

THE

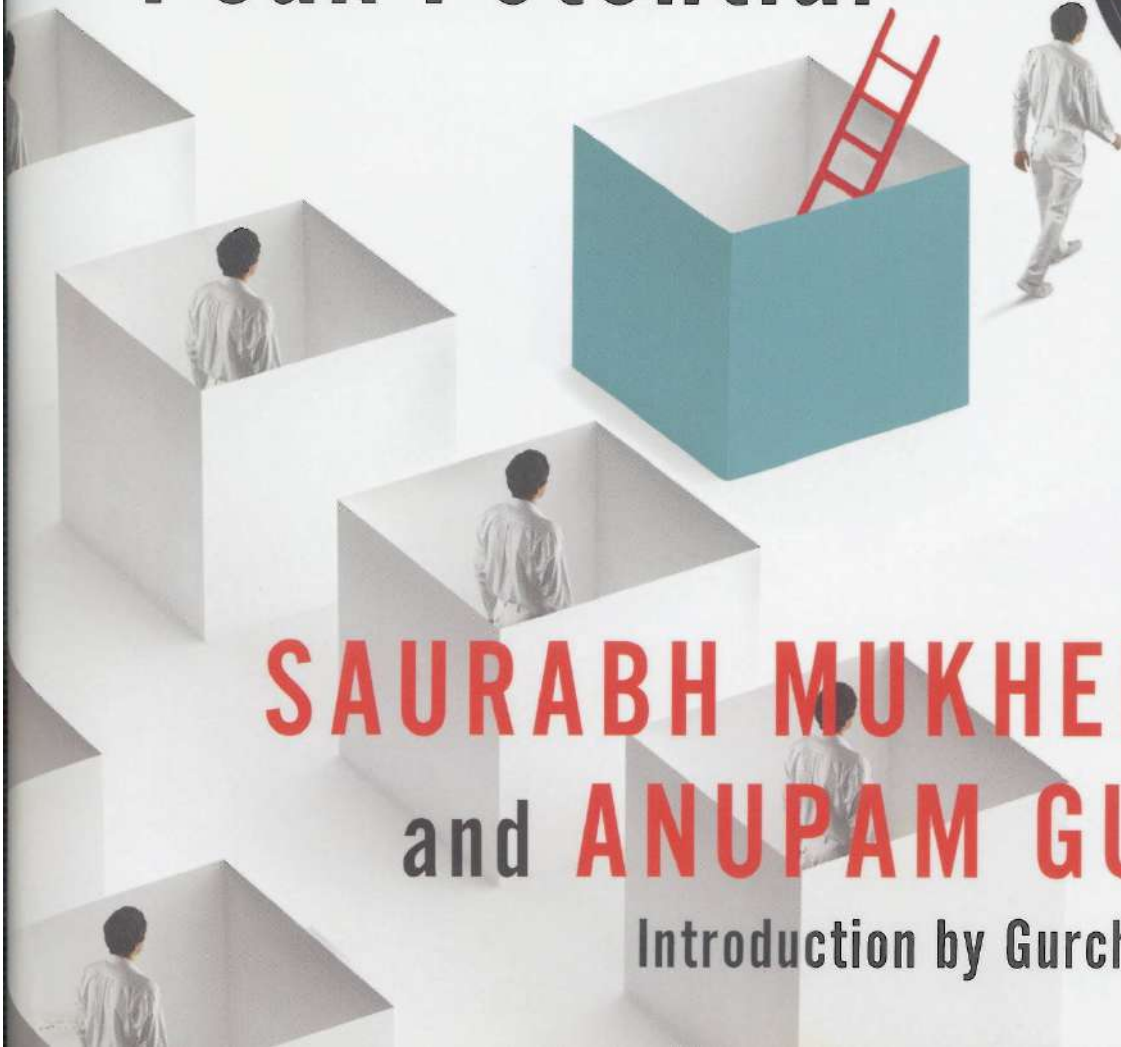
'An elegant framework for structuring continuous learning and amplifying our creativity and potential'

NANDAN NILEKANI



VICTORY PROJECT

Six Steps to Peak Potential



SAURABH MUKHERJEA
and **ANUPAM GUPTA**

Introduction by Gurcharan Das

How Apurva Purohit Built Radio City around the Tenet of Simplicity



Apurva Purohit is the president of Jagran Prakashan Limited, which owns publications such as *Dainik Jagran* and *Mid-Day* as well as various other media businesses. Apurva is a veteran in the media and entertainment industry and worked with the Zee Group and the Times Television Network before joining the FM radio station Radio City (corporate name Music Broadcast Limited—MBL) in 2005. In 2015, the Jagran Group acquired Radio City, and in 2016, Apurva became president of Jagran Prakashan.

Apurva is a graduate from Stella Maris College in Chennai, where she played hockey for Madras University and then represented Tamil Nadu in state-level hockey tournaments. She holds a PGDM degree from IIM Bangalore and is also the author of two books—*Lady, You're Not a Man!: The Adventures of a Woman at Work*¹⁴ and *Lady, You're the Boss!: The Adventures of a Woman at Work – Part 2*¹⁵.

Apurva has a refreshing take on simplicity in business. In a tough and niche business such as FM radio, Apurva led MBL

to profitability in FY13 and the firm has stayed consistently profitable since then, clocking impressive financials along the way. She is a big believer in organizations having a simple, no-nonsense, no-frills vision and communicating it clearly across the firm.

