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# God's will, the matrix, and the Chinese bamboo tree

Singapore Management University

# GOD'S WILL, THE MATRIX, AND THE CHINESE BAMBOO TREE

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*Suresh Shankar took the figurative red pill, went down the entrepreneurial rabbit hole and discovered the need to mesh the right-brain with the left*

At the height of the dotcom boom in 2000, **Suresh Shankar** quit his marketing job at a bank in Singapore to join a startup. The Madras native proceeded to visit his family in India for ten days, during which time the startup "decided not to start".

"Here I was, sitting in Singapore, with $30,000 sitting in my bank account," recounts the 53-year-old. "I was in a stranger in a strange land, I don't have a job and I don't know what to do.

"[But] I realised that marketing had become what used to be a right-brain activity – creativity, images, being catchy – into something that was something far more left-brained; It about was data, technology, and understanding your consumer."

## GROWING THE CHINESE BAMBOO TREE

The result of that realisation was RedPill, a customer analytics firm that was acquired by IBM in 2009 – nine years after Suresh had started it. While no financial details were disclosed, the payoff justified RedPill's early struggles although nobody could foretell its eventual, and lucrative, acquisition.

"The first four years we struggled to pay our bills, and I had lots of credit card debt," Suresh tells the audience at a recent SMU Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lunch talk. "But in the fifth year, things actually started to happen. People started coming in requesting for analytics models to use their data and drive business outcomes.

"That journey is like the story of the Chinese bamboo tree: You plant it, water it, fertilise it for a year, and nothing happens. You repeat that in the second year, still nothing happens. You do it for a third year," he pauses before adding, "nothing."

Still nothing changes for the fourth year, by which time "you're about to give up, you blame God, the universe, your friends, your dog," but then he decides to give it another go.

"Because there's this stupidity that every entrepreneur has where they keep doing the same thing but hope for a different outcome, I give it yet another go in the fifth year watering and fertilising it. Guess what happens in the fifth year? The Chinese bamboo tree sprouts 90 feet in six weeks."

He adds: "The story of an entrepreneur is just like that of the bamboo tree with the added problem of not knowing it will happen in the fifth year. You don't know how long you have to wait, or the things you have to do to be successful."

## ENTREPRENEURIAL LESSONS

After selling off RedPill Shankar worked at IBM for two years to integrate the acquisition. It was not long before the entrepreneurial bug bit again, and he started the big data firm, Crayon Data, in 2012.

"If you're creating a startup and you want to make headway, one of the first things you should do is to create a distinctive name," says Suresh. "I called my first company RedPill. It had nothing to do with analytics but because my co-founder and I were feeling high on life on a Friday night, and we were both fans of the movie *The Matrix*.

"That name brought on a lot of jokes but we never had to introduce ourselves a second time. Everybody just goes, 'Oh you're the RedPill guys.'"

With regard to Crayon Data: "One of my fundamental convictions is that people in the technology and analytics business make it too hard for clients to understand what they do, by using all sorts of jargon. So I wanted to keep it simple.

"A colleague and I were talking, and we asked ourselves what is the most simple object in the world. It struck us it would be a crayon. A child can use a crayon, there is no instruction manual, and just about anyone can use a crayon to create wonderful images. So we wanted our company to be like a crayon."

## LEFT, RIGHT, AND PROSPER

Today, Crayon Data is an award-winning company with big-name clients in the financial, tourism, and tech industries. Not bad for a five-year-old company, but for Suresh, it represents something he calls "God's will".

"What struck me was that all my life I've ran away from maths and statistics and technology, and now it's what I do every single day for a living!" he muses. "I get into the office and someone is showing me some statistical model or data analysis regarding a client. It's God's will: If you're not studying maths and science, you'll end up doing something with it."

The primacy of data is perhaps unsurprising in the Information Age, which had led to RedPill's creation and prompted Shankar's assessment of the need for right brain-left brain co-ordination. Going forward, that combination of creativity and analytical rigour is essential not just for entrepreneurs but for everyone.

"Data meet design, left-brain-meets-right-brain will be the single most unique differentiating skill any human being can have going forward," asserts Suresh. "Google is a data company. It's a completely left-brain company and it shows in the products it creates. The interface looks like they are designed by engineers, but its underlying use of data is brilliant.

"Apple is exactly on the other end of the spectrum. Apple products look beautiful, everything works with the human aesthetic, but they have no idea how to use data. That's why Siri still does not seem to know how to use data well.

"The one company – and I don't like this company for other reasons – that combines both is Uber. It's a beautifully designed product, it's easy to use, and you end up saying, 'This is exactly what I need when I call for a taxi.' At the core of it all is an algorithm that works really well, and the surface is a great simple interface to die for."

He concludes: "The companies and people that will do really well in the future will be those that have a data-meets-design DNA. Unfortunately, most people are either right- or left-brained but not both."

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