



We Are Vodafone - Episode 2

Transcript

HOST

Cara McGoogan

GUESTS

Rekha Devadiga, Hema Kariyappa

Cara McGoogan: Welcome to We Are Vodafone, a new podcast series where we'll bring together people from very different parts of the organization to hear their opinions, theories, fears, passions and successes. Over the course of this series, we'll explore the subjects that matter most to you, and how they impact on your life.

Cara McGoogan: I'm Cara McGoogan, a journalist and podcaster and in this second episode, we're gonna talk about the theme, learn, relearn, unlearn. My guests today, are Hema Kariyappa and Rekha Devadiga. They join me remotely to talk about challenges they faced and opportunities they found in their lives. To start off, I asked them to introduce themselves to each other.

Hema Kariyappa: Hi everyone, I'm Hema Kariyappa. I recently joined Vodafone about three months ago, as a solution architect. I live in the beautiful city of Bath, in the southwest of England. And I moved to UK in 2003, from Mumbai, India.

Rekha Devadiga: Great to e-meet you Hema, this is Rekha Devadiga and I'm based out of Pune, in India. I take care of the communications team in Vodafone Intelligent Solutions.

Cara McGoogan: It's great to have you both on the show today. We thought it was really interesting how you both grew up in Mumbai. And we're going to be talking about learn, relearn and unlearn. So it might be really interesting to start with how your backgrounds have shaped you as people. Hema, do you want to go first?

Hema Kariyappa: Yeah, sure. I will. I was actually born in South India, my parents migrated in the 70s, to Mumbai, from the south of India. And I think a lot of what I am today, I owe it a lot to my parents, largely to my dad. So my dad actually took night classes to learn English and to find a decent job. So that has always been running behind my mind to know that he always leads stress on education. And my Dad encouraged me to study. Although I wanted to grow up to be a neurosurgeon, computers had started becoming quite prevalent in the 90s. And so when I wanted to choose my vocation, instead of medicine, I actually picked Computer Engineering. I worked three years in India, and then I moved to Bath. So most of my working life has now been in UK.

Rekha Devadiga: I believe Hema, that we were destined to meet. And probably we might be soul sisters, and I'll tell you why, okay. Both my parents are from South India, too. And they migrated to Mumbai for a living. My father, he took night classes to learn English, he really wanted to become a journalist. However, because of financial conditions he could not and he started working in a hotel as a waiter. And he worked near the airport, his guests were primarily people who used to travel and he used to tell wonderful stories about their travels to me, whenever he used to come back from



work. He is the one who encouraged me to study, to travel as much as I want. And oh my god, I just can't believe that, you know, we have so many things in common.

Hema Kariyappa: We have such similar backgrounds.

Rekha Devadiga: I think probably it's the podcast team or destiny and Vodafone that got us together.

Hema Kariyappa: Probably, yes.

Rekha Devadiga: Brilliant. Yeah, so my childhood was quite a difficult one. However, I suppose I was the most happiest at that point in time, because though we did not have the resources as much as we could. We had wonderful parents who supported us in everything that we did. I wanted to become a doctor, like you, you wanted to become a neurosurgeon as well. And I had really good marks. However, because of the financial constraints, I could not pursue studies. But what I learned throughout, in my journey is that and from my experiences of my father and mother as well, that education is the most important thing, when you study hard, when you learn new things. And there is no age to learn anything. I mean, just two months back, I started learning how to drive and even ride a bicycle, I did not do that in my childhood, or even for that matter to swim. There is no time limit to learn anything. And it's only when you learn, when you expand your knowledge. And when you share that knowledge with others. That's when you truly grow as a person.

Hema Kariyappa: I absolutely concur with that Rehka, education was a way for me to become financially independent, not because we ever lacked anything, but if we aspired for something, we always had to work hard towards it. My dad taught me that very early on by saying, oh, if you want a bicycle, then you need to do very well in your studies. And he pushed me to say, can you come first in your class, so that's how I got my first pair of rollerblades. The next year, I got my first bicycle and I treasured that bike. I would clean it every Sunday. It gave me that sense of freedom that I've earned something. I'm valuing it. I'm looking after it. But yes, the most important thing was to become financially independent, so that we could travel. I've always wanted to travel. So I think that's what our parents taught us, although we have limited means you shouldn't limit your dreams, you should be able to do whatever you like, and go ahead and achieve that. So yeah, that's how we all grow.

Cara McGoogan: I'm interested in some of the challenges that you face and how you've taken those learnings into your adulthood. You said Rehka that you're learning to ride a bike now? Is that something that kind of you've brought with you? And how has that been going?

