

Chapter 1: Finding True North

The Stories of David Kenny and Orit Gadiesh



David Kenny



Orit Gadiesh

BOSTON, 1990

“I got an outside offer,” the man said as he walked into the office of Orit Gadiesh, a 37-year-old partner at Bain’s Boston headquarters. “Should I take it?”

For the past several months, managers and partners had been leaving the firm in droves. The up-and-coming consulting firm had gotten in trouble through a dangerous cocktail of poorly managed debt, an opaque governance structure, and a reputation for being “too hot to handle” that had gone sour. Now, as Orit was working alongside other partners to ensure the survival of the company, the man in front of her was likely to be the next in line to get out—and she couldn’t blame him. Like him, she was talking to headhunters about options outside the firm.

“Orit, I don’t want to be the last one left on the sinking ship,” the man said, “I know everyone is talking to them.”

A few offices further down the hall, a young consultant was having similar concerns over his future. Having switched just six months earlier from GM’s “young potentials” program to Bain, the Michigan-born David Kenny had hoped the consulting firm would give him a chance to learn about more industries and see more of the world. For now, however, it looked like the only thing he was going to learn more about than at GM was bankruptcy.

“Don’t pay attention to the restructuring,” Bain’s CEO, Mitt Romney, told Kenny. That was easier said than done. People were leaving, and the company was in dire straits.

What were Gadiesh and Kenny supposed to do?

ISRAEL

Orit Gadiesh was born “Orit Grunfeld” in Haifa, Israel, post the independence at the end of the Arab–Israeli War of 1948. In that war, the Zionist Israeli army defeated an Arab military coalition including Egypt, paving the way for the Zionists to establish Israel as an official Jewish state in Palestine. Many of the first Israeli settlers were immigrants from Europe, and Grunfeld’s parents were no exception. Her father had emigrated from Germany, her mother had come from Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Empire, where Jewish people had been persecuted by means of pogroms, a form of ethnic cleansing.

Orit told me that her father did a “sensitive job” in the young Israeli state, working as a Defense Force colonel in the army. She explained her father was asked by David Ben-Gurion to change his name to a Hebrew name. He chose to combine the first letter of his last name, *G*, and *Diesh*, the Hebrew word for Grunfeld (his German name).

Just like every young Israeli, Gadiesh had to fulfill a mandatory service in the army when she graduated from high school. It was through that experience, she said, that she learned how to lead in times of crisis. “I was 17 when I started my service, and was appointed to work for the deputy chief of staff.” In hindsight it may seem as if she got that job because of her father’s role in the army, but she assured me that wasn’t the case. He was known in the army as Grunfeld, and she was admitted under the name Gadiesh. “The role I had was part

of the basic training every Israeli performs in the army,” she said. “But I was younger than most, as I graduated early from high school, and got special permit to join the army at 17. I was selected to work for the deputy chief of staff office—I had been a grade-A student. But it was a huge responsibility, and I was fortunate to be selected.”

Her most vivid memory of that period, she said, was when she was present in the “war room” during a conflict situation. While Israeli soldiers in the field were risking their lives in a combat situation, the army generals had to decide on their strategy. “The war room was in a bunker, so we were physically all very close to each other, with the chiefs of staff, the people that ran the army in that particular time, all there. I was merely listening in, but I could hear what was going on in the field hundreds of miles away.”

She saw how the generals often followed the advice of those in the field no matter what their rank or title was. “In the Israeli army, you lead from the front, not from behind,” Gadiesh said. “People in the war room were making decisions [based] on imperfect information. I listened to the debate and saw how they went about that. There was always consultation. Sometimes the generals in the room were several levels higher up in rank from those on the ground. But if the person on the ground [was] under fire and said: ‘I need to do this,’ then the generals would say, ‘Yes, go for it.’”

What she took away from that, she said, is how as a leader, “you [should] trust your people, how you work under extreme stress, and how you work as a team to come up with the best possible decisions. At that age, it’s something that you never forget.”

