

NAME
Subroto Bagchi

PROFILE
Co-founder &
Gardener, MindTree
Ltd., best-selling author

**FORBES
INDIA BRIEF**
Every fortnight,
exchange tales of
the road with
successful
entrepreneurs

Total Focus, Absolute Intent

Shibanee and Kamal Sagar on how to get quality, being focussed and other lessons for entrepreneurs

by Subroto Bagchi

When Kamal Sagar had just graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur with a degree in architecture, he got hired by a rather unusual man who wanted to build a stud farm near Pune. His employer, Zavaray Poonawala, wanted to employ someone who would “stand there and build”. However, when he reported to work, he found Poonawala — a man who drove around in a thirty foot car — in no hurry to build anything. Instead, he made the young graduate do odd jobs, until one day, the restless youth forced the project on his employer.

He showed Poonawala a cathedral shaped design that flabbergasted the horse breeder.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, “This is my building. I want to build something nice here”.

He drove off in a huff in his thirty foot car. The next morning, when the young architect was called in, instead of being shown the door, his eccentric employer asked him to go ahead. “I do not necessarily agree with what you propose, but I will take the chance,” he said. “Do not try to save me money, I want the absolute best”.

A year later, Poonawala was simply delighted. In executing his very first project, the young man had found his calling: To use the power of design not just to make artifacts

for, but to create an entire environment for his clients.

Thirteen years later, the founder of “Total Environment”, Kamal Sagar still falls back on his days at the stud farm as the foundation of his life.

I am sitting across from him and his partner Shibanee in the immaculately designed prototype of his next project, “Windmills of Your Mind”, in Whitefield, Bangalore, where each apartment sells for close to a quarter of a million dollars. Even *this* selling price is affordable compared to his other apartments, which begin at a quarter of a million dollars. But that is not what Total Environment is all about. Within the span of a decade, the organisation has built an enviable reputation for excellence and transparency in both design and execution. Looking at him, the first question that strikes me is, why don't our IITs produce more entrepreneurs like him and fewer job seekers?

“I guess they should provide a lot more inspiration — simply through the stories and documentaries of the Greats. I don't see any value in creating just entrepreneurs who have only a business focus — they do not add any value to society — it's the ones who are inspired and passionate who can make a difference by creating something new”.

Shibanee and Kamal Sagar could have been in any comfortable job in India or overseas. While Kamal studied at IIT Kharagpur, Shibanee went to JJ School of Arts, Mumbai. For such people, brought up with a sense of professionalism, it is not

easy to be involved in the real estate business. I want to know whether it sometimes feels tainted to be in their chosen path.

“Definitely not in the profession of architecture — which is our real focus, and which is the industry we very clearly believe we are in. All the rest — managing the construction, and the various verticals that we have set up to ensure high quality, such as the real estate, land, marketing and sales, dealing with customers and their expectations, even building the organisation and its people, and all the operational issues of running a large business — and yes, having to swallow the treatment that we very often get just for being in this “tainted” real estate business — all this we do, only for one single reason: The ability to design and build buildings the way we want them, and to our satisfaction. We know what our intentions are, and ensure that we're driving this into our employees all the time. And finally, we take pride in being front runners in changing the perception of the real estate business.”

The man sounds like Dewitt Jones, the famed National Geographic photographer, who tells you that life, like every great picture, is all about focus and vision.

The two of them are like the yin and yang of their organisation, and started out by designing houses for classmates and “wing mates” at IIT Kharagpur. Today, the duo has a staggering 2.5 million square feet under construction in Pune, Hyderabad, and Bangalore. They employ 310 people directly, and nearly twice that number indirectly. I ask them for five lessons as entrepreneurs for some young lad who might be interning with a horse breeder somewhere out there.

“Clarity of intent and focus: This is the most important. You need to be focussed like a needle and very clear about what it is that you have really set out to achieve. The focus will help in all your decisions along the way and will also help you move all the mountains that you will need to move — believe me there will be many.

“Trust in yourself always, in all kinds of circumstances. Even if everyone is

dissuading you with all the logic, if you believe in your decision, just go ahead.

“Your people are your most important asset. Spend a large part of your time in building the right team, and in aligning their vision with yours. Let your intent be infectious.

“The customer is right even if he is wrong — remember you cannot control what he is going to say about your company to the rest of the world, even if you think he was unfair. It doesn't cost very much most often to ignore an incident and to win over the customer. It may require you to swallow your ego — but if you really care about your business then you better swallow it.

“You get what you inspect, not what you expect. You cannot think to yourself that you have prescribed the requirements very clearly and provided every detail that was required and therefore you will now get the quality that you wanted. You need to check and review at every stage to ensure that the quality is up to your requirement. There are no shortcuts — hard work is the only way.”

As photographer Mallikarjun Katakol and I pack for the day, I look again at these two beautiful, determined people, and tell myself that someday I must come back and buy a house from them. Someday! ■

NAME
Kamal Sagar and
Shibanee Sagar

PROFILE
Founders, Total
Environment

BASIC PRINCIPLES

- Clarity of intent is the most important thing
- When it comes to quality, you must check and review at every stage

