

**GURU
GUIDE**
with
Vidusha and Anton

in conversation with
Dilani Alagaratnam

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**MAKING IT TO THE TOP
WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SOUL**

A QUICK INTRODUCTION TO THE GURU GUIDE

The 'Guru Guide' is an attempt to refine decades of hard-earned expertise into succinct, simple and practical advice.

It is NOT meant to be an exhaustive exploration of a topic: rather, pointed areas of focus which can only be discerned by a practitioner. It is not meant to be a generic set of advice: it is advice from battle-hardened professionals who have had a lifetime of experience and proven track records.

The Guru Guide has a pre determined format:

- ✓ It aims to understand a topic/ area of focus
- ✓ It aims to give tools to help you navigate the area
- ✓ It also gives contexts and examples: so that you can customize it to suit YOU

Exploratory, intimate and insightful, the Guru Guide aims to bring to you a wealth of expertise which can only be possible through veterans whose varied and in-depth experiences offer unparalleled insights.

The brevity and simplicity is by choice, and design. Focused on Executives and Managers who want to get quick tips and techniques, who are eager to improve their craft

and trade : the Guru Guide aims to offer 'little nuggets' of advice and importantly, simple tools, which will enable practitioners to up their game and benefit from expertise which may be hard to find in a hurry.

INTRODUCING



**VIDUSHA
NATHAVITHARANA**

Vidusha is currently the Destiny Architect at High5 Consultancy and Luminary Learning and the organization's founder. His areas of expertise are with strategy facilitation, HR strategy development and Leadership Training. He has conducted assignments in 15 countries regionally and consulted for the World Bank, the UN as well as some of the top corporates in Sri Lanka and the Region. He is also a member of the board of directors for Chrysalis, a social enterprise working to empower women and youth by fostering inclusive growth in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.



**ANTON
THAYALAN**

Anton is a multi-faceted professional who has had over two decades of hands-on experience in process improvement, change management and strategic management, and currently works as the Chief Evangelist of Luminary Learning and the Transformation Therapist of High5 Consultancy. As the former AVP at HSBC DPL Anton won accolades for his superlative work there: and won the prestigious HSBC Group Service – Global Talent Management Member two years in a row. Anton currently works as a consultant focusing on efficiency and productivity improvement and process optimization for local and regional clients.

INTRODUCING DILANI ALAGARATNAM

We first met Dilani as our 'Client' : during our formative years. Heading HR and Legal for John Keells Group, Dilani was always someone others spoke about with reverence. Her 'No Nonsense'-styled leadership and persona were hard to miss - and we remember, with great fondness, the direct, focused and clear briefs she would give - and the pointed feedback after programmes that enabled us to truly fine-tune our programmes. A little 'fun fact' : it is Dilani's pointed question: 'Can you train someone to be a leader?' that got us, at High5, to really dig deep about our training methodology : and the inspiration behind coming up with our (now) signature 'Learning Facilitation' and 'Process'-Oriented Leadership Development Approach.

Starting out as a young 'understudy' to a famous lawyer, Dilani started her career at John Keells in the legal function, and rose to being the Head of Legal, Secretarial, HRD, CSR, Sustainability and Enterprise Risk Management - and in her final year, even headed a business unit - something totally outside her comfort zone. Her commitment, hard work, discipline, as well as absolute focus, made her one of the most iconic female leaders of her time : and shone quite a strong beacon for women across our little island to follow on...

Sitting on the board of several organisations after retirement, Dilani is passionate about giving back - and works on livelihoods and entrepreneurship development at grassroots levels, whilst offering much needed advice and guidance to anyone who seeks her out. A true example of poise and grace : coupled with astute judgement and decisive action, Dilani is one of those people you learn from even by having the simplest of conversations...

WHY DID YOU JOIN JKH ?



I joined JKH quite by chance...

One of my former lecturers was the one who introduced me to the company - and back then, I didn't really harbour any 'yearning' to join a company at all. I was at home - and actually quite happy being there.

In all honesty, I think the 'decisive' motive was to earn a little bit so that I could help my husband finish off the house we were building. We were almost there - the majority of the work was done - just a little bit remained and I thought: "The work sounds interesting - I am getting paid - so why not give it a shot?"

