



## Startup Superstar

On an early December night, in a North Carolina Central University classroom, Ravila Gupta sat exhausted as a law school professor discussed torts. Night school was Gupta's only option, since she was working full-time as an engineer. She was making use of every moment, memorizing legal outlines in her car when she pulled up to red lights, and opening her books to study when she got home at 10 p.m. every night. Every minute was precious.

Gupta felt like she'd chosen to step off of the world for four years, exiling herself from her friends, from her life—giving up time with her family and time for herself. It was all so hard. But was it worth it? "I just can't do this anymore; it's far too much," Gupta thought. "This is too big a price to pay."

Then she thought about something else. Her six-year-old son, Neel, sitting in the back of the law classroom with the other children whose parents didn't have childcare. If she quit now, what message would that send him? If she didn't do something because it was hard, what kind of role model would she be?

The questioning moments of defeatism Gupta felt as a law student were out of character. Gupta is a charge ahead, tackle anything kind of doer who is not at all prone to self-doubt. The decision to stay the course, get her J.D. and keep forging ahead was a more accurate reflection of the woman who today is the president and chief executive officer of the Council for Entrepreneurial Development (CED).

## Forging Ahead

Founded more than 35 years ago, CED is North Carolina's oldest nonprofit dedicated to



strengthening startups in the state. It connects founding companies and visionary entrepreneurs with resources, financial backing, mentorship, and each other.

Gupta took its helm in 2017. At the time, she had no entrepreneurial experience save watching her parents open and run a furniture business in their retirement. It didn't matter. Gupta had no doubt she could do it. In fact, she knew the job would combine all the skills and ways of thinking she'd honed over an ambitious and winding career path.

Gupta started out as an engineering student, along with her two sisters. They were the first trio of female siblings to graduate from McGill University's engineering program. But to the girls, their accomplishments were simply expectations met—to-dos checked off a list.

"We lived in a house where hard work was something that you just did," Gupta says. In the 1960s, her parents emigrated from India to the U.S., where they hoped to make a better life for themselves. Her mother rose through the ranks as an executive, and her father was an engineering professor. For their daughters, there was no option: Education was the ultimate priority. "School was just what you did," Gupta says. "There was no question about how hard you'd study or that you were going to continue studying."

Fortunately for Gupta, the pressure to excel in school never created an aversion to learning. Instead, learning became a lifelong passion. This quest for knowledge has propelled her every professional move, from her early days as a chemical engineer who switched into environmental engineering. Then, as an engineer who went to law school. A lawyer who became a company president. And a president who took a look at everything she had to offer and decided to give back.

This thirst for learning kept Gupta in her seat in that law school classroom three nights a week, where she hoped she'd learn a new way to approach problems and gain a new skill set.

Studying the law indeed provided a whole new lens through which to view things. Her engineering experience had trained her to see the world as a series of problems and solutions. What was wrong—and how she could fix it. But from a legal perspective, nothing was binary or empirical; the solutions were always tempered with pros and cons and consequences.

"When you're trained as an engineer, there's always a problem, and you're trained to find answers," Gupta says. "As an attorney, you're trained to look at options and downsides." As both, Gupta says she became solution-driven but also aware of the bigger picture, cognizant of all the possibilities and repercussions.

## **Well, Why Not Me?**



Gupta took a job at a Raleigh law firm after graduation, but in 2008, she moved on to be general counsel at Umicore USA, a subsidiary of the Brussels-based materials technology and recycling company that employs more than 10,000 people and brings in more than \$10 billion. Three years later, Gupta was Umicore USA's president.

It was a heady position, punctuated by surreal opportunities. During a roundtable discussion on foreign investment that Gupta was invited to at the White House, she strolled around the table looking for her name card. She finally found it, next to an unmarked place with a blue folder and a cup of green tea: President Barack Obama's seat.

"Well, why *not* me?" Gupta thought as she took her seat beside the president's.

She was the only woman at the table. Indeed, Gupta is the only woman and person of color at many of the tables she sits at. But those are aspects of her identity that don't take up much headspace.

"I don't lead with that. I have a heritage and culture that's really rich, and it's shaped who I am, but I just view myself as trying to do the best I can," she says. "It doesn't even come to my mind a lot of the time."

What does come to mind—all the time—is how to keep learning.

That manifests in simple, day-to-day things, like Gupta's obsession with nonfiction reading. Gupta is never without a book, and she reads constantly, everything from biographies to a recent release explaining all facets of the human body. "I can't put that book down because I'm gaining knowledge at all times," Gupta says.

"I just have this insatiable desire to know things and understand, and it helps me connect dots in the world."

After nine years at Umicore, Gupta was also connecting the dots of her own career. She loved her job at Umicore USA, and it was a company she felt great about working for.

But was there something new to learn elsewhere?

