

Deepa's American Dream

Building & Earth Sciences, Inc. is a consulting engineering firm specializing in geotechnical, environmental construction materials testing and inspection services. BESI has offices in Birmingham, Tulsa, Atlanta, Columbus and Savannah. In four years, BESI has become one of the largest firms of its kind in Alabama. Ms. Deepa Bhate, the firm's founding principal, shares her views on success, culture shock and the challenge of living up to one's values.

On culture shock and America:

I grew up in India, in a rural, one-horse town at the edge of a forest. A tiger would occasionally come after dark and sit outside the gates of our house. I came to America in 1985 and the transition was very difficult; the first ten years were the toughest of my life. But in this country, you have the freedom and infra-structure to become anything you set your mind to be. The opportunities here are far greater than any other country in the world.

On running her own business:

The better something is in life, the higher the price you pay to earn it. Running my own business has been exhilarating, and at times filled with real anguish and heartache. It has been satisfying to know that our management philosophy works; that you can have a successful business and happy employees; that you can have high productivity without high turnover. The responsibility is greater but easier to shoulder because my own money is on the line. I am willing to take greater risks with my money than with other people's money. And success is ultimately about taking good risks.

On values:

When we formed our company, my partners and I spent a great deal of time writing down our core values, what we wanted to stand for. Today, those values guide us. Accountability. Excellence. Respect. Trust. Tolerance. Honesty. These are words easily abused, and living up to them is difficult. But, having our core values written down as our company's guiding principles helps us see clearly what the right decision is even when the choice is difficult. It forces us to walk the talk and live up to our promises.

The CEOs in the news lately—I don't think they wake up looking for ways to lie, cheat and steal. They are under considerable pressure from Wall Street and the media. They cut a few corners to make themselves and their companies look good; they tell a small lie to embellish performance. The first lie is always the hardest, then the lines get blurred over time and the next thing you know they can't tell where the truth is anymore.

On education:

The schools in my hometown were very basic. There was practically no math or science curriculum. We didn't have libraries or laboratories; the only games we could play were the ones that required no equipment or facilities. People talk about wanting good schools—and good schools make a difference—but it's mostly about who you are, what you want to be and how hard you are willing to work for it. You can rise above your circumstances. Accepting mediocrity is an ailment. If we are going to solve the problems in this country, parents must demand more from their children, give them more time and support, and set higher examples for them.

On the challenges facing her business:

In four years, we've had an annualized growth rate of 62 percent. Continuing to create sustainable growth is a challenge. Recruiting the right people, providing training and support to make them good future managers and rain makers is a daily effort. So is inspiring morale and motivation. We all admire a productive garden, but a lot of time was spent on hands and knees making it so and keeping it so.

On the value of service:

Strong client relationships based on a high level of trust are the reason for our success. I don't tell my clients we don't make mistakes, but if we do, they will not have to look for us. We will come to them first with an idea of how to fix the problem. I look for that same philosophy in the people we work with. It's why we use Burr & Forman. They are responsive; I never have to wait for an answer. They return their phone calls promptly. Most importantly, their billing is accurate and the advice they give me is prudent.

On success, race and gender:

Being a female and non-white is not an impediment in this country unless you allow it to be. I have no advice I would give to a young girl about going into engineering that I wouldn't give to any child. Nothing can stop you if you do not let it. Race, gender, age, none of that matters. You can be whatever you want to be.

At Burr & Forman, we know that client relationships are the foundation of our firm; our lawyers are proud to have represented Building and Earth Sciences, Inc. since 1999.

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