

Sonali Batish

Mother, Engineer, Entrepreneur; All in One

Sonali Batish drinks chai every day, twice a day. Once in the morning, once in the afternoon. She goes through the complex yet relaxing ritual of carefully preparing it with special ingredients. The ritual of preparation takes about 25 minutes; she refers to it as “a labor of love.” Then, she drinks her chai in her favorite mug, a branded mug from Harvard University.

As a child growing up in India, Sonali sometimes imagined studying in the US. After moving to America, she visited Harvard along with her three and 5-year-old daughters at the time. She imagined that one day they might attend Harvard. In fact, it was Sonali herself who ended up taking classes there. “Two years ago, I did my first Executive Education program at Harvard,” Sonali smiles. “I did it again last year, and it has changed my life forever. I got this cup more than ten years before I got the opportunity to go to Harvard as a gift from my husband. To me, this mug is a prized possession because it’s an institution I love, holding a drink I cherish, and sweetened with my husband’s love for me. And it’s one of my favorite colors!”

Sonali’s affection for her mug is perhaps a window into her success and psyche; she admires education, prioritizes family, and has the exacting mind of an engineer. Today, she utilizes her many talents as the Founder and President of Cospan Consulting (Cospan), a business dedicated to helping other companies grow, scale and optimize.

Sonali launched Cospan in 2020 after twelve years working as the COO of Incapsulate, a technology service provider she ran along with her husband. During the decade plus that she ran the operations side of Incapsulate, it grew from eight employees, to 25, to 50, to 120, and beyond. “When we reached 200 people I lost count,” Sonali laughs. “Throughout that process I became a scale addict. I

love to scale businesses. And I found that through every step of that process, there were numerous challenges across various issues from finance to people, to processes. It seemed to me that this wasn’t a ‘snowflake’ situation, that these problems are consistent across any small or medium-sized business scaling up. I decided I should use all the lessons I learned from having to solve these problems effectively and offer assistance to CEOs who were going through those same pain points.”

Thus, Cospan was born. Sonali doesn’t intend to hire a slew of employees; instead, Cospan will be run and operated by herself, with outside experts coming onboard as needed for particular contracts in consulting roles. Cospan’s ideal clients are small-to-midsize businesses in the technology space with revenue of \$10-30 million, a staff of between 25-200 people, and a topline year-round growth of at least 15%. However, Sonali hasn’t limited herself too strictly on the size or industry fronts; she recently

began working with a massive global pharmaceutical corporation at the behest of the CEO. That said, she’s direct about who, specifically, she’ll work with. “I only work with CEOs and founders,” she states emphatically. “And I do not work with indecisive CEOs and founders.”

Along with bringing her expertise in scaling and business optimization to the C-suite, Sonali offers a much-needed sympathetic ear to the CEOs who hire her. “It’s lonely at the top,” as the old saying goes, and many executives find themselves unable to confide in other staff. Sonali can serve as a sounding board and advisor, as well as an expert.

“I think the third value proposition that I bring is my ability to execute,” Sonali says. “In my experience, CEOs are visionaries. They’re idea machines. They have ideas, but they need someone



to execute. You need someone who can incorporate your vision into strategic execution.” One could describe Sonali’s work at Cospan as drawing on both the head and the heart, and indeed, she herself notes that she “discovers with curiosity and empathy, but decides 100% with data.”

Sonali’s professional success would not have surprised anyone who knew her growing up, least of all her parents. As a kid in India, she was known for being good at just about everything. She was the straight-A student, the after-school athlete, the competition junky, the piano player. “I was loved so deeply by my parents,” Sonali glows. “I felt that nothing was impossible. They encouraged me to take risks and to sign up for a new activity or competition. And at some point it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Sonali’s mother never had the opportunity to attend college. She was born to a wealthy, politically savvy family, and at that time well-off daughters were not to be sent to school. “She chose to be ambitious for me,” Sonali smiles. “She said, whatever I didn’t get educationally, you will get that and then some.” Although the new ideas Sonali learned in school sometimes conflicted with her mother’s traditional upbringing, her mother’s support for her was unwavering.

Sonali’s father, conversely, had come from nothing. “His parents were farmers, and his father told him that if he wouldn’t help raise the cattle, he’d have to fund his own education,” explains Sonali. “So that’s what he did from age 10 onward. He put himself through engineering school, then he got a job at Siemens. He learned to speak English through his job there. He retired 26 years later as a global executive who had travelled the world. So yes, he’s always been my role model.”

