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MBS ([00:00](#)):

Have you ever felt a victim of your own success? Or perhaps better put, a victim of your own reputation? You become known for something, an expertise or an experience or a moment. You claim it perhaps as some personal brand and then people assume that it about you, the sum total. How do you keep confounding others expectations of you? And perhaps more importantly, how do you keep confounding your own expectations of yourself? Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. The podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that's moved them, a book that has shaped them.

MBS ([00:47](#)):

Dr. Vikram Mansharamani is the author of Think for Yourself: Restoring Common Sense in an Age of Experts and Artificial Intelligence. He's lectured at



Harvard and Yale. He's a LinkedIn top voice around finance and economics. So he knows a bit about building a reputation. But when he describes himself, it's not his expertise that he focuses upon.

Vikram ([01:11](#)):

I think of myself very simply as a global generalist. And by that, I mean, I don't like being put in a box. By that I mean, I don't want to be thought of as just an academic, because I'm also a non-academic. Some people have called me a pracademic because I try to be practical while also being an academic. And so I tried to cross silos, if you will. But that makes me self-described as a global generalist because I take a big picture view across industry sectors and functions.

MBS ([01:41](#)):

That's a tough stance to take when the world around us constantly wants us to be neatly categorized and predictable. And the pressure to be that way causes many to conform, but not this man. Vikram believes that, yes, deep focus is powerful, but also risk generating broad ignorance. So here's his plan.

Vikram ([02:02](#)):

I have conscientiously worked on becoming a multi-disciplinary person. And that means that the way I've resisted the boxes is going into a box, jumping out going to another box, jumping out, going to another box, and not feeling overly comfortable in any box. And I find that's the value in my approach.

MBS ([02:22](#)):

Well, that jumping in and jumping out, doesn't that destroy focus? Or maybe just, you simply end up collecting a whole lot of boxes. But Claude Debussy the composer, said, "Music is the space between the notes." I think Vikram has a similar perspective on what's useful here.



Vikram ([02:42](#)):

When you move from box to box, what you find is, the real value, at least as I see it, is in the connections. It's in the connective tissue that connects across or within silos. So if we're looking at something, and I'm looking at it through an economic lens, I might see something. If I look at it through a political lens, I might see something else. But when I look and see how politics and economics interact, to produce the outcome, I may get a third and possibly more useful insight. And so what I find is, there's plenty of dots and there's great expertise at developing those dots and generating dots. And what we've lost I think, as a society, in general, is the ability to connect those dots. And so the dot connecting ability requires some appreciation, maybe not expertise, but an appreciation for the language and knowledge of what resides within different silos so that you can connect them.

MBS ([03:43](#)):

One of the first boxes Vikram jumped into was finance and financial bubbles in particular. He was the youngest intern ever at Bear Stearns at the age of 15. I don't know what you were doing at 15. But I wasn't being an intern at Bear Stearns. As young as he was, Vikram was a sponge that soaked up everything and questioned everything.

Vikram ([04:04](#)):

I watched Japan, go up into this bubble and burst. And then I went back to... I was in high school at the time. I said, "Wait, hold on a sec. Markets are efficient? Wait, no." Then I went to college. I learned markets are efficient. And then I watched the Asian financial crisis. I said, "Wait, markets are efficient? They don't seem efficient." And then I watched the internet bubble. And then I watched the global financial crisis. And I said, "What?" And so I knew that there was something missing when an economist is telling me prices are correct, markets



are efficient. And then when you connect the dots to a psychologist who says, "Well, people are irrational." Of course, they are. I said, "Wait, hold on a sec, I can understand this complex, uncertain phenomenon, a financial bubble by only really connecting the dots. It's impossible to truly appreciate or understand the nuances or complexities without connecting the dots."

MBS ([04:57](#)):

And in the work you do, because as you say you are a pracademic, I love that term. So it's not just you're in your own Harvard or Yale ivory tower, but you're out there working with CEOs and business leaders and the like. How do you help them make the connections because when you talk about it like this, everyone's nodding. I mean, nobody disagrees with the value of doing that. But there's a resistance reality. How do you help people overcome that resistance?

