Dr. Srikumar S. Rao

Dr. Rao has helped thousands of executives and entrepreneurs all over the world discover deep meaning. His methods have enabled them to achieve quantum leaps in effectiveness. Graduates of his workshops have become more creative and more inspiring leaders. He conceived the innovative course Creativity and Personal Mastery. Students found it so overwhelmingly powerful that it remains the only business school course in the world to have its own alumni association.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined. Rethink what’s possible. Push the boundaries. Break new ground.

My goal everyday is to make people feel, or think.

When I saw the internet, I knew that that was going to change publishing forever. I just felt it.

By falling down a lot and having to keep getting up.

The work that we do, feeling good, but the marketing of the work can actually feel good to us, and also to the people receiving it.

This is Business Reimagined with Danny Iny.

DANNY

Srikumar S. Rao is the author of several bestselling books including Happiness at Work and Are You Ready to Succeed? He’s also a TED speaker and former professor at many of the world’s top business schools including Columbia, Kellogg, the London Business School and Berkeley. On today’s show, we explore the deeper questions of meaning, purpose and happiness at work and come to some pretty surprising conclusions. Srikumar’s journey to learn these lessons began as a bright student in India with his eyes on the opportunity and social safety net that America offers.
DR RAO  I came to America to do a PhD and to be honest, I wasn’t really interested in doing a PhD but I was very interested in coming to America. What happens in India is that since it’s a middle class society with no social safety net, if you’re in the middle class, you better get highly educated because that is the only way to have any kind of “security” or at least that’s what people believe. I was a bright student. I was pushed to do better and I did.

DANNY  Srikumar made it to the states and attended the prestigious university Columbia but he was restless there. He took a hiatus and made his first foray into the world of business.

DR RAO  Then, I dropped out of Columbia for a while and got a job at Warner Communications. I did extremely well. I played an important role in the advertising for a movie that then went on to become one of the all-time blockbusters. This was the original Exorcist [00:02:00]. I don't know if you have actually seen the Exorcist but it's a pretty gross movie. I thought, “Hey, is this what I really want to be doing pushing on an unsuspecting American public?”

DANNY  Srikumar’s restlessness was a symptom of something much deeper. His journey may have begun in India and brought him to America but that was a small part of a much larger, more personal journey. Feeling disillusioned, he returned to academia.

DR RAO  The corporate politics remained and I said, “Gee, let me go to academe where there is no politics,” and I was sorely disappointed. It was a very naive view of the world. By the time I found out how alive and well politics was in academia, I’d already made the transition. That was a time that I also started feeling sorry for myself.

I said, “Gee, I had such a wonderful start in corporate America. I was doing really well and then I quit all that to go to academe and I stagnated.” I was in an already prestigious university and not pretty clearly known for anything. I said, “Hey, I’ve had this brilliant
education. I had this early corporate success. What the hell has happened to me?” I was generally feeling pretty sorry for myself.

Now, all my life, I’d been doing a lot of readings, spiritual biography, mystical autobiography. They would take me to a very nice place. Then, I came back to the real world and it sucked. I remember thinking that if all of this was useful only if I was sitting quietly thinking peaceful thoughts and not when it came to the hurly-burly, then, actually it was pretty useless but somehow I knew that wasn’t true. Somehow, I knew that was the only thing that mattered. I just haven’t figured out how to make use of these concepts.

DANNY How old were you at this point in the story?

DR RAO I would say probably in my mid-40s.

DANNY It took a while to get here.

DR RAO It took a while to get there because here’s the point, Danny. By conventional terms, I was very successful. In my own head, I was disastrously unsuccessful. To give you an idea, up here, everybody thinks, “Hey, Columbia is great. You got into Columbia there.” For persons who are good students in India, Columbia is a safe school. It’s not a reach.

DANNY What would be the reach?

DR RAO Reach would be if you get into something like the Indian institutes of technology or the Indian institutes of management and I got into both of them.
DANNY Why did you go to Columbia? You just wanted to go to the states?

DR RAO Because it was in America.

DANNY This is a really interesting thing that you’re touching on. I think this is something that you probably explore in your creativity and personal mastery, training which is what you’re known for today but this dichotomy almost between feeling successful in their mind versus having the markings of success, being seen as successful. Is there a big disconnect like that for a lot of people?

