

# Just Aspire

**Ajai Chowdhry**

Ajai Chowdhry is one of the six founding members of HCL, began an exciting journey of more than four decades. Ajai has served and continues to serve on several government committees, several top notch college and University boards.

Never let your aspirations die or your passions dim, for they are the soul of entrepreneurship.

After graduating from Christ church in Jabalpur, I made a life changing decision, by opting for a programme in telecommunications bundled with a new course – electronics.

My father was a civil servant and for him a private sector employee was no better than a shopkeeper.

Looking back at Jabalpur engineering college, they were halcyon days because of the great friends I had. Psychologists say the role of the peer group is crucial in adolescence.

Movies were our passion in college and it became a tradition to watch a movie after every exam.

I began my career selling electronic calculators which were bulky, gadgets priced at Rs 10,000 , the equivalent of Rs 4 lacs today.



The most important lesson is sales is to present the product as a solution to something, the panacea of all problems.

In the 1970s start ups were virtually unknown. When I was part of starting HCL, most people thought I was crazy.

Between the 6 founders at HCL, we raised a grand sum of Rs 1.87 lacs.

We had a tie up with the UP Electronics Corporation and hence could use the name Hindustan Computers Ltd, else you couldn't use Hindustan. This gave us legitimacy.

At HCL we were restless and we always looked out for the right people.

One of my important learnings in Singapore was the concept of face, in negotiations one was never aggressive.

Before I took charge of HCL infosystems, I went for a course at Michigan under the famous CK Prahalad.

Professor Prahalad was a tough taskmaster, and none of us dared show up in his class unprepared.

In certain circles, nationalism is equated with xenophobia and nativism. For me it is simply 'desh prem', love for one's country.



I was fortunate to meet Bill Gates because of the HCL relationship with Microsoft. He is always driven by logic , constantly asking why.

In 2003, HCL became the first company to sell 100,000 PCs in India, we went on to create a PC revolution in India.

We also sold Kodak digicams in India before Kodak went bankrupt. What impressed me most about Kodak was its product development machinery and a culture of innovation.

The unique human ability to learn from the experience of others applies to the workplace.

Running a listed company is a relentless focus on quarter on quarter results. Not to mention the annoyance of having to deal with youngsters from financial consultancy firms, who know very little about the business but were addicted to endless inventorizing.

Having received my share of industry awards, nothing was more humbling than getting the Padma Bhushan from the President.

I chose to take the award on 1 st April since it was my wife's birthday.

In 2012, I started thinking about retirement from HCL.

When I became chairman of the board of IIT Hyderabad, I picked a lot of lessons from Clayton Christensen's book "The Innovative University"



When I became chairman of the IIT Patna board in 2012, I introduced a platform for online learning – called Aurus. I could see digital learning was the future.

When Kapil Sibal, the then HRD minister had an offsite with people involved with IITs, we pointed out that IITs have no mechanism for marketing.

In 2012, I gifted a large auditorium *Jashan* to my alma mater - Jabalpur college of Engineering , coined after my parents names – Jai Krishna and Shankuntala

As a nation in the midst of a great technological revolution, India needs world class institutions, capable of producing Nobel laureates and racking up patents.

CK Prahalad would tell us “ If you have the ambition, resources will happen”

Entrepreneurs have acquired a certain mystique in recent years – they are seen as innovators, agents of change and harbingers of development.

To capitalize on the larger eco system, entrepreneurs need passion which is an unshakeable belief in their idea and second which is determination.

Entrepreneurs are idea people and in their love for the idea, they forget finance, HR, sales and marketing.



Entrepreneurship is about Innovation – it can be disruptive, radically altering the existing order or incremental, involving a new approach or improvement to a process.

The time and timing of your product are critical. Be aware not only of the time to market but how long it takes to convert the idea to a product.

Mentorship is critical in getting off the ground. A mentor who can open doors, help build your business, hone your strategy and navigate challenges for you can make all the difference.

Get the best people you can get to your start up, even if it means paying them more than you pay yourself.

Generating profit is the business of business.  
Social entrepreneurship is about bringing  
social change, has much more deeper impact.

People are a company's greatest asset,  
provided you hire the right people.

Employees must feel that the company cares  
about them.

Time invested in mentoring people is never  
wasted.

I believe constant evaluations are necessary part of growing your employees. Casually dropping pearls of wisdom and giving people sporadic input doesn't help.

Recognition like peer pressure is an important source of motivation.

In my experience no CEO can work from an ivory tower.



In business , there is no more important role than sales.

In sales persistence pays, never take no for an answer.

Plunging directly into a sales pitch is poor strategy, build a rapport - find common interest etc. before you start the sales pitch.

Being a good listener is a very important quality in a salesperson. Great talkers don't make great sales, good listeners do.

Sales people hate writing reports. Insist on it, because you need to know how they are spending their time.

As a leader you need to know three things:

1. Set the field ( like in cricket) i.e. drive the agenda
2. Create barriers to competition and
3. Set goals for your sales team.

I began my philanthropic journey by sponsoring the education of the children of my domestic staff, on the strict understanding that it was contingent on performance. Fail to measure up and I would stop the funding.

Successful CEOs tend to have interests outside work. Having a wide range of hobbies prevents burnout and enables lateral thinking.

Personally, I think technology is neutral but AI needs a regulator.

Success should be seen in terms of self development rather than wealth alone, and the family plays an important role in this respect.



I am an optimist about the electronics industry's future and I look forward to the day when India will design and manufacture to meet domestic requirements and also that of the world.

When aspirations meet vision, the result is electrifying.