

Leaders to Learn From

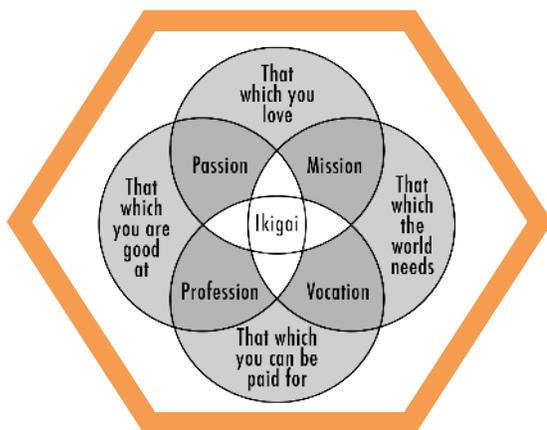
Sonar Thekdi

*Vice President of Engineering Business Operations, IoT
Cisco Systems*

“When I was a 12-year-old girl growing up in a middle-class family in India, I could not have imagined my future in my wildest dreams. As the youngest of six girls, living with my single mom (my dad passed away when I was two and a half years old), I was just trying to be an obedient daughter, a great student and a cautious young woman. The world around me seemed to be full of hardships, and I thought that all I had to do was overcome the daily challenges and take care of myself, and at most, my mom. My only dream was to become an ‘engineer’ because my dad (who I didn’t even remember) was one and I wanted to carry forward his legacy. While I did become an engineer, I am proud of how I took charge of my career, listened to my gut and charted an unconventional path.”

Her Pathway to a Fulfilling Career

Sonar began her career as a software engineer and within the first year, “realized that what makes me come alive is solving critical, complex technical challenges, not just by writing software but by bringing the right people together, asking the right questions and focusing on shared successes. That realization led my transition from a software engineer to an engineering program manager to my current role as VP of Business Operations. I didn’t know at the time, but I was thinking about the concept of ‘Ikigai’, (see the diagram to the left) and was fortunate



to land on a career path that has given me a great way to build my profession around my passion.” As the Vice President of Business Operations for Cisco’s Internet of Things Business Group, Sonar spearheads strategy planning, business analytics and governance, operational framework and change leadership. She describes her team as the central nervous system of the business, essential to driving execution and ensuring business success. They play a critical role in defining and driving strategic, operational, and organizational excellence to scale the business with speed and deliver aggressive growth. Very importantly, her team helps perpetuate a culture of alignment and transformation that drives optimization for the future of IoT. What gets Sonar excited every day is sharing personal stories, pushing and stretching herself and her team to question the status quo and find new ways to solve problems. Personally, Sonar is a passionate advocate for girls and women (especially in STEM), mentoring (and reverse mentoring) early in career talent across my ecosystem and driving full-spectrum diversity across the organization. “I feel that every role brings with it a set of challenges and accomplishments. I have always sought out new roles that will stretch me, force me to learn (and at times unlearn) and in the process give me a growth and development opportunity.”

STEMconnector



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The Qualities that Make a Great Leader

“To me, great leaders are empathetic, authentic and kind. They are great listeners. They support their teams – they build great relationships and are personally vested in the growth and development of their teams. They believe in team success over personal success. I love being able to help others grow, bring out the best in my team members and solve hard problems together, while having fun along the way. I am grateful to be able to learn from my teams every day.”

Advice for Future Leaders

- “I would tell them that they need to keep an open mind and try new things. Continue to keep up with new technologies and skills even if you are not a STEM major. Don’t settle but really be curious and hungry to learn. Lot of people are fortunate enough to know what they’re passionate about and build a career around their passion. But there are many people who also don’t know where their true passion lies early on. To all those people I would say that they need to find the passion within their profession. And when people ask me how to find their passion, I tell them – look to see what elements of your job excite you and make you genuinely forget to go eat lunch! That is passion.”
- “I think each person has to define their own formula for work-life integration, and acknowledge that it’s not a ‘one and done’ rather something that will need to be revisited and adjusted constantly throughout the different phases in life. Listen to everyone with the intent to learn, but ultimately make the decisions that best fit your definition of happiness and fulfillment. I like to think of life decisions as trade-offs rather than sacrifices. If something feels like a sacrifice, you should revisit the situation and really think about the options.”
- “I am all about trusting my gut and letting it lead me to the best outcomes. Having said that, I also like to verify things (after all I am an engineer), so I do look for clarity in my thought process whether it’s about solving a particularly difficult business challenge or deciding on my next career move. So the way I think about it is I start with data and logic, and after understanding all the implications, I listen to my intuition.”

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How She Knows to Take the Next Step

“The below graph roughly highlights how I thought about transitioning from one role to the next. I always look to see when my learning curve and impact in a position start to reach a peak and that’s a good indication that it’s time to look for my next challenge.”

