RAJESH UNNI of Singapore’s Synergy Marine Group is committed to giving back to the community, and not only in his home country. When he recently participated in the Advanced Management Program (AMP) at Harvard Business School (HBS) Executive Education, his charitable nature led to something remarkable. After searching for an opportunity to volunteer locally during his visit to the HBS campus—which he found at an organic farm in nearby Concord, Massachusetts—he inspired 24 of his classmates to join him. The result? Raising $9,000 for the farm and a bonding experience that will last a lifetime.

As the CEO of Synergy, a ship management company, Unni has built the company from a small firm to the world’s seventh-largest service provider in just over a decade. He founded the company after gaining industry experience in risk management, marine insurance, and business development in senior roles at leading ship management firms in Hong Kong and Singapore. In this interview, he stresses the importance volunteering has on him as well as other leaders.

What inspired you to volunteer in an unfamiliar environment and get other participants involved?

AMP is a program that’s designed to equip thought leaders. The participants are a highly motivated, accomplished set of people. They are sector leaders who hold key positions in their industries and can genuinely influence social change for the long-term. With such resources at my disposal, I jumped at the opportunity to kick-start something meaningful. When I started talking about my personal experience, I quickly realized that many of my peers had a similar mindset. Some were unknowingly caught up in the market race, and others were reaching out in their own ways to build their communities. Once the conversation began and gathered momentum, it exceeded everyone’s expectations. All I had to do was ignite the spark.

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FOUNDER & CEO, SYNERGY MARINE GROUP

How did it make you feel to lead an initiative that gave back to the community?

During my childhood, my grandmother emphasized caring and giving back to people. This is intrinsic to Hindu culture—serve the society that nourishes us. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” I am fortunate enough to be in a space where my “deficiency” needs are met, so I look for opportunities to fulfill my “growth” needs. I was happy to work alongside a group that was as thrilled as I was to contribute to a community that puts food on people’s tables.
Did your volunteer experience help you develop bonds with others who participated?

Undoubtedly, I have built a few friendship bonds to last a lifetime. Ours was a significantly large class, and I did not get the opportunity to interact with every individual, but I was able to build many bonds based on trust. Most of my fellow participants remember me because of the volunteer project I initiated. It was a humbling experience that many came back at the end of the course to tell me that they would be more socially conscious in their future endeavors.

How did your volunteer experience change the way you think about your career and your goals?

Volunteering always brings out the best in me. It reminds me that there is a larger purpose to life beyond simply improving a corporate balance sheet. I believe that there is a role for me to help grow social entrepreneurship, and in the next few years I hope to contribute to building a better world—where problems do not outrun solutions.

Aside from the volunteer experience, what were some of your greatest takeaways from the program?

For the rest of my life, I will cherish the new friendships and bonds I made at AMP. I am grateful for the ongoing access to my professors, and I am greatly inspired by the industry experts who lent their valuable insights and shared their knowledge. My thought process has been transformed, and today I approach things more objectively. Without a doubt, the program exceeded my expectations, and my challenge now is to live up to the brand that Harvard espouses and values. That is a huge responsibility.

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“AMP’s most significant advantage is that it enables participants to challenge themselves.”