

Apple Peach Greenleaf Smoothies Can Help You Unlock Your True Potential

Date : June 8, 2016

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As students around the world graduate from high school, the future can seem daunting. Many are experiencing their first true inflection point, a life event that results in significant change and progress. What better time to taste a purpose-sustaining smoothie? Mukul Pandya, managing director of Knowledge@Wharton, Wharton's online journal of business and analysis, recently sat down with Sessa Dhanyamraju, CEO of Digital Risk in Florida, to discuss the IT executive's smoothie recipe that helps high school students remember to follow their passions and to set short-term and long-term goals on their journey to success, fulfillment — and even Mars.

An edited transcript of the conversation appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Our guest today is Sessa Dhanyamraju, who is the CEO of Digital Risk in Florida, which is an Mphasis company. Sessa is also the chief strategy officer for Mphasis, which is a global IT services company. Sessa, welcome to Knowledge@Wharton, and thank you for speaking with us for the Knowledge@Wharton High school site.

Sessa Dhanyamraju: Thank you so much, Mukul. I'm very happy to be here.

KWHS: Some time ago, we had a conversation about the fact that when many students graduate from high school these days, one of the options that some of them like to think about is a career in IT services. How do you see the potential for students to join IT services as a career path? I think you recently had some interesting experiences about that. Could you tell us about it?

Dhanyamraju: First of all, when you look at the high school generation today, IT comes naturally to them. Unlike the prior generations where IT was a gained skill, the high school students today have an advantage because they are born with IT. So, skills around IT — using IT, leveraging IT — come naturally to them. This puts them in a spot of advantage, which they can leverage. They can harness this skill to utilize IT knowledge and do many things with it.

Recently, I had an opportunity to address a group of freshmen at a high school, which was focused around IT. I felt going in that all the students would be very happy to be in that environment. On the contrary, when I went there, I was told that a good majority of the students actually feel as if they are fish out of water.

KWHS: Why would they feel so negatively about being in a school that focuses on IT?

Dhanyamraju: I think the main reason for their discontent was not whether the school was focused on IT or not. [It was] the fact that the choice about joining the school was made by somebody else other than them. High school students want to be in total control of the choices that they make, and if their parents or caregivers decided this option for them, then it became a situation where they didn't really want to be associated with that choice. So, rather than embrace their

access to so many new technologies [and] courses that they could leverage, they felt, “I’m not at the right place. This is not the desired school for me — not a set of courses that help me in where I want to head.”

KWHS: You came up with a model that would allow them to reframe their thinking about how to become successful in thinking about a career in information technology. Can you tell us a little bit about your model, and does it have anything to do with smoothies?

Dhanyamraju: When I was thinking about the topics that would be of interest to high school students, I wanted to give them some framework; guidelines that they could use in a way that relates to their age. So, I came up with this fragment, if you will. One high school student basically remarked that it is both quirky and creative. And that is exactly what makes it relevant for high school students. The concept was around how do you maximize your true potential? How do you unleash your true potential? And the success mantra is “Apple Peach Greenleaf Smoothie Is Nice.”

KWHS: What does it mean?

Dhanyamraju: It’s a mnemonic to remember a few things that might be of help to high school students. [In the word Apple] the A stands for attitude. The key point here: Now that you are in this [IT] high school, [which maybe was] a choice made by somebody else for you, you can either make the most out of the current situation, or you can fight every day and think of going through the daily courses as a big chore. [We suggested that] students re-look at the situation and approach it with a “glass is half-full” kind of approach, rather than saying, “I’m in a very bad environment, in a bad spot.” We discussed, “What’s the worst thing that can happen to you if you get stuck with IT?”

And then we talked about some of the examples of how many teenagers have successfully used their IT skills to set up companies. They have created tremendous value for themselves and for people around them.

KWHS: I recently read somewhere that instead of thinking that the glass is half-empty or the glass is half-full, it’s good to realize that the glass is always refillable.

Dhanyamraju: That’s very, very true.

KWHS: If you look at it that way, then you can change your attitude, which is the point that you are driving at.

Dhanyamraju: Right.

