

Vikas Rambal FAIM

Leadership lessons of a serial entrepreneur

By Gary Martin FAIM

Standing on a ledge overlooking a Burrup Peninsula bathed in sunshine in around 2000 made Vikas Rambal realise a vision that established him as a Western Australian industry pioneer and cemented his views on leadership.

Almost two decades on, and with his vision having evolved into a world-scale fertiliser plant, Mr Rambal is headed back to the Burrup, near Karratha in the Pilbara, with the latest chapter of his entrepreneurial ambition: developing a urea plant using the abundance of gas off Western Australia's coast.

Mr Rambal's Perdaman Group has signed a memorandum of understanding with proposed gas supplier Woodside Petroleum and is well advanced in discussions with the State Government about securing a site on the Burrup that will house the project.

With a mooted capital cost of at least US\$3.3 billion (\$4.4 billion), this urea project is not for the faint hearted. Nor will it be easy work.

But, as Mr Rambal recounts, he is used to facing off with sceptics who believe his ambitions are far-fetched dreams that will never see the light of day. And it is not deterring him from his vision to create a global diversified company based in Perth with investments in the property, solar, chemical, business services and pharmaceutical sectors.

His entrepreneurial journey took a giant leap when he arrived in Western Australia around 2000, aged 28, for a fact-finding mission on a solar project. Instead he devised the strategy and executed the plan for what became a world-scale fertiliser plant on the Burrup, operated today by Norwegian giant Yara.

Few believed back then that he could secure the all-important gas supply deal to underpin the liquid ammonia processing plant, and then secure the funding necessary for the plant's construction.

"They (executives from the then-WA Department of Resource Development) asked me if I could do the project and I said 'yes, I can'," Mr Rambal recalls.

"And then I stayed (in WA) for four weeks and we did a (gas supply) deal with Apache. That's my entrepreneurship."

The Burrup plant became the world's largest and highest-tech fertiliser manufacturing operation, not to mention one of the biggest resources projects ever undertaken

in Western Australia, and to this day remains a highly successful operation for its current owners. It also put on the map the potential for WA to house a downstream processing industry based on its gas riches.

Mr Rambal's involvement with the Burrup plant ended when he and his subsequent business partner Pankaj Oswal ended a lengthy legal battle in 2007 with a confidential settlement.

You should never say 'never', and you should not doubt your vision.

But as the saying could go, once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur.

And so it proved with Mr Rambal as he turned his attention to real estate including regional shopping centres, immigration services and, of course, the urea project.

Originally slated for Collie, to be fed by the nearby coal fields, Mr Rambal's project was left without a feed stock when a proposed supply deal with Lanco Infratech fell over.

Frustrated yet undeterred, Mr Rambal shifted the urea project location to the Burrup, a sort-of back-to-the-future moment in a region he knows only too well.

MAKING AN ENTREPRENEUR

How did a trained chemical engineer, whose first job post-university back in India was with the local offshoot of petroleum giant Shell, develop his entrepreneurial streak?

As Mr Rambal explains, the graduate program at Bharat Petroleum provided a perfect "holistic insight into engineering, in that they trained you in refinery, management and how management works".

"During that process, I found out one of the reasons I was a misfit in that organisation was because you needed to spend three years in this position, then you had to go the next six years, so your promotion was not linked to your performance, your promotion was linked to a system, and in my first year of training with them I thought – and I never thought I'd be an entrepreneur at that time – if I want to be a general manager, it will take me 15 to 20 years," he said.

"So that's the reason I left that company after one year, and that was my starting point to entrepreneurship."

"I was selected by Deepak Fertilizers in Mumbai, which at the time was one of the very big fertiliser companies in India. I quickly progressed from shift supervisor to controlling the ammonia plant there. So that was a big change. I was working for the (plant general) manager and we used to run the shifts 24 hours. It was a continuous plant like Burrup, but with older technology.

"I was learning so much that at the end of the third year I said to the boss that I was resigning. He asked why and I said I was going to work for a company (now known as Krihbco Shyam Fertilizers) in India's north, near Delhi.

"He asked what they were doing and I said they were starting construction of the Shahjahanpur plant in Uttar Pradesh.

"My boss at Deepak said he would give me double the salary and a huge promotion, but I said I was so thankful and I had gotten what I wanted out of the company. Basically, I was leaving the city and moving to a village.

"I called my dad and said I've got this opportunity, they're saying the plant is in construction and I really want that construction experience. That was my journey – to leave a promotion and then go back to a sub-regional centre to commission a fertiliser plant."

In Mr Rambal's eyes, it proved a defining moment, but also an apt point to look back at his decision-making since leaving university. Whatever potential for entrepreneurship had been bubbling away within a restless Mr Rambal, it affirmed itself after stints experiencing the full spectrum of the industrial process – studies, construction and commissioning – and arriving in WA.

WHAT IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO

"I took opportunities as they came," Mr Rambal said.

"But one thing was for sure – and I want everyone to learn from this – I was never distracted from a vision."

And that, perhaps, is Mr Rambal's biggest learning and the one he is most keen to pass on to other budding leaders and entrepreneurs.

Develop your vision, make sure it is realistic and stick to that vision.

"If you want to be an entrepreneur, the money should follow you, not the other

way around," he said.

"You should never say 'never', and you should not doubt your vision.

"You have to follow your passion and the creation will follow – 100 per cent.

"The most important part of your vision should be to be honest with your vision, be patient and listen to people with different dynamics.

If you want to be an entrepreneur, the money should follow you, not the other way around.

"I listen to all. I may not agree with them, but I listen. Not everyone can be a leader, so you have to take the best of everyone and assist and grow that vision."

Mr Rambal said he was a hands-on leader, but based success on "how many people I can employ and how many young people I can mentor to become good leaders".

His typical day at Perdaman Group, his overarching family company named in honour of his father Perdaman Rambal, starts at 5.30am with a gym session before he arrives at his St Georges Terrace office by 8.30am. He tries to be home with his wife and two sons by 6pm, though that is governed by "when the work is done".

"My day doesn't start with a timesheet, it starts with an agenda of what I want to achieve," he said.

Communication features high on the agenda, making sure the Perdaman team is on the same page, united and aware of the vision and progress made.

Also included on the agenda is that every day in the office Mr Rambal spends 15 minutes to half an hour with a member of the Perdaman family to have a coffee and "talk about life", ambitions and professional growth opportunities.

Mr Rambal said he was immensely proud to see some of his long-term staff become leaders in their own right, including at other organisations.

"Be realistic with your aim, and once you have the aim, create a vision and a time plan and a story board, and don't change. Don't change it every morning, stick with it," he said.

