

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 1, BONUS EPISODE 0A

BALA BALASUBRAMANIAM – HUMAN CONNECTION IS AT THE HEART OF INNOVATION

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Bala Balasubramaniam is the Founder, Visionary and CTO of Innovation Minds. Bala believes that human connection is the heart of innovation and that great innovation happens when people have the right mindsets, tools, and processes to collaborate effectively. With that in mind, he founded Innovation Minds to equip enterprise and academic clients with the best crowdsourcing and AI innovation platform and in-person events to move ideas from basic concepts into game-changing solutions. Prior to Innovation Minds, he worked as Head of HR Innovation at LinkedIn, and before that as the leader of Innovation at eBay Research Labs. Bala frequently gives keynotes at Innovation and HR Summits and Conferences.

In this bonus episode, Bala shares his own personal journey as an innovator and innovation leader, and tells us the many reasons why he believes that innovation should be something that every single person in a company should be involved with.

Michael Lee

We're here with Bala Balasubramaniam, the CEO and mind behind Innovation Minds. Bala is going to tell us his story why innovation is so important to him. And a few really interesting things about the journey he's taken to get to where he is today. Welcome, Bala.

Bala Balasubramaniam

Thank you, Michael.

Michael Lee

Tell us about your journey, how you got involved with innovation in the first place. Really go back to the beginning, how it started for you.

Bala Balasubramaniam

They always say that when you're a kid, when you're a baby, you're pretty creative, you're pretty innovative, you don't worry about being judged, you're always coming up with out of the box thoughts. And also, they say that as we grow, slowly, we lose that curiosity to find out what is around the corner. That's pretty much the same for me as well. But where I reconnected with a kind of curiosity with innovation, I would say, I can go as far as back to my first job at GE Power Systems. That was in Schenectady, which is outside of New York. As you know, GE is a pioneer when it comes to operational excellence, Six Sigma, and all those things. I joined there early as a professional, and I was raw.

When I went there I was more like a kind of code monkey, you just gave me the task and I'll go and deliver it. But the more I talked to my managers and the leadership team, I was able to gain a kind of perspective like, this is good, but you should always think about why you're doing what you're doing. So that was the beginning of my innovation journey. When I started having that curiosity. And even to be more specific, when I started challenging the status quo, whenever I saw something, asking why is this working this way, why not another way, but in a constructive way. Not critical like, hey, this is wrong, you have to go and fix it. So that is the starting point of my innovation journey, as part of GE Power Systems , especially coupling that curiosity with a structured Six Sigma process.

It was really a kind of an aha moment. I was put onto the right path from that point onwards. I had an extensive corporate career. Fortunately, most of my roles have been aligned with innovation, creativity, operational excellence. I was really polishing myself when the moment came when eBay's CIO, Scott Seese, he was actually seeing all my work, and also he thought that I'm a go getter, and at some point, he also started thinking, Can you throw more challenges at Bala? And one day, he came to me saying that, hey, I'm starting a small innovation programme, do you want to be taking charge on that one? Why don't we go and just run a hackathon for internal eBay. At that time, Facebook was really pioneering this concept of hackathons, so everybody was going after that like the magic bullet of innovation. And then I started arranging a hackathon for eBay. And then, slowly, I just grew into that role. Along the way, we were able to learn a lot of good things. And also, I was able to unlearn a lot of the bad things that we gather along the way. And I would say that this point, we got close to what true innovation is and how we should do it and what should we look for and how we will really make a transformation any company or any institution is looking for. I think I'm getting there now.

Michael Lee

How would you say your experience at these big companies, PayPal, LinkedIn, what did they teach you about innovation?

Bala Balasubramaniam

My background is I started as an engineer, and then I grew into the role of manager and then director. And also in various capacities. I was focusing on engineering to begin with, and then operational excellence when I was a manager. And then when I went into the director role, it was more focused on HR. It's such a great combination, how actually you will

be able to perfect your innovation maturity within yourself. They always say that if you want to be a true innovation champion, there are two things you should possess.

The first one is you yourself should be an innovator. So when I say innovator, it doesn't mean that you need to have like fifty patents on your name, and you have innovated so many things, as I was telling you earlier. Innovation or innovator is just a mindset, right? As long as you have the mindset of challenging the status quo in a constructive way, and ask the right questions, but not stopping with it, pursue the answer for that, and follow, follow through to implementing the small spark that you had into a good idea, from a good idea to the minimal viable product or concept, and finally, get that idea to the finish line. So the passion of challenging the status quo in the right way, constructive way, get all the input, and then try to really build the solution championing that to really get it to the finish line. That is what I'm calling being an innovator. So being an engineer, and also being an operational excellence expert, and also part of HR, I was blessed to have that kind of coaching and mentoring, so I was just trying to get better at it.