Rekha Devadiga: So while I was a child, like I said, the resources were limited, and we did not have a bike, we did not even have our own home, or for that matter, clothes as well. So we used to borrow it from someone else. I mean, that was the situation we used to live in the Mumbai slums, we focused only on our education and the fact that we have to move from this place. Coming to Vodafone was a 360 degree change for me, before I was living in a slum. And now I'm living in a flat. Right now, because I have the time, because I have the money, the resources, I can follow my dreams, I can do what I did not do at that point in time in my life. And that's what I'm doing right now. So whether it is travelling, or you know, going out with friends doing something or the other, which helps me to grow, I wanted to learn new things, I just don't want to stop. So whatever challenges I have faced in my life earlier, I am getting over them by learning new things, and enhancing myself and the people around.

Cara McGoogan: What's it been like to ride a bike in your adulthood?



Rekha Devadiga: Imagine, you know, you have a six-year-old riding next to you, and he's riding so well. And here you are not able to balance the bike. So it was a little bit embarrassing, but I would say it was exhilarating. It just felt so good to fly. Same experience was with the car as well, I had this fear that I might just crash into someone else or probably you know, get someone under my car. But after a month of practice, I can safely say that I can drive a car, probably I don't know how to park it, I will learn it.

Hema Kariyappa: I think you are very brave there Rica, because I do get scared about driving in Mumbai, although I've grown up there and I started my driving lessons there. So I think you are far braver than me. And comparing your bike experience learning alongside a child. I never actually learned a musical instrument. So when my daughter was learning piano here, I started attending her classes. And just by watching what the teacher taught her I used to learn alongside her. And I decided that I will take the music theory exams with her. So it was quite fun. When I walked in the exam hall, the ladies who marked on the roll call the like, right, so this is Renessa. And she was telling me Oh, so you're the mum, you can leave now she'll be fine. I said no, I'm taking the exam along with her. So there was a bit of a shock. But here my daughter and me sitting behind each other in the exam hall taking exams, it was fun. Learning new things comes with its own, in India, we would call it Nasha, it's got its own, high.

Rekha Devadiga: I totally agree with you. My dad, at least a month before he passed away, we were sitting together and learning grammar from the Wren & Martin grammar book. I remember the last thing that we read was about adverb clauses. He really wanted to learn about adverb clauses and I don't remember him being at home during the weekdays because he used to come late at night. But at least on Sundays, we used to sit together and have that conversation for half an hour or so where he used to tell me about his stories. And then I used to teach him a little bit about grammar.

Hema Kariyappa: That's beautiful. Can I ask when your dad passed away?

Rekha Devadiga: He passed away in 2008.

Hema Kariyappa: My dad actually passed away very recently on Jan 1st, and this was during lockdown. I was here and he was back in India. So it was a very difficult time because everything that that I went through was online. But since then, in the last three months since he passed away, I've been going back and thinking about how he's shaped my life. My dad had a green thumb, and no matter where he went, he would always grow flowers and fruits and vegetable plants. One of the things that I really feel bad about is that I didn't quite pick up his green thumb. When he came to visit us, I told him we've got this garden do whatever you like. So he grew beautiful flowers, he grew carrots, he grew courgettes. And when I asked him to teach me I didn't actually learn, but now that he's passed away, we've inherited some farmland and my brother and I, we have vowed that we will keep that legacy going just because I know how much he valued his farmland. He said that, you know, no matter what we do, we cannot be removed from our farms and the food that we eat and we need to learn to grow our own fruits and vegetables and even flowers for all the beauty that they provide. That is going to be something that I want to take up at some point, make him proud that, you know I can actually grow something and maintain it.

Rekha Devadiga: I'm so proud of you and I'm so glad that you are doing this for him and for everyone else as well. Thank you.

Cara McGoogan: Hema, that's such a nice story about your dad. Another story that I thought it might be nice for you to share with Rekha, is about your swimming challenges because I know that



Rekha has been learning to swim recently. And you've kind of had some similar experiences, challenging yourself swimming.

Hema Kariyappa: I'll let Rekha go first, you go on Rekha.

Rekha Devadiga: Thank you Hema. Two years back, I went to the swimming pool. And I told him on the very first day, the swimming instructor, hey, you know what, I really want to cross the English Channel. And he looked at me and he said, okay, you come here for 10 days, and then I will decide whether you're ready to do that or not. I went there for about 20 days. And then I changed my role, something other came up, and I did not prioritize this. This year. I said, now I have to do it. I have no option. And this year, I'm going to swim. And I took a one-month crash course with him for two hours every day. And finally, I think I can keep myself afloat without that rubber tube or tire. I believe I can swim now. Yes.