Vikram ([05:29](#)):

Sure. I'll give you a great example, one that I'm allowed to talk about, because I cleared it through their corporate compliance department, et cetera. And also, what's lovely about it is they allowed me to write it up in my most recent book as well. But I did some work for one of America's largest and oldest companies was a company called United Technologies. It was a conglomerate, 100 plus year old company that had iconic brands, such as Carrier for the air conditioning, Otis for the elevators, Pratt & Whitney for aircraft engines, et cetera. This was an iconic company and I had gotten to know their CEO and their board relatively well, Greg Hayes, a truly impressive executive.

Vikram ([06:15](#)):

He said to me, he says, "Look, I've got all these people around the table, suggesting I should be breaking up this business. How should I think about this?" And ultimately, he retained me to tell him why not to do it. And the insight here is, I believe every single perspective is limited, biased, and incomplete. So you



want to get more perspectives. And it reminds me a little bit of that Alfred Sloan story. Alfred Sloan, the legendary CEO and chairman of General Motors, walked into a room and was trying to make a tough decision. And I think he looks around and everyone's nodding their head like these bobble heads sometimes in boardrooms do and he says, "Okay, gentlemen..." I'm paraphrasing. "Okay, gentlemen, I see we're in this complete agreement. I think we should therefore adjourn, until we can develop some disagreement and actually understand the issue that we're discussing, because without disagreement, you can't understand it."

MBS ([07:16](#)):

I hear that.

Vikram ([07:16](#)):

So I think sometimes the role of playing a devil's advocate is the way of providing that different perspective. So that's one way I help people think differently and for themselves.

MBS ([07:30](#)):

This reminds me a bit of Edward de Bono's [inaudible 00:07:33]. He's just died, unfortunately. But Edward de Bono had this moment of massive popularity, I think, in the late '80s, or early '90s. He faded a little bit since then, from our bookshelves. But he has a sick-hat method where he goes, "There are six different perspectives you can take on the situation and each had a different color." You have the devil's advocate hat, that would be black. And you'd have a know-it-all, go for it, Gung-Ho hat. I think that's a white hat. You'd have the facts only hat, that was the green hat maybe. You have feelings hat, maybe I'm not sure what color that was. But different perspectives there just to get out of the compliance, pseudo rational way that so many of us approach decision-making, which is like, "It's better if I don't actually make ripples here."



Vikram ([08:23](#)):

Yep. That's right. In fact, the controversy produces, I think better decisions.

MBS ([08:27](#)):

Vikram, how about this, it's all well and good to be an academic or be an outsider and come in and be able to provoke and offer different perspectives. But it can somehow feel like a career limiting move if you're actually within the organization. How do you help people make connections, push back against the prevailing groupthink, if that's what's going on in a way that doesn't have them become the pariah in their own organization, a scapegoat because I feel like I've done that. I've been the pariah, I've been the scapegoat.

Vikram ([09:00](#)):

Yeah. It's interesting. I mean, usually, the advice I give is to the senior executives about how to produce an environment in which you are not filtered in terms of the information that bubbles up to you. CEOs often live in a bubble of misinformation. And in fact, I'll give you a great little story, which I think captures the essence of this. One of the executives I got to know very well was Gary Loveman. Gary Loveman was a former Harvard Business School professor who became Chief Executive Officer of Harrah's Entertainment, which became Caesars Entertainment and went through a buyout with a private equity firm, filed bankruptcy. He's had his trajectory but an insightful operating executive. And one story he shared with me 15, 20 years ago, was Harrah's Entertainment was a completely... I maybe getting... either Pepsi or Coca-Cola company. Let's just say it was Pepsi.

Vikram ([09:58](#)):

So it was Pepsi products throughout their entire enterprise. Everywhere they went, they had no Coca-Cola products, except Gary loved Diet Coke. So Gary



would bring Diet Coke, put it in a brown bag and keep it in his CEO's office in a little corner. And he's fine, company's Pepsi. "I'm all Pepsi everywhere in public, but I got the Diet Coke." And he goes to a board meeting and in the middle of this board meeting, surrounded by the executives of this team and senior leaders, board members, everyone's in the boardroom. This waiter comes in with a silver platter with Diet Coke on it and brings it to him. At which point he says, "That's it, stop, just stop. I don't need people feeding me what they think I want. I want real information, how deep is this problem? Let's evaluate and figure it out."

