

Everybody Is Good At Something: Meeting V. R. Ferose by Nipun Mehta

Everybody is good at something. In a ServiceSpace context, that's a daily assumption -- by design. When your organizing principles forbid you to hire staff, or fundraise, or sell anything, you are happily forced to make art with the colors you've got in front of you. And as we've witnessed over the years, creative constraints like these can actually end up seeding inspiring innovations.

Last Wednesday, I met V. R. Ferose, a like-hearted artist who applied this thinking in an unlikely setting: The corporate world. In fact, a tipping point in Ferose's journey came when he published an article in Forbes. The title? Everybody is Good at Something. The article went viral and sparked a movement of sorts.

First, though, let's rewind. "We met in college, my wife and I. Being from two very different religions and regions, you can just imagine the stereotypes we had to struggle with," he jokes with his characteristically warm laugh. Along the way, Ferose got a job at SAP and they settled in Bangalore. As the manager of his group, he focused more on igniting purpose than mandating orders -- and his team's performance stood out across the entire company. After more rapid successes, the SAP board soon hand-picked him for another challenge: India's R&D labs was losing money, attrition rate was sky-rocketing, and productivity had hit rock bottom. They asked Ferose to fix it. Well, he did more than that. Within 18 months, attrition rate halved, engagement rates hit unprecedented highs, his R&D lab ranked #1 in employee satisfaction across all of SAP and #4 across all the companies in India. He was just getting started. By the age of 36, he had a staff of 5,000. He was traveling the world, meeting celebrities and millionaires, and piling on fancy titles and awards.

That path to traditional success took an unexpected turn with the birth of their son Vivaan, who they learned was on the Autism spectrum. "I remember coming home from the doctor's office, when Vivaan was one and half years old -- and going into the bathroom, locking the door, and crying for half an hour straight," Ferose shared candidly. As he grappled to process their new reality, he recalls calling up one of his mentors, Kiran

Bedi. "Kiran actually congratulated me. She said, 'You have now found your purpose in life. Lot of people struggle to find a purpose, but you're lucky that your purpose has found you.'"

It turned out to be prescient. "My wife was among the top students in college, far better than me, but after this news, she decided to dedicate her life to Vivaan and to help him grow so that he can engage with the world. While I supported her in that, I decided to try to create a world that could engage more Vivaans," Ferose shares poignantly.

He started applying his skills and resources to studying the issue. He was shocked to learn just how prevalent autism was. It affects 1 in 68 births. The challenge is that autistic children require 1-on-1 care and that's hard to scale -- unless, he thought, you can empower the mothers, who are already delivering that care. Watching Steve Jobs announce iPad 2, and talking about how iPad gives voice to kids with autism, he and his long-time colleague and friend, Sridhar Sundar, created an iPad workshop. That quickly turned into Project Prayas.

Never the one to be accused of thinking small, :) Ferose wondered how he could further push the envelope. He had heard of a small group in Denmark that employed autistic children, so he flew out there, learned from them, joined the board -- and then decided to hire 4 employees who were on the autism spectrum. No Fortune 500 had ever taken such a risk, but Ferose explained his logic at WEF in his Davos talk recently:

Our recruitment systems are fundamentally flawed. Statistically, we reject 99 percent of those who come to us. Instead, can we focus on what people are good at, and structure our problems around it? Autistic children can't work with teams and don't have communication skills -- but what they have is an amazing memory, they excel at doing repetitive tasks without being bored, and they never lie. We hired four autistics to do testing work, and research proved that they were 20% better than regular engineers!

At a big event, SAP's president shared Ferose's experiment and their commitment to focusing on these strengths. This is when the Forbes article came in. It captured the imagination, and compassion, of many. A couple thousand press inquiries later, coupled with Ferose's creative weaving within the company, another bold commitment was brewing. More than 20 organizations started hiring autistic employees, and SAP soon announced a major commitment: 1% of its hires would be people on the autism spectrum. Ferose recalls this moment with teary eyes, "Someone came and told me, 'Ferose, your son has just created 650 jobs at SAP.'" UN Secretary General, Ban-ki Moon, is now nudging other business leaders to all make similar public commitments. [A meeting for this is set to happen in early April in New York.]

Everybody is Good at Something. Ferose's journey with that mantra didn't stop with autistic children. While thinking about writing a book on leadership, he kept realizing that his heroes were actually those with disabilities. Not in any PR way, but actually.

