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The Man Who Got Carlson

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Dr Ramesh Kapur, CMD, Radisson Blu Plaza Delhi, and recently anointed Carlson Fellow shares the lessons he has learnt during his eventful transition from structural engineer and real estate developer to seasoned hotelier

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by [Sourish Bhattacharyya](#)[Print this article](#)[Font size](#) - 16 +

TWO YEARS AGO, I met Dr Ramesh Kapur after a long hiatus at Neung Roi, the celebrated restaurant of his hotel, Radisson Blu Plaza, on the road leading up to the Indira Gandhi International Airport. He was his usual jolly self, but he took us by surprise with his knowledge of Urdu poetry and his mellifluous voice. He sang one classical Hindi film number and as soon as he ended, there was a loud call for an encore.

We all know Dr Kapur as a self-made middle-class success story, as one of the five engineer-founders of a ground-breaking real estate company, United Technical Consultants Pvt. Ltd. (later Unitech), but he also has a naturally hospitable side to him that makes him eminently qualified to own and run Carlson Rezidor's flagship Radisson Blu hotel in India.

The Radisson Blu Plaza at Mahipalpur could have become just another airport hotel, living off airline crews, layovers and cancelled flights, but under Kapur's leadership it has also emerged as a durable F&B destination that has been around since 1995 with a trend-setting Indian Cuisine brand, The Great Kabab Factory, and more recently, Neung Roi, which has been acclaimed by critics universally as India's best Thai restaurant. Unsurprisingly, earlier this year, Kapur became the first Indian owner of a Carlson Rezidor hotel to be honoured as a Carlson Fellow.

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I asked Dr Kapur about his transition from a civil engineer specialising in Soil Mechanics and Foundation Engineering, to a passionate hotelier. "An engineer," he said, "has common sense and a rational mind. These two attributes are critical for anyone to become a hotelier." Going a little deeper, he said: "Engineers develop the skill to analyse any problem in depth and find a simple, rational and cost-effective solution. This training has helped me modify and rationalise a number of aspects of operations and marketing in our hotels." Members of his tribe have another critical attribute. "They learn to respect professionals of different disciplines and give them the freedom to work," Dr Kapur said.

This respect for other professionals has helped Dr Kapur navigate the unfamiliar waters of hotel operations. "In the 27 years I have been intimately associated with the hospitality sector as an owner, I have learnt that hotel operations are not as simple as they appeared to me initially," Dr Kapur said. "I have realised it is a highly sensitive business that requires multiple departments to work in tandem as one well-oiled machine. To make this possible, the owners have to give complete freedom to their general managers and heads of departments." This advice is particularly relevant for owners who wish to develop durable relationships, like Dr Kapur has, with international hotel chains.

Engineering is a part of Dr Kapur's DNA -- his father, whom he lost when he was nine years old, was a civil engineer with the Military Engineering Service -- but he has spent the last 30 years (he's a fit 76-year-old today) mastering the business of hospitality.

Dr Kapur was still with Unitech -- the company was set up in 1972 by five civil engineers with a seed capital of Rs 50,000 -- when the company made its first foray into hotels in 1987. It started with a 7.5-acre plot next to the Trident on Fatehabad Road in Agra and a project in Almaty in the then Soviet Union (the scenic Central Asian city is now in Kazakhstan), but these did not make much headway.

Then came the slow but steady advance of the forces of liberalisation under P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, and the phenomenon pumped adrenaline into the real estate and hospitality sectors. Overnight, hotels became desirable investment destinations. It was in 1991, the year the process of liberalisation officially took off, Unitech joined Amrit Lal Batra, who had opened the first privately run hospital in Delhi and also ran a hotel named Fidalgo in Goa, to develop a hotel on Airport Authority of India (AAI) land at the Delhi end of the then under-development National Highway 8. (The holding company of Carlson Rezidor's flagship Radisson Blu Plaza, Mahipalpur, is still AB Hotels, which had been established by Amrit Lal Batra, whom Dr Kapur bought out in 2010.)

The 5.5-acre plot was originally meant for a 21-room motel. The Unitech-Batra combine developed a hotel, which was ready for opening by 1995, but immediately, the property got embroiled in a legal dispute between the Delhi Development Authority and the AAI. "It took 15 months for the matter to get sorted out," Dr Kapur recalled. "The then prime minister, the late I.K. Gujral, signed our file."

A year before the hotel opened, Dr Kapur shot off emails to the major international hotel chains. Then he heard from a Citibank executive based in Singapore that Carlson (it was still a family-owned company then; the Rezidor tag came later) was keen on entering India. Dr Kapur seized the opportunity. He created a JV named Radisson Asia with veteran hotelier K.B. Kachru, he had intensive discussions with the founder-managing director of Sarovar Hotels, Anil Madhok, and the veteran banker B.D. Narang to understand the intricacies of the business, and hired Sanjiv Tyagi as the first vice-president and general manager of the new Radisson.

Recalling how the business ties between him and his international partner evolved over the years, Dr Kapur said: "My relationship with the Carlson Group has always been very warm and friendly since 1995, the year when I visited the company headquarters in Minneapolis where I met Curt Carlson and senior executives, apart from attending a global conference at Scottsdale, Arizona. Radisson Blu Plaza Delhi being the first and flagship hotel of the Carlson Group in India also ensured a very special relationship. I found that the warmth and friendly working culture percolates down the line even after the number of hotels flying the Carlson Group flag has gone up to more than 1,000 from about 300 at the time of our signing the first agreement in 1994."

Not many owners can claim to have such long and cordial relationship with international partners. Dr Kapur has some words of advice, based on his long experience, for owners of hotels keen on signing management contracts with international chains.

"Hotel developers must study the organisational set-up at the headquarters and regional offices of the brand owners they wish to align with," Dr Kapur said. "They must satisfy themselves that the senior executives of brand are well-qualified and have proven track records. They must also inquire about the percentage of developers who have renewed their management agreements. Developers must look for brands with efficient management systems in operations and marketing. And their contracts must lay down clearly the minimum occupancy percentage that the international brand will be able to ensure."

In 2005, Dr Kapur separated from Unitech and in lieu of his 14 per cent stock, he got full ownership of the Mahipalpur hotel and the one at Varanasi, which was built on a plot of land the company had secured from a man in the carpet business. His foray into hospitality education in partnership with Oxford Brookes University, IIMT-OBU, under the banner of a JV with Carlson named RHW Hospitality Management, ended in 2010, when the international chain bought his shares. The IIMT-OBU legacy is being kept alive by his son, Amit Kapur, at the Vedatya Institute in Gurgaon (Haryana).

For Dr Kapur, his foray into hospitality won't stop with the hotels in Delhi and Varanasi. He has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Orissa to develop five hotels in Bhubaneswar, Paradip, Konark, Puri and Chilika Lake. And he intends to develop the 150-acre Shilon Resort, between Kufri and Chail in Himachal Pradesh, once he frees it from litigation. Even as his business grows, Dr Kapur hasn't lost sight of his two cardinal principles -- keeping up a durable



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relationship with his business partners and respecting the professionals entrusted with the task of running his business. These have never let him down.

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