After completing her service, Gadiesh went to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and got a bachelor’s degree in psychology and human geography (her minor). She was a top student, and she planned to stay in academia. “I always thought I was going to be a professor in Jerusalem,” she said. So after earning her degree, she looked for a master’s and PhD program, to eventually become a professor. But things turned out differently. While looking for a PhD program abroad, she came upon a highly selective but prestigious double degree in the United States: the Harvard MBA-PhD program.

“I didn’t know anything about accounting, finance,” she said. “And I couldn’t imagine getting a PhD without having an MBA as a basis.” The idea of going for an MBA in the United States was “crazy,” according to Gadiesh: “Every business school required that you did economics before—only Harvard didn’t. It was literally the

only school I could apply for—they looked for leadership grades instead. Most people in my country said I was crazy, but my father was supportive. He said, ‘If you want to do it, you should do it.’”

Thanks to her outstanding grades in college, Gadiesh managed to get accepted at Harvard, and even got a scholarship to pay for it. It was much needed “because inflation in Israel was sky high, and I couldn’t get a loan for my studies.” After the initial excitement, however, reality kicked in. Despite her stellar academic background, the Hebrew-speaking Gadiesh could barely speak English, and her knowledge of American culture was close to zero. At first, “I could hardly say ‘Hi,’ ‘Hello,’ or ‘How are you?’,” she said. “I certainly couldn’t have a conversation about politics, and I took hours to read a text.”

But the hardest thing, she said, was not knowing about the American culture. “I had never been to a supermarket. I had never eaten cereals in my life. And I didn’t know who Johnny Carson was.” That was a problem for her because, as she explained, “HBS [Harvard Business School] is all about case studies, and one of the first ones was about whether or not Kellogg’s should add another cereal to its offering. So I started to go to the supermarket with a friend, [where] we looked in the aisles [to find out] about what Americans were eating, and went to a friend’s apartment to watch television.”

It was all very overwhelming. “We had to study at least three cases per week,” she said. “With my level of English, I had to translate every word at first. It was hard. Take the word *contribution*. It didn’t mean what I thought. It took me six hours instead of one hour just to read the case. In class, I couldn’t express myself. In my third day, I remember I was looking at a particularly long case. It was midnight, and I hadn’t even finished reading the case. I said: ‘I can’t do it.’”

For Gadiesh, it was an exercise in perseverance, in believing in herself despite the challenges, and in keeping the right perspective. “That night, I decided to just go to sleep. I woke up the next morning, and I thought: ‘I never quit anything in my life. So I shouldn’t quit this. I should read the important cases, and do so until I master them.’” She made a plan, and stuck it out. “I went to talk to professors, and I joined a study group, which was encouraging. I decided that I wasn’t going to be shy about asking things if I didn’t understand them.”

In such cases, the motivation can come from simple human interactions and small encouragements. “There was one guy who thought

it was hysterical,” Gadiesh said. “I was a woman, I was Israeli, and I didn’t speak English. So I asked him if he would be willing to help me. And he did.”

But the slow learning process continued to cause challenges, and overcoming them wasn’t easy. One professor gave Gadiesh three cases to choose from for her exam, each consisting of 40 pages of text. “Could you tell me which one to focus on?” she asked, worried. “If you have no background in economics, why don’t you just fail the course?” her professor retorted, and added: “I like to see long answers.”

Gadiesh was shocked. “I wasn’t mad at him, but I was upset. After all, I was studying to become a professor, just like him.” But she tried her best. “I spent 3 hours and 40 minutes reading the case. I knew I could never finish answering. So during the remaining time, I wrote: ‘Here’s what I would have done. I would make these analyses. I would think of these two options. And here’s what I would choose.’ Much to her surprise, after the test, Gadiesh got summoned to her professor’s office and received good news: he had given her an “Excellent.” “You actually spent time thinking about options, instead of going straight into the case,” he explained.

In the end, Gadiesh said, “I spent a lot of time getting to know the language, the culture, and the business. But it was all very exciting.” By the time she finished her MBA, in May 1977, she was in the top 5 percent of her graduating class, and got the prize for Most Outstanding Marketing Student. But the next challenge was already on the horizon. Having finished her MBA two years into her four-year doctorate program, Gadiesh realized she didn’t want to remain in academics.

