

# The mind must be a calm pond

*Grey Group Bangladesh's Managing Partner and Country Head Syed Gousul Alam Shaon shares his thoughts at The Daily Star's The Chief Executive Show powered by Marico*

DWOHA CHOWDHURY

Having begun his advertising career in 1999 with the Mumbai-based Rediffusion Dentsu Young & Rubicam Private, Syed Gousul Alam Shaon assumed responsibility of Grey Group's strategic planning and creative department in early 2007. Now, as a managing partner and country head, he leads the global advertising and marketing agency's Bangladesh operations. During the second episode of The Daily Star's 'The Chief Executive Show', he spoke about his turbulent youth, risk taking, various challenges to success, creative leadership and more.

To handle the pressures of doing business, Shaon prefers a philosophical approach.

"The mind must be like a calm pond where nothing moves," he said, adding that when faced with adversities, a leader should only smile and say: "Don't worry, there's a solution".

In order to avoid bringing one's work problems home, one should compartmentalise his/her life. For example, in a book titled, 'Six Thinking Hats', the author Edward De Bono talks about when and how to switch off certain parts of one's brain.

"Even Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina uses an interesting model to switch on and off, which I came to know from interviewing her," he said.

*"The day you believe you know everything is the day you die. Experience is an enemy to creative thinking."*

However, Shaon's life was not always easy as he underwent turbulent youth on his journey towards the top.

Despite having faced hardships while completing his SSC, Shaon went to study economics in Delhi, where he met a man who would define the course of his life by simply saying, "You will do very well in advertising".

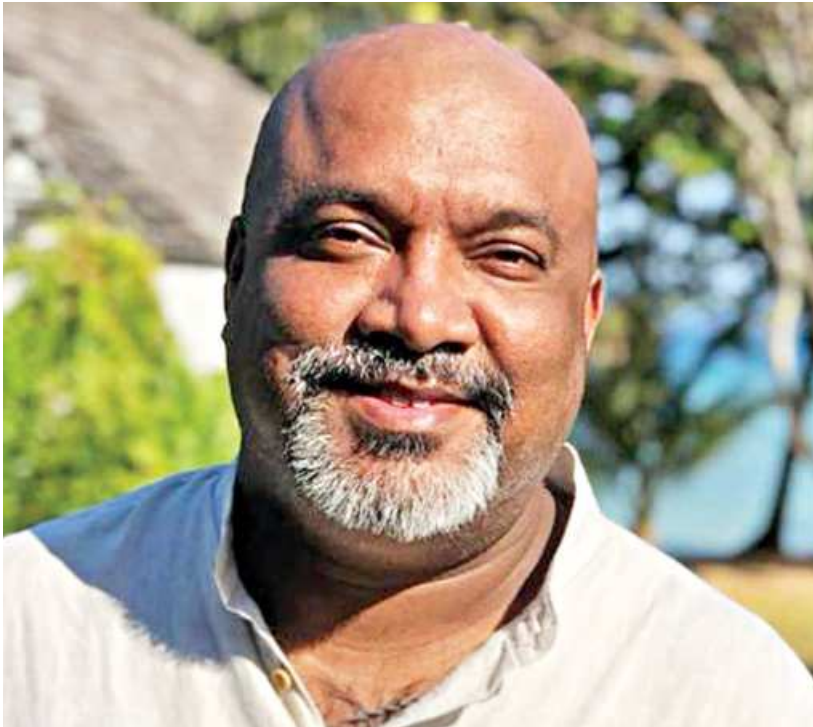
With this man's guidance, Shaon began fostering an interest in brand marketing and communication and ultimately decided to join the Indian Institute of Mass Communication.

"In a long-distance call to my father, who was a government employee at that time, I told him that I do not want an MBA degree but would rather study marketing and communication," he said.

"Surprisingly, the man I feared the most gave me permission to pursue my dream. My father eventually told me that it was a very difficult call for him. But seeing how things turned out, he thought I made the right choice," Shaon added.