Vikram ([10:44](#)):

So what I'm getting at, a long-winded way to describe it is, I think there, you have to set the conditions for people to feel safe to disagree. You have to set the conditions for that. And one way to do so is to actually appoint a person as your devil's advocate. It's your job, Michael, this week to play the devil's advocate or for this decision, to play devil's advocate. We're not judging you, this was your job. You're not the disruptor, you're not the fly in the ointment. You are in fact doing your job. We need this perspective. Next project might be someone else. But it gives psychological safety and cover for that person.

MBS ([11:25](#)):

I like that. Slightly related, it's not exactly the same as when two people are having these arguments. And there's a way of getting them to flip and defend the other person's argument and argue against themselves as a way of creating a robustness to the thinking. And there's a similar idea that I've heard which is we've got to bring conflict out, controlled conflict to test the edges and push fingers into the soft spaces.

Vikram ([11:54](#)):



Yeah, so it's great. But one of the things I do in my class is we'll occasionally have debates set up. And I'll say, "Okay, next week, we're going to discuss this topic, and we're going to discuss pro and con. And you students, you will get assigned, which side when you arrive in class. So prepare for both." You see, if you don't know what you're preparing for, you prepare for both sides, and you appreciate the problem.

MBS ([12:19](#)):

Yeah, that's really clever. Vikram, tell us what book you've chosen for us.

Vikram ([12:25](#)):

All right. Great question. I decided to go a little bit back in history, if it's okay with you.

MBS ([12:32](#)):

Oh good-

Vikram ([12:33](#)):

As long as you don't mind. It's a classic book. It's a little bit older, 1969 book called The Peter Principle-

MBS ([12:42](#)):

Brilliant.

Vikram ([12:43](#)):

... recently republished, I think, in paperback, probably 1990-something, I forget. But it's a classic management book. I chose what I think are the two pages that capture the essence of the Peter Principle logic. And we'll then tie it to whatever you want. That's what I chose.

MBS ([13:06](#)):



Before you read the two pages, how did you come across this book? And why did it have such an impact on you?

Vikram ([13:13](#)):

Sure. I got *The Peter Principle* on the recommendation of one of my colleagues when I was studying for my PhD at MIT. Professors tend to have older books in their office. And so I was about to get on a plane to go to Las Vegas. And I was going to Las Vegas for my research on my dissertation. I had done some work on Harrah's Entertainment and I was flying out to meet some Harrah's executives. And I was in one of these professors offices, and he says, "Have you read *The Peter Principle*?" I was like, "No." He's like, "It's right there, grab it." And I took it with me. And, Michael, on the plane, it was a 7:38 o'clock pm flight out of Boston gets in at midnight, Vegas times, like 3:00 AM Eastern Time, everyone's asleep on the plane.

MBS ([13:58](#)):

Sure.

Vikram ([13:58](#)):

I'm up. And I'm laughing and laughing out loud to the point where the flight attendant's like, "What are you reading? Is that a humor book?" And I was like, "No, it's a management book." She's like, "What?" I was like, "Yeah, don't worry about it. It's just a management book." And she's like, "You're laughing like you're reading the funniest thing you've ever read." I was like, "It's pretty funny, actually." So it made an impression. I haven't forgotten it since. And I've recommended it. And after we go through it, I'll tell you a really funny story. What I've done is, I often send copies of the book to my friends, former clients when they get promoted. And for those that don't know the story as to what the Peter Principle is, it'll make more sense after I read about it. But if you know the story, you understand why that's a little poking.



MBS ([14:50](#)):

Look, I'm excited to hear it. Take it away.

Vikram ([14:57](#)):

"Hypothetical case file, case number one. Suppose you own a pill-rolling factory, Perfect Pill Incorporated. Your foreman-pill roller dies of a perforated ulcer. You need a replacement. You naturally look among your rank-and-file pill rollers. Miss Oval, Mrs. Cyliner, Mr. Ellipse and Mr. Cube all show various degrees of incompetence. They will naturally be ineligible for promotion. You will choose other things being equal, your most competent pill roller, Mr. Sphere and promote him to foreman. Now suppose Mr. Sphere proves competent as a foreman, later, when your general foreman, Legree, moves up to works manager, Sphere will be eligible to take his place.