“In May, I decided—when everyone had a job already—that I didn’t want to teach. I wanted to practice. I made up my mind, but no recruiters were coming to campus anymore. I wanted to do either of two things: retail or consulting. I was interested in retail, because my father’s family had a history in it, and I applied directly to Macy’s and Bloomingdales, after they already accepted everyone. I got an offer from both of them, but after consideration, I turned them down.”

The reason was a new, up-and-coming consulting firm that had gotten Gadiesh’s attention: Bain & Company, founded just four years earlier, in 1973. Having learned to love to “crack cases” at HBS, Gadiesh decided she was set for a career in consulting, rather

than one at a large company. It was a decision she shared with many business school graduates at the time. “I was interested in consulting, because it was thinking about problems and solving them,” she said.

The most obvious choice would have been McKinsey & Co, the longtime industry leader, or Boston Consulting Group, a strong Boston-based competitor.¹ But a new kid on the block was making strides: Bain. Founded by Bill Bain, a former BCG vice-president from Tennessee, Bain & Co worked in ways that were unconventional for the industry at the time: It would accept only one client per industry, would report directly to the CEO, and would take stakes or other variable success fees to show its commitment to getting “results, not reports.” Most importantly, it would not limit itself to consultation, but help the companies it worked for in the implementation of their advice. Gadiesh was sold on the concept: “I was very taken by Bill Bain’s idea of implementation. Plus, it was smallest of the consultants, and it was in Boston as well.” The decision was made quickly: Bain offered Gadiesh an interesting position, and instead of staying at Harvard, she accepted the position at Bain.

In that small, fast-growing company—there were only two offices—the young Israeli consultant was soaked in knowledge all the time. She traveled the country for the first time and appreciated being put even in the oddest of situations. “One time,” she said, “I went to visit pig farmers, maybe about 100 of them. I went into their homes, interviewed them, and loved it. I really went all over the country, and saw and learned all kinds of things.” That intellectual curiosity, she said, was a gift.

Her curiosity wasn’t always reciprocated though, and sometimes, the young Israeli woman was even frowned upon. One of her first assignments was in a steel company, a male-dominated industry. She told me of her experience there, a story he had previously shared with Sheryl Sandberg:² “There were no women in the steel.” It was a test of some sorts, Gadiesh assumed, because “it felt as if Bill Bain threw a ball at me and asked ‘can you take it? Or is it too big for you?’ and I would answer ‘sure I’ll take it.’ After all, I did want to work in the steel industry. I wanted to climb up the coal oven and see what was happening.”

She got a chilling welcome. “Women are bad luck in our industry,” the CFO of the company said to Gadiesh, as she was meeting with management in preparation for some competitor visitors. It was outright offending. Was she supposed to get mad? “No,” Gadiesh said.

“When someone says something like that, the last thing you can do is be upset. These were his beliefs—it was not about me. My job as a consultant was to make him comfortable.” So rather than pick up a fight, she thought about something her father often used: humor. “He had a great sense humor,” she said. “He showed me that the power of humor is a very important part of life—just like it is very important to be able to laugh at yourself.”

“Well, if I’m bad luck,” she finally retorted, “I think you should make sure I join the team on every single one of the competitor visits.” Everyone started to laugh, and the ice was broken.

It wasn’t just the outside world that fed her intellectual curiosity. Her colleagues did, too. In the same year, Bill Bain, the company’s founder, recruited another young consultant to his Boston offices. This young man had graduated just two years earlier than Gadiesh from Harvard Business School and had started his own consulting career at BCG, where he caught the attention of many colleagues because of his talent and appearance. His name: Mitt Romney.

LANSING, MICHIGAN, 1977

Around the time Orit Gadiesh and Mitt Romney started working for Bain, David Kenny, the son of a janitor and a payroll clerk, had to start thinking about an equally important choice for his future: Would he become the first person in his family to go to college?

Kenny was born in 1961 in Lansing, Michigan, a town of “farming, automotive industry, and state politics,” as he said himself. It was a time of major changes in America. There was the media revolution: Around the time Kenny was a toddler, for the first time, more than 50 percent of households had a TV, and in 1964 the United States switched to color television. There was the science and technology revolution: In 1969, the 8-year-old Kenny saw Neil Armstrong land on the moon as first man in the earth’s history. And then there was the car revolution. Throughout Kenny’s youth, American families grew richer, got more modern equipment, and started riding and owning cars. Nowhere was that more felt than in Michigan, the heart of America’s car industry.

