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Surina Piyadasa Melds Art and Science to Help Clients Communicate Effectively

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“Communication is everything,” says Surina Piyadasa, the CEO of Dynamically Speaking, a firm she founded to help leaders present their ideas as effectively as possible when the stakes are high. With a client list that includes 2016 NBA Hall of Fame inductee Shaquille O’Neal and executives from giants in virtually every business sector, it is clear that Piyadasa knows how to put that belief in communication to work.



That makes it all the more ironic that, when she first learned to speak, she was unable to talk to her father. The family had emigrated to the U.S. from Sri Lanka — Piyadasa’s father was an engineer with United Airlines — and the first language she learned was Bengali, her mother’s native language. “I couldn’t communicate with my father,” she says, “for probably the first year I was speaking. That’s what my mother tells me.” That situation did not last long as she quickly learned both her father’s tongue and English, thanks in part to an older brother who shared what he learned in school.

Her love of language grew further thanks to her early experiences in the performing arts.

“I was a thespian in grade school and I had wonderful public school teachers. Mr. Stewart, God bless him,” she says. “He always challenged me as an actor and he would challenge me to play traditional male roles. In the fourth grade, I played Prince Hamlet of Denmark — that is, modern Prince Hamlet. In the fifth grade I played Ebenezer Scrooge and Captain Hook. To play these men was just fascinating and challenging. You have to find the humanity in every character. When you look at a Captain Hook, he’s clearly a villain, right? The pirate captain Hook who walked around threatening Peter Pan and making Pan’s life miserable. But I’m not sure how many people know that he had two big fears. One was a fear of his own blood and the second fear, which was more obvious, was the fear of alligators because one actually took his hand, which is why he had to wear a hook. Finding the vulnerability in those characters — to make them more likable, to make them more human — I always found that really interesting. I think it’s really relevant to what I’m doing today.

“You have to be likable in business. Your likability, trustworthiness, and approachability are all keys to establishing successful business relationships because business rises and falls on the success of relationship building,” she explains. “People do business with people — they don’t do business with technology. Technology is just a tool for building better quality relationships. So I think that the earlier background with acting was very, very helpful in terms of finding what’s likable in a person and then also it teaches you the value of empathy.”

Her acting career did not end with elementary school, as her current membership in the Screen Actors Guild indicates, but there was a hiatus from dramatics while she finished her primary and secondary education, eventually earning an MBA in finance and going to work in that industry.

“I was an institutional bond salesperson. I wasn’t a Bond girl — I was a bond lady,” she laughs. “I would travel and build relationship with institutional investors across the country and in my role as an institutional salesperson and then later on I became a banker. You have to tell a story. You have to believe in the value of what you’re selling. And in my case it was helping companies to raise capital, and you have to be able to tell the story well. I really enjoyed that.”

In 1999, she became the vice president of Business Development and head of Private Placements

for The Brenner Group, a Silicon Valley professional services firm. It was during the height of the dot com boom, and the taste of entrepreneurship her position provided was electric. “You could walk down University Avenue (in Palo Alto) and it was just bustling with creativity and energy,” she says. “After the tech implosion, and you would walk down the same avenue and it was a completely different climate. I think the Valley had tumbled.”

Her exposure to the entrepreneurship bug proved to be contagious, however, and in 2004 she launched Dynamically Speaking.

“After the tech implosion and 9/11, I did quite a bit of heart searching in terms of what was happening and where I was in my life’s journey. I did a lot of self-reflection and decided it was time to do something different,” she says. “I wasn’t sure what I would do but I knew that it would be something involving communication and telling stories and helping C level executives, because that had been my business background. If you look at my professional career, the common thread is I’ve always worked with C level executives and enjoyed the challenge of building trust with them. And Dynamically Speaking was born in 2004.”

The independence that came with her self-employment also enabled Piyadasa to pursue more actively her passion for acting and performing, something that had largely been put on the back burner until then. “I couldn’t do both — I wasn’t able to pursue it with my foot on the accelerator until I had left the corporate world,” she says. Despite the constraints of her schedule, she still managed to win small parts in San Francisco, including a role as a day player in the 1990’s Don Johnson/Cheech Marin series, Nash Bridges. “Everyone including my boss saw that episode,” she recalls. “He said, ‘You know, there was a gal on Nash Bridges last night who looked like you.’”