Vikram ([15:48](#)):

If on the other hand Sphere is an incompetent foreman, he will get no more promotion. He has reached what I call his quote, level of incompetence quote. He will stay there till the end of his career. Some employees like Ellipse and Cube reach a level of incompetence in the lowest grade and are never promoted. Some like Sphere, assuming he is not a satisfactory foreman, reach it after one promotion. E. Tinker, the automobile repair-shop foreman reached his level of incompetence on the third stage of the hierarchy. General Goodwin reached his level of incompetence at the very top of the hierarchy. So my analysis of hundreds of cases of occupational incompetence led me to formulate The Peter Principle.

Vikram ([16:36](#)):

In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence. This is referred to as a new science. Having formulated the principle, I discovered that I



had inadvertently founded a new science, hierarchiology, the study of hierarchies. The term hierarchy was originally used to describe the system of church government by priests graded into ranks. The contemporary meaning includes any organization whose members or employees are arranged in order of rank, grade or class. Hierarchiology, although a relatively recent discipline, appears to have a great applicability to the fields of public and private administration. This means you. My principle is the key to an understanding of all hierarchical systems, and therefore to an understanding of the whole structure of civilization.

Vikram ([17:32](#)):

A few eccentrics try to avoid getting involved with hierarchies, but everyone in business, industry, trade-unionism, politics, government, the armed forces, religion, and education is so involved. All of them are controlled by The Peter Principle. Many of them to be sure, may win a promotion or two moving from one level of competence to a higher level of competence. But competence in that new position qualifies them for still another promotion. For each individual, for you, for me, the final promotion is from a level of competence to a level of incompetence. So, given enough time, and assuming the existence of enough ranks in the hierarchy, each employee rises to and remains at his level of incompetence. Peters Corollary states: 'In time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties.'

MBS ([18:43](#)):

Oh, man, it's breaking my heart hearing this because of course, I'm thinking of my own career and going, "Yep, I can see a whole lot of that in there." And then, of course, I became an entrepreneur, which I think is some modern iteration of the incompetence which you get promoted into trying to start your own business or something.



Vikram ([19:02](#)):

There you go. Well, the simple way to think about is I've run across people at even something like a Panera Bread or even a Starbucks cup. And I'm like, "Wow, this person's amazing. I should hire this person." And, of course, within a few weeks time, they're not there. They're gone because they were so good at what they did, they got recognized as such.

MBS ([19:22](#)):

Yeah. What was it in particular about this that struck a chord for you?

Vikram ([19:28](#)):

Well, obviously, there's... I love the fact that it helps explain why life and bureaucratic organizations can be so infuriating. I've spent time in large companies, et cetera. So it gives me a sense of understanding, wait, why is it that I'm so agitated by interacting with bureaucracies? That's number one. But actually, Michael, the real insight that it's had... A profound impact it's had on me has to do with focus. And we talked a little bit about this earlier, but the idea that one can be so focused on something that you missed the bigger picture. And it has to do with how we think about promoting people.

Vikram ([20:08](#)):

If you think about it, we promote people based on how they're doing in their current job, not how they may do in their next job, or the job to which you're promoting them. And so we're so focused on the evaluation of the present, that we're not willing to consider an alternative for the future. And so maybe the skills needed for the next job are totally different than the job skills you need for your existing position. And so it really is, in some ways, a matter of how much of a zoom do you have on your focus versus a wide angle lens? And I think we've gotten too zoomed in. And The Peter Principle is one example of it in action.



MBS ([20:46](#)):

So how do you balance this against something like Carol Dweck's growth mindset with the perspective that there's always a place for growth, and actually the process of life is just an ongoing series of failures. Failures that don't preclude actual progress in some way?

