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'Nothing is impossible if you have a great idea!'

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Enzymes are considered to be a boon and an alternative for detrimental chemicals. Armed with this key idea, Leaf Cleantech's core business focus rests on these enzymes.

Voices Mr Vidyashankar (Shankar) Balasubramanyam, founder and CEO, Leaf Cleantech, "We either replace chemicals partially or completely. We had prior knowledge about enzymes and their applications. Enzymes remain our key business. I have a background in Chemistry and my father, who is an engineer in the R&D, started out together. We offer clean solutions in the air, water and energy spaces. At the same time, we offer products and solutions for the food-and-feed, alcohol, biofuel and neutraceutical industry."

He points out that the company's mission is to provide sustainable and biochemical solutions for some of the pressing issues today in the area of energy efficiency and dependency.

"We offer solutions where we can improve processes efficiently, either directly or indirectly, and reduce the carbon print. Especially in the area of waste water treatment, we wanted to find solutions which would treat the generated waste water from process industries, where it can be used again within the process," he explains.

Initially Mr Shankar started as a consultant and worked with technology incubation firms. Later the company began to work on developing products and technology, as it realized the business model wasn't working.

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Prior to kick-starting his own venture, in 1998, Mr Shankar started his career with Biocon as a marketing manager which lasted close to a decade. He also had a brief stint with Novozymes South Asia as the business head.

Starting his own company wasn't a cakewalk for Mr Shankar. "Till now we are completely self-funded. I have a commercial background in sales and marketing space. So establishing a company and looking at all the aspects of the business, right from getting the company registered to setting up the warehouse and laboratory, was a humongous challenge," he laments.

Like any other Life Sciences start-up, Mr Shankar states that fundings aren't available easily.

"Even talking to the banks does not result in any fruition. There are many requirements to fulfill. Today venture capitalists are more driven towards Information Technology than Life Sciences, since the latter has longer gestation periods. Right now, the revenues that we generate is used up internally for various developments," he points.

He also suggests that the government should ease Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) funding. "There needs to be schemes and some sort of partnerships that would help funding private start-ups, and the government can risk to some extent by playing an active role," opines Mr Shankar.

Leaf Cleantech now totally employs 10 professionals catering in the R&D, QC and marketing departments.

According to Mr Shankar, innovation comes from two things. "Domain knowledge and understanding the industry are two key components. We encourage our people to be open to try and do new things, move into unchartered markets, talk to customers and develop new solutions which is long lasting," he tells with a sparkle in his eye.

The company now compliments its business by having balance between domestic and international business.

"Once we set the platform for ourselves and build products and services, then we have a strong portfolio. Right now we have started small for a specific market. As we mature in business we will look at larger markets. Globally, we plan to be on top in the industries that we operate. We want to venture into formulations and see complimentary products getting into our portfolio," Mr Shankar smiles.

He also expressed interest and openness for associations and like-minded partnerships who can add value to the company.

He says that so far the company's products have been well received in the South-East Asia and Far East countries, especially in the Biofuels' space.

"We want to work with top pharmaceutical and neutraceutical companies in India and around the world. In the next 3 to 5 years, we are eyeing Europe, South-East Asia, Far East and Japanese markets. However, right now our focus is to build our business and improve our infrastructure, and see that all our operations come under one roof," Mr Shankar says passionately.

Next to Bangalore and Hyderabad, he sees Indian cities like Pune, Chennai and Mysore emerging as the hot-bed for Life Sciences start-ups.

"These cities have good institutes and many good engineering and medical colleges. We should have more biotech parks like the one in the University of Delhi, South Campus. There should also be more incubation centers," he voices.

Mr Shankar also brought about the fact that the government needs to bring in some clarity in the ethanol fuel space which will drive the demand for biofuels.

He deliberates, "The US and Brazil are the largest producers of ethanol fuel in the world. For decades they have been successfully doing this. Sadly, we are already lagging behind. In Brazil more than 20 percent ethanol is already blended in fuel for several years now, whereas in India, we are yet to completely implement 5 percent ethanol blend in petrol across the country. We are also seeing inflation and the cost of fuel is shooting up so much that it has impacted the industry processes."

As a final conclusion, Mr Shankar advises confidently, "Funding will definitely be a challenge for start-ups. At the same time, nothing is impossible if you have a great idea!"