So, I came in for the interview, was given the job, and I took it..

The rest as they say, is history...

WHY DID YOU STAY FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS ?

That's simple...

It's the work itself...

I was blessed with really interesting work. For nearly a decade it was mostly legal and company secretarial related. Because of the diversity of industries JKH was involved in, work was always different - challenging and there was lots to learn.

Over the years JKH threw other areas for me to take on. After JKH decided to bring in Boston Consultancy Group to set up our HR processes, the management wanted me to take over and look after HR. I was reluctant at first - but the then chairman and directors gave me all the confidence I needed - and I knew I would be supported fully. So I took it on. I never hesitated to take on more afterwards - because I knew I was never alone : and that I would always be backed up by my superiors, peers, and also my team.

It was never a 'burden' : it was never a 'pain' : it was never 'too much'

In fact, I have never woken up on a single day and thought: 'I really don't want to go to work' - EVER. That is not a testimony to me - but a testimony to the great team I had the privilege of working with throughout my tenure...

So, if you are one of those people who loves to work - and takes pleasure out of doing great work - then, my honest advice is to find an organisation that is a true meritocracy : and you will never really feel any form of 'burden' of taking on more...

PRINCIPLE 1 : EMBRACE OPPORTUNITIES



Want to get to the top ?

Well then - you need to be willing to take the opportunities that come your way. Opportunities aren't always obvious - they generally come disguised as 'more work' : but you need to be willing to take them, work with them, grow with them, and then, you will realize they were actually opportunities..

Sometimes you may feel a little overwhelmed. Sometimes you may not really be 'competent' in the areas you get the 'break' in. So, you need to be willing to learn as you go, be willing to make mistakes and learn from them, and also, be willing to ask for the help you need to ensure your tasks are completed on time, in the manner in which they are supposed to be.

Unless you commit to growing, you really can't make headway in a career : and most of the time, growth isn't always vertical only. Be willing to move laterally and explore other areas within the organisation and all of that will become invaluable experience when you take on more senior roles..



TOOL 1 : TYPES OF OPPORTUNITIES

Don't always 'wait' for opportunities to be 'given' to you. Seek them out. There are always a ton of initiatives taking place in any organisation. If you are keeping a look out for opportunities to grow - you will spot enough of them floating around - so, rather than wait for you to be asked - why not go and 'ask' to either lead an initiative or be part of one.

The more you get involved in things which matter to the overall organisation, the more skilled you will become as a leader. If you are serious about reaching the top - you really need to make maximum use of the opportunities in front of you...



PRINCIPLE 2 : DO THE TIME WHEN REQUIRED



Lots of times we shy away from 'doing the time'.

There really is no substitute for hard work. When things need to get done - they need to get done. I remember working 10-12 hour days on a very important project - for nearly 2 years. It was gruelling work - but I never looked at it that way. It needed to be done. I was needed to lend that support - and I did. Now, do you do this as a matter of habit all through your career : of course not. Be very clear : you need to be able to work your normal working hours and get home - and not 'burn the midnight oil' daily. However, understand that in everyone's careers there will always come a time when you really need to dig in and put in the time - because the organisation requires it - and because it is one of those pivotal moments in time. If you can't do that yourself - how on earth can you ever ask of it from your team ?

Remember - what you put time on matters if you are looking at your career progression. Simply working long hours or on routine work is not adequate. So, make sure you are able to find faster and smarter ways of getting things done - answer is not to simply delegate them. It is important to think strategically about what you put time and effort into - be innovative , question the status quo and ensure efficiency because this is where the big wins come from.

TOOL 2 : CHOOSING WHAT TO PUT TIME ON

Remember - what you put time on matters if you are looking at your career progression. Simply working long hours on routine work which is of no consequence is a complete and utter waste of your time. It also shows that you don't quite understand what the organisational Impact areas are.

So, make sure you are able to find faster ways of getting routine things done - don't simply delegate them because that eats up valuable time of your team members - who can assist you in much more important things. Think strategically about what you put time and effort into - because this is where the big wins come from.