Having made the right decision at the right time, it turns out that the advertising and marketing wiz is a huge believer of risk taking.

When a person becomes complacent at any point in life, that person will get stuck but people who



Syed Gousul Alam Shaon

take risks will move up.

Asked about the most challenging experience of his professional life, Shaon said it must have been the first few days of his job as Grey's Bangladesh country head.

"It was around 2006 when many multinational clients left the company. As a result, many co-workers vacated their positions and suddenly, the office became smaller.

"It was then that my bosses told me 'you have to run this office', and I was not prepared," he said.

After considering his options

for two days, Shaon realised his two greatest strengths -- innovative strategies and creative thinking. He then discovered that there are not many advertising agencies in the country that offer cutting edge creative or strong communication-based brand strategies.

Since Grey was only employed by multinational companies at the time, Shaon decided to expand their clientele by working with local firms.

"And all it took was two great campaigns," he said, adding that the first two years were hard for his



28-member team but he enjoyed every bit of it.

However, risk taking does not mean a person should engage in knee-jerk reactions.

"When a crisis comes, you have to sleep over it and think before you take a decision. That crisis taught me that challenge makes a person," he said.

As a member of Grey's top brass, Shaon plays the role of a creative leader but has the attitude of a lifelong learner.

"The day you believe you know everything is the day you die. Experience is an enemy to creative thinking," he said.

When it comes to working as a team, everyone should contribute and there must be a healthy atmosphere for debate.

In regards to thinking divergently or convergently, Shaon said thinking patterns have changed all over the world.

One problem could have several solutions but choosing the right one

depends on the unique situation and a person's judgement.

"Even a few years ago, branding and marketing were not as prevalent as it is now. Back then, strategies were formal but now, we have even adopted Carl Jung or Joseph Campbell's psychological models," Shaon said.

Being a multitalked personality with forays into screenwriting, acting and producing, Shaon believes in 'multipotentiality'.

"When we were young, our elders asked us to choose one aim in life. But later, I realised that there is no need for only a single target," he said.

There is currently a concept on this theory called, 'multipotentiality', which states that a person can do two or more things if it brings him joy.

He also has some tips for newcomers to the corporate world.

"There are no right or wrong decisions but there are consequences. Whatever your heart says you should follow, go for it but make sure that you make the right choice," he said, adding that he thinks rushed decisions are usually based on 'gut feelings'.

"Like author Paulo Coelho expresses in his novel 'The Alchemist', life will keep giving you hints and it's your duty to pick up on these opportunities," Shaon added.

*One problem could have several solutions but choosing the right one depends on the unique situation and a person's judgement*

## BSTI certification now required for solar home system batteries

SOHEL PARVEZ

The government has prohibited sale and distribution of batteries used in solar home systems (SHS) that have not been certified by the Bangladesh Standards & Testing Institution (BSTI).

This is to prevent the use of substandard batteries, says a notification issued by the industries ministry recently.

This means that firms have to comply with national standards when making the batteries, said BSTI Director (Standards) Nilufa Hoque.

The key SHS component will face testing before being granted the required licences to be sold in the market, she said.

In its notification issued on October 6, the Ministry of Industries said the new rule would come into effect two months into the announcement.

The BSTI is also in the process of bringing solar panels under its mandatory licencing arrangement for firms that market solar modules, she added.

The move comes at a time when the market for renewable energy products, particularly solar projects, is gradually increasing mainly due to the government's thrust, low cost loans and people's interest at tapping into renewable energy sources.

Bangladesh has 58 lakh SHS and

other solar-based power projects, which accounts for 64 per cent of the country's 650 megawatt (MW) renewable energy production capacity.

Bangladeshi businesses annually import about 150 MWs of solar modules while local manufacturers also cater to a portion of the market, where the demand mainly stems from solar power plant operators and rooftop based solar projects, said industry insiders.