For the young Kenny, those changes would prove to be extremely impactful on a personal level. When I met hem in Dubai, at the end of 2014, he had already worked three years as the CEO of a

major television channel, The Weather Channel, which specializes in translating weather science into TV programs. He also told me of his early career at General Motors, one of America's driving forces of the car revolution. And around the time I wrote this book, Kenny was appointed head of IBM's Watson project, an artificial intelligence project that in scale and ambition reminded me of the mission to go to the moon back in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, going to college wasn't immediately an obvious choice for Kenny. "We had a nice life at home, with both of my parents bringing in a salary, but it wasn't considered necessary I go to college," he said. So, whether at elementary school or high school, college wasn't a must: "I went to a public high school, and maybe 10 percent went on to college. It wasn't guided that way."

Besides, other Lansing public high school students at the time found other ways to success. A boy two years Kenny's senior, Earvin Johnson, started making headlines in local newspapers, for leading the Lansing public Everett High School to the state title in basketball, and being named to the 1977 McDonald's All-American team. Later, he would go to Michigan State, and even later, he'd become world-famous as a Los Angeles Lakers star in the NBA and a member of the USA Dream Team in the Barcelona Olympics. Most people now know him as "Magic" Johnson.

Nonetheless, Kenny said, "It seemed interesting to go to college and learn more about science. I got fascinated by the moon landing, and so did my dad. I thought a college science education could open new doors. And luckily, I had a practical way to get there. I looked at scholarships in state schools, but didn't get them. But I also did a science project, and Tom Shields, an HR scout who worked for General Motors, discovered me through that. He came to visit me in high school, took a real interest, and drove me to GM."

At the end of the 1970s, General Motors was facing a major macroeconomic shock, which threatened to end what was eventually the longest and biggest growth phase of its history. In Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi fled his country after heavy protests, and the anti-American Ayatollah Khamenei took over power, fueling what would be known as the 1979 energy crisis. Oil prices in the United States skyrocketed, and the car industry was directly and adversely affected. Still, GM needed new talent, and to funnel young professionals into their company, it had set up the GM Institute in Flint, Michigan (now Kettering University), before the war, a co-op

school that combined college education and work experience at GM's original Flint facilities. "They aimed for students like me," Kenny said: smart, eager, but not necessarily with the means to go to college. "I had a 4.0 grade average, and high SAT scores. I had other schools I was accepted to, like the University of Michigan, and Michigan State, but I had no way to pay for it."

Kenny got accepted at GMI with a full scholarship and even a small salary, together with a host of other students. One student he specifically spoke to me about was Mary Makela. "She was really passionate about GM," he said. "She was a typical 'product person.'" She studied electrical engineering, later got a master's degree from Stanford, and spent her whole career at GM. When she got married, she changed her name to that of her husband, and in December 2013, she was appointed by General Motors as the first female CEO in the automotive industry. Her married name is Mary Barra.

Like Barra, Kenny did so well at GM that upon graduating from GMI in 1984, he got selected for the GM fellowship, allowing him to pursue a master's degree at Harvard Business School. This time, the U.S. economy was again in full swing and oil prices had gone back to normal. The 1980s were also the time of Reagan and his "Reagan boom" of deregulation in the financial sector, and the rise of the bankers and consultants as new business stars, something Kenny realized at Harvard.³

"Going to business school was a huge eye opener," he said. "The most interesting part was not what I learned, but who else was in the class: people from banking, consulting, all top of their game. I got exposed to many different backgrounds and careers. But I didn't go to any interviews, because I would go to back to GM."

In 1986, when Kenny graduated from HBS, he went back to GM and resumed his work in the company. But the excitement of business school had disappeared. "I became a bit bored at GM. It was constantly reducing and cutting, it had big economic challenges. And I looked ahead to say: If I work really hard, I might run a division, or become the CEO. But it didn't look as interesting anymore." His fascination for consultants, on the other hand, didn't go away.