Vikram ([21:01](#)):

Look, I think that book's brilliant. I love Mindset. But that has to do with an individual. And so the individual, I can sit there and say, "This hasn't worked for me." And with a growth mindset, I can say, "I've learned from it, I'm going to grow. I'm going to move on and do something differently in another position, another cool company, another function, another role. Another something." The interesting thing is The Peter Principle at least is focused on a group dynamic where the promotion method is to focus and that's outside the individual, if you will. So tangential orthogonal ideas, but related.

MBS ([21:39](#)):

Okay, I get that. And that's interesting. And in fact, you talked earlier about the influence of structure around people to allow conflict or alternative points of view to arise. How do organizations help disrupt, what is it, hierology?

Vikram ([21:53](#)):

Hierarchiology.

MBS ([21:58](#)):

Have you seen organizations trying to do this differently? Because there's a way that hierarchies have a floor or a built-in feature, I guess, which just stop as soon as you become the thing that you're really good at.

Vikram ([22:10](#)):



Yeah. So I've done a lot of work with the HR departments and trying to answer this exact question, Michael. And the first thing I'll say is, there's no answer for sure. There's lots of ideas. I have mine, I have my suggestions and my thoughts as to what may work. Obviously, it's an uncertain probabilistic phenomenon. With that said, I think one of the quick changes in framing that one can make to HR departments for organizations thinking about this hierarchy logic, is to start changing how people think of their careers. We've gotten so wedded to the idea of a career ladder, that I'm climbing vertically up the ladder. The phrase I use is, why don't we think of a career jungle gym?

MBS ([22:57](#)):

Nice.

Vikram ([22:57](#)):

Maybe we go up, but then maybe you have to go over. Maybe you actually have to crawl down in order to get further over, then you go up even higher. And then you come back laterally, and then go up. Think of it as tours of duty, where you're filling out your skill set. Think of it as a tour of duty rather than I'm good here. I'll go up here. I'll go up. I'll go up. I'll go up. That may or may not work. In some places, it might work. But I would suspect from an individual perspective, a career that goes left, right, up, down laterally across geographies, across functions, maybe across organizations will prove most fulfilling and likely to help that individual excel the most.

MBS ([23:38](#)):

Yeah, I love that. I think I can see that connection to the title of your most recent book, Think for Yourself, which is to say, "Look, don't get obsessed with a single path. There are many routes to get to a more interesting destination." When you have these conversations with HR departments, and in fact, probably at a more senior level as well. What you're really trying to do is reimagine the



structure, the way power works in an organization. What do they like about the idea? And what do they resist about the idea?

Vikram ([24:13](#)):

Yeah, the resistance is always people have pre-ordained logics. So someone rose to the ranks, likely by coming up a silo, if the organization... Change is difficult, right? I mean, the person who's the CFO was previously the controller, previously, the treasurer, and previously the assistant controller, previously an accountant and previously an auditor of Big Five firm, and that's the... And so there's a pipeline. And when you make a change, what you're doing is you're trying to change the oil of a race car going around a track. It's not easy to do that.

MBS ([24:49](#)):

I love that you've got a different metaphor. That's first of all... I mean, we've all heard they're trying to build a plane while it's still flying. And first of all, it's impossible. Secondly, it's just such a tired metaphor. So I love that and explaining thinking for yourself, you've thought for yourself and come up with a different new metaphor. It's perfect.

Vikram ([25:11](#)):

You're welcome. But the point is, when you have something in process, it's hard to change it. It's hard. There's baggage, there's momentum. There's other things. So oftentimes, what I've seen work, it's worked in a couple organizations, is you say, "Okay, we're going to continue to respect those in the pipeline. But we're going to start a new executive leadership program with the recent MBA grads as they enter our program. And this is going to be thought of not as a career ladder accelerator, but as a jungle gym promoter."

Vikram ([25:40](#)):



So you're going to go from finance in this division, to marketing in that division to a different geography head. You're going to move over this country. And so of course, it takes a big, diversified company to be able to take this logic and offer it to people. But I tell people... I've done a little bit of executive coaching, not a lot but a little bit and I tell people, "Look, you can create this for yourself. You can work for one company in this function here and then change companies and functions. And if you need to change geographies, go change geographies too. You'll develop your own skill set by developing yourself holistically."

