Leading Bio-Pharma Innovation

VIJAY SAMANT MS’77

As a foreign student who came to Columbia Engineering in the 1970s, Vijay Samant quickly learned how important it is to go after what you want. Samant hoped to receive a different room assignment when he arrived on campus, so without hesitation, the Mumbai, India, native gathered his unpacked bags, made his way to the crowded Dean of Student Affairs Office, renegotiated, and got a different one.

“[It instantly taught me how this country works, which is different than any other country],” he said.

The initiative Samant displayed then has contributed to the development of his American entrepreneurial spirit.

Since 2000, Samant has served as president and chief executive of Vical Inc., a San Diego–based biopharmaceutical product developer focused on DNA vaccines and cancer immunotherapies.

“Dna vaccines and cancer immunotherapies,” he said.

The bulk of his career took place at health care giant Merck, where he spent 23 years in sales, marketing, operations, and business development.

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Samant earned his MBA from the Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1983. He received his master’s in chemical engineering, from the University of Bombay in 1975.

“I’m a technician by training and a businessperson by experience,” Samant commented. “Nobody who doesn’t understand how business works cannot be a successful entrepreneur.”

Samant credits Columbia for being “intellectually honest and intellectually intensive”—two characteristics he feels a person needs to possess as an entrepreneur.

Of course, he got some help along the way, too.

There were influencers at Columbia who supported Samant, including Carlos Bonilla, former professor and chair of the Chemical Engineering Department at the School. Professor Bonilla gave Samant a paid fellowship when he couldn’t cover his health insurance costs. Samant said Bonilla expressed concern to him, however, that as a foreign student, Samant might go back to India and never contribute to Columbia.

“I told him I would prove him wrong. Over the years, I have contributed very hard,” Samant said.

The life lessons didn’t stop there. Samant’s adviser, the late Professor Carl Gryte, became a lifelong friend.

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Samant knows it takes energy and passion to be an entrepreneur. He believes 75 percent of success is based on hard work, 5 percent on genius, and the remaining 20 percent is luck.

“If you’re going to engineering school, you need to get hard skills to make sure you learn something,” Samant advised. “Don’t chase money; get some good experience. Money will come.”

Event as a kid, John Koger knew he wanted to start his own business. He kept a log of business ideas on index cards. There was a card dedicated to a concept for adding handbrakes to skis and another for a solar-powered dirigible. He also had a natural knack for electronics and spent hours at home putting together electronic projects, including a primitive video game system and an electronic BB gun made from magnetic coils and a straw.

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Koger attended Princeton University as an undergraduate, but when he decided to pursue a master’s in electrical engineering, the faster pace and energy of the city drew him to Columbia Engineering. It was at the School where he had his first taste of entrepreneurship.

Koger and a friend attempted a start-up around the concept of a digital oscilloscope plug-in card for an IBM PC.

“We convinced a professor to sponsor our project and adviser to several start-ups. His current ventures include a solar company developing a heliostat (mirror on mirrors that constantly adjusts to reflect the sun onto a fixed point), a computer tablet software infrastructure company that has been leading the charge on android tablets, and a surveillance drone aircraft startup that plans to debut its special flying properties this summer.

At Columbia Engineering, Koger sits on the Entrepreneurship Advisory Board. He has fond memories of Professor Yannis Tsividis’s class on analog chip design. Beyond just the coursework, it was Tsividis himself who left a lasting impression.

“The part I remember most was his confident but gentle personality that showed me you can be bold and successful without being abrasive or abusive,” says Koger.

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