DR RAO A heck of a lot of people. In fact, some of the most “successful” people on paper and on the surface are actually the most insecure. In their private moments, they recognize that.

DANNY Why do you think that is?

DR RAO That is a very good question. Inside each one of us, Danny, there is a feeling of incompleteness, the feeling that I’m not good enough as it is. I need X, whatever X is, to make me complete. Virtually for all of us, our entire life is a quest to feel complete. Most of us try to feel complete by doing things outside. If I had more money, if I had a bigger house, if I had a better spouse, if I was promoted, if I became CEO, then I will be complete.

What they don’t recognize is that you cannot solve an internal problem with external action. The people who have the greatest hunger are the ones who do the most and they get the external trappings but internally, they are just as empty as before and maybe even more so but they have to be in frantic activity because when they’re in frantic activity, it dulls the pain.

DANNY Something that I’m hearing is that that internal dissatisfaction, discontentedness with your current, where you are, this feeling, as
you call it, of being incomplete. It is the driver to go out there and do
and create and achieve. What I’m sitting here thinking as I hear this
is that if you’re driven to make an impact in the world, is learning to
be, I don’t know what the word would be, at peace with yourself, is it
counterproductive?

DR RAO Let me backtrack a bit. Though I started off as a Physics major and
then I switched to business, I’ve always been very, very, very for the
poetry. I love Shakespeare and the romantics, Byron, Shelley, Blake,
Wordsworth. If you look at their lives, many of them led very
miserable lives. Beethoven was deaf. Michelangelo was bossed
around by unsympathetic popes. Da Vinci was ostracized and
humiliated because of his sexual orientation.

If you look on all of these people, they had in many instances lives
which we would look at and say, “Hey, they were miserable,” but out
of that, they produced enduring masterpieces of poetry and literature
and sculpture and music that centuries later, still give pleasure to
many. I think that they are to be applauded for their ability to
literally transform and sublime their sorrow and agony [00:08:00]
but the point is, is that necessary?

I have a question for you and everybody who’s listening. Would you
rather be pushed by great pain or pulled by grand vision? There’s a
lot of trivial question. Each person has to answer it for himself or
herself. Would you rather be pushed by great pain or pulled by grand
vision? I would submit that it’s better to be pulled by grand vision
than pushed by great pain.

DANNY Obviously, hearing this, it sounds like a no brainer. If you have to
choose between grand inspiring vision and great and destructive
pain, of course you want the vision if the output is the same but that
being said, frankly not everyone has grand vision. I had a great
conversation with a friend of mine just a couple days ago and he’s an
executive coach. His focus is helping people get things done.
His take on it is that a big part of the challenge is that for the first decades of life, we’re put in environments where success or failure is evaluated and rewarded or punished by external sources, by third parties. We’re taught not to self-motivate, not to be the driving force for ourselves. Is it easier to be driven by a sense of something missing than it is to be inspired by a grand vision?

DR RAO That is a very good question Danny and I’m not sure that I have the answer to that but what I can speak unequivocally is that grand vision is something that you can develop. That is what my program is all about because if you recognize the fundamental problem is that you don’t feel complete, that you do have the means to reach that feeling of completeness.

I don’t say you’ll become complete but that you feel headed in that direction and there is a pretty clear path to doing it and while you are doing that, you can also accomplish all of the great things that you are capable of. When you accomplish all of the great things that you’re capable of from the point of view of you are the instrument as opposed to you are the doer and when you do that, you can actually do a heck of a lot more.

DANNY Explain that distinction to me because I’m not sure I get it.

DR RAO Here is something. Let’s say Gandhi for example. No. Let’s back off even more. Let’s say what are you really here in life to do? That’s a pretty fundamental question. If you ask it for most people, they’ll answer it in a bunch of ways. I want to be a good father. I want to be a good husband. I want to be a good parent and then, I want to build the best business, the biggest business. I want to make X amount of money, et cetera, et cetera.

That’s what they say that they’re doing. What’s really happening underneath that? Take the example of a father playing with his child. The child really wants Cops and Robbers. The father is getting in and
playing Cops and Robbers with his child. On the surface, they’re just playing but what’s happening below the surface, what’s happening below the surface is that the father is bonding with his son.

Even below that, it’s possible the father is transmitting values to his son with simple questions. “Hey, why should bad guys be put away? Why should you capture bad guys?” That goes as I’m thinking in terms of what are the roles in society and so on. There’s many things happening at different levels there. Correct?

