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FAMILY BUSINESS

## **ROCK SOLID**

Hotel heiress Mita Vohra is thinking outside the jewellery box

## **EXCELLENCE IN FAMILIES**

Who has been nominated for the European Families in Business Awards 2018?

# **HIGH SPIRITS**

Pernod Ricard's debonair next-generation leader on winning mindsets and a culture of innovation





# EMBRACING CHANGE

**A triple-hit of major life crises led Feisal Alibhai from heading up a multinational family business to establishing the world's first multi family health office. Feisal shares his personal story**

**I**t is said that there's nothing surer than death and taxes. Somehow we leave out change, which on a day-to-day basis is by far our greatest challenge. Whether it affects our financial affairs, our health, or our relationships, change is something none of us can avoid.

To handle change effectively, on one hand we need to develop resilience. On the other we need the wisdom to embrace life's challenges in such a manner that we respond to them instead of reacting. In this way we convert challenges into opportunities.



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Few invest the time and energy to prepare for the inevitable changes life brings. As a consequence, we find ourselves scrambling to know what to do next. If we are to move from what feels like chaos to clarity, we need to approach life's challenges with head and heart united.

Just like a family office manages everything related to wealth, a family health office does the same for the health and wellbeing of the family. As founder and chief executive of a multi family health office, Qineticare, my personal experience has allowed me to understand the importance of developing practical tools and techniques to unite the wisdom of head and heart. This is what gives us the clarity we require to take the kind of action that results in flow, which is often spoken of as being in “the zone,” a mode of being in which achieving excellence becomes virtually effortless.

Uniting head and heart is a four-step process involving learning to embrace a situation, trusting that it will work to our benefit, achieving clarity, and moving into a state of flow.

It required three major crises to bring me to the place where I could embrace whatever might arise. After these epiphanies I entrusted myself to life's flow as I made decisions that sprang from absolute clarity.

## LET ME SHARE MY STORY

Within a year of getting married, my ability to accept a financial meltdown was shockingly tested in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Whether it was my age of 30 or my idealistic view that everything would be okay, I was able to recalibrate, transforming our family

business from a trading house to a multinational fast-moving consumer goods distributor with operations in 15 countries, seven in war-torn Africa, five in Eastern Europe, and buying offices in Hong Kong, Dubai, and Paris. This re-emergence allowed us to build a 10,000 employee business generating revenues of several hundred million dollars within a span of five years. I was clearly on top of my professional game and felt invincible.

Then, at age 35, a fundamentally different challenge was presented—stage three cancer, involving 10 tumors and a low probability of survival. My house was in order in terms of inheritance and succession planning, but with a one-year-old and a three-year-old I was not ready to throw in the towel. Accepting the cancer was not as difficult as preparing to say goodbye to my two little boys. I asked my doctors to give me the absolute maximum treatment possible.

“If I am to die in peace, I have to be able to look my children in their eyes, assuring them, ‘Baba did his best, but the Big Boss decided otherwise’.”

I soon realised that the cancer had in fact saved my life, sparing me from dropping dead of a heart attack as a result of my driven ways. I recognised I was being given a second chance. Was I going to continue living other people's definition of success? Or would I seize the opportunity to live a life that was more in line with my authentic self?

After the first five rounds of chemotherapy, I got on my hands and knees, put my head in my spouse's lap, and begged not to be taken back. It was my son's four little eyes looking up at me that enabled me to muster the resilience to face the next toxic blast. ➔

**Top:** Feisal Alibhai recalls spending too much family time on work via his ever-present smartphone

Each time I had a scan during my cancer treatment, I visualised saying goodbye to my loved ones. I was able to say goodbye to my parents, my brother, and my spouse. My body simply would not allow me to attempt to say goodbye to my two little boys.

During my 11 months of cancer treatment, my extensive reading brought to light the surprising fact that many couples divorce post-cancer. I asked myself, “When two people have endured an experience that is so bonding, how is this possible?” It is when we are face-to-face with death that we are likely to begin questioning whether we are leading a life that is true to who we are.