To ensure that quality products are being used, the BSTI formulated a standard for solar modules, inverters, batteries and other materials used in solar power projects after it was found that substandard products were being imported.

Until now, businesses did not have to comply with the national standards when producing components for solar-based renewable energy systems as the BSTI licencing was not mandatory.

Munawar Misbah Moin, president of the Solar Module Manufacturers Association of Bangladesh, said they have been demanding compliance to be ensured in the sector for the last few years.

"One of the problems in the sector was that here was no certified product in the market either for rooftops or SHS," he said.

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## Come forward to strengthen economic integration

*FBCCI president urges South Asian nations*

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Sheikh Fazle Fahim, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), has called for steps to boost economic integration of Bangladesh and India with other neighbouring countries in South Asia.

He has also urged the south Asian nations to come to Bangladesh to explore the untapped trade potential of the country.

The special economic zones for India in Bangladesh have created prospects for more strategic investment here and other nations should also come forward to take benefit of the value chain under the South Asian Free Trade Area, he said.

"We have invested over \$70 billion to upgrade our industrial ecosystem by strengthening infrastructure, developing 100 economic zones, building high tech parks, establishing multimodal connectivity and improving trade logistics by air, roads, rail and waterways."

Moreover, tariff, non-tariff facilities and policy frameworks for ease of doing business are underway to maximise the competitive edge that Bangladesh enjoys in case of production, he said.

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Fahim was addressing a virtual meeting on "South Asia Session Reimagining Neighbourhood Economic Integration" on Wednesday organised by LEADS 2020, a multi-faceted four-day global thought leadership initiative, and attended by stakeholders from 100 countries, including Bangladesh.

The trade recovery under the regional value chain initiatives can be ensured by collecting raw materials from the neighbouring countries and exporting those to other nations by utilising the advantage of competitive production in Bangladesh, he said.

Bangladesh's vibrant domestic market of 160 million, the south Asian regional market of 1.8 billion, duty and quota-free benefits for Asia Pacific Trade Agreement and to the European Union, India, China, Canada and Australia are widening the prospect under the value chain initiative, he said.

"In the next normal, cooperation between us is not limited to bilateral or regional only, but globally and beyond. Bangladesh's position in regional cooperation and beyond can serve as a conduit between East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia and beyond."

## Sugarcane cultivation gains popularity in Barishal

SUSHANTA GHOSH

Sugarcane cultivation is becoming increasingly popular in Barishal division due to favourable growing conditions in the region, according to officials of the Department of Agricultural Extension.

Due to favourable growing conditions and proper nursing of the plants, farmers in the area are enjoying more profits from sugarcane

production, sources from the DAE's Barishal divisional office said.

In 2020-21, about 105,900 tonnes of sugarcane will be harvested from 2,288 hectares of land across the region with at least 50,000 families directly benefitting from this production, as per DAE data.

Last year, the crop was cultivated on 2,266 hectares of land across six districts, which produced over 104,410 tonnes of sugarcane.

In 2019, sugarcane sold for Tk 15 per unit but this year, the price could double to as much as Tk 25-30.

"I have already spent Tk 5 lakh on a stock of sugarcane which could sell for over Tk 7-8 lakh," said Samir Kumar Ray Chowdhury, a sugarcane wholesaler.

Mohammad Miraj, a farmer in Indurkathi village of Nesarabad upazila in Pirojpur district, said he started sugarcane farming five years

ago and this year, he spent around Tk 1.2 lakh to cultivate the plant on 15 kathas of land.

"I hope that I can earn over Tk 2 lakh from the 7,000 sugarcane stalks up for sale," he added.

Ganesh Dutta, vice president of Barishal Fruit Wholesalers Association, said that each piece of sugarcane sold at Tk 40 at the local markets in Barishal last year.

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TITU DAS

Due to favourable weather conditions, production of sugarcane is increasing in the region and farmers are logging more profit than before.