



Hiten Shah – Founder & President, MES, Inc.



Hiten Shah, owner and president of MES, Inc., believes that human beings have unlimited potential, and he is the living proof.

Hiten built MES, Inc. on a culture of trust and honesty, where employees have the freedom to express themselves and where everyone in the company strives to treat all people—coworkers, customers, and suppliers—fairly and transparently. MES today incorporates both his ambitious work ethic and his personal values. Hiten credits a lot of his success to his wife of 27 years, Heena.

MES develops custom engineered solutions by leveraging global manufacturing resources and implementing comprehensive supply chain solutions. It follows five

distinct steps from finding and auditing suppliers to developing their quality systems, consolidating shipments at various ports, performing domestic value-added operations and warehousing near customers and shipping just-in-time (JIT).

Tell me about your early career.

After finishing my M.S. in Plastics Engineering from UMass, I found a job as process engineer working in Medina, Ohio. From there, I moved to Columbus, Ohio and worked at an automotive insulation manufacturer. I learned a great deal about process, tooling, human factors in manufacturing, productivity, waste, and launching projects.

How did the concept for MES, Inc. come about?

I left my job and started working as a sales representative for a couple of automotive suppliers. In 2006, while I was visiting family in India, one of my friends asked me to visit some casting foundries. When I got back, I ran into an opportunity for a lighting and medical customer, where they were interested in purchasing from India. I helped introduce the suppliers to these customers, and with significant savings, they had an immediate opportunity. However, customers wanted me to be involved rather than dealing with the suppliers directly. Further, they wanted me to hold the inventory in the U.S. and ship JIT. This was quite risky, as I would then take responsibility for quality, delivery, and inventory. But it was clear that OEMs and tier-one suppliers wanted this service. Given my belief that we can manage quality and develop robust supply chain processes to hold the right amount of inventory, I agreed to take on the supply chain work. We placed orders to China and India, received containers and shipments from both locations, as well as got some parts approved for quality – all within the 90-day period in summer 2007. That's how we started. We just celebrated ten years in business this summer (2017).

How was the first year in business?

First year was difficult as I had my sales representation business which paid the bills. We didn't have any money so I borrowed against my home line of credit and paid suppliers to buy our first couple of containers of parts. I also made a major mistake in not having the right engineer in India, and as a result, I lost a medical customer. I was also asked to follow ISO 9001, which forced me to move out of my home office. Eventually, I did a poor job managing those programs and lost that business as well. First year was fraught with mistakes which I would learn from,

but regret making. It was also dicey investing without knowing that this will work. In 2009, banks got really stringent on lines of credit, so money got even tighter.

What was your marketing strategy?

Marketing strategy was just me and myself! I spent a lot of time with our first couple of customers making sales calls, screening drawings, creating quotes and proposals, as well as coordinating with my customers' customer service, purchasing, and quality engineers.

How fast did the company grow during the first few years?

Company grew from \$800,000 in 2008 to \$75 million in 2016.

How do you define success?

We measure success as achieving our "metrics." I define it as achieving pre-determined goals.

What is the key to success?

There is not just one key to success. Success happens because of a myriad of events and opportunities meeting with the right amount of energy and effort. There is a saying, "Success happens to a prepared mind." Generally though, there are no silver bullets. Consistent and long-term success happens because of individuals' and teams' relentless focus, passion, and strength to make decisions and their work to achieve them. One measure of success, which is not emphasized enough in my opinion, is one's willingness to fail. You can only succeed if you are pushing your own core abilities. While doing that, you are apt to fail. One must have an reflective and learning ability to get over your mistakes and failures.

What is the greatest lesson you've ever learned?

Biggest lesson is that success happens by taking advantage of an opportunity. We come across lots of opportunities but most of them pass by without any action on our part. We must take action to convert opportunities into achievements.

What are some of your favorite books?

Among recent books, I absolutely enjoyed Napoleon Bonaparte's biography by Robert Asprey. I loved all of Malcolm Gladwell's books. Harvey Firestone's biography was a nice read, along with the one by Phil Knight. I am a voracious reader and have read many biographies including Hitler, Gandhi, Winston

Churchill, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and many other sports, political, and business figures. I really enjoyed the book Scaling Up by Verne Harnish. I incorporated quite a few recommendations from that book into our business, as we scaled up.

Tell me about one of the toughest days you've had as an entrepreneur.

Toughest days for me are when we are engaged with our top few customers on annual cost reductions. Most customers always have an option which are lower in prices and it's a challenge to keep them engaged, show them the value, and convince them to pay a little more than they would to other suppliers because of our superior service, quality, and delivery capabilities and records.

When faced with adversity, what pushes you to keep moving forward?

Faith that we can always find a solution to any challenge, and confidence to actually do what your inner voice is asking you to do. As entrepreneurs, we face lots of issues which do not have a recipe for solution. Engaging with stakeholders and finding a common ground needs a lot of inner strength. That's what allows me to push through various adversities.

What advice would you give to young entrepreneurs?

Biggest issue is to develop your communication skills, the ability to deal with people, persuade people to your way of thinking, and finding common ground to move the issues further. There is a lot of focus on developing technical skills, and while they are important, I am convinced that entrepreneurs' success lies in his/her ability to convince customers, suppliers, partners, and their people to help them build the company. Soft skills are far more important than what most people will realize.