My ingrained belief was that marriage is till death do us part, a conviction that was shattered when my wife announced, “I am sorry, but I do not love you anymore.”

As I questioned her decision to leave, the only logical answer I received was, “I am sorry, but I cannot help what I feel.”

The financial meltdown, even the cancer, I could accept. But the loss of my 18-year marriage? How could I embrace such a catastrophe? To me, it meant I had failed on an epic scale. What was wrong with me, that I could not even provide my children with their most basic need, a stable home? I was unable to function on a day-to-day basis.

I could not recognise the opportunity that was being presented to me. All I saw was abject failure. It took three years to move beyond my self-judgment and accept that we truly cannot challenge how another feels. The minute we judge others or ourselves, we go pear-shaped. The wise course is to free them, neither blaming nor shaming.



## EPIPHANY

As I shared the three changes that challenged me, what thoughts came to you with respect to your own life? In what ways did you find yourself relating to the situations that were presented?

Whenever a health crisis emerges, family businesses and family offices potentially face a disruption in leadership and succession planning. Beyond tensions that may arise in the spousal relationships, our ability to connect and communicate with the family at large can be compromised. It is imperative we know how to unite head and heart to guide us in moving through difficult times. To do so is key to family longevity and generational continuity.

Embracing change involves accepting what's occurring instead of resisting. This is neither a giving in nor a giving up, but an invitation to take a more expansive view of life.

Our ability to embrace a situation will depend upon how we judge it. Do we put people or situations in boxes, as I did when I used the box “till death do us part” to label myself a failure?

Mental chatter and emotional turmoil are like murky water. Any decisions taken in this frame of mind are bound to lack clarity. Once we embrace whatever may be happening, we find ourselves moving into a state of trust, whereby we no longer impose, expect, or judge anything. An inner calmness arises within us, resulting in clarity of mind, and a centered heart.

Inner stillness is foundational when it comes to the direction we want our life to go, how we wish to get there, and the purpose of it all. Taking action as we move into flow is the natural next step.

While discussing marriage and parenting with the chairman of a family-owned global bank, I pointed out that we require a driving licence in order to drive and have to be certified to become a doctor, lawyer, or therapist. Yet getting married, the biggest commitment we ever make, requires no formal training, only our signature—and to become a parent, not even this. The chairman reasoned that animal instinct guides us in such matters. I replied, “Although our



## “ The impositions and expectations of family muffled my ability to hear my authentic self

original self at birth has the innate qualities of ‘animal instinct,’ we grow up adopting patterns of thought and emotion, engaging in impositions and expectations, and judging and labelling, all of which derail our ability to follow our basic instinct.”

My ability to follow my intuition in business was second nature to me, whereas an intuitive approach was somewhat foreign in my spousal relationship. How sad that I was trained to master the art of running a large multinational business, while not having a single day of training in understanding the dynamics of the masculine and the feminine.

Pre-cancer, the time I spent with my family was compromised due to my restricted ability to be mentally and emotionally present. In more than a third of my photos with my

boys, I am on the phone. I simply took my family for granted. In contrast, post-cancer I appreciate every hug, every kiss, and every opportunity to spend time with my children as an absolute gift.

No longer governed by the driven ways that had taken me to the brink of death, each of my actions now originate in a state of flow. How different this was from my need to prove myself to my father, whose shadow I had lived under for years.

When I was 13, I was asked, “What do you want to be?” My response was part-time businessman and part-time doctor. Subsequently the impositions and expectations of family muffled my ability to hear my authentic self. It took a near-death health crisis for my true purpose to emerge, enabling me to live in both worlds. I now have the honour and privilege of serving family businesses and family offices to prioritise health and wellbeing as foundational to family longevity and generational continuity.

As you gain wisdom by learning to embrace change through uniting head and heart, are you able to see the opportunities presented to enhance the wellbeing of not only the family business, but also the family at large? ■ FB

**Feisal Alibhai** is speaking on embracing change for family longevity and generational continuity at the **European Family Office Conference** on 6-7 November 2018 in London and leading a post-conference workshop on embracing change on 8 November 2018. For more information, visit: **campdenconferences.com/efoc**