It’s easy to see where Sonali inherited her drive and spirit, and she’s quick to give credit to her parents for her wonderful upbringing. “From my dad, I got my extroverted nature,” she reflects. “From him, I inherited the power to win people over and build relationships very quickly in a very genuine way. From my mother, I inherited my tenacity and resilience. She worked through ridiculously hard problems on her own with very little education. And we never heard a peep about it. She never complained about her circumstances, she just figured it out. She’s a great problem solver.”

Sonali is also very close with her younger

brother who is also an entrepreneur and quite successful in his own right. Still, during the early years of their lives, she reflects that he was sometimes overshadowed by her in the home. Uncharacteristically for Indian families at the time, Sonali’s parents showered their daughter with attention and encouragement, and her star pupil status led him to act out during childhood. However, around the time she moved to London, he began to come into his own. “He’s one of the people I rely on most in my life,” Sonali says of him today.

In her free time, Sonali loved, and still loves, to read. She was a “flashlight under the covers” kid, secretly devouring novels long after the lights went out. Back then, she loved fiction; as an adult, she switched to non-fiction. “In 2013, I was pregnant with my third child, and something happened, a switch flipped. I 100% blame it on him,” laughs Sonali. “But since then, I have not read any fiction. I picked up my copies of Anna Karenina and books by Charles Dickens, but I can’t read them. In some ways it’s sort of sad. Who knows, maybe the switch will flip back again someday.”

When it was time to attend college, Sonali decided to pursue a degree in Engineering from the University of Bombay. “In India when I was growing up, if you were academically proficient, you had two choices—medicine or engineering,” explains Sonali. “Half of my family were in engineering, including my dad, who to this day is the smartest engineer I know, so I picked engineering. Plus, I could not stand the sight of blood!”

During her time in engineering school, Sonali experienced what she refers to as her “first failure.” From the time she was little, she had always exceeded the expectations of the adults—parents, teachers, relatives, coaches, etc.—around her. She’d grown accustomed to achieving what she set out to do. Failing her engineering drawing exam in her first year of school was a total shock. “It was almost a physical shock,” Sonali elaborates. “I was terrified because I knew the consequences of not passing on my second attempt. I still remember the image of that score. At the time, they printed your grade and posted it outside the classroom. If you failed, it was in a red font. I still remember how I felt when I saw it.”

The experience was a defining one for Sonali, one that taught her the value of failure and

the reality that failure can be overcome. At first, she feared her parents' reaction, but her father simply joked that it was "about time she failed at something." Then, hellbent on passing the exam, she simply worked very hard. "I studied, I figured out a plan, and I executed it," she says with characteristic frankness. She passed and received three job offers directly out of school.

Sonali accepted the best of the three offers, and after a year, the company sent her to work in London. She loved it there, made many friends, traveled extensively in Europe, and even met her future husband, Ajay. Within six months of dating, the two were married, and the young couple moved to the US.

The move was another of the defining moments of Sonali's life. "At 26, I decided to leave everything that I identified with—my family, my career, my friends—and move eight thousand miles away to be with my husband who I'd only met six months before. It was a decision that I made with remarkable clarity. In hindsight, I never thought about the potential of failure. I think it was transformational."

Today, Sonali has been married to her husband Ajay for over 20 years, and his support has been unflagging. He's also an engineer, although Sonali is quick to note that "my dad is my number one engineer. My husband is my number two engineer!" Like Sonali, Ajay is entrepreneurial and an overachiever. He's also dedicated to challenging himself mentally and physically. "He actively works to get himself in uncomfortable situations," Sonali declares. "He was afraid of heights as a kid, so he decided to go to the top of a black diamond and ski for the first time ever. Three years ago, he said he was going to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, and not the seven-day, scenic climb. He's going to do it in 26 hours in shorts. So, there's a part of me that's deathly terrified, but I try to empower him to do what he wants as opposed to impede him. After 20 years of marriage I've learned to be supportive of what he needs to do, too."