Hema Kariyappa: I do hope that you continue swimming because it is, I find it very relaxing actually. I do hope you actually cross the English Channel and if you do it, maybe we could try it together. So my story also actually starts back in Mumbai. When I started working. There was the YMCA club very close to my workplace, and I was earning, so we took lessons and I started learning to swim, I started learning to dive. When I came to UK, I wanted to continue that. So that was all good. However, then came triathlons. And with triathlons you have to do open water swim. Everybody's like, you'll be fine. You'll be okay. You should be fine. Others were like, it's a completely different ballgame. You need to prepare, make sure you're not panicking. And on that morning, my very first triathlon, very first open water swim, we were swimming, we were going to be swimming in a loch. And a loch means something like a canal where they've blocked off. I purchased all the kit; wetsuit, everything. I get into the water and it was just so different. I was very cold. And I think I was panicking. I was hyperventilating, I was talking to other people, trying to calm myself down. And as soon as the whistle blew, everyone splashed about they went ahead, that made me hyperventilate a bit more, when you've got everyone splashing around you, you don't have the space to start swimming. And I just refused to put my head down, because the waters are dark. I put my head in, I couldn't see anything. I said, I'm not putting my head and I'm going to continue swimming, I started hyperventilating, I just couldn't complete the swim. I did try. But when I saw that the rest of them had already completed a lap. Whereas, we had to complete two laps, and I was maybe like just 10% on the lap. That's when I gave up. I had two people rescuing me trying to put me onto a motorboat. And then they put me back on to terra firma. And then one of the race ladies volunteer, she came in and she said, if this was your first open water swim, it is going to be tricky, you know, don't give up, take some lessons, and you should be able to come back. So that's exactly what I did. I took two lessons, private lessons, and then I signed up for another triathlon this time, it was a shorter distance. And then since then I've been doing open water swim. I think it was me wanting to do stuff, but then not preparing for it thinking yeah, I will wing it. And I'll see how it goes. It can't be that bad. That was a learning curve for me that even though I think I'm prepared, I may not be prepared enough.

Rekha Devadiga: You prove the proverb correct. Failure is the first stepping stone towards success.

Cara McGoogan: Lovely proverb. It might be nice for us to talk about how you've brought some of these outside experiences into the workplace, the sort of challenges you've overcome and that idea of bringing your whole self to work. Rekha, do you want to start?

Rekha Devadiga: Learning has always been an integral part of my life. And it will always be. And for me, it is really important that I keep learning new things. And this is what I do. I'm a morning person,



I wake up every day at five in the morning, I ensure that I do some exercise, then I get into learning mode. So whether it is a LinkedIn course, a Udemy course or learning a new language, reading newspapers, this is generally my day-to-day work. Apart from that it is also very important that I share my knowledge with other people. In my school and college days when I did not have any money to pay for tuition. It is my school friends and my teachers who supported me, they gave me these extra classes. And that is exactly what I do, even now in case if there is any new team member who has joined the team, or someone who needs my support, I ensure that I give my time so that they do well as well. I totally believe that when we work together we work as a team. And the team success matters more than an individual success. Apart from that I observe people and I learn and I want to become a leader who is human, who is authentic, more than the skills that person might have, he needs to be a human. I have encountered some really amazing leaders in Vodafone, who have given out their human self and showed everyone how a leader should be. And that is how I want to be, I learned from them and I want to inculcate that in my life as well.

Hema Kariyappa: You couldn't have put it better Rekha, you're saying everything that I want to say. So nothing more to add, because I think the kind of industry we are in, you cannot do without constant learning, there's always something new that you have to pick up. As you said, working collaboratively, that is what helps, and I don't think I've reached this position without receiving help from a lot of other people. So giving back is also paramount for me, if I've learned something, I do feel excited that I've picked up something new and I want to kind of spread the joy of having learned something new. But I like your thoughts that you want to be a leader, but be a compassionate leader. Absolutely great.

Rekha Devadiga: One more thing to add here is that you should also not shy away from asking help from someone. When I joined the organization. I did not even know how to open an Outlook and I joined the internal IT team, can you imagine? And it is the floor support person who actually helped me how to open an Outlook, how to send out a calendar invite. I completely believe that if you are a part of a particular team, you should know in and out of what the team does. And that is how, without even having a technology background, I ensured I did my ITIL certification, learned what the Investigations team does, or the business continuity support team does. Because it's very important for me to know what my team is doing or what my organization is doing. So that I can communicate better to others.