But now, if you want to become an innovation champion, an innovation leader within a big enterprise or institution, being an innovator yourself is not enough. This is a little different challenge, different task. On top of understanding what challenges, what opportunities an innovator can go through, you should also know how to enable those innovators, because when you become a champion, you're not going to be innovating yourself, you have to actually replicate all the innovation knowledge that you have across the community. And not only that, make sure that they are getting the right guidance, mentoring enablement. So that is how I see that a true innovation champion is going to slowly progress. You'll be an innovator first, and then slowly grow yourself into an innovation champion by really understanding and also appreciating the factors needed for enabling the innovators around yourself. And I would say that my experience under HR especially the talent management, employee engagement employee experience, coupled with engineering really actually gave me the perspective of not only being the innovator, but how you can be an innovation champion. So you will be able to nurture the culture of innovators and innovation within a company.

Michael Lee

Steve Jobs, said quite famously, that the difference between a leader and a follower is that leaders are innovators. How did you find your experience at these corporate companies to teach you to be a leader in innovation?

Bala Balasubramaniam

When I was talking about the early part of my innovation journey it was purely under the eBay and PayPal. So now they are two different companies. When they were together, you could see that the magnanimity of that employee workforce and the different cultures and as well as different challenges within each and every one of the functions. So that really kind of was the perfect playground for me to really learn what are the factors that you should focus on to be a truly innovation leader. And the fortunate thing is, my leadership team was giving a little bit of a free hand. And also they told me, hey Bala, I'm going to be giving you

some excuses, if you're going to be failing first time, it's okay, try to learn the mistakes but don't actually make the same mistake again and again.

So that sort of was the cushion, the comfort zone, especially when you're actually starting and the innovation growth is very critical. So with that, I was able to make some mistakes here and there knowingly and unknowingly, but very quickly, we are able to realise what is working, what is not working, and then actually just perfect it and replicate it. But the main thing I would say, you want to really grow up into this innovator and also as innovation champion role is that there is no silver bullet or there is no playbook, or single playbook that you will be able to apply across all the scenarios. Even within eBay and PayPal, I would say that there are so many departments, there are actually so many different cultures and different needs. And each and every one of the functions in terms of that innovation journey, everyone is in a kind of different corner of that maturity map.

So when you really try to become a balanced innovation leader for a big company, big institution, and also if you're an innovator, you'd like to thrive within the company's innovation framework. You should understand that innovation is always subjective and context related, based on the needs, based on the challenge of the team, and the business challenge that you're working on, based on the colleagues in and around you, the culture that you're working on. So based on other factors, you should be able to be really agile, and also dynamic to try out something new. And then see very quickly what is working, what is not working, work your way up to perfect it and then slowly get that.

My point here is, there is no silver bullet or measurement that we can give to an innovator or innovation champion that this is the runbook: you go and make it happen. You can give baseline advice. But is it actually your inherent answer our call, based on any given circumstances, trying to really identify what is going to work, what is not going to work, try to seek advice and mentorship from all the other folks around there. And slowly, you're going to be growing up into that role. And that's how you become a successful innovation leader.

Michael Lee

And the last position you had before you left the corporate life was LinkedIn.

Bala Balasubramaniam

Yeah, that was LinkedIn, Head of HR Innovation. That's a pretty interesting and exciting journey, I would say.

Michael Lee

And why did you then decide to leave this interesting journey to start Innovation Minds?

Bala Balasubramaniam

I'll just give you a little bit of context. Even though I had extensive career, when I took over the Innovation Officer role in eBay and PayPal, the challenges we had the opportunities we are perceiving were a little different. And the kind of demographics, I mean, employee workforce that I was working on, is a little different, in the sense that the average workforce, age of eBay, PayPal, somewhere around 38, by the time I was working there, and they were primarily focusing on innovation, and also to add a little more colour to that, Amazon and a few other competitors were really kicking these guys ass. It brought up a lot of opportunities for eBay, at the same time exciting challenges working with this. I wouldn't say that kind of seasoned workforce on one side, focusing on the engineering and stiff competition from our fellow companies out there. So it gave a little bit of perspective, what is working in innovation? How do you really move the needle?

And then when I moved on to LinkedIn, it was pretty much a night and day difference. I'm not saying that one is better than the other, but I'm just giving you a comparison, when I took on that LinkedIn role, as if like, you're just getting into the UC Berkeley Extension when you get into that LinkedIn campus. It's such a dynamic and young workforce. And these guys were primarily focusing on talent as well as culture and process innovation. So the challenges were completely different. They're seasoned-workforce, technology-focused at eBay and PayPal. LinkedIn is a little different, a young and dynamic workforce, focusing on the talent, culture, and all those things. When I was trying to really Institute the innovation programme there, I was able to get a whole lot of things right, and also a whole lot of things wrong.

But one thing that I was actually able to find out from both the cultures is that if you want to really thrive on innovation in any culture, I would say that human connection is the heart of innovation. As long as you're able to provide the right tools, and create the ambience for the right mindset for the employees to have. And also create the culture through which they will be able to ask the right questions, get the answers, and also will be able to pursue the answers, innovation is going to thrive. So that is the kind of balance I saw in both companies. But saying it is easy, right?

So human connection is the heart of innovation. Provide the right tools and all those things. But even if you're going to be giving the right tools, then the next question will be, are they easily adopting it? Are they able to follow the marching orders of moving the whole company as innovative, and also creative? Even after we were giving all the tools, I saw a major gap in both these companies. And as always, when I'm talking to my fellow innovation leaders, one of the things that we are traditionally doing wrong is that we are making our employees see innovation as a separate discipline. And asking the employees to carve out time from their busy schedules and focus on innovation as another task, another job. So when you do that, you may be able to get some support from innovation evangelists, "Okay I can do it, I can find time." But across the board, this was not resonating with any of the cultures that I worked at.

So that is where I started thinking and also with my friends and colleagues, and at some point, we started coming to the conclusion that, hey, innovation shouldn't be a separate discipline. It should be close to whatever you're doing on a day to day basis. You're working on a product development, you're working on a project development, you're in HR or

finance, you have to do anyway as part of your roadmap, certain things. Can we bring in innovation thought and innovation discipline tools and frameworks into what they're already doing, and completely transform the way they are getting results? So that is where you will be able to really win over hearts like, "Oh, that makes sense. You're not asking me to do one more extra thing. Rather, you're helping me to make my job easy, I can be the better hero and best hero within my campus, because I'm able to apply these kind of innovation tools and thoughts in a much more seamless and non-intrusive way." So that was the root of why we founded Innovation Minds, don't make innovation a stand-alone discipline, trying to run it as a separate silo. How do we bring innovation to the core of whatever you're doing? We call this, Innovation at the Edge.

Michael Lee

So this is the perfect time, I think, for you to explain what "Innovation at the Edge" means and why it's important.

Bala Balasubramaniam

Every company out there wants to be the next Apple, the next Tesla, the next Google, right? I would say that each and every one of the institutions and the enterprises, they are sincerely trying. But one thing that's oftentimes getting overlooked is that they want to put innovation as a separate silo, rather than looking at the successful companies trying to learn how they were able to really pioneer innovation. The one fact is that they are making innovation as part of everybody's everyday job. So innovation is for everyone, every time. And I would say that it's for every scenario that they are working on. You're bringing innovation closer to what they are doing already. You have to create the framework or programme of innovation in such a way that you use innovation to bring in engagement rather than trying to engage the employees first, and then as the outcome or goal work towards innovation. That is a huge difference: Innovate to engage employees, rather than engaging the employees first, to get to the end goal of being an innovative company.

But there is one important thing that you have to keep in mind. When you go to any culture and ask them to be innovative, it's not easy. Unless it's simple, it is fun, it's exciting. So that is where Innovation Minds is really helping, how to make innovation quickly adaptable, so everybody is going to be raising their hand, "Oh my god, this is so cool, I want to be part of this journey." The more you're pulling them into this kind of collective notion that we are on to something new here, and enabling them, supporting them to be innovators. As part of the journey itself, we are going to be bringing in all sorts of collaboration, looking for all sorts of conversation, looking for engagement. You're going to be innovating all these next million dollar, billion dollar ideas, getting them to the finish line, as the end goal, and now you have such a thriving and engaging workforce. And after that when you throw any challenge at them, they're going to say, "You know what, I'll just take care of it." There is no kind of question or anything else. Innovation at the Edge is more like innovate to engage your employees or talent rather than put all your efforts to bring in the engagement first, then work towards the innovation. I think it's working out really well with pretty much all the clients that we have, into such a huge success story.

Michael Lee

The reason you moved from this corporate trajectory in your life into creating Innovation Mind, is because you wanted innovation to become easier for people.

Bala Balasubramaniam

Yeah. When you're on a journey, you have to just keep trying multiple things to see what is sticking and what is not sticking. Part of my multiple roles, and I would say that even my colleagues, they are all trying certain concepts, certain approaches when it comes to this innovation programme, entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship, all those things. But one hard truth across the board is that innovation has to be seamless, it has to be simple. It has to be intuitive, more than all those things. On top of being simplistic, it should answer the question, "What is in it for me?"

You're asking an employee to be innovative and put some focus there. Unless you are able to explain why they should do it, what is the benefit they are going to get out of this particular discipline, this particular framework program, by this contribution, in terms of their career progression in terms of their personal profile progression? The same way when you're working with managers, when you're working with cheerleaders of this innovation programme, stakeholders. Try to actually start answering the question what is in it for them by participating in this greater innovation programme? What are they're going to get out of it? And when you're creating that interest, