



Executive Education
OWEN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

“Are you doing what you **want** to do?”

It's not the first question that one might expect a management professor to ask, but for Ranga Ramanujam, professor of management at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management, intentionality — doing something because you've chosen to do it, not because you let it happen to you — is at the heart of true management effectiveness.



An Interview with
Ranga Ramanujam,
professor of
management at
Vanderbilt University's
Owen Graduate School
of Management

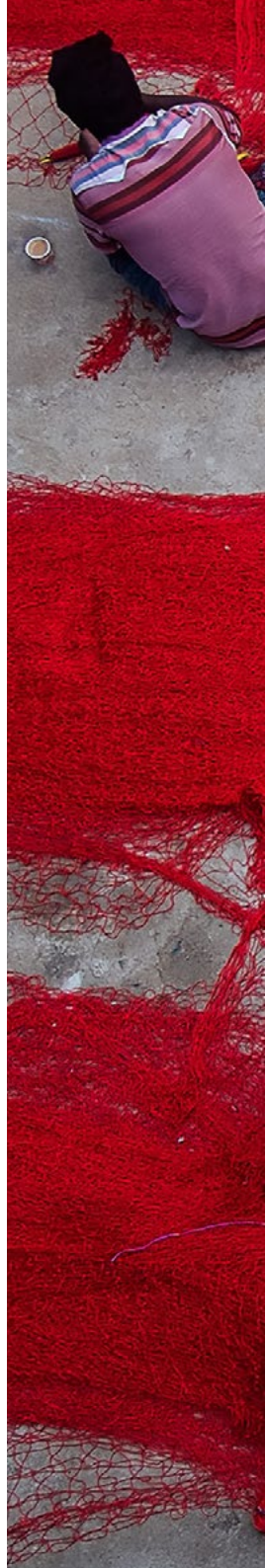
Why Effectiveness and Success Are Different

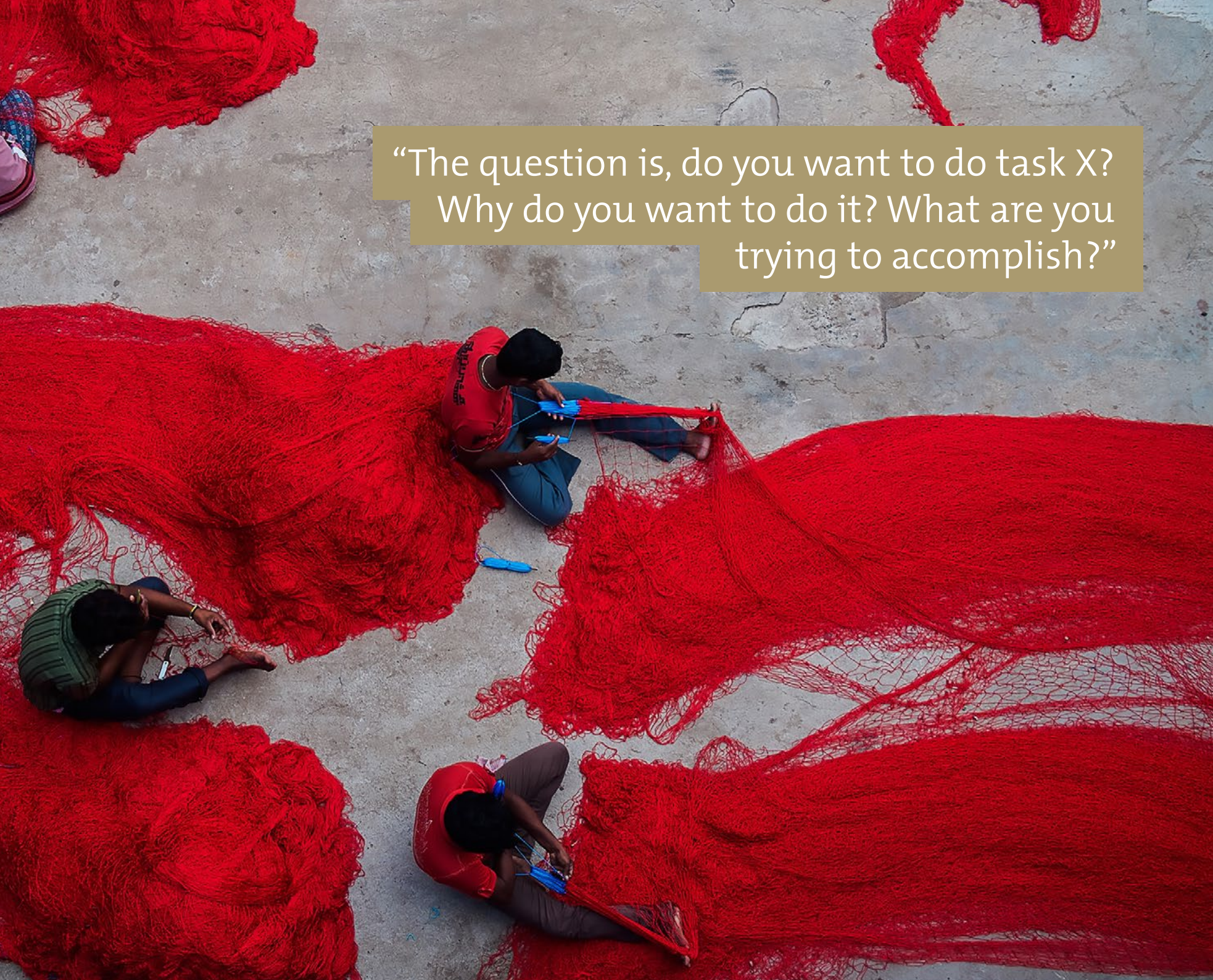
“The basic idea in everything I teach is to give people a more systematic understanding of what exactly is effectiveness,” says Ramanujam. “It’s not just about saying in your career, ‘Somebody’s asked me to do task X, so I’m going to perform as well as I can.’ That’s performance. The question is, do you want to do task X? Why do you want to do it? What are you trying to accomplish? This kind of intentionality is very fundamental to being effective.”