Hema Kariyappa: What I have found is that asking for help, doesn't make you a lesser person that makes you humble. And humility is a very important quality, to continue to learn, learn to ask for help, because that should keep you humble, always and grounded. And I think that is one of the key traits that a leader needs to have.

Cara McGoogan: What are some of the challenges each of you have faced in the workplace, and how have you sort of dealt with those and move forward? For example, as a parent.

Hema Kariyappa: I think one of the difficult things that I faced was, when I was pregnant with my first child, I had early on indicated to my team and to the company that if I can, I would like to work till the last day, if possible. There are physical limitations to what a fully pregnant woman can do. And also with the attention span when you are, when there is a nesting period. But if you have a team who haven't worked with a pregnant woman first before, they are also not sure of how to handle that, although I was still delivering what I needed to it took me longer to deliver and it came up as a negative feedback. For me, what was important at that stage was to sensitise the team members about the situation that a person can or team member can be in and the physical challenges that I was facing in trying to do my work. That is something that I had to put it out to the



team members, to the HR to say, although I have agreed to work, it doesn't mean I can work in my full capacity. So then they had to actually go back and review their own processes, the kind of work that was given to me. When I came back after my maternity leave, it was my decision to go back part time, I found that that became slightly career limiting. So I had to then actually go back and have another chat to say, there are these limitations that I'm finding at work. And can we have some new processes in place? I see that positive change in most organisations now. But back then no, I had to fight a few battles.

Rekha Devadiga: Hema, I know I can't relate to that because you know, I have not been a mother yet. One of the best things about working for Vodafone and this has been my first corporate job as well, is that you get a lot of opportunities to grow. And that is primarily when you ask for it. And that has been the highlight of my career as well. I joined as an Executive Assistant managing the calendars of a senior SLT member and I moved through an internal job posting to the Marketing Team, then the Strategy Team and then again back to Communications. When I look at challenges, yes, there were challenges. The very first challenge was when I joined the IT team and I did not know what to do and I still ask my boss, why did he keep me in that role after the goof up that I did. He had to go to Dusseldorf once and he was supposed to go from Pune to Bangalore and then from Bangalore to Dusseldorf the same night. I ensured that his Bangalore to Dusseldorf ticket has been booked, but not Pune to Bangalore and I messed up completely. So, he just went to the travel desk himself and he got that ticket arranged. He did not say a word to me, and the next time we spoke, that was after two weeks when he came back from his visit, and asked him, you did not even say one word to me. And he said, Rekha, it was your first time. I'm sure if you had known, you wouldn't have done this. Which was right. So I got this person who ensured that, you know, I learned from my mistakes, and he wasn't harsh on me. Another challenge came up when our team became global. I reached out to one of my mentors, a Romanian lady and I asked her, what should I do now, it's, I don't know how to handle Egyptians or people in Europe. It's not that I can't communicate with them. But it's important for me to ensure that everyone is on the same page. And she suggested me a book, which is called The Culture Map. And she said, read this book, you will be able to understand how to talk to people, how to deal with them, and more than anything else, remember that they are humans. Just tell them this is what you are going through, this is what you're facing, I'm sure they will understand. And of course, they understood, the most important challenge for me has been the last one year where I had four different managers, one has been an Egyptian one, a British, a Hungarian, and now an Indian. Having those authentic conversations has helped me to get a broader perspective about life, about people, about work, and how each one of us can collaboratively work and get the best for the organization as well as for ourselves. So yes, there have been challenges, but there have been people too.

Hema Kariyappa: Having just listened to you Rekha, the fact that you know, Vodafone has such a great culture, I feel that now that I've joined Vodafone and seen your inspiring story, I feel that I want to start really unleashing my potential here in Vodafone, there are quite a few things that I want to try out. And your story only inspires me to try various things, speak to the right people and as you rightly said, make it happen for myself, it's not good to just land on my plate on my lap.

Rekha Devadiga: You just have to ask for it and people will be there to support you.

Hema Kariyappa: Oh, that's great to hear.

Cara McGoogan: That's a really nice jumping off point for our next question, which is, where do you think you're going from here? What are your future plans, and that can be in work or out of work, don't feel like it has to be career goals necessarily.