KWHS: What’s the “peach” part of your [equation]?

Dhanyamraju: [In the word Peach, the P stands for passion.] You want to talk about trying to discover your true passion; your purpose. It’s very important for people across all different generations to understand their true purpose. The hypothesis that I shared with these students was that [your life has] different inflection points [when change is happening]. One inflection point is [when you are approaching high school]. The next inflection point [might be when you are] approaching college. And the next inflection point, as you graduate from college [and move into] a professional career.

At these points, you may want to revisit your so-called purpose statement. One of the homework assignments that we gave the students was to write an essay to themselves [creating their] purpose statement. Then revisit that purpose statement every few years to check the progress that they are making and the journey that their lives are taking. I first did this exercise when I was in my early 20s, as part of business school. I still vividly remember that purpose statement. [At the time], we did not think it would have a transformational capability for all of us. It’s very interesting that when I talk to several of my friends who were in the same business college around the same time, that exercise, which seemingly

looked very simple, had remarkable impact on all of our lives. When I'm in doubt, I go back to that purpose statement and basically ask myself the question: "Am I living that purpose or not?"

KWHS: Do you remember the purpose statement?

Dhanyamraju: Absolutely. My purpose statement was to live my life in such a way that I would help each and every person in my sphere of influence to realize [his] full potential.

KWHS: That's a pretty impressive purpose.

Dhanyamraju: It came naturally to me. And so this intent of going to these high school students and talking to them about this topic was in line with that purpose statement.

KWHS: What's the third element of your model, which is, "greenleaf"?

Dhanyamraju: [The word] greenleaf has two components to it. The G stands for goals. Once you have your purpose defined, then how do you start setting goals for yourself? We talked about setting long-term and short-term goals. Where do you need to be, say, six years from today in order to be living your purpose statement? So we say, "Okay, if six years from today you need to be achieving these following important initiatives, then what do you need to achieve three years from today? What do you need to achieve one year from today? Six months from today? Three months from today? Next month, next fortnight and tomorrow?"

And the L in "leaf" stands for the long haul. You need to be prepared for the long haul if you wish to be effective in your professional and personal lives. You need to understand that it is a marathon and not something you run as a sprint. You need to be prepared for the long haul.

The next part [of the mnemonic] is the smoothie, which stands for stamina and strength. Because of the fact that you have to be prepared for the long haul, you need to focus on building your strength, building your endurance and building physical, mental and spiritual strength and stamina so that you can endure the long haul.

KWHS: When you presented your model to the students, how did this resonate, in terms of becoming successful IT professionals?

Dhanyamraju: A few things happened. For one, it was not a monologue. People felt quite passionate about the topic and the concepts that were discussed. One of the students said, "I have a better mnemonic." And it had something to do with AP grades. So I said, "This is wonderful, because now you are coming up with something that you can relate to, and which probably will make it more memorable." I said, "The idea is not that you need to remember this particular mnemonic. You could actually come up with your own. But do you understand the concepts?" In that way, the purpose was served.

And the last [word] that I mentioned in [my smoothie formula] was "nice." You need to always understand that you're not alone in this journey. [It's important to surround] yourself with a support system — in the form of parents, teachers, friends, mentors, and anybody who can help you, because there'll be multiple situations on this journey where you'll get bruises, where you'll get hurt. Somebody needs to be watching out for you, helping you along the way. More importantly, they would need to ensure that if you stray away from your purpose statement, they're able to show the mirror to you and say, "You are acting inconsistent with your purpose statement."

KWHS: I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about another expression I've heard you use, which is the Mars Generation. What exactly is that?

Dhanyamraju: We are in a very exciting phase right now. By the 2030s, mankind would like to set foot on Mars. Essentially, the age group of six to 16 is getting referred to as Generation Mars. I think this generation is going to [involve] the visionaries and the future space explorers for all of us. Associated technological innovation needs to come. We have not yet seen many of those types of disruptions. Now they're talking about having deep space homes. To that extent, I think it's probably an excellent time to be a Generation Mars citizen. Good luck to all of those people as they try to conquer this Mars quest.