MBS ([26:15](#)):

Yeah, you're also inviting people to feel incompetent a lot of the time, because as soon as you move from one part of the jungle gym to another part of the jungle gym, just have to learn different politics, different structures, different language, different tools.

Vikram ([26:30](#)):

Yes.

MBS ([26:31](#)):

So what's your guidance to help people move through the stages of learning, unconscious incompetence, you haven't even discovered that you suck. Conscious incompetence, you realize you suck, you realize just how much you don't know. That's the moment that I think most people find most painful. That's, of course, the learning moment as well. Then you go to conscious competence, which is when you're like, "I'm getting the hang of this. And I'm okay at it." And then of course, finally, unconscious competence, which it's become a degree of mastery, and it's a so-called muscle memory.

Vikram ([27:08](#)):



Well, I think right off the bat, if you're proactive about this in your own career logic, and you know and you have a game plan that I want to change functional roles, I want to move from finance to marketing, you're probably doing that because you know that's a lacking. that's a hole in your skill set. And if you do want to be a general manager, who has the ability to have some appreciation for every silo, well, then it's important to spend time in each silo. You might need not master it. So you're already beyond the unconscious incompetence, and that you're stepping in with awareness that you don't know. In fact, that's the very reason you're going there because you're seeking out that.

MBS ([27:45](#)):

Sure.

Vikram ([27:45](#)):

What I would say is that I wouldn't belittle or downplay the value that comes with fresh eyes. There's huge value in not bringing the baggage of expertise in that domain. And in fact, some of the more insightful innovations, some of the more profound innovations, some of the more insightful changes that take place are from people who are precisely not well-steeped in the domain.

MBS ([28:12](#)):

Yeah, who go, "Wait, why are we doing this again?"

Vikram ([28:16](#)):

Yes, exactly. Right. Yeah.

MBS ([28:18](#)):

Vikram, the other tension that I see here because I agree with what you're saying, I feel like I'm a generalist myself, and you're a generalist. So we're both violently agreeing with each other in a nice piece of confirmation bias here,



which, of course, is awesome. We're generalists and so therefore, that must be great to our mutual admiration society. But then you have someone like Marcus Buckingham, who goes, "Play to your strengths. Work with your strengths. Don't try and broaden out and fix the places where you're weak, but double down and amplify your strengths, the things that you're not any good at, but which leaves you energized and amplified." How do you hold the tension between the power and the value of exposure to different ways of thinking and a broad level of learning, being a generalist, and also wanting to play to your strengths?

Vikram ([29:09](#)):

By the way, I don't think this is a binary choice people are gradations of. And in different aspects of life, you can be one and in another aspect that might be another. I can be very focused as a finance professional in a particular industry, evaluating companies in my day job, but then, when I go home, I've got to deal with a broad range of issues in personal life that involve dealing with my finance, I got to deal with medical issues. I got to deal with this issue. You got to deal with that. There's a whole swath and you might need to be a generalist in that way. I know it's easy to talk about generalists, and specialists logic as binary, but I just want to make sure that nuance doesn't get lost, that we can all be both and even to different degrees in what we do. I don't have to be overly specialized or overly generalist.

Vikram ([29:56](#)):

So I think that your word is correct. Michael, attention is the right way to think about that. And I think there's a healthy tension there. I mean, I used to talk about, it's important to have at least some depth in some area. Sometimes, oh, what you're suggesting is a T logic, broad, but I have depth in one. I said, "Yeah, but only depth in one actually doesn't qualify you to have an understanding of where that particular perspective may be lacking." So really, what I said is, "You should have two." "Okay, so this is π , the Greek letter π since you have a top that



goes broad, but then you have two things that go down vertically. You can keep going."

MBS ([30:32](#)):

Plus it's pie, and everyone loves pie. So that's good.

Vikram ([30:36](#)):

3.14, exactly.

MBS ([30:39](#)):

There you go. That's interesting. I've heard the T-shaped metaphor before. I think I heard it from IDEO, the famous big design firm. They recruit T-shaped people, deep expertise, but also some broad knowledge as well.

Vikram ([30:55](#)):

Yep, exactly.

MBS ([30:55](#)):

I like this pie thing, because I think it's true that if you've got some depth in two different subject areas, that sets up an interesting dialogue between them that gives you perspective others might not have.