One problem, he says, is that “there is a tendency for us to confuse success with effectiveness.” As a result, it’s possible, he says, for people to be outwardly successful because they can do something well, even if it’s not something about which they are passionate.

Ramanujam should know. Today, he is not only a management professor with nearly 20 years of experience, but also an expert in patient safety, with a large body of research dedicated to reducing medical errors and saving lives.

But without intentionality, it could have been very different.



An aerial photograph showing three individuals sitting on a grey concrete floor, surrounded by large, tangled piles of bright red fishing nets. They appear to be in the process of mending or organizing the nets. The person in the center is wearing a red t-shirt and blue pants, while the others are in darker clothing. The scene is brightly lit, and the vibrant red of the nets contrasts sharply with the dull grey of the floor.

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“What’s The Next Thing To Do?”

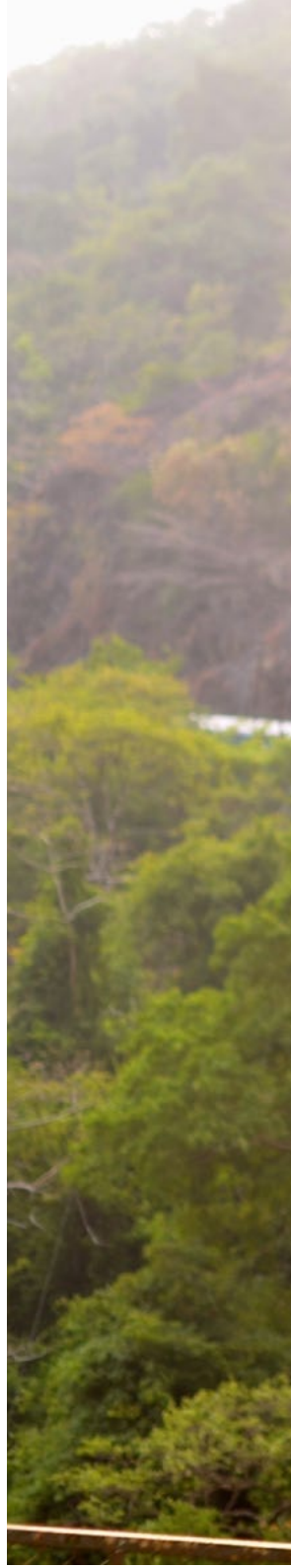
Growing up in a small town in India, Ramanujam followed without asking too many questions the path that others laid out for him: first, either medical or engineering school (he chose engineering) because that’s what all the smart kids in India did; then, after “looking around and asking people, ‘What’s the next thing to do’”, he follows the general advice and completes an MBA at one of India’s best schools; he finally lands a job at a foreign bank because, again, that’s just what you do.

By the early 1990s, Ramanujam is a rising mid-level manager at Standard Chartered Bank and is unequivocally successful: responsible for 400 people, he is one of the youngest area directors in the bank. There is just one problem: He is no more interested in being a successful banker than he was in being an engineer.

A ground-shaking scandal at Standard Chartered in India sparks a dramatic change. When a securities trader contributing an astonishing 40% to the firm’s overall profits is revealed to be a fraud — none of his trades are

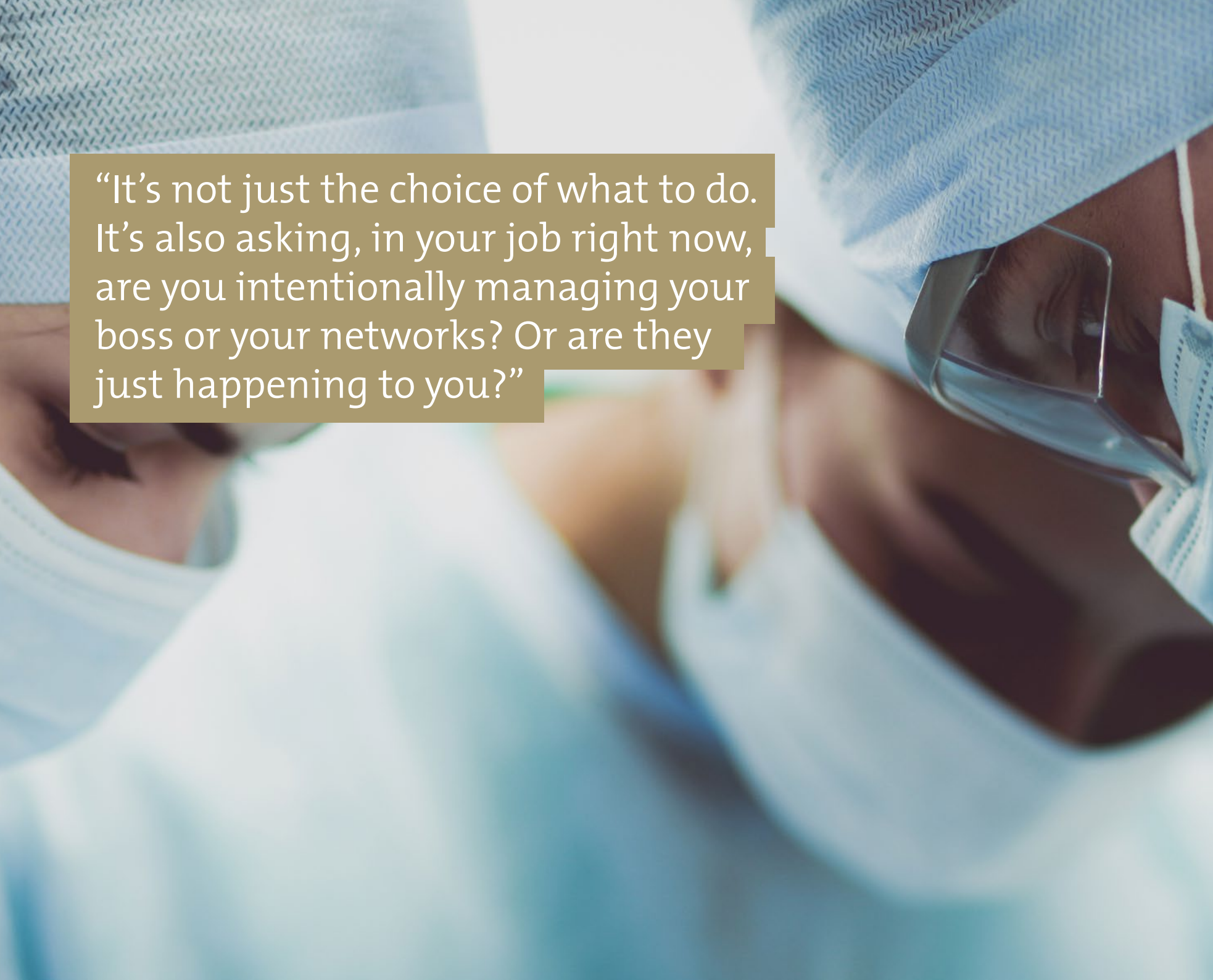
legitimate, and the bank loses hundreds of millions of dollars — Ramanujam wonders how such an egregious mistake could have occurred. “That really got me interested in understanding, more systematically, what are now called operational failures or errors,” he says.

