

## **Abhijit Bhattacharya: Rifle shooting has shaped my view on life**

Infinite focus and concentration. Philips Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Abhijit Bhattacharya excels on the rifle shooting range. It's something he benefits from in his daily work, as he explains in an interview with Het Financieele Dagblad for the newspaper's *De Bestuurskamer* (The Boardroom) series. "When you are completely in the present, you can stay cool, calm and relaxed."

His initial salary at Philips, the company where 57-year old Abhijit Bhattacharya still works, was no more than the equivalent of 30 euros. Not per hour or per day, but per month. Born in India, he started working in the Philips radio factory in Calcutta, eventually advancing to the group headquarters in Amsterdam. He has been CFO since 2015, and was crowned 'CFO of the Year' in spring 2019.

With his father holding a high position in the pharmaceutical industry, Bhattacharya was fortunate enough to receive a good education. He practiced all kinds of sports during his studies in Bombay, from hockey to cricket, volleyball and football. But he was really serious about rifle shooting, at which he became junior national champion and won several medals at senior level. Despite his CFO job at Philips, Bhattacharya is still one of the top-ten in the Netherlands in the small caliber rifle category. "This sport has shaped my view on life," he says.

### **How did you get involved with rifle shooting?**

"Ah, that's an interesting story. And you just have to decide whether it's interesting enough to write about. In India we had a rather violent labor union movement in the 1970s. If there were problems, my father usually went to the factory to stand with his people. Get up, show your face, that's how he was. He was a well-trained rower in his student days, so he was well built, but security advised him not to go into the workplace because it would be too dangerous. When he did it anyway, they said, well, if you don't want to listen to us, you have to carry some protection."

### **A bulletproof vest?**

"No, a revolver. When he bought one, he hoped that he would never have to use it for the purpose for which he purchased it. According to the rules, you had to be a member of a shooting club to learn how to use such a gun, which he began to do. After a while, he asked me if I wanted to accompany him to the shooting club. I was thirteen years old. The then champion of India happened to be at the club and he said to me: why don't you start shooting instead of sitting here and watching. That's how I started, and I was lucky enough to win my first competition. And once you start winning, it becomes a rather addictive sport."

### **Do you still practice a lot?**

"Just like golf, it's predominantly a mental sport. I think for me, I put in about 25% of the physical practice that the people I compete with put in, but I can compensate with mental training. You must have a completely empty mind and focus on one point. It is a bit like meditating in yoga. The beauty is that you immediately notice if you are doing it right or not because the shots on the target reflect your state of mind. Shooting is relaxation for the mind. And in the Netherlands you are required to shoot eighteen times a year, otherwise you lose your license. That helped me. It forced me to keep practicing, because there were always enough excuses to do more work."

### **Is there a link between shooting and your job?**

"Yes, that connection is very strong. If you run a large company or control its finances, you are performing top sport. Because I have been shooting for so long, it has become second nature. The

most important thing it has taught me is that you cannot make excuses. If you don't win and you come up with a good story about why you didn't, people listen for one, maybe two years. But after a while they really start listening to the person who actually wins."

### **Do you also use the mental training of shooting sports in your daily work?**

"Absolutely, you have to be focused on what you do. You have to live in the present. If you get stuck in the last shot or think too far ahead, you will not have clarity of thought. When you are completely in the present, you can stay cool, calm and relaxed. There are many challenges on my plate here, right? You must ensure that you remove the noise from a problem and try to understand what it is really about. You have to think about the right approach, who has the competency to resolve the issue and how you can help them to solve the problem. If you go through those steps, it actually becomes fairly simple. In itself, that process is not particularly intellectual. But if you are able to approach it that way - one issue after the other - then the results will come your way. If you rush things, you disrupt a systematically calm and quiet process and you have no results. Yes, you may succeed once or twice, but not consistently."

### **How do you deal with facts and figures, now that you are CFO?**

"I was tested after high school. For me it was simple, this is where my strength lies. Look, I am not gifted in many ways, I try to grow as strongly as possible in what I am good at. But first I wanted to become an engineer. Before I started studying, I had my own garage. I worked for people in the neighborhood. In the late 1970s you could have air conditioning installed in your car in India. But car technology itself was old, even with the new models. They had too little power for the air conditioners, causing the cars to overheat after a while. I was one of the first to overcome this problem and I started a business to solve it. I was eighteen. If you've never earned money before, you think that's it. But I think my dad was smarter than me. He gave me an option. You can continue with this, he said, but I would suggest you complete your study first. Because if something happens to your company, you still have another option. But if you continue, you will have no plan B or plan C in the event of a failure. That left a deep impression on me. I'm still looking for a plan B or a plan C. The world is complicated enough. If something does not go well, you always need to have an alternative instead of just apologizing."

### **How did you first encounter Philips?**

"I started with Philips in India after completing my post-graduation and professional accounting qualification. Philips was fascinating because of the televisions and the latest technologies. I first had to go to Calcutta, where my family actually comes from, in a factory for radios and record players. Before I decided on that job, I spoke to a number of people, among them someone from the Indian headquarters of Philips in Bombay. He said: look, we have rooms full of senior managers here, but they all learned outside the big offices how the business really works. If you want to work here at Philips' headquarters, it's best to lay a good foundation. Then it becomes easy. They hired me as the accountant for color TVs, which they were just starting to produce. I started on a salary that was equivalent to around thirty euros a month, but fortunately I was able to move into the house where my father's family lived."

### **What did you learn in Calcutta?**

"If you have not built a solid foundation ... if you have not been truly tested in a difficult period, then you will not succeed. You have to understand how a factory works. You must know how production works. Even though I was an accountant, I was very often on the shop floor. If you know what

happens there, you also know how the results will develop. That also became a kind of game for me. I spoke to the people on the shop floor, and if you heard that there was a problem somewhere, you could foresee a loss or lower profit there. On the other hand, if break-through improvements were being implemented that would improve results, you could learn how to quantify things. People wondered why I could predict this so well. It taught me how to manage performance looking at the road ahead rather than looking in the rearview mirror. I was there for a total of three and a half years, during which time my father died of cancer. Philips was kind enough to give me the option of coming back to Bombay to my mother and my sister, who was very young at the time. But my mother told me to stay there and complete my learning, because that is why I went there in the first place."

**Do you still often walk into the factory?**

"Yes, I still do that. We call it 'going to the gembu' here. I also encourage my team to do the same, visit factories, warehouses, customers. I shape my role in such a way that I talk to people all day, in person or via video conferencing. I send no more than five e-mails a day. I don't believe in sending e-mails. I prefer to discuss the problem instead, look for a solution. That's my working style. I spend 95% or perhaps 100% of my working day with people. I only look at my e-mails late at night. First and foremost, I am available for the people who want some of my time. It is actually fantastic. Everyone comes with their issues and you learn more, and more, and more."

**So every appointment is a new moment of concentration – is that the case?**

"Absolutely, people expect that from me too. At this moment, my time is for you, so I am not thinking about the next meeting or the one after that. People come to you with a certain expectation, so be in the present with the person you are with."