

# Carving success out of stumbling blocks

*From personal tragedies to boardroom crises, life has often thrown him a curve, but Karan Paul has always come out tops. Sun caught up with the young scion of the Apeejay Surrendra Group...*



ADVERSITY CAUSES SOME MEN TO BREAK, OTHERS TO break records,' said a wise American. But there are some men who don't simply break records; instead, they turn adversity on its head and use it as a spur to move ahead in life. Karan Paul, the 35-year-old director of Apeejay Surrendra Group, is among those.

## Tragedy and resilience

In 1989, Karan's younger brother met with a fatal accident. A year later, he lost his father to terrorists in Assam. Many would have wilted under such personal tragedies, but Karan picked up the pieces of his shattered life and moved on. "It was a very difficult phase of my life, but I had to look after the business, so I regrouped myself and took up the challenge," says Karan, who currently heads the Rs 500-crore group of companies, which is into shipping and tea plantation, among other businesses.

A happy childhood, a good value system, a great family and an unwavering focus in life have gone into making Karan what he is today. And he doesn't forget to mention God. A firm believer in destiny, this political science graduate from Brown University, US has come a long way in the 12 years since he joined the group.

## Pouring energy into work

"I still remember my first day at work," he reminisces. "My uncle, who is my mentor, made me sit on his chair while he sat beside me. It was a symbolic gesture, which kind of prepared me for the times ahead. He made me work from his office for the next three months and this helped me to learn the ropes quickly."

## Karan Paul on business decisions:

"Depending on the nature of the decision, I may sleep over it, think hard or may even take a break and get back with renewed vigour. I also consult my team members and seniors when arriving at important business decisions."



**'I really enjoy getting involved with new projects and start-ups. It gets me fired up...**

His vision oozes youthful energy and dynamism. "We want to be among the top three companies in every business that we take on. We want our products and services to be benchmarks for others." Incidentally, his family owns the country's oldest privately owned shipping company and has been into the business for well over 50 years.

#### Learning from others

Despite heading various companies, Karan, an avid reader, finds time for his passion – books. Reading helps him keep abreast with the times and introduces him to new ideas blowing across the business world. "I don't have any particular role model like Jack Welch or Bill Gates, but yes, I do inculcate the values and skills of successful people I meet or read about."

What was the most memorable day of his career? "Maybe the day I made my first crore," he says, laughing cryptically. New beginnings and newer challenges are this

young entrepreneur's staple diet. He reveals, "I really enjoy getting involved with new projects and start-ups. It gets me fired up as it offers a lot of opportunities and challenges. It gives me an adrenaline rush!"

#### Managing time and adversities

With so many companies to look after, how does he manage his time? "I can't manage time," he laughs, quickly clarifying, "Actually, I take one thing at a time and move on to the next thing quickly."

Tragedy struck again in 1994, when terrorists killed a senior manager at his tea garden in Assam. "It was the most

**"A spark of intelligence, self-directed attitude, grasp of fundamentals and a positive attitude are some of the attributes I look for in my employees"**

horrible day at office," he admits. But he quickly swung into action and ensured that all his employees at the tea garden were safe and secure. Handling crises has become his forté; after all, he's had more than his fair share, which he has tackled with remarkable maturity. Keeping a cool head and not getting flustered are his mantras for handling crises.

#### Competitive streak

Raising the bar for his company and providing customers the products and services they are looking for are some of the challenges that keep Karan on the move. To tackle these challenges holistically, he helps his employees upgrade their knowledge and skills by deputing them to business management schools like the Indian School of Business and the Xavier's Labour Research Institute (XLRI). Personally, he prefers to pick up books on macro and micro economic theories to understand the intricacies of the business model, the market and making more money! "I was bad at economics and now I'm making up for it by reading various economic theories," says Karan, who indulges in small holiday breaks to rejuvenate himself.

Karan's parting shot: "A spark of intelligence, self-directed attitude, grasp of fundamentals and a positive attitude are some of the attributes I look for in my employees." For the man who says that work defines him, it is no wonder that he settles for nothing but the best men and women for his companies – to strengthen his drive towards success, success against all odds...

ANUPAM PRATHIARY 