He decides to trade banking for research, and eventually moves to the U.S. to pursue a doctorate at Carnegie Mellon, which he earns in 2000. He spends eight years at Purdue University, before accepting a position at the Owen Graduate School of Management in 2008. By now, Ramanujam has extended his research to operational errors in the health care field, an area that has been his focus for the past 10-15 years. Ramanujam is a passionate advocate of helping doctors and hospital administrators to think more like managers — not to save money, but to align costs to the value and quality of health care. In recent research, he has also been studying how to reduce operational errors in hospitals by enabling better communication among nurses and doctors.





Intentionality — making conscious, deliberate choices — permeates effective management in different ways.

A close-up photograph of two surgeons in an operating room. They are wearing blue surgical caps and masks. The surgeon on the right is wearing glasses. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

“It’s not just the choice of what to do. It’s also asking, in your job right now, are you intentionally managing your boss or your networks? Or are they just happening to you?”

Intentionality, Experience and Becoming a Better Manager

Many executives have their own life and work trajectories and experiences, which is one of the benefits of teaching executive education courses, he says. For example, just as he can relate to the power of intentionality through his own experiences, Ramanujam finds that executives in his executive education class can use their lived experiences to connect to his concepts more quickly than many MBA students.

MBA students, he explains, tend to be very performance-focused: you will be successful if you get the job done. With the executives he teaches, on the other hand, “I can immediately corroborate the difference between success and effectiveness from their personal experiences,” he says. “I can also draw out instances where at least some of them have consciously

changed their behaviors to make this transition from success only to effectiveness-driven success.”

However, Ramanujam notes that while “the quality of the discussion is different, I think the message is equally relevant and timely for both audiences.” This is especially true because intentionality — making conscious, deliberate choices — permeates effective management in different ways.

“Intentionality is also recognizing that becoming a manager means picking up skills that don’t come naturally to most people and that will make you uncomfortable,” he says. To be effective, for example, managers have to overcome their reticence to wield power and influence or their awkwardness when networking aggressively or managing up — the latter a key and sometimes misunderstood skill of effective managers.

“All of these are examples of what I call ‘intentionality,’” explains Ramanujam, who covers such skills extensively in his MBA and executive education courses. “It’s not just the choice of what to do. It’s also asking, in your job right now, are you intentionally managing your boss or your networks? Or are they just happening to you?”

Going Online

Today, Ramanujam is reaching new students with his concepts of management effectiveness through the medium of Owen's online program in Business Management Fundamentals. The program, which is tailored for practicing and aspiring managers is built around four "specialization courses": Strategic Innovation for Managers, Accounting and Finance for Managers, Operations Management and Strategy and Leadership for Managers. In the Leadership for Management course, Ramanujam offers online classes on motivation, team dynamics, organizational design and organizational culture.

Ramanujam is finding the challenge of connecting with online students "a great learning experience." Building on his PowerPoint-supported lectures, he is experimenting with different ways to make the lectures more engaging and interactive. For example, in addition to using animation, he pauses the videos and inserts

"probes and questions to allow students to step back and think about what they just heard." Questions or quizzes between the lectures further help Ramanujam verify student comprehension. Recently, he has asked his online students to read a Harvard Business School case and then use the discussion forum to share their viewpoints.

Ramanujam sees the online program as a great opportunity to reach managers who work and who might not be able to commit to an executive education program. In addition, given the irrelevance of time differences and distance, online education enables universities that are not in major hub cities to reach students from around the world, he says. "Nashville is a great town, a boom town, but we don't have an airport that is connected directly to any European or Asian city. For someone like us, the potential for access to all of the managers across the world who are clamoring for this kind of content is the most exciting promise of online education."



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We're the B-School built for the persistent. The genuine. The professional who knows he or she hasn't heard it all before-and uses that humility to grow. To learn. To change. Take note of Vanderbilt. We're building a new type of business leader-together.

This is the first in a series of four interviews with members of Vanderbilt Executive Education faculty.

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