DANNY Absolutely.

DR RAO In exactly the same way, as you go through life, you are running a business, you are being a father or in your particular case, father-to-be, you are a husband and all of that is going on. Underneath that, the only thing you are doing, the only thing you ever do in life is you work on yourself. All of the things that I mentioned, your role as a husband, your role as a father, your role as someb — be, you are a husband and all of that is going on. Underneath that, the only thing you are doing, the only thing you ever do in life is you work on yourself. All of the things that I mentioned, your role as a husband, your role as a father, your role as somebody who founded and runs a business, your role as a boss to your employees, all of those are tools that you use to work on yourself.

You do the very best job that you possibly can as you see it at that point in each one of these roles because in the process of doing that, you are working on yourself but the only thing you ever do in life is you work on yourself. If the only thing you do in life is ever work on yourself, all of these things that you would portray as great sorrow really don’t become that unpleasant because this is simply part of your training in life and your objective is to learn the lesson as fast as you can.

Once you’ve learned the lesson, you then apply it in your life but it really doesn’t matter whether you get great sorrow or great joy because you are the same either way. When you truly have that attitude, you don’t view yourself as an individual ego. I am Danny Iny doing all of these things. You know you’re Danny. God bless the role of Danny Iny and you’re going through life and doing the best you
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can but something, call it universe, call it God, whatever, is acting through you and responsible for all of that. You job is to be the best God instrument you possibly can and take that feeling of doer-ship out of you.

DANNY I have seven different categories of questions like directions I could go in right now.

DR RAO Absolutely. Go over them.

DANNY The first thought that comes to me, just an observation, I tend to be a very ... I’d like to think of myself at least as a fairly hard fact grounded evidence based guy. I know that at least some of the people who follow and will be listening to this, they fall into that same category and they might be hearing this and thinking, “Well, this sounds like woo-woo, airy-fairy kind of stuff.”

DR RAO Absolutely.

DANNY At the same time, I’m reminding myself that, wait a minute, this is what you teach and what is one of the most highly rated and celebrated courses in some of the top business schools in the world like Columbia and the London School of Economics and Kellogg and so forth. How did that happen? How did you write up ... I don’t know the processes but how did you write up a syllabus or something and show this to a dean of a business school and have them say, “Yeah, that’s a great idea. Let’s add this to our curriculum”?

DR RAO No. What actually happened is that I wrote up the syllabus and much of what I teach is contrary to the ethos of business schools which may be part of the reason why I’m not teaching at business schools anymore. The first time I entered into a business school in a new class, I would be greeted with lots of people who were downright skeptical. In fact, they’d already made up their minds that, “Hey, you
know, this is probably utter crap but at the same time, this guy has received some of the highest ratings any professor ever has and I’ve got friends who took the course and they rave about it so let me check it out to be safe.”

DANNY Boy, that’s later. Once you’ve delivered the course a bunch of times and people love it, it’s easier to overcome that hurdle. How did you do it the first time? How did you fill that first class?

DR RAO What happened in the first class is my class was unusual in the sense that it was the only class at Columbia even from the very first time I offered it where you couldn’t decide you wanted to take the class, you had to apply and be accepted into it. The application required a bunch of essays and personal recommendations and stuff like that. What happened is the syllabus was written in such a manner that people took it and then you instantly … This is something I’ve got to take or there’s no way I’m going to take tat.

There is a small group of people who recognized that this is exactly what they had been waiting for their entire lives and they’ve loved it. That became my core group. My syllabus is actually the biggest calling card was when people take it, it appeals to them something at a deep level. Even they can’t explain why but it has a ring of truth to them.

DANNY You’ve had a lot of very accomplished people go through this program. I don’t want to focus so much on the program so much as the ideas that you’ve developed that you share with them. When people internalize this insight that it’s not about chasing after some external marker of feeling complete but rather working on yourself and finding more joys in the work that you do, what happens? If someone goes through this and it works, what happens?

DR RAO What happens in most cases is they continue chasing what they were chasing before and they are much, much more successful than they
were before but what has changed is they still continue the chase but they don’t continue the chase with the feeling that if I succeed, I will then be happy. They continue the chase by this is what I always want to do and I’m going to do it. In the meantime, in their happiness, I’m going to be doing other work.

