

**Srikumar Rao** is a maverick professor, writer and one of the hottest business gurus. He has helped people on Wall Street manage stress and coached executives at Johnson & Johnson, McDonald's, United Airlines, Google and Microsoft. He developed his course, "Creativity and Personal Mastery," in the mid-90s and has taught it at Columbia Business School, the London Business School and the Haas School of Business at Berkeley, California. Rao hands out eclectic reading lists and his lectures include mental exercises, breathing, meditation and "total immersion exercises."

McGraw-Hill is publishing Rao's seminal new book, *Happiness at Work* in April 2010. "Technological innovations like cell phones, email and PDAs mean that you are always on an electronic tether. Now, if all you are getting from your job is a paycheck then you are bound to be in a miserable place," Rao tells **Uttara Choudhury** in New York in a preview of his book. With work hours getting longer and more gruelling, Rao counsels executives to avoid burnout by finding a deeper purpose in life that also encompasses work. He says the fundamental job of a CEO is to manage the development of people and create a titanium-strength employee culture.

Excerpts:



# 'GREAT CEOs never treat people like ROBOTS'

**In *Happiness at Work* you encourage people to stay 'resilient, motivated and successful no matter.' How is this always possible?**

I encourage executives to shed negativity. People tend to instantaneously label occurrences as "bad," instead of remaining neutral.

In my book, I talk about a 23-year-old Baltimore man who slipped on a patch of ice and broke his wrist. This young man was a swimmer and the injury kept him on the sideline for weeks. By anyone's standards, a broken wrist sounds like bad news. But this determined young man didn't want his years of training to fall by the wayside so he spent hours kicking at the wall while his teammates practiced furiously. Later, at the swimming meet he

was practicing for, he won by a hundredth of a second.

High speed photos at the end of the men's 100-meter butterfly final in the Beijing Olympics show Michael Phelps was still kicking while his opponent's legs were trailing. Those weeks at the side of the pool gave Phelps the extra muscle he needed. It got him his seventh gold medal. It's clear from Phelps' story that a broken wrist wasn't a "bad thing." If you resist labeling things as bad you find lurking possibilities you would never see otherwise.

**How does one survive in a workplace roiled by layoffs?**

The reason people feel insecure is

that they are projecting into the future. What if I am sacked? In minutes they have aggravated themselves by creating scenarios where they don't have money, can't pay the mortgage.

## q&a

**srikumar rao**

We can learn from Navy Seal Marcus Luttrell, who was isolated behind enemy lines after a mission in Afghanistan went awry. He survived and says it was thanks to Special Ops training culminating in "Hell Week." He describes what happens during days of round-the-clock training with barely any sleep.

The majority of recruits drop out after "Hell Week." You run 10 miles on the beach and then are told to swim up to 2 miles in the ocean. You think you

have 10 minutes to eat breakfast and are told, "Sorry, change of plans; you have two minutes." You are bleary from lack of sleep and are doing live-fire exercises. If you think, "I have four more days of this hell," you will drop out. People like Luttrell survive by concentrating on the next step. One needs to ferociously prevent one's thoughts from straying — stay in the "now".

**Do you encourage executives to wade through a reading list ranging from P G Wodehouse to books on Zen and quantum physics before addressing whether they want to spend their lives working 15-hour days in the pursuit of riches?**

I have a huge reading list that includes *A Search in Secret India* by Paul Brunton, *Leave it to Psmith* by Wodehouse. I ask people to evaluate the mental models used by Psmith and his cheery insouciance when faced with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This is the spirit to cultivate.

Then there is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, where he talks about flow being a state of intense absorption where the distinction between you and the work you are doing disappears. Hours feel like minutes. Peak performers achieve this state and it has been studied in champion athletes as well as artists. I make everyone go through a ton of books as we get stuck in mental ruts. These books shake you free — I like everyone to read them be-

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**How does a CEO inspire people?**

I have no sympathy for managers who say it is impossible to 'motivate' workers and who tinker with incentives and punishments. Such "motivation" is okay — maybe — if we are talking about animals in a behavioural psychology lab. It is demeaning when applied to people. As a manager you have to figure out what is demotivating your employees — get rid of it.

Too often managers look on people as "mechanisms" for fulfilling goals. They push them to accomplish A, B or C as it makes them look good, but does that fetch loyalty? Employees respect bosses who are good at their work and have a human touch. People always ask, "Does the boss care for me as a person?"

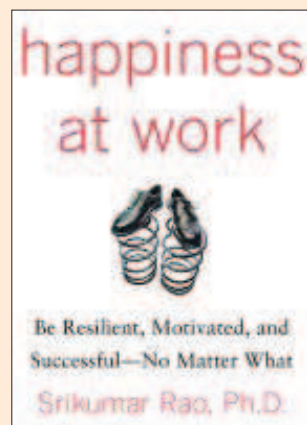
Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com, has built a company that thrives on the human touch. Having fun is a publicly proclaimed virtue at his company as is delivering great customer service. It's a non-hierarchical office. Tony sits at a desk in a row along with everybody else. He answers customer calls if the volume gets heavy.

**How do your 'self-mastery' classes use Indian methods to help managers boost their leadership skills?**

My mother was very spiritual. When I was young we had monks from the Ramakrishna Mission and Maharshi Mahesh Yogi, before he was discovered by the Beatles, as frequent visitors. I was rebellious and rejected everything — but over time found that enough had sunk in by osmosis.

The West is heavily indoctrinated into achieving goals: good grades will get you into a good college which in turn will get you a good job. If you succeed your life is good, otherwise you are doomed. Everyone is goal-centric and gets set up to face inevitable disappointments.

In the Indian tradition, you are taught the action is in our control, but the outcome/goal is out of our hands. I encourage executives to invest completely in the process and not the goal. If they invest every fiber of their being into the process they are likely to enjoy the outcome. It is a paradox. When you become detached from the outcome, the probability of achieving the goal rises dramatically.



fore the first meeting.

**What is the secret to finding fulfillment at work?**

The work place has deteriorated with increasing competition. Due to globalisation executives stay up odd hours dealing with clients and colleagues in different time zones. Now, if you are only in the job for the money you are bound to be miserable.

More significantly, if you are looking for fulfillment, you won't find it in the job. It comes from inside you. After you have recognised it inside yourself