In the spring of 1987, less than a year after he had returned from Boston to Michigan, Kenny decided it was time to make a move. That April, *Fortune* magazine published a feature story that would long be remembered among consultants. Its title was "Bain: A Consulting Firm Too Hot to Handle?"⁴

The story looked closely at some of the benefits and pitfalls of the consulting firm's famously aggressive business approach. It painted an ambiguous picture of the company's founder and CEO, Bill Bain, and questioned the company's practice of working so intimately with its client-CEOs, that it seemed as though the Bain consultants were in charge. While the story received mixed reviews within Bain, it prompted Kenny to join the mysterious, powerful consulting firm. "When I went into consulting, 'Too Hot to Handle' was the cover story on Bain," said Kenny. "It was bold back then."

But Bain was in trouble, too, and Kenny didn't know that—he was simply looking for the best cultural fit. "I knew another consulting firm, too, McKinsey. They were a little more prestigious, and they worked for GM. But they looked a little elite, and that was not my background." Bain seemed more like a good fit for Kenny. The dice had been thrown: Kenny joined Bain in the summer of 1987.

Unfortunately for Kenny, less than a year later, the company almost went under.

BOSTON, 1988

How exactly Bain got into trouble has been documented extensively.⁵ In short, three factors came together in a perfect storm. First, Bain's one-client-per-industry backfired, just as the company bet on expansion by hiring more people and opening more offices. Second, competitors like McKinsey and BCG started copying Bain's unique client approach, further threatening its revenues. And third, the fact that Bain's structure and shares were still largely controlled by its founders began causing internal struggles. In response, Bain & Co. was formally incorporated as a partnership. As partners began to trade out their shares for money, Bain was facing an increasingly large debt, which began to hang as a millstone around the firm's neck, as its revenues came under further pressure.

It was in this environment that Kenny and Gadiesh, both with their different backgrounds and history at the company, had to face the most important choice of their careers: Should they stay or should they go?

Gadiesh, who had been with the firm for 10 years, knew what was coming. "What Bain came up with was revolutionary; it was a terrific company—that was still true," she said. "But the investment bankers

told us we were not going to be able to make it. The owners had taken too much money out of the company.” Even so, Gadiesh thought the values and principles were worthwhile: “There was a belief in what we were doing,” she said. “And that belief was independent from the cash that did or did not remain.”

Kenny, on the other hand, was taken by surprise. “I joined Bain as a consultant, and six months later, the company went through a restructuring, and people got laid off.” In the hectic years that followed, Kenny started to work for clients under Gadiesh directly, and both were rewarded for their results—though their future remained uncertain. Gadiesh a senior partner and a crucial part of the company’s new leadership, while Kenny, under Gadiesh’s leadership, got promoted to manager and then partner.

As Bain went through its near-death experience, Gadiesh found herself in the middle of the storm. By the end of 1990, the company was still around, and so were Gadiesh and Kenny, but due to the debts that remained, its forecasts were increasingly grim. In a final effort to save the company, the senior leadership at Bain asked Mitt Romney, the former Bainee turned private equity investor, to return and become CEO. Romney obliged.

Announced as its new CEO in January 1991, Romney oversaw an effort to restructure Bain & Company’s employee stock-ownership plan, and put in place a new governing structure that increased fiscal transparency and ownership.¹ He got Bain and other initial owners who had removed excessive amounts of money from the firm to return a substantial amount, and persuaded creditors, including the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, to accept less than full payment.

This was a turning point, not just for the company, but for all three people. To put it in the military terms Gadiesh previously described: commander-in-chief Romney set out the turnaround strategy from the bunker, Gadiesh led the troops “from the front,” and Kenny was a loyal lieutenant on the ground. “When Mitt

¹You can read more about this turnaround plan in Tim Dickinson’s *Rolling Stone* article, “The Federal Bailout That Saved Mitt Romney” (August 29, 2012), and Matthew Rees’s *The American* article, “Mister Powerpoint Goes to Washington” (December 1, 2006). Both give interesting details about what happened at Bain during Romney’s tenure as CEO, though their primary objective is to speak about Romney as a politician.

took over, he decided we would focus on the big clients,” Kenny said. “Since I was working for the biggest of them all—a financial services client—Mitt paid attention to me. We met several times, and he always said: ‘Just focus on the clients, don’t pay attention to the restructuring. Focus on the clients and your team.’”