Most of her acting now takes place in commercials. “This is primarily a commercial acting town because we’re so close to Silicon Valley and Fortune 500 companies,” she says. “If you want to really build a career around film then either you move to L.A., if you want to build a career around theater then you move to New York and you pursue Broadway. I love it, although you don’t have as much opportunity in terms of the emotional range that you would have as in film but still, at the end of the day, you’re playing somebody other than yourself. It’s fun — I get to play.”

Many of her roles allow her to incorporate her business experience. “Interestingly enough, I get hired to play executives,” she says. “I’ve worked for a lot of tech and low-tech companies as either a spokesperson or I’m playing an executive on camera, which is quite interesting.”

She finds that Dynamically Speaking allows those two sides of her experience to come together, creating a synergy that she finds fulfilling. “What makes me happy and whole and feel alive is being immersed on the creative side as well as the business side,” Piyadasa says. “I need to have feet planted in both areas, nurturing the creative side of my brain as well as the analytical and business side of my brain. Dynamically Speaking has been the vehicle where the creativity could meet the analytical, the data driven side of me. And I was able to take those two skill sets plus the relationships that I have cultivated along the way to my clients and deliver value and work with

them. They are really fascinating, fascinating people who keep me challenged all the time.”

Her clients typically come to her when they have a high-stakes presentation to make. “There's typically a lot of money on the table and they need to present with excellence,” she says. “It's very presentation specific. I'll actually partner with my client or the client team as a trusted advisor and we will co-develop the messaging. I will help them to fine tune the delivery, but it's very targeted — it's not public speaking 101.”

The key element to a successful presentation — and to successful communication in general, she says — is empathy. “To be able to listen and understand another person's point of view or how they are feeling is a highly sought after leadership strength. You don't necessarily have to agree with someone’s point of view but to understand where they're coming from and what their perspective is will help you in communicating more effectively. I think the biggest challenge that I see with business executives is how you create that warmth and approachability in a very short period of time. That's especially challenging for portfolio managers or engineers or doctors, people who are very analytical and data-driven. That I see is probably the biggest pain point for that type of executive. You can learn to be warm and approachable with the messaging but if there's ever a disconnect between what your audience is seeing in terms of your body language and your facial expression with the words that you're speaking, the audience is going to put more value on the body language and the facial expressions and the tone of your voice.”

She has worked with O’Neal, her most famous client, for over three years, and is effusive with her praise for the former NBA star. “I use an acronym, APP, to describe public speakers,” she says. “A for approachability, P for power, and the second P for presence. He embodies that, he exudes that, and he is one of the hardest working leaders I've ever had the pleasure to meet with. He has that mental grit, focus, and discipline that you know he wants to deliver excellence and create a memorable experience for the audience. That's all that he's about.”

With a skilled communicator like Piyadasa in his corner, he has an important ally.

For more information on Dynamically Speaking, access the company’s web site at www.dynamicallyspeaking.com.

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- **New Cisco Sales Office Showcases Company's Workplace Technology**
- **Bell Sports Medicine Finds a New Home in Hacienda**
- **Business Bits**
- **Surina Piyadasa Melds Art and Science to Help Clients Communicate Effectively**
- **Axis Community Health's Hacienda Expansion Provides Greater Access to Health Care, New**

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- [Walovich Architects Group Brings a Detective's Eye for Detail to Construction Litigation](#)
- [Hacienda Offers a Variety of Childcare and Educational Opportunities for Children](#)
- [From Disneyland to Universal Studios, Summer Fun Comes with a Discount from Hacienda](#)
- [Pleasanton's Firehouse Arts Center Offers the Best in Music, Theater, Film and More](#)
- [Upcoming Sandra J. Wing Healing Therapies Foundation 5K Fun Run, Golf Tournament Will Benefit Area Cancer Patients](#)
- [Hacienda July Index](#)
- [Calendar](#)

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