Still, moving to the US wasn't all smooth sailing. In hindsight, Sonali recognizes that she was likely in a low-grade depression for about a year and a half after the young couple's arrival in the States. She'd left behind everything she knew and moved from busy London to isolated Herndon, Virginia. She wasn't used to driving on the opposite side of the road, and the doldrums of

suburbia were getting her down. But eventually, she landed her first US job at MCI and began to feel connected to people and community again.

At MCI, Sonali took a role as an application developer doing coding and design. Her next job was as an intern, and she felt somewhat discouraged that her career appeared to have taken several steps backwards during her move abroad. "I came to realize I had no past performance in this country, that my education wasn't an American education, and that I was going to have to retrace my steps," remembers Sonali. "On bad days, I felt like it was a waste of my time and energy, but I knew I didn't have a choice. I had to keep retracing for a couple of years, and then I started building back up again. My next position was as a Project Manager in Rockville, Maryland, and that's when I felt like I was finally on par with where I'd been when I left home."

Sonali began commuting between Herndon and Rockville and faced another life change shortly thereafter. She was pregnant. The company was accommodating and allowed her to work from home for six months. But after six months, they wanted her back in the office. A short time later she learned she was pregnant with her second child. Ajay was reluctant to put the kids in daycare, but Sonali was firm. "Work fulfills me," she asserted. "I told him that I had to continue working."

Then Ajay had an idea; he had just launched his own firm, Incapsulate. What if Sonali came onboard in an operations capacity? That way, she could still work, find fulfillment outside the household and be given the flexibility she needed as a young mother.

"At first I said I wasn't sure, because I had never done anything like it before," Sonali recalls. "I didn't know what it meant to run HR, to run operations and basically serve as COO. But I agreed to give it a shot. And I loved every single part of it. I still remember the IRS fax coming through with the EIN number. I don't remember many numbers, but I will never forget the EIN number for Incapsulate. It was so much fun setting up the company and hiring our first 30 people. We did some amazing work."

For the first few years, Incapsulate did contracting work for the DC government but quickly decided to diversify into the private sector as well. By 2010, they decided they needed a niche

service rather than solving all kinds of technical problems and settled on Salesforce. In 2012, they brought in their first partner, which expanded the firm's capabilities into new verticals. "The next milestone was 2016," Sonali relates. "Up until then, we had been services only. But in 2016, we started developing two products, and both of those products still sit on Salesforce. Then, we expanded to India. We outsourced all of our product development to our two offices in India, and within two years we grew from zero to 120 people working in India. Then there was a period of time—September 2017 to May 2018—where we hired 130 people in six months. It was the most stressful time of my life, but it was also the most exhilarating time of my life. And I learned that I was a scale addict. I love scaling up!" It was Sonali's passion for scaling that led her to her work today, as President of Cospan.

As a business owner, Sonali still has her prized flexibility, something which has benefited all three of her children as they've grown. Their births were also defining moments in Sonali's life. "Every single time I gave birth to a child, it changed me," she reflects. "There were so many physical and mental challenges. My second child was an emergency C-section, and I wasn't prepared for that. I like to be prepared for things. I was so upset I cried for two weeks afterward because I wasn't prepared for it. But I had a moment of clarity as I held my new baby that I would do it all over again. If they told me there was no anesthesia, I would do it all over again. That's how much my children mean to me."

As a leader, Sonali works to balance the left and right sides of her brain. Yes, she's analytical; yes, she's data driven. But she's learned that empathy and relationships can be just as crucial. "Something I heard from one of my Harvard professors was that it is impossible for curiosity and judgment to be on stage at the same time," she relates. "So let curiosity take the stage. Every time I feel like I'm starting to become

judgmental, I work to replace that with curiosity. I've seen tremendous changes in negotiations and in conversations. It's very disarming to people."

These days, Sonali makes the most of her free time as a powerlifter, something she got into after her second C-section. "I felt like I had no core anymore," Sonali describes, "I had almost chronic back pain, and a physical therapist recommended a consultation at a local gym. Within two months, my back pain was gone." She also runs a podcast focused on career transitions and women where she shares and encourages others to share their stories of professional successes and transformations.

To young people entering the working world today, she advises continual learning. "This generation wants their career to look different," she reflects. "They're not going to have a single career. So how do you become a lifelong learner who knows how to learn, unlearn and relearn? They are so mission-driven. They care about the planet. They care about making the world better. So I guess the real question is: what can I learn from them?"

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