PRINCIPLE 3 : TAKING THE TOUGH CALLS



Want to rise to the top? Well then, be willing to take the tough (and often unpopular) calls.

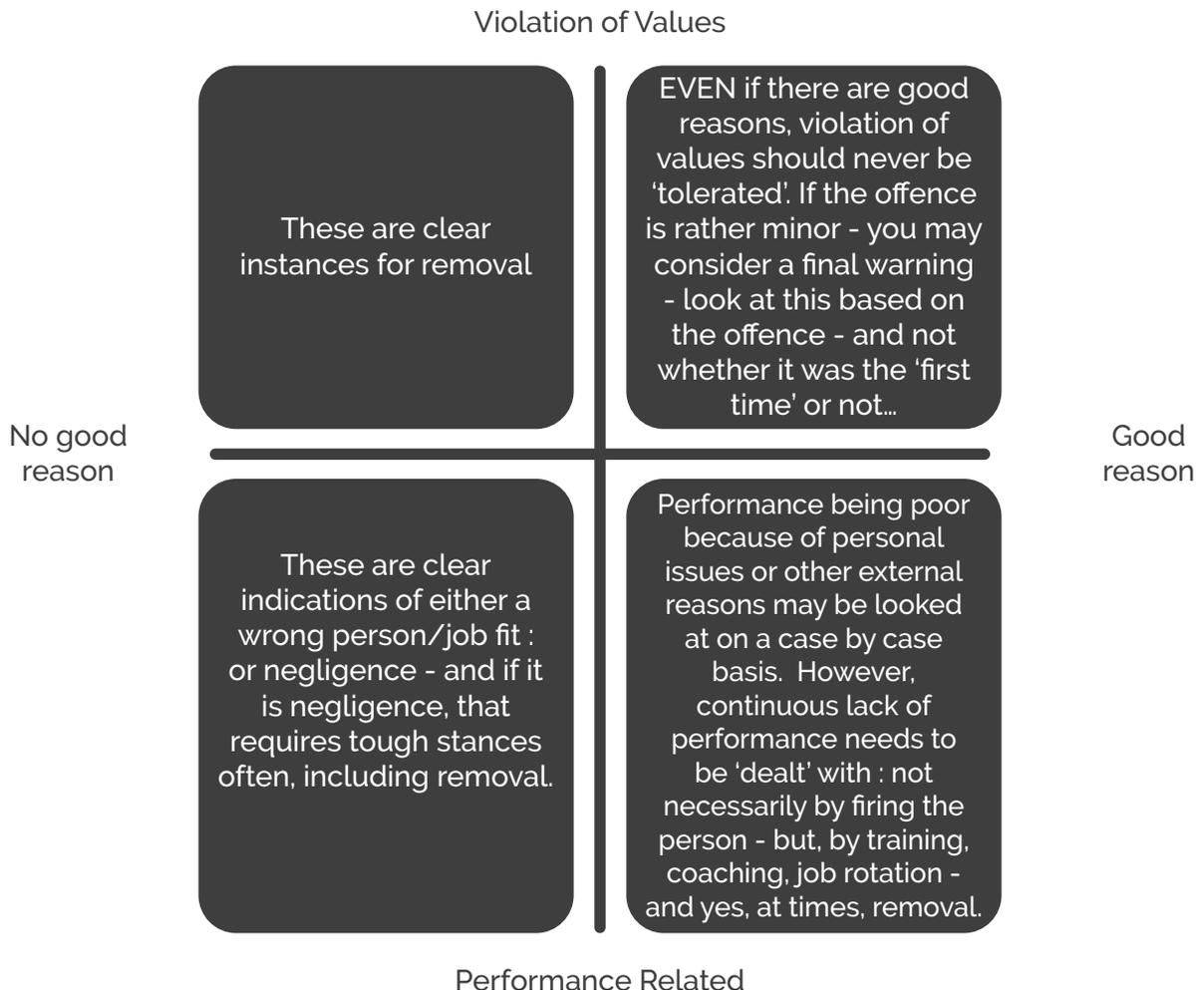
This is NOT to say you need to be a completely unemotional person - and not care about people : it just means that you need to be willing to put the company's interests before you, and your relationships (even with those closest to you.)