That was exactly what Gadiesh did too—focus on the clients. After the partner we met at the beginning of this chapter walked in Gadiesh’s office to ask her whether he should accept an outside offer, Gadiesh decided it was time for her to lead by example. “I called headhunters and said: ‘I don’t want to get calls anymore. I want to stay for at least two years.’” The next time the partner came into her office, Gadiesh said: “See, not everyone is talking to headhunters. I am not. Now do me a favor and say to people that you decided to stay as well. Tell people the whole story of what we did.”

Gadiesh’s plan worked. More people came over to her and asked: “Are you really not talking to headhunters?” She said “yes,” and found it liberating. “That type of leadership really contributed,” Gadiesh said. “We kept our focus on the clients, and after I stopped talking to headhunters, people realized that that helped.” By 1992, the skies started clearing up again, and the financial mist disappeared. Romney, who had remained a partner at Bain Capital all along, decided to return to his private-equity position and hand over leadership of the company to two successors. As chairman, he chose the woman who had been so instrumental in helping him succeed the turnaround: Orit Gadiesh.

As a symbol of the new Bain & Company, Gadiesh chose a compass that pointed to the company’s “true north”: its clients. “When it’s foggy and you can’t see, you have to know where true north is,” said Kenny. “For us at Bain, it was our clients, not our money.” He told me Gadiesh had learned that lesson from her husband, who is a sailor. Gadiesh largely confirmed Kenny’s story. “Have you heard of True North, Peter?” she asked me at the end of our conversation. I nodded. “I coined that concept,” she continued, “so we remind ourselves always about what we went through.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Many of the people I spoke to for this book started their careers at similar firms: management consulting firms, large accounting firms, or large multinational companies of some kind. It’s an obvious

career choice, as these companies are often most aggressively recruiting on campus. I experienced that myself, having started my own career at Bain without really having given other companies any serious thought.

But there is a deeper advantage to this. The CEOs I spoke to told me time and time again that this type of career-start enables you to learn the basics of being a professional in a very well-structured way and gain a toolbox of skillsets that you can apply throughout your career. And it's a two-way street: these companies have an interest in attracting young graduates, as they can make use of their eagerness and enthusiasm to learn and do well. They can "mold" young graduates in their corporate culture, so they can either become the next leaders of the company or its biggest supporters.

Orit Gadiesh and David Kenny are two cases in point. Orit Gadiesh stayed at Bain her whole career, while David Kenny went the other direction: he left Bain, becoming CEO at several other firms. But as their experiences show, the toughest moments they lived through at Bain were among the most "teachable moments" for the rest of their careers.

The following sections summarize the key points you can take away from Kenny and Gadiesh's story, and that you can apply in your own career.

Follow Your Gut Instinct, Not Money or Fame

For both Gadiesh and Kenny, working for Bain was one of several options they had. They didn't choose Bain solely for the money or the career prospects, but because they loved what it stood for. Kenny had a good job at GM, and could have stayed there his whole career if he wanted to. Consider again what he said: "I looked ahead and said to myself: 'If I work really hard, I might run a division, or become the CEO of GM.' But that didn't look interesting."

That he could have become CEO were not vain words—as a matter of fact, he did become CEO of several listed global companies in the end: Digitas and The Weather Company. And as you have read, his classmate at the GM Institute, Mary Barra, *did* in fact become CEO of GM. Regarding that, he said: "It's the first time in the history that GM is run by a product person. You need a passion for the product. I'm happy for her." But as for Kenny himself, by the time he applied for Bain, he was consumed by the idea of working in different

industries and different countries, and thought it was much more exciting than continuing to work for GM.

As for Gadiesh, she could have become a professor at Hebrew University in her home country, as she had wanted to at first, or she could have become a professional in the retail industry, as her family had done before her. Again, the options were very real and attainable. She even had to go out of her way to get to what she really wanted, namely, to work for Bain. The lesson learned is that if you really know what you want, you should develop a sort of tunnel vision, and go for it. If that means saying no to other offers, so be it. It is certainly better than the alternative, whereby you go for other people's preferred choices rather than your own.

