



Navin Valrani, CEO of engineering services, Al Shirawi Contracting. Jeffrey E Biteng / The National

Off hours: Family workouts and cricket sustain Al Shirawi chief in Dubai

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Navin Valrani is chief of the engineering services cluster of Al Shirawi Group, a family-owned industrial group based in Dubai. He also heads the education part of the company and is overseeing September's roll-out of the group's first school, Arcadia Preparatory School. Mr Valrani is 45 and from India.

How do you spend your weekends?

On Friday mornings, I play cricket with my sons, who are aged 18 and 16, and our staff at home. We have a few hours of games, then my kids go over to their grandparents who are very close by, and my wife and I have lunch together and spend a few hours on our own. Then the kids come back and we usually end up doing some indoor activity, or we go to a nice restaurant and spend time as a family, with quality intellectual conversations. On Saturdays, we work out together as a family in the gym. We motivate and correct each other, doing a combination of cardio and weights – the boys do more lifting. It's a fun family activity. After lunch everybody runs their errands.

How did you become a CEO?

I was schooled in Dubai, then went on to the Wharton School of Business in the US. I came back and joined the group, initially on the marine heavy equipment side of the business. In 1997 our chairman and senior vice chairman called me and gave me the building services side, because of the successes I'd had with the equipment. I started off as an executive director for five years, then they wanted me to lead the business. In the 19 years since I took over as CEO, we've grown the business over 30 times.

What was the lowest point of your career?

Probably when I first took over the business. I was relatively young at 27 and was given the construction side to run. It was a harsh industry, and being young and trying to learn from the people around me was quite daunting. My wife was pregnant and we were trying to achieve many goals together. But that was a while ago and we've moved on since then.

What advice would you offer to others starting out in your business?

Believe in yourself. Life is full of challenges, but the majority, if not all, of the problems are temporary. There will be a time when you will look upon that problem and smile. It's also important to live by your values. Work becomes more fun than it's supposed to be when you do that.

What's your most indulgent habit?

I have a tendency to get lost in my thoughts, but I would say eating the wrong foods is probably my close first. I try to stay away from carbs, but once I get a taste on a spoon then I just can't stop.

What do you have on your desk at work?

I have several desks, and I spend a lot of time in my car. So there's nothing given on my desk. A lot of big ideas aren't on my desk but are in my head.

What's your go-to gadget?

It's got to be my iPhone. Between my iPhone, my iPad, my Apple TV and my Macbook Air, I'm pretty much Apple all the way.

What can't you live without?

My wife, Monica. I met her when I was in my last year of university and we've pretty much been sweethearts since then – we got married on Christmas Day when I was 23 and she was 22 and we've had 22 fantastic years together. We're quite a romantic couple. I am who I am because of my wife. She is constantly there to support me, and vice versa. She runs the Ladybird chain of nursery schools and she's a passionate believer in early years education. Her passion rubs off on me.

How do you achieve a work-life balance?

I think it's a question of knowing what my priorities are, that my family comes first. When I wake up, the first thing I ask myself is what do I need to do today for my family. Before I get to work I check those boxes. They could just be simple tasks like homework support for my kids. I have a smile for the whole day because I start it off on such a positive note, helping those I love.

If you could you swap jobs with anyone, who would it be and why?

I think I'd want the job I have right now. I truly believe I am fortunate enough to make a difference in so many people's lives. I have over 5,000 working for the company and I go out every day knowing there are 5,000 families that I contribute to in my own little way, which keeps me going at work.

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