Learn to be objective : clear headed : equitable and just. You need to be able to weigh things clearly : and make sure that the decisions you make are not swayed by emotion, bias or your inability to make them. You want to lead ? Then, you need to be able to stand firm in your convictions, judgements and decisions.

It is certainly not easy making these decisions. There is a fine line between 'giving people a chance' and not wanting to 'face up to realities' - and you need to be able to discern between the two. NOT making the tough calls puts the entire team and the entire organisation at jeopardy - and you are not fit to lead if you are unable to make them - without hesitation.

TOOL 3 : 'MORAL COMPASS' TO TAKE TOUGH CALLS

You need to be able to 'live with yourself' after making a tough call - otherwise it 'gnaws' at you. Be bone about the kind of person you are : and if you don't have the 'stomach' for it - it is highly recommended that you do not take the positions/titles that will often require these types of decisions. No matter how much you would love to be a doctor, if you pass out at the first sign of blood, well then, you really can't be a surgeon now, can you ? So, first of all - be bone honest about who you are. Once that is figured out - have a simple 'moral compass' for yourself - so that making the tough calls becomes a rather 'simple choice'.



PRINCIPLE 4 : HONOUR COMMITMENTS



Made a commitment ? Well then, live up to it...

Simple - but absolutely critical. IF you want to make it to the top - and make sure you are a good spouse and parent - then, you need to be able to honour ALL commitments you make - not only the ones in office.

Most of the time we take a flippant attitude to commitments we make at home - knowing that they will 'understand.' Do this a few too many times - you are not going to be the person they trust - or 'take seriously' - even though they may love you.

Most career people lose out on their personal lives because of this one simple reason : they don't honour the commitments they make to their loved ones - and it becomes a habitual excuse.

Don't fall into that trap.

Make a commitment - then honour it !

TOOL 4 : 3 STEPS TO FOLLOW WITH LOVED ONES

Find out what is important to them

There is absolutely no point making time for things that are not important to them. so, find out exactly what they truly value - and ensure you block your time in your calendar for these 'events' and don't compromise on them. If it is important for your child to see you at the prize giving - make sure you are there for it - and if it doesn't matter to them either way, well then, don't bother (just because YOU feel good about yourself in being there).

If you can't do it/ make it, explain why

Many times you may not be able to make the time to be at an important function/event because of a prior commitment you have made at office. EXPLAIN the nature of your work, and take your child/spouse through why you can't make it. They may not always 'buy' it - but they WILL know if you are sincere. honesty and sincerity trump everything else. But always, always, explain things...

Make up for it

take the effort to make up for things you miss out on that are important to them. This is NOT a bribe - and it shouldn't be done as one either. So, make sure you are able to do something that THEY value - rather than doing something to make you feel better about having missed it. IF they understand that 'they' come first - and that you will always make the effort to ensure their interests and needs are looked after - it generally works out.

A WORD ON INTEGRITY



Please do remember to ensure your integrity is never questioned.

You can never quite get to the top and garner the respect you need at the helm if you have compromised your values - if you have taken 'shortcuts' and if you have 'sold yourself out' in the process.

Remember that you leave a legacy behind : and it is up to you to decide what that legacy needs to look like. Compromising most things is fine - compromising your values and integrity is not...

Integrity defines you - your actions will always speak louder than your words...

SOME FINAL TIPS

- » Do not lose your common sense. Most major theories are based on common sense. Thus, do not get lost in the detail, but try to understand the core issue/s. This will help you find effective and durable solutions to most issues.
- » Be open to change, however hard it is at first. It is no doubt hard to adjust. But be flexible.
- » Trust your team to do the right thing without constantly looking over your shoulders. One has to appreciate that all your team members are not alike. In fact, differences bring about good outcomes. It is important for you to recognize the differences and guide them as appropriate. Immediate feedback on work done, whether the feedback is good or bad, works well.
- » Constantly push your team to do better. Always up the game. This makes work interesting as you are always looking to do something different and better.
- » Be on time for everything, whether in your workplace or in your personal interactions. Being late because you were busy is unacceptable. It shows a lack of respect for the others who have committed time, apart from showing up your own shortcomings.

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