My model is Rajinikanth. If this guy at the age of 67, can act as though he is energetic, and make actresses tired, how is he doing that? If you act energetic, you become energetic, that's all.