Taking untrodden path for success

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The son of a cardiologist, Dr Rashmi Barbhaiya opted not to tread his father’s footsteps and entered the arena of pharmaceuticals pursuing higher education in clinical pharmacology. More than two decades later, the father proudly describes his son’s achievement: “As a doctor I can treat about 20 patients a day; while Dr Rashmi’s work, with such a strong base in pharmaceutical R&D, can help save the lives of millions.”

When one throws a ball at the wall, it rebounds. But the force with which it rebounds depends on whether the ball is hard or soft. If it is tennis ball then the force will be more. The exit of Dr Rashmi Barbhaiya from Ranbaxy in 2004 had similar situation, as he was pushed to the wall with nowhere to go.

Like a tennis ball, Dr Barbhaiya, with extensive global experience in handling diverse aspects of drug discovery and development at Bristol-Myers Squibb, USA and leading a team of over 900-strong scientists at Ranbaxy, bounced back with the same or greater force. The support and encouragement of his colleagues - Dr Kasim Mookhtiar and Sanjiv Kaul - led to the setting up of Advinus Therapeutics in 2005.

“I started Advinus at the right time, right environment; backed by the right set of people,” says Dr Barbhaiya, who left India as a student to the UK to pursue doctoral studies, over 35 years ago. This graduate in biochemistry from MS University, Baroda, later landed in the US following the advice of his guide in the UK. Hence the journey for Advinus became smooth; to achieve the goal to explore novel targets in selected diseases areas with no API, no
Driving forces
Recalling his career at Bristol-Myers-Squibb from 1980, he calls them the fantastic 21 years that gave him over two decades of highly productive stints in the industry. During that time, Dr Barbhaiya was actively developing drugs in-house in many areas like antiretroviral, a number of drugs for AIDS, cancer, depression and anxiety, hypertension and congestive heart failure (CHF), diabetes besides many infectious diseases. He is proud to say that during that time, the company launched many drugs. He is also one of the rare industry professionals who has authored nearly 150 scientific research papers.

Although he never thought of returning to India, the changes taking place in BMS during 2000, led him to opt for an early retirement, at the age of 49; and start consulting services. He could not resist the offer from Ranbaxy Laboratories; and moved to India in 2002, along with a couple of former colleagues - Dr Kasim Mookhtiar and Sanjiv Kaul. He joined Ranbaxy Laboratories as president of R&D, and led a team of over 900 professionals involved in generic, drug delivery, herbal and innovation-driven new drug research and development activities. During his short tenure of two years, Ranbaxy Laboratories and its drug discovery laboratories became a global pharmaceutical R&D hub and the state-of-the-art facility in Pune, Advinus Drug Discovery, offers end-to-end pre-clinical to early clinical development platform for pharma product development.

Stepping untridden path
Advinus, with 470 employees, is a company created with a vision of not entering the field that 15 other companies are into. We choose to create a drug development center where we can do all regulatory requirements for IND. To put a molecule into human beings, we are the only company with this kind of bandwidth, says Dr Barbhaiya.

Inspired by his grandfather’s words: “I should play a game to win it and try not to lose it.” Dr Barbhaiya admits that a major factor for success of Advinus as a company is the senior team. In today's world, it is a big deal for the senior team to remain intact. He shares that many senior employees of Advinus have moved to India not to make a living having left India.
behind successful careers in the US. They are here to make a difference to India's pharmaceutical R&D.

Sharing the vision for Advinus for the next five years, Dr Barbhaiya says, “Having the senior team intact, giving fresh thought to the next phase of growth to go leaps and bounds (for which we may look for a strategic investor from outside); achieve turnover of $40-50 million not by entering manufacturing, but by building more capabilities.”