We met Apurva at the colourful MBL office near Bandra Kurla Complex on 12 September 2019, which was the last day of Ganpati Visarjan and also an expectedly rainy Mumbai morning.

Apurva uses a very interesting concept—called F1—to introduce clarity in all business debates which take place under her command. We will explain F1 to you in a bit, but before we do that it is interesting to understand the origins of Apurva's F1 thinking. She told us that the idea went back to her college days when they had to play one sport and she chose hockey, 'My F1 was to be in the team, so I applied for goalkeeper. I knew no one was trying to be the goalkeeper. So I trialled to be the goalkeeper and I got selected and went on to play for the Tamil Nadu state. If I was trying to be centre forward, I would never get in because that was the most fought for position.' Apurva believes that the four ashramas of Hinduism (brahmacharya or student, grihastha or household, vanaprastha or retirement, and sanyasa or renunciation) can teach us what to focus on in each stage of life. 'You can have it all but not at the same time. Clarity comes from reflection,' she told us.

How does one develop thinking with such clarity? Apurva shares from her early life when she was not a very popular student: 'I was this student who comes first, sits very earnestly in class, always reads her books . . . not very popular with people.' This wasn't easy when you are a child and are seeking approval and validation from the entire world. But over time, Apurva learnt that rather than worrying about what people around her were saying she should listen, instead, to her voice within.

sw Recalling her advertising days setting up Lodestar Media, Apurva told us, 'The good or bad part of the advertising industry then was that agencies were unstructured organizations. I had no mentors, no KRAs [key result areas], no boss.' This lack of a higher authority or a mentor did not affect Apurva. She made it work for her and even today advocates that while we can draw lessons from mentors, we should look within ourselves and not worry about being popular. Apurva is also a big believer in moral compass and fairness. 'I think the earlier you develop a moral compass and know what's fair and what's not, the better it is for you,' she told us.

But life isn't fair and neither is corporate life. How does Apurva then ensure fairness within her organization? She outlined her philosophy to us, saying, 'Fairness is the hallmark of the Radio City culture and it has been difficult to convince managers on this virtue despite my fifteen years of working there. People can tolerate a lot as long as they know you're being fair to them. You need to put your objectives clearly—that it is about the whole process. You need to demonstrate fairness and walk the talk, consistently. For example, I believe in appraisal-based increments that happen once in a year. I would not do mid-term corrections. I can't tell you how much pushback I got for this. But I don't make exceptions. Exceptions are the biggest destroyers of fairness.'

b Toughness can cause dissent and alienate people. How does she ensure common ground? Apurva refers to the balanced scorecard (BSC) performance management tool. The BSC tool, as propagated by American accounting academician Robert Samuel Kaplan and management consultant David P. Norton, outlines four areas of measuring performance: financial perspective, customer perspective, internal business perspective, and innovation and learning perspective.¹⁶ Apurva learnt the term 'F1' from the BSC tool, which specifies a primary goal at

the top (F = financial). 'If we can do this at a company level, we can do this at a function level,' she told us.

While these concepts in clarity work in small businesses, would they really work in larger, complex, diverse organizations? Apurva believes they can, depending on how exactly your F1 is framed. If the F1 is restricted to increasing margins at the consolidated level, then a company operating in infrastructure can even look at acquiring an IT services firm. But if the F1 is framed as making the core business more efficient, then the firm can look at acquiring companies in the supply chain, distributors, etc. and entering other adjacent/complementary businesses.

How can we apply F1 to our lives, say, for a young person starting his or her career? Apurva tells us that they should start by listing down key motivational factors such as learning, money, power, etc. and choose the non-negotiable ones, without being too bothered with what the world says. 'Prioritize those factors that are non-negotiable and then go for the jobs that deliver those factors,' she tells us. For each of us, Apurva believes, there can be at any point in time only one F1. That F1 is your north star. That is what you need to prioritize above everything else.

'Don't run the race everyone else is running,' she tells us, giving her own example. Apurva laughed about how she wanted to start her career in the unconventional (for IIMB graduates at that time) areas of brand building, communication and creativity: 'I joined advertising straight out of IIM Bangalore. My salary brought down the average of the batch. But then if I'd worried about that, I wouldn't have become the youngest CEO of my batch twenty years ago.' Similarly, for those looking to reinvent themselves in their mid-careers, Apurva believes they should start with the small things that make them happy daily and marry those things with their broader purpose: 'As Annie

Dillard says, “The way we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

Apurva loves reading and when we ask her for her favourite books, she mentions Bertrand Russell’s classic *The Conquest of Happiness*¹⁷. She also mentions *All Things Shining*¹⁸ by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, which had an immense influence on her.

As we wrapped up, we asked Apurva why she did not carry her mobile to our meeting, as most CEOs are not seen without their mobile phones. ‘All of us focus on building a CV but we don’t focus enough on building our reputation. But reputation doesn’t get built on a piece of paper, reputation is in interactions. As Gulzar wrote: *Ek bar waqt se, lamha gira kahin, wahan dastan mili, lamha kahee nahi* [Loose translation: Once a moment fell out of time, a story was found in that moment even as the moment vanished]¹⁹. So I might never meet you again, but there is a reputation getting formed,’ she explains. As we walked towards the Radio City car park we realized that the reputation being formed was a formidable one.