That produces marvelous results. You become much, much more effective in what it is you normally do. At the same time, you don’t have these sinusoidal transitions from elation to despair that is so much a part of us when we are totally goal obsessed.

DANNY That’s fascinating. The re-imagination of business that’s happening here is that effectiveness doesn’t come from, I guess what you’d almost call like a drive to achieve because you feel something’s missing, working what would seem very counterintuitive but working on yourself and …

DR RAO Yes. It is counterintuitive. By the way, this is completely contrary to what we are indoctrinated into as a society. We’re conditioned to believe that you’ve got to go out and achieve and the way to achieve is to desperately want it and so on. What I’m putting is something which is totally contrary to that.

DANNY Not to trivialize what you cover or the work that you do but for someone who’s listening to this who’s just like most people, who encountered this idea, they’re skeptical, they’re like, “Okay, sounds nice but let’s be realistic,” is there an exercise or an example you can share of something people can do that you explain it in five minutes, they go do it in a day, they’re like, “Hey, wow. This actually worked”? 

DR RAO I’ll give you two examples. Number one, for anybody who’s listening, here’s an exercise they can do and it’s very simple. Basically, what I invite them to do is sit down in a very comfortable armchair. Relax preferably with the back straight and the spine erect both feet on the ground. For half an hour, do absolutely nothing. When I say do
absolutely nothing, I mean do absolutely nothing.

There are some things which are specifically precluded. You’re precluded, for example, from thinking about your next project or what you have to accomplish or planning your next novel. Don’t drift off into a sexual fantasy [00:20:00]. Simply observe your mind thinking. You will be amazed with how totally restless you’ve become, this feeling of, “Oh my god, I’m wasting my time. What am I doing just sitting down quietly?” and all of the crap that literally gushes out and envelopes you. Most people have great difficulty in managing five minutes, let alone a half hour.

DANNY I can attest to that by the way. I’ve tried this on various occasions. I say I’m terrible in meditating but it’s very challenging.

DR RAO Here is my question. If you can’t sit down quietly by yourself for a half hour, how much freedom do you really have? This goes back actually to a French philosopher called Pascal. Pascal was a scientist as well as a philosopher and he made a statement which is profoundly true. That is all of the problems of man are caused by the fact that he is unable to sit quietly in a room by himself.

DANNY That is very profound.

DR RAO That’s exercise number one. Exercise number two is we have in any given class, I have ... They’ll be somewhere between 10% and 40% of people who have difficulty sleeping at night. I have an exercise which has 100% record of solving this particular problem. What most of us do is we spend an enormous amount of time focusing on the two, three or four things that are wrong in our lives or more precisely on the two, three or four things that we think are wrong in our lives and totally ignoring the 40, 50 or 60 things that are actually pretty damn good about it.

I invite you to flip that around. Before you go to bed, think about all
the things in your life that are really good. Now, I and most of the people who come to my program, and I’d mentioned this too, probably most of the people who are listening to this program or part of your list are the kinds of people who live in their heads. We’re all thinking beings and thoughts are very important to us.

For people who live in their heads, this exercise is a little challenging because you’re used to thinking gratitude rather than feeling gratitude. We might have to work a little so that it becomes a feeling rather than a thinking. You can’t make a checklist and say good health, check, roof over my head, check, foot to eat, check. You can’t do that. You actually have to experience the gratitude that comes from all of the things that you have in your life. Once you do that, go to sleep.

DANNY  Wait. How? How do you do that?

DR RAO  There are many ways. First of all, you begin by thinking it. As you begin by thinking it, think back to your time, any time in your life where you were overcome with involuntary gratitude. Think back to sometime maybe in your life that you were confronted with a scene of such spectacular beauty that it took you outside, you marveled one thing self into a place of great God and serenity. Try to reimagine that vividly and let that feeling arise in you again.

Keep doing that with different things that have happened in your life. Say, your father gave you a present and you’re really young and you really felt deep gratitude. Play around with it till whatever method works for your happens but if you keep around with it and start impressing upon yourself that it is not the thinking but the feeling, sooner or later, you’ll find the click and you’ll find that it does happen.

For some people, it takes longer than others but persistence is what matters. Do it five minutes before you go to bed but it’s going to be the last thing. When your head hits the pillow, it’s got to be with that
feeling of appreciation and gratitude. In fact, one of the most common complaints, complaints and quotes I get is Professor Rao started an exercise and I could never finish it because I fell asleep.