## **Connecting the Dots**

"I've constantly been on a journey," says Gupta. "Every single job. It was like, OK, what can I learn from this person? What can I learn from this decision? What can I learn from this industry? I didn't realize early on that that's what I was doing—I felt like I was just being myself, and I was constantly searching for knowledge from people or new ideas."

Gupta knew herself and knew what motivated her. She needed to master something new. And she wanted to do something beyond learn; she wanted to teach. Over the course of her career, she'd amassed not just a wealth of skills and a trove of knowledge, but multiple ways of viewing and solving



problems.

She'd also shaped herself into an astute leader. Inspired by executive coaching she received as Umicore's president, Gupta had gone back to the classroom yet again, to earn her coaching certificate. She learned that the way she tended to jump in and solve problems her team was having was not as effective as helping them realize and develop their own solutions.

"I noticed that my coach never told me what to do or how to do it, but she asked me questions," Gupta says. "And I began to realize that the answer is actually inside, you just need to pull the answer out."

As she learned to coach and applied the practices to her own team, Gupta saw how powerful an approach it was. It forced her to step back and to allow space for creativity. And it allowed her to build strong, invested teams.

Gupta decided she wanted to apply all of her executive and leadership experience to a smaller team she could really influence, with a mission-driven focus she could feel passionate about. She wanted to lead an organization she could personally reshape.

## **Paying It Forward**

It was perfect timing for CED, whose chief executive officer and president was stepping down just as Gupta was looking for that unicorn role that would make use of her combined experiences.

"I was looking for a place where I could take everything I had and all the leadership skills I'd developed and be super impactful, just really help an organization transform itself," Gupta says. "Can I take everything and put it in one place and see the results of my work in a very quick manner?"

Less than three years later, the answer seems to be yes.

Gupta has already presided over a major overhaul of the organization's business model and strategy, a move she expects to result in increased funding, financial sustainability, and improved engagement.

After Hurricane Florence foiled CED's biannual tech conference plans, Gupta quickly rebounded by combining it with the organization's upcoming life sciences conference—a revenue-saving move that also produced a synergistic joint event she now plans to replicate every year.

Gupta also gets to see her work transforming CED reverberate through the entrepreneurial companies it supports.

"The nice thing about CED is you have direct impact to an entrepreneurial company, and that impact can be large," she says. "That's what's really exciting about it. As a small team of nine people, when we touch a company, we see it right then."





There are plenty of those ambitious young companies to reach out to. North Carolina is home to a unique and incredibly collaborative ecosystem of startups of many stripes. Having both tech and life sciences in the same, supportive scene is special in and of itself. And they're not just ambitious, but incredibly successful, too. Companies in North Carolina brought in a record \$2.7 billion in venture funding in 2018, led by Epic Games, Precision BioSciences, and Humacyte.

"This area is so special. It's grown so much in the last however many years, and the ecosystem here has really blossomed a lot," Gupta says. "It's very collaborative, and it's very encouraging for companies."

CED helps entrepreneurs navigate their way around this ecosystem, providing connections, support, and guidance as they look for assistance of all sorts. "I think that's really, really important, just to make sure that they know this community's behind them and wants them to succeed," says Gupta.

Failure is not an option. Gupta doesn't believe in it. There are setbacks and obstacles, challenges, and perhaps disappointments. But she doesn't trade in doubts or fears. Not when it comes to her own life and work, and not when it comes to others'. That kind of certainty can be a kind of sword and



shield all its own for the startups Gupta works with.

## The Greatest Joy

When Gupta speaks with entrepreneurial leaders, she keeps them in touch with their *why*—the passion behind their all-consuming project. She personally helps companies understand how they can share the story behind their company and the importance of doing so. She tries to keep them feeling steady as they weather the ups and downs of an uncertain and high-stakes life.

For Gupta, her why is simple. It's her team. And it's there that Gupta feels she's made the greatest contribution. She encourages their passions and sets a unified direction. She brings them opportunities for professional development so that they can keep learning and growing.

“For me,” she says, “that’s been the greatest joy.” Perhaps a new learning opportunity will present itself alluringly to Gupta in the future—maybe even a startup idea of her own. But for now, there’s plenty of pleasure to be found both within and beyond work. In the pages of a fascinating book, of course. But also, in her travels around the world. In foreign cities, Gupta makes it a special mission to find the best and most authentic restaurants to try. She especially loves embarking on those quests with her son—the 30-year-old venture capitalist in London who was once a little boy sitting in the back of the classroom looking up to his mom.

## ABOUT THE COUNCIL FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

Formed in 1984 by a group of business leaders, the Council for Entrepreneurial Development (CED) is a North Carolina nonprofit organization dedicated to connecting regional entrepreneurs with the resources they need to build and launch successful businesses. For more than 35 years, CED has partnered with a network of supporters, giving startups the chance to get mentoring, financial backing, education, and other resources needed to turn a new company into a success story.

If you're just getting started with a new company and need support, or if you're an experienced entrepreneur wanting to foster a young company's success, CED facilitates the ideal connections.

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