Meeting lots of differently-abled people, he would find himself completely spellbound with inspiration. Ashwin Kartik, for instance, was India's first quadriplegic to get a college degree, and an engineering job; but he got there because of his friend, Bharat, who was his scribe. As a scribe, of course, he couldn't take his own exams, so he decided to delay his schooling for a year. Bharat was socially castigated -- even his parents refused to talk to him and practically disowned him. When Ashwin got into an engineering school, Bharat stunned his community even further. He decided to delay his education for 4 years!), so he could continue to scribe for his buddy Ashwin! A truly remarkable story of friendship.

Similarly, Malvika Iyer lost both her hands and severely damaged her legs due to a freak accident at the age of 13. It raised serious doubts about whether she would ever walk again. But young Malvika braved the odds and is now a dedicated social worker, a motivational speaker, a model for accessible clothing in India, and part of the "Global Shakers" initiative of the World Economic Forum.

As Ferose is narrating these stories, I am immediately reminded of our own Ragu -- who without legs, was able to touch lives of thousands, many times with the offering of a simple holy-basil plant.

After some immersion into this world, Ferose realized these were actually his real heroes. Ferose met Mohammad Sharif even before his son was born. As an avid reader and big fan of music, he wanted to encourage music for the under-privileged communities. That's when he ran into Mohammad who taught others how to sing, play the tabla and the harmonium. Except he only had one hand. "You won't believe it -- he played the harmonium with his left hand and right leg! And when you talk to him, he says, 'I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I probably would've been a beggar on the street, but here I am living a life of dignity as a teacher and musician who is respected

for his art. What more could I have asked for in life? Now, that is contentment!"

Repeatedly, Feroze was so moved that he decided he needed to help his heroes tell their stories. With Sudha Menon, he co-authored a book called *'Gifted: Inspiring Stories of People with Disabilities'*. His publishers said, "Such books never make it." Well, this one ended up being a best-seller: "I had a friend, who used to sell books at signal lights when I was in college -- Krishna. He had a street sense for books that would sell, so I asked for his opinion and he was all thumbs-up. And when I told him, I'm donating all my proceeds, he was so moved that he donated all his proceeds too. Krishna himself has sold 4 thousand copies. People ask me how we made this work, and I think it's simply goodwill gone viral."

When he offered me a copy of his book, Feroze asked his assistant for a green pen. Green pen? "Neruda always signed his books with a green pen, because that's the color of hope. So I'm following in his footsteps." And as I leaf through the table of contents, I notice many such subtle but significant gestures -- like that fact that the story chapters are listed in alphabetical order, and told in first person.

To build this dialogue even further, he piloted a first-of-its-kind "Inclusion Summit" in Bangalore. Over a thousand people came, and it generated a huge buzz. "Fourteen of the last 27 best-actor and best-actress Oscar winners have gone to those who have told stories of those with disabilities -- including this year, with Eddie Redmayne playing Stephen Hawking and Julianne Moore playing a woman with ALS. We know these stories exist, but we need more platforms to amplify them, in a person to person context." The emcee was a blind comic, a Nepali Buddhist nun offered profound chants and the Rajan Brothers sang, Temple Grandin as well as former president of India, Abdul Kalam, skyped in -- all to celebrate stories from the differently-abled community. The event is titled -- yup, you guessed it -- Everybody is Good at Something.

The broader implications of this kind of a mindset are staggering. A few years ago, I remember listening to John McKnight in Wisconsin when he talked about ABCD -- Asset Based Community Development: "We do development by identifying problems, and then fixing it. What if we, instead, looked for our untapped gifts and see how we could amplify it?" The modern-day positive psychology movement is rooted in the same ideas; Peter Block has eloquently spoken about applying it to organizational development. Our own community member, Susan Schaller, is manifesting that mindset with the deaf community, after originally using the sheer power of love to help a deaf man learn about the existence of language -- a miraculous feat that even Oliver Sacks couldn't initially believe. Similarly, Steve Karlin has applied that thinking by remarkably bringing together "wounded animals with wounded children" and holding space for them to heal each other.

During his decades-long work of supporting prisoners, Bo Lozoff wrote a popular book

titled: "We're All Doing Time." Indeed, we *all* have our unresolved fallibilities that create suffering for us and the world around us. Ferose's experiments, though, provide a hopeful addendum in bolded-green: all of us, yes, even, and perhaps especially the differently-abled among us, have gifts. If humanity can recognize and assemble these gifts creatively, we may be able to create a happier world.

As we get ready to part ways from our hour long meeting that extended to four hours, he shares a beautiful quote: "Intention has infinite capacity to organize. I've always believed that." Me too. :)