The dream of Advinus could not have been fulfilled without Dr Kasim Mookhtiar, Sanjiv Kaul; Homi Khusrokhan, managing director, Tata Chemicals; Dr Venkat S Sohoni, managing director, Rallis India; R Gopalakrishnan, executive director, Tata Sons; and Kishor A Chaukar, managing director, Tata Industries, admits Dr Barbhaiya. Their passionate commitment was crucial in creating Advinus. Their tireless and sustained support made it possible to bring

First Person

Rashmi as a person is large-hearted, warm, caring, meticulous, organized and a commanding personality. Rashmi as a professional - tremendous self-esteem, passionate about research, face of today's poster boy for innovative pharma research in India?
-Sanjiv Kaul, MD, ChrysCapital Investment Advisors

Dr Barbhaiya is a brilliant blend of science and business; and is wonderful to talk to. His desire to discover new molecules is backed by a thorough scientific knowledge and a passion to prove that one can do this from India.
-Anu Acharya, CEO, Ocimum Biosolutions

Rashmi has brought multinational experience and expertise he developed in the US to India. Through Advinus, he has been effectively translating his learnings, to deliver the India advantage; and culture to meet the global needs.
-Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, CMD, Biocon

The five years that I have known Dr Barbhaiya, I had the opportunity to learn from him science, drug discovery business and even HR! He brings with him a unique style of management; comprising professionalism of the West, and seamlessly merging it with personalized flavor of Indian style. He has led from the front on many initiatives; and the noteworthy among them is his value for ethics and integrity. In every employee survey, we have seen that our employees have rated Advinus' culture of ethics and integrity highly.
-Thomas Putti, VP & Head (Human Resources), Advinus

Dr Barbhaiya for over 15 years as scientist, mentor and friend. Our professional lives have been closely linked during this period, starting with my joining BMS in 1992; to our current collaboration at Advinus. Rashmi is a dynamic leader. He is one of the gifted people who is charismatic, a person who attracts others by his personality. This charisma allows him to engage and interact with people who are best at what they do.
-Dr Kasim Mookhtiar, CSO & Executive VP (Drug Discovery), Advinus
Achievements of Advinus

Key successes in drug discovery

- Discovery of a novel molecule for treatment of type 2 diabetes on a new target in pre-clinical development (in partnership with a large pharma) which is now in phase I clinical trials – A Glucokinase Activator
- Other initiatives include: Promising compounds for IBD, asthma/COPD and Parkinson’s disease that could be ready for IND enabling studies in current/next fiscal.
- A neglected disease initiative to address the unmet medical needs of “Kala Azar” with DNDi.

Key successes in development

- A client base of about 80 global pharmaceutical, biotechnology and agrochemical companies.
- First company in India to establish services in regulatory toxicology, DMPK and safety pharmacology; and also to develop IND packages for clinical trials initiation in the US, Canada, Germany, France and other countries.
- Developed the first internal molecule for clinical studies and enabled the identification of the second candidate – first molecule discovered and fully developed in India is undergoing clinical trials.

Pursue your dreams, believe in yourself?

What is the Advinus mission?

To create a name like the IT industry for pharmaceutical R&D in India; win respect and achieve success. We want to make a difference to India’s pharmaceutical R&D. We have felt great and happy about the success of our competitors.

How do you treat your employees?

When they fail, I do not crucify them as long as the failure is not because of negligence. We believe in team work. As individuals we are great, but collectively we fall apart. Managing a team by striking a good balance is a sure way to success in any business.

How do you describe your role at Advinus?

I soften targets (potential clients). Then the other team members move in to negotiate the deals. The best way to describe my role is that I am like the air force. After air strikes, the ground level battalion has to move in to win the battle.

Who can become an entrepreneur?

For a person who is capable, success will follow. I never aspired to become a CEO. I did my work and became what I am.

What words of motivation would you give aspiring entrepreneurs?

Pursue your dreams; believe in yourself. Have the right concept and ideas; and most importantly, the ability to articulate your ideas. Then success is sure to come your way.

How do you see the Indian biotechnology industry in the past 10 years and now?

I have profound respect for outstanding work that has been done; the never-say-die spirit of Indians; entrepreneurial abilities that Indians have. Regulatory reforms by the Indian government in this area is an immediate requirement for further growth of the industry.

Narayan Kulkarni in Bangalore