Hema Kariyappa: I do come from a technology background. And now that I've understood technology, I want to start using that technology to help people. I have a lot of ideas about how I want to use the technology. One of the good things is that Vodafone encourages women leaders, so that's where I see myself, as a women leader, pushing products that I want to create that will help the community or help, you know the wider world. I do want to add here and Rekha, this might be useful to you as well. There is a lady called Rubi Kaur who started Women and Technology Group in Vodafone and that is what I'm part of. We are trying to create a group where women support each other, mentor each other and help each other realize those dreams. So I think that is the baby step that I'm taking, getting involved. And the whole idea is to see if I can mentor someone but also get mentored and help me take the next steps towards a leadership role.

Rekha Devadiga: Really glad to hear that. Hema. And just to let you know, you might have also seen this on Vodafone Workplace group, we have recently launched something called as a Launchpad campaign and any ideas that you have, you can just post it there, and our leaders will look into it. And they will ensure that you know those ideas get implemented. So what are my future plans, one of the things which I regret personally is that I had been so focused on my work in the last eight years that I did not meet my friends as much as I should have or interacted with them. I have not been a part of their lives; their marriages or the birth of their children, or even for that matter, birthdays, anniversaries or deaths in their families. These are the people who have supported me a lot in my early days when I was doing my master's or when I was looking for work. So one of the things which I would really, really want to do is go back to them, connect with them more often. One of the other things which I had planned last year, which of course due to COVID I could not do it, was a backpack trip to UK and also to the European countries. I was planning to take about three months off and maybe work from the Vodafone offices in those countries. That was actually my plan. I had actually, I had taken a world map, I had mapped all the locations where Vodafone offices are present so that I go there. I do maybe four hours of work from the office, explore the country be there for two, three days. I really had some big plans last year. So maybe once all this is over, I would like to do that. I would like to focus myself more on CSR, on employee experience. I like to provide a 360 degree change to a person's life and that that I have seen as possible in these two career options as well. And the best part about my current role is that I'm already a part of the HR team. And this is where I would like to go next in corporate social responsibility, and employee experience. And I'm sure things will be good, in fact, great, in the future.

Cara McGoogan: That trip sounds amazing. I hope you get to do it when COVID is all over.

Hema Kariyappa: I know, I'll be rooting for you Rekha, you can come and stay with me in the UK.

Rekha Devadiga: Great, I already have one accommodation, thank you, Hema.

Hema Kariyappa: Yes, there you go.

Cara McGoogan: This has been such a lovely conversation. And I feel like you guys have got on so well, it's been great. Maybe it would be nice to kind of finish by saying one thing that you've each learned from each other, that might be really hard. I feel like we've all learnt a lot from each other here.

Hema Kariyappa: We have almost similar background Rekha. But I feel you have channelled so much energy into everything you want to do. And you're constantly looking to better yourself. I see you as my role model. I learn from everyone. And now I have someone else. I will be thinking about you most of the time. And I'm thinking if Rekha was in this role, how would she have actually approached



this particular issue or approach this particular problem? So I can already see you as a mentor for me.

Rekha Devadiga: Thank you so much Hema. And Cara, I'm just thinking, out of the probably what, 100,000 people in Vodafone, we were destined to connect. Oh my god, there are so, so, so many similarities, whether it is about our parents, about the state that they were born, whether the city that we were brought up together, the organisation that we are working for, so many similarities and similarities in our ways of thinking as well. While you look up to me as an inspiration, I look up to you as well. Probably every single time, I would think about doing something, I will definitely reach out to you or I'll think about you, that this is what Hema has done and this is how I would like to do it as well. So, we echo each other.

Hema Kariyappa: Thank you.

Cara McGoogan: Thank you both so much. It's been so good to chat. Do you think you guys will stay in contact after this?

Hema Kariyappa: Absolutely. As I've mentioned, you know, I already see Rekha as my role model and as a mentor in Vodafone, so even if she doesn't like it, I'm going to be pinging her.

Rekha Devadiga: I have already checked her on Vodafone Workplace and LinkedIn. And at the same time I have found her email ID on sky, so I will be contacting you.

Hema Kariyappa: Wow. So you're one step ahead of me. I have friends in Pune as well Rekha, so next time when I come down to Bombay, I will catch up with you too.

Rekha Devadiga: Thank you and you're very welcome at my place. I hope to see you super soon.

Hema Kariyappa: Yes, hopefully soon.

Cara McGoogan: I hope you've been as inspired as I have by Hema and Rekha's ideas and stories, the ways they've learned, challenge themselves and kept things exciting in and out of work. This has been We Are Vodafone, a podcast series brought to you by Vodafone, for Vodafone people. If you want to find out more, head to the resources in the show notes below.