Vikram ([31:08](#)):

Well, I think what it does is it also at some level, and again, fully acknowledging that I'm biased and talking to someone who's equally biased in my favorite so let's just put that on the table. But I actually think generalists end up being more open-minded. I think that's so because I know when I enter a room, I'm by definition, not going to be the smartest person. There's always people who know more about virtually everything than I do so I become a sponge. I know I can learn from every single person I interact with, because more often than not, people are deep in a particular, and so why not take that opportunity to learn



from them? And so I view it as an opportunity. I've seen other generalists take a similar approach. They're very broad in who they talk to, they learn from lots of different people in different domains. And I think that makes the whole experience richer, and therefore you end up being I think, more open-minded if you realize that you're not the expert.

MBS ([32:11](#)):

So for everyone listening, it's obvious, obvious, the generalists are smarter and better-looking and more successful, basically, glorious human beings. Take it from two generalists. But let me ask you this, Vikram. Because I think one of the things that you're pointing to about something that's essential, something that's important here is curiosity. And, of course, I find curiosity as one of the things that nobody is against in theory, but in practice, they really struggle to maintain a sense of curiosity. How do you keep nurturing your curiosity?

Vikram ([32:47](#)):

Well, so first of all, I think there are people against curiosity so let's start there.

MBS ([32:53](#)):

Sure.

Vikram ([32:53](#)):

I mean, if you're running a military, you really don't want curious people. You don't want... Soldiers need to just don't think for yourself, do what I tell you. Don't think about how you could do it better. I'm not asking you to do that. I want you to not to be curious. I want you to execute. So there are domains where we don't want people to think. But generically speaking, I think you're right, more people think curiosity is a good thing. It does wane over time, depending upon stage of life and other complications. And what I personally do



is I consistently rotate through different domains that I don't know about to learn.

Vikram ([33:30](#)):

And so right now, I happen to be on this kick of understanding the universe in space and outer space, nothing to do with finance, nothing, but great. So what do I do? I run my own little webinar and podcast here and I interview guests from space. Great, I'm going to find an astronaut. I'm going to find an astrophysicist. I'm going to find some... And I go find the MacArthur grant winners and I've talked to him on that topic. And so that's what I'll do. And I'll rotate after I'm done with that.

Vikram ([33:55](#)):

Okay, inequality seems to be a problem of our time. Let's find people that really understand class structure, capitalism dynamics, historically, what's worked, what hasn't worked. Okay, fine, then you know what, I need to understand something else, and I just go. Now, I don't know if that's just a Vikram dynamic, because I have the luxury, structurally and I don't fault people that don't have this. That's what I do. I get to be broad. I get to connect dots. That's the function I play. So I think that's one thing. I know you didn't ask this, but I'm going to go there.

MBS ([34:30](#)):

Sure.

Vikram ([34:31](#)):

You asked about curiosity-related although not identical, is creativity and imagination. And here there is, I think, a tangible way I do go about promoting imagination and creativity, which dances a little on the edge of curiosity, but not



necessarily. And here, what I recommend is people spend time reading fiction and watching movies.

MBS ([34:55](#)):

I love that you're saying that. Yeah.

Vikram ([34:58](#)):

I don't know anyone who doesn't want to watch a movie, who doesn't like watching movies or miniseries or what have you. So I'm a big believer, that part of one's intellectual development, the framing of how you view the world, and the possibilities within it. Your imagination, your creativity, and little bit of your curiosity, I hope will get piqued by studying scenarios that are brought to your attention through fiction, through stuff that's not true. And maybe it's science fiction. Maybe it's speculative fiction. Maybe it's just fiction.

MBS ([35:33](#)):

I mean, it's not true, but it's not untrue, either. I have a master's degree in literature and I'm married to a librarian. So you're talking to two huge fiction readers there. And I love that you've been there.

Vikram ([35:45](#)):

Yeah. Well, oftentimes business folks are the type A personalities. They say, "I've got to read all this nonfiction. I've gotten so far behind. There's 12 new business books in my domain. I've got to get through them and I don't have time." And I'm like, "You know what, you don't have time not to read fiction because fiction is what's going to contextualize it. It's going to give you a framing and thinking about the human component and possible scenarios."

