

# Making of a *beautiful mind*



Dynamic and vivacious, Darshana Shah Ubl defies the logic of age having anything to do with success. The young CEO of Entrepo UK shares how she fulfilled her childhood dream of setting a Guinness record, and how she impressed none other than Cherie Blair with a 30-second pitch at an event that surprised the other participants.  
By Jasmine Chokshi



**B**aroda-girl Darshana Shah Ubl has come a long way. From a young student attending her sociology lectures at M S University to becoming one of the first Radio Jockeys of Gujarat, to eventually moving to Singapore for an exciting career sprint and finally launching her own startup in London.

Darshana, who is the CEO of EntrevuUK, believes in living many avatars in one life-time, including that of a jewellery model, a serial entrepreneur, a keynote speaker and a sustainability champion. While she looks every bit the glamorous model, as she settles down to chat with *Femina*, it's her impish grin and only the mildest trace of a British accent that prepares you for the interesting anecdotes ahead.

"I grew up in Vadodara and spent a great deal of the initial years of my career in Ahmedabad. Gujarati was the first language that I learnt to speak and think in. In 2001, I was a part of the launch team at Radio Mirchi in Ahmedabad. And to this day, I think of Baroda as home. I go there frequently to meet my parents and friends, visit the old haunts and cafés in Alkapuri," she says.

Darshana who is somewhat a career gypsy, is armed with a Masters degree in economics and has

had a career in media, events and advertising for over a decade. But she claims she was always a dreamer. "I have always dreamt big and dreamt abundantly. My ambition comes from my ability to desire more and create more. And once I am obsessed with an idea, be it a business plan or a start-up I can't put my feet up till I have it going," she says.

### THAT GUJARATI BUSINESS SENSE

Does she attribute her enterprising spirit to the Gujarati gene pool? "Absolutely. I believe we have it in our blood, the knack to spot an opportunity, the spirit of enterprise and foresight. Look at some of India's great leaders for instance, they have led the way in all spheres, be it spiritual, political or professional. Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Ratan Tata, Dhirubhai Ambani, to name a few."

Although Darshana is quick to lament the imbalance when it comes to Gujarati women at the business leadership front, she does say, "Even in developed countries like UK where there are about five million businesses, less than 15 per cent of these are led by women. A research conducted by London School of Economics states that one third of women who wish to start their businesses don't, due to the fear of failure. There are many limiting beliefs that hold



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women back in their careers or starting a business, such as self-doubt, fear of being accepted by society and sometimes the fear of success," she says.

Darshana hopes to see more female icons on the leadership front in Gujarat. "In India, the conflicts are diverse, as traditional society does not encourage women to be career minded or independent. However, in metropolitan cities one can

see that changing. There is an emerging trend of female CEOs like Chanda Kochhar from ICICI Bank, Ekta Kapoor of Balaji Films and they have changed mindsets to a large extent. Today, I can see so many women willing to step into the entrepreneurial world."

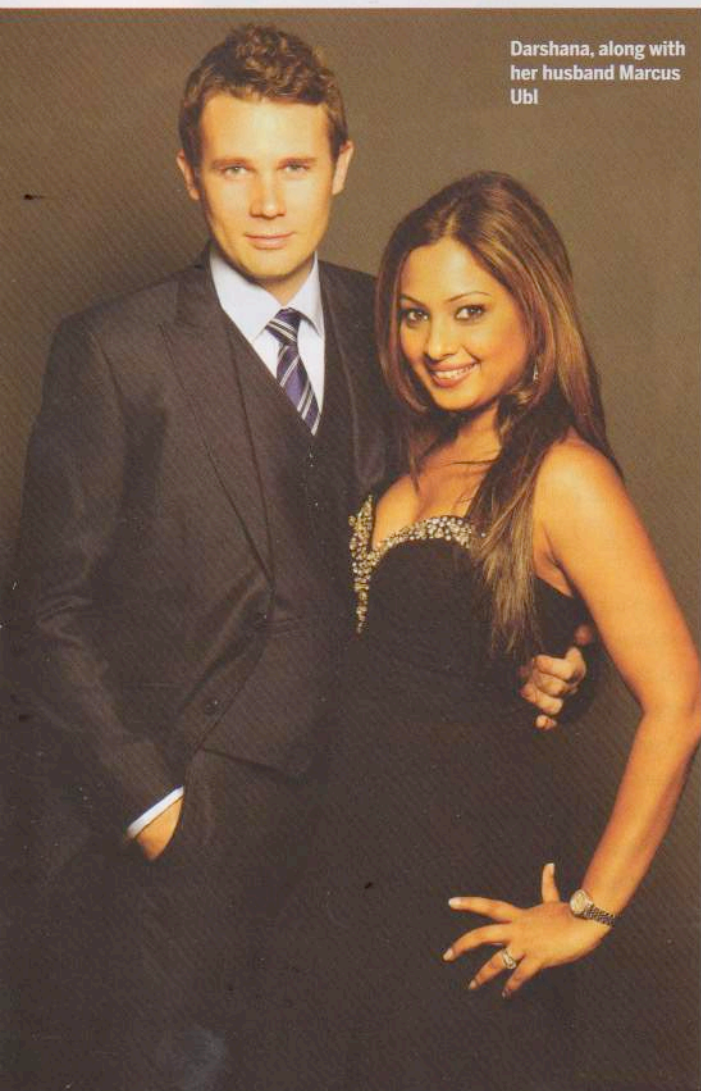
### WHAT GLASS CEILING?