DANNY  Which is perfect.

DR RAO  Which is perfect. Now, when you get up in the morning, don’t go immediately into the space of, “Oh, my God, there’s too much to do and I don’t have enough time to do it all which is where most of us go very soon.

DANNY  Yeah, I’m guilty.

DR RAO  Instead, even when you’re lying in bed, bring up that feeling of appreciation, gratitude and revel in it for five minutes. Then, get up and start your day. At selected times during the day, recall deliberately that feeling of appreciation and gratitude and be in it for a minute or two minutes.

Eventually the point is you want to get to the point where your default emotional domain is appreciation and gratitude because here’s a funny thing. When you’re being appreciative and grateful, you don’t have time to be worried, you don’t have time to be fearful, you don’t have time to be anxious and all the rest of the places that we spend too much in. It’s a very powerful antidote. It’s very simple and anybody listening can start trying it in their own lives and see the impact it has. I tell you, the impact is profound.

DANNY  This is actually a practice that I’ve engaged in for quite some time. I measure it in many months, not many years but still that’s quite some time relatively speaking. I can attest it’s incredibly powerful. It’s much more powerful than you would expect from hearing it described without having experienced it.
I want to do the big picture in the time that we have left. The people who I think you’ve described as having internalized and implemented all this, the best day, they are driven by a grand vision. What’s yours?

DR RAO  My grand vision is I want to see a world where ... By the way, I am a big believer in business. I think that the major social problems in the world can only be solved by business because not-for-profits are too small and too disorganized. Government sure is really ain’t going to do it. Business is the only institution that has both the resources, both the financial resources and the intelligence and manpower resources to do it.

I see a world where people get up in the morning and they want to go to work as opposed to, “Oh god, it’s Monday.” Especially do I want to see it in large corporations because in my experience, many of our largest corporations are pretty toxic places to be in. The only way this is going to happen is if we change the metrics by which we define success.

We can’t talk about maximization of shareholder value or earnings and revenues targets and things like that because nobody gets up in the morning all excited about the part he’s going to maximize shareholder value. Business has to stand for something which is concrete and which betters a community in some way. It has to have a purpose which brings a greater good to a greater community. This has to be real and sincere, has to solve some social problem.

When that is so, people who are working within and with the corporation get energized because you are appealing to something which is bigger than they are and leading on a grand vision. That is the world I see. I think that the way to achieve that is to affect the consciousness of people in a senior position in the company because when they have this transition, it ripples out.

My grand vision is I’m going to continue to work with senior executives and entrepreneurs and get as many of them to make a
transformation and when they do that, it will ripple out into their companies, into their families. Who knows how long and how far those ripples will travel? That is my grand vision. That’s why I do what I do. That’s why I get up in the morning. That’s why I write books and do podcast like this one.

DANNY I can say pretty much the same thing. Like Srikumar, I believe in a business world that is more contributive and rewarding to everyone that’s a part of it. If you feel the same way, remember that the re-imagination of our world really starts with each of us. Practice gratitude and let your work be driven by grand vision. If you’d like to learn more about Srikumar’s work and the creativity and personal mastery training that he teaches, visit theraoinstitute.com. That’s the-R-A-O-institute.com.

Voiceover We hope you’re enjoying our new podcast. You can help us reach more people so take a moment to subscribe and leave a review, and we’ll mention a new reviewer every week.

DANNY Today’s reviewer is MTN History who says, “This is one of the smartest and most thoughtful podcast I’ve listened to. Danny has emerged as the Oprah of biz interviewers with his thoughtful interview style and careful selection of guests. I could listen to Danny talk to his guests all day and look forward to many more shows.”

Thank you very much Mountain History. I’m blushing a little bit. Honestly, I could keep talking to a lot of our guests for days because they’re just that interesting. I’m so glad that you’re enjoying what they have to share.

Voiceover This has been Business Reimagined with Danny Iny. Join us next time as we talk with Gini Dietrich.

GINII DIETRICH A friend of mine pulled me aside after a meeting about two years ago and he said, “Are you lonely?” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “You’re paving the way and you’ve got one lantern. There isn’t anybody following you and there probably won’t be for a couple of
years.” At the time, I thought, “Well, that’s strange but he’s right.”

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