

IIIT-Delhi journey so far and some life lessons

Dear Graduates: It is my pleasure to now speak for a few minutes with you. I usually share some ideas which may be useful in your life. As this is my last convocation speech as Director, I thought I will talk about the decade long IIIT-Delhi journey, and some life lessons from it.

Focus on creating / generating value.

I have always believed that organizations and individuals are valued by society and people based on the value they deliver. At IIIT-Delhi, we maintain a sharp focus on delivering value in whatever we do. In courses, we ensure that there are good conceptual learning as well as actual engineering capability development, in research we focus on publishing in good quality venues and impact, in our infrastructure management we ensure that things like STP are actually working, etc,

It is an easier path to just work without focusing on outcomes, or just manage the perception by talking loudly about whatever one has done or even not done. But in the long run, the focus on value delivery will always pay. For IIIT-Delhi, this focus has already shown good results – our graduates get good opportunities in jobs as well as higher studies, our faculty is highly respected, and now we have been included in BRICS rankings as well.

So, the first life lesson from our journey is that you must always deliver value to the organization you work for, including your own start-up. Never lose sight of this, and more importantly never rely on short cuts for “managing the perception” of value, which are inevitably short lived.

You can achieve a lot

There is no doubt that at IIIT Delhi we have achieved a lot in 10 years. Let me highlight some;

- From one floor in library building in Dwarka to a campus that Hon’ble CM said is of one of the most beautiful he has seen
- From an intake of 60 to more than 600 this year overall.
- From 1 program to 6 programs of Btech, 8 specializations in MTech
- From 1 faculty to over 75 including visiting
- A strong Phd program with over 160 scholars, bigger than even the older IITs in CSE

When I look at IIIT Delhi today and what we have, it is quite remarkable actually. If you ask me whether this is what I had imagined – absolutely not. In all honesty, if I was asked that this is what we have to build in 10 years – not clear I would have taken up the challenge. I suppose the same is true for all colleagues who joined in early stages. We all had a vision of creating an institution that is globally respected for research as well as education and some plans, but the actual achievement was done through steady contribution year after year towards the vision.

So, the second life lesson is that you keep chipping away, keep contributing, keep growing, and over the years you can achieve a lot. Actually a lot more than what you can imagine today.

Effort and Support from Colleagues and Family

But to do this – you have to put in the requisite effort, and you also need support from colleagues and family. There is no gain or achievement without effort. Yes, luck matters, but the main determinant which is in your control which influences the outcomes is your effort. You have to put in solid effort on an ongoing basis to achieve success – and you have to seek support from colleagues by leading by example. For the first many years I routinely worked at night from home and over weekends – it is only now that I had started reducing my effort to allow me some time for my innings after the current one as founding Director of IIT Delhi gets over. And I know many of my faculty colleagues often put in 10 to 15 hour days often. Our team involved with campus construction and running often put in long hours.

Clearly this is not possible without strong support from your family. In my case, it was clear that my mindshare for family matters had reduced considerably. Once when I noted that I am usually home at night, my wife rightfully observed that “while you are physically here, your mind is in IIT-Delhi”.

The third lesson is, that effort matters hugely. Do not rely on luck – rely on your effort. Hopefully, luck will also come as the famous quote by Jefferson says “The harder I work the more luck I have”. And seek support from your family and colleagues.

Innovate in your sphere – there is always room.

In 2008 perhaps a dozen new Institution started by Govt. At IIT Delhi we have perhaps innovated the most. Let me give some examples:

- Admission – while we adopted the common exam JEE, we innovated by recognizing achievements beyond a single exam by having the framework of bonus marks. This has worked very well and is something that I hope can get replicated.
- In our course design and teaching – we have added post conditions, expected outcomes, etc, to make education learning focused rather than teaching focused.
- For faculty we have system of yearly feedback, tenure, etc, to help them achieve their potential
- We were perhaps the first govt institution to actually hold full faculty selections overseas
- Our campus management has many innovations – e.g. using FMS, BMS, etc

The point is that we are also within the same overall environment as other institutions – but we have innovated in many aspects. And let me assure you that innovation is badly needed in higher education in our country.

So, the fourth lesson is that regardless of what is your job or the environment, there is always scope for innovation and we must innovate. In this fast changing world, those who will not innovate will not survive long. And individuals who will drive innovation will be valued more and more.

Positivity

Cynicism and negativity are easy – it is very easy to find faults and problems, and blame others or the systems for the situation. And our evolution has ensured that our minds are more tuned to receive and believe negative news and views. All of you must have faced all kinds of negativity being promoted by people – about the world, country, an institution, etc.

At various stages we had people who would paint a strongly negative future. And I recall, in many cases it bothered me for days – trying to solve problems that perhaps existed more in the negative person’s mind. I have learned that to counter the attraction towards negativity, we have to rely more on your own independent analysis. If you read the book Factfulness, you will see how we are biased towards negativity and how we can use facts and data to counter this tendency and see the positivity. For your own personal happiness also, positivity is the most important habit that you can cultivate – there is strong research to support this.

So the fifth lesson is, for your happiness and success, cultivate positivity, challenge negativity by checking facts and doing your own analysis, and associate with positive people.

Have a higher purpose

Let me now suggest perhaps a philosophy of living, which may not be relevant in the immediate future, but is indeed an important life lesson.

Clearly our journey has not been all smooth. There have been periods of stress and distress. There are continuous challenges in trying to build consensus, resolve conflicts, handle special cases, etc. In such situations, there is sometimes a desire to quit, or reach a conclusion that “it is not worth it”. In these times, I reminded myself that whatever we are doing is not for me or for a few individuals – we are creating a fine institution that will help young faculty and students make their careers. This purpose, helped in weathering such periods, and also helped me in pleading our case with the various authorities for permissions for the campus construction – which greatly helped in getting the campus constructed speedily.

The life lesson is that if you have a higher purpose for what you are doing, it can help you in motivating yourself, as well as in facing adversities, which must come in the way of any worthwhile purpose.

Giving back to Society

Finally, let me end with a thought which I always end my convocation speech with. Whichever way we look, we are a privileged section of the society – there is no doubt about it. We are in the top few percent of the country with respect to our earning potential, education, etc. It is therefore incumbent upon us to give back to society, and to those who are less fortunate than us. This also enhances personal happiness and satisfaction – many experiments have shown that giving has a strong positive influence on happiness. I have met some alum, who now recall their CW experience with pride and point out the deep impact it has made. And volunteers of the summer camp we hold for government school children have also expressed that they got back much more than they gave, and that it was a lifetime experience for them.

Life is richer and more satisfying if we also engage in the act of giving back to society and helping others.

And in giving, please always consider your alma mater also, which has laid the foundations of your wonderful career ahead. I have been saying that all alumni should start giving 1-day salary a year to their alma mater as soon as they start earning, something which is like night

out with family. And gradually increase it to 1% of the yearly income. I hope you will all strive to achieve this.

Dear graduates, you have an exciting life ahead of you. You can achieve and contribute a lot by working hard, leading your life with positivity, innovating, keeping a focus on generating value and higher purposes, and seeking support from colleagues and family. In your exciting journey, do not forget to give back to society, and to your alma-mater. I wish you all the best in your career and life ahead.

Pankaj Jalote, Aug 25, 2018