Darshana attributes her personal success to >





Darshana impressed Cherie Blair with her pitch at an International Women's day event in 2012



Darshana, along with her husband Marcus Ubi

her quest for learning and achieving more. "I've had a diverse background from economics to advertising and to working for the largest media company in India and Singapore to leading events and training business, and finally starting my business in the UK. The vehicles have changed, but it's the same race," she says. "The driving force to my success is determination, self-expression and a desire to help others thorough business."

"I believe that women work twice as hard as men. Women CEOs deserve that extra bit of kudos. Most women have had to go through series of objections before, during and after they've held an important and responsible role," says Darshana who has seen a fair share of upheaval in personal and professional life. But that has never deterred her. "I think that women CEOs serve as role models to young girls who are looking for career choices."

## THE GUINNESS RECORD

One of the milestones that Darshana is extremely proud of is the setting of a Guinness World Record. "There comes a time in your life when you have to do something different, something outstanding and something daring. Attempting the Guinness World Records title was one such thing for me."

Darshana's company in London used to run 500

people events three times a year for entrepreneurs, leaders and small business owners. "Our events were very well received by those who attended them. In fact *Huffington Post* called our events the world's leading brand accelerator."

With an idea in place and a never say never attitude, Darshana decided to make an attempt at a record last October. "We wanted to set a Guinness World Record for 'Most people attending a business speed-networking event'. It was a huge challenge as it included not only being able to get so many people on the same platform but event logistics, costs and to be able to deal with the risk of reputation, in case we didn't succeed." However, with the support of her team, clients and partners, she was able to break the Guinness World Record title with an outstanding participation of 487 people (the previous record was held by Australia's Institute of Management that had 475 people speed networking).

"One of the most nervous moments came when we had 15 minutes to go for the record attempt and we were still seven people short. When the Guinness World Record attempt started, it was no longer just on our ability to organise but it was to lead the 500 people to network non-stop for one and half hour with a dozen rules, which if not followed could disqualify them," says Darshana.



## CAREERS ARE A JUNGLE GYM, NOT A LADDER

'Careers are a jungle gym, not a ladder,' said Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In*. This is one lesson that Darshana abides by. "It's time we stop viewing careers as having a single trajectory. It is no longer essential to stay in one field and try to climb the so-called corporate ladder. In fact, there is no ladder. Let the road take you. You can venture down different paths and explore numerous possibilities on the way to achieving your goals like you are trying to climb on top of a jungle gym. Each new project, job or business you undertake will bring with it a fair share of challenge and opportunities. You gain experience by overcoming the challenges and seizing the opportunities. I have looked at every opportunity as one where I can build my capabilities and learn."

Darshana certainly walks the talk. She recently surprised an unsuspecting audience when she demonstrated her abilities as an entrepreneur for 'the power of a good pitch' by calling upon stage none other than Cherie Blair. "The story of how I first met Cherie Blair goes back to an International Women's day event in 2012, an event I attended while running LyncMeUp." Darshana, along with her husband Marcus Ubl, founded the very successful daily deal site in London called LyncMeUp, which was



***"BUSINESS IS LIKE A SPORT—TO BE GOOD AT IT, YOU NEED TALENT, SKILL, PREPARATION AND FOCUS."***

later acquired by GoGroopie. "Meeting her was amazing; Cherie was standing right next to me and I talked to her about what I did with my business and who I was. I gave her my 30-second pitch, and luckily for me, she turned back and said she would like to know more. So I gave her my five-minute pitch. At the end of it, she offered her contact details and said, 'Can you send me our photo that someone just clicked and I will sign it and send it back to you.' The rest is history.

### POWER OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Her anecdotal wisdom combined with her international experience and expertise in networking/marketing makes Darshana a very reliable source of advice and that is precisely what businesses hire her for. "Business is like a sport—to be good at it, you need talent, skill, preparation and focus. I often compare it to the example of heavy lifting. If you've joined the gym with

a goal of wanting to lift 20kg weights, chances are you can't do that on day one. You may start by lifting 2kg, repeating that, and then going on to lift more. In a few months, you will find that you have the strength to lift the 20kg weights. Similarly being good at what you do in business requires you to build your capability and capacity. You need to work on your 'hustle muscle' and be ready to embrace the fast pace, challenges and opportunities it presents," she says.

"No matter how small your business is, you can partner with companies, groups or individuals to succeed. A good partnership is one that helps not just you and the other person, but also serves a bigger purpose and helps your clients, target market and makes the world a better place. I call this the 'triple win method', says Darshana who is also working on her book based on this strategy.

Interestingly, behind the workaholic, focused and committed professional, lies a fun-loving party girl. "I am a big fan of work-life balance. I work on weekdays but ensure that I switch off and have enough time for rest and rejuvenation with family and friends on weekends. Besides music, I love playing backgammon and I enjoy travelling. The best trip though is the trip back home, to Vadodara." **F**



MAY 19, 2015

A Times of India publication

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