MBS ([36:06](#)):



And honestly, most fiction is written better than most business books. And one of the other things it does is it enables you to read business books faster and more quickly. Because you're able to go, "Look, I can discern what's useful and what's not useful in this business book."

Vikram ([36:20](#)):

Yep. 100% right. In fact, I just picked this book up to read, the Ender's Game.

MBS ([36:26](#)):

Ender's Game is a classic.

Vikram ([36:27](#)):

Yeah, I hadn't read it.

MBS ([36:29](#)):

Totally classic. You're going to love it, I think. Hey, Vikram, I've got a final question, which I like to end these interviews with. And it's broad and a bit tricky. But I'm going to ask it anyway. What needs to be said in this conversation between you and me that hasn't been said yet?

Vikram ([36:48](#)):

I think there needs to be a respect, broadly defined for the context. So often, we, meaning Western society, because I don't know it's necessarily globally true. But Western society tends to focus on the foreground. And we have good research out there. You look at a picture, people focus on the front. And you look at some Eastern folks who say, "Well, I see the background." I think we've missed weighted our appreciation for context, rather than what's happening within the context. We underweight context and I think we need to remedy that a little bit.

MBS ([37:27](#)):



I love that.

Vikram ([37:28](#)):

It's related to some of the stuff we've talked about focus, ignoring, are you too focused, are you going in a particular linear direction. But context matters. And I think context is that connective tissue across silos. Context is also really important, I think, because there are these feedback loops between context and what you're paying attention to. And it affects the context and the context will affect what you're paying attention to, which will affect the context. And so we're missing a major component, when we become, pardon the academic term, but very reductionist. When we reduce things into their parts, we're missing what is happening within the wholes. The sum of the parts in the whole are not always the same.

MBS ([38:21](#)):

The sum of the parts and the whole are not always the same. I've just finished the final draft of my latest book, in copy editing, which is an exciting moment. And it can be published in January 2022. And the experience of writing that has been in some ways, the embodiment of this conversation. I mean, obviously, I've had to focus and focus and focus, I can't tell you how many 1000s of words have been cut. But I can't tell you because if I looked it up, I'd probably cry a fiddle. It's a lot of words that end up on the cutting room floor.

MBS ([38:56](#)):

But I've always committed to writing the shortest book I can, that's still useful, a book with a singular arc to it, so it has a crystalline strength and elegance to it. And some of the best bits of this book found their way into it through serendipity. Something I picked up while browsing a bookstore, or a nugget from a random newsletter or podcast that I subscribe to. And these are sources I try to make adjacent to my usual areas of focus. I don't want to become an



echo chamber of myself. I want the sum of my parts to be animated by the Big Magic of the outside world. How about you?

MBS ([39:41](#)):

For more on Vikram, you can go to his website, it's mansharamani.com. I'll spell that out for you, because there's a lot of As in his name, M-A-N-S-H-A-R-A-M-A-N-I.com, Mansharamani. And that's where you'll find his latest book, Think for Yourself, which I have a copy of. And it's terrific, along with opportunities to sign up for his webinars and his podcast. You can also find him on LinkedIn and on Twitter. And thank you, lovely person, for listening to this interview, listening all the way through. I hope you've thought about joining the free membership site, YouCam free. That's where you'll get transcripts and access to other interviews and unreleased interviews and some other good downloads, you can grab totally free and you'll find out just on the website @MBS.works.

MBS ([40:29](#)):

Of course, this podcast grows through word of mouth. Your recommendation to a friend or a colleague to say, "Hey, this interview, you should listen to it. I think you'd enjoy it." It helps me grow the subscriber base and it's not just my ego at stake, it actually allows me to have some influence to invite other great thinkers onto the show. So if somebody comes to mind as you listen to this conversation between Vikram and me, please pass along the news. And while you're there, if you haven't done so already, please do leave me a review on wherever your podcast app because. I know all of us podcast host ask for this but it's one of the ways the algorithm gets in our favor and success breeds success. So help me feel successful. Thank you. You're awesome and you're doing great.