Gadiesh put her feelings about this philosophy in the following way: "I never had the target of becoming CEO. When I started at Bain, all my peers wanted to know how long it would take to be a partner. I just wanted to be the best consultant. And I wanted to be good at what I did. Within each job, it was important for me to evolve, and that hasn't changed even today as chairman. In our company, you don't need to get a new title to perform a new role."

In short, you should always follow your gut instinct when making a choice about your future. When you're contemplating a change, ask yourself whether or not you still enjoy what you're currently doing.

Find Your "True North"

We all have moments in our careers when we face uncertainty or adversity. For Kenny and Gadiesh, the moment of greatest uncertainty came when the company they both worked for, and which in a way represented their professional dreams, threatened to go under. Neither of them knew whether the company would survive, nor whether they themselves would survive at the company. But even though the view was "foggy," as Kenny said, they did soldier on, and in the end came out of the mist, together with their company. The most important reason, they both told me, is that they knew what their "true north" was, the direction they had to follow.

In their case, "true north" was servicing the clients of the company. It was the belief that what they did was unique, and that it

was valuable for their clients. So that's what they had to keep doing. They knew they were on a solid ship, they knew they were skillful sailors, and they knew that if they kept going in the right direction, they would get into quiet waters again.

For others, "true north" may mean a different thing than "servicing the client," but it will always involve your answers to questions like: What is it exactly that I am trying to do? Why am I doing it? Am I good at it? And does it have value for others? If you know the answers to these questions, and those answers intuitively make sense, you probably found your "true north"—and you are likely to regain focus and continue to do what you're doing despite external destabilizing factors.

Know When to Persevere and When to Change Course

Finding true north is a necessary condition to succeed, but it is not enough. It will help you regain clarity when you're not sure whether you should stay or you should go. But then, it's still up to you to bite the bullet or give up. That is the final lesson from the "near death" experience of Gadiesh and Kenny at Bain.

That doesn't mean that you should never quit, or that "quitting is for losers," as the known mantra describes. As a matter of fact, as we have seen, both Gadiesh and Kenny quit a professional duty at least once in their careers: Gadiesh when she dropped out of her PhD program, and Kenny when he dropped out of the GM Institute program.

Quitting or persevering is thus not the point in itself—it's the reason behind it that matters. If you are convinced you should quit, as Gadiesh was when she dropped out of her PhD program, then you should do so. Or if you are convinced you should hold on, as Gadiesh was when she stopped talking to headhunters for two years, then you should do that instead.

It's only when you know what to do but don't do it that you are really a quitter, and will fail. Next time you quit because you think it's the right thing to do, give yourself a pat on the shoulder. And next time you persevere even though you're going through a rough time, also give yourself a pat on the shoulder. In both cases, you're doing the right thing. That's what Gadiesh and Kenny tell us through their stories.

ENDNOTES

1. Coincidentally, one year earlier, BCG hired a fellow Israeli that came to the United States for his studies: Benjamin Netanyahu, now Prime Minister of Israel.
2. The story of Orit Gadiesh to which this makes reference appears on the “Lean In” website of Sheryl Sandberg. It accompanies her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (Knopf, 2013). Read more at <http://leanin.org/stories/orit-gadiesh/>.
3. The term “Reagan boom” was referred to, amongst others, in 1990 in the *New York Times* “Opinion” article “The Reagan Boom, The Greatest Ever?” <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/17/opinion/the-reagan-boom-greatest-ever.html>.
4. “Bain: A Consulting Firm Too Hot to Handle?” *Fortune* (1987), <http://fortune.com/2012/01/15/bain-a-consulting-firm-too-hot-to-handle-fortune-1987/>.
5. For more information, see:
 - Mariam Naficy, “The Fast Track,” *Crown Business* (1997).
 - Jack Sweeny, “Raising Bain,” *Consulting Magazine* (2001).
 - Tim Dickinson, “The Federal Bailout That Saved Mitt Romney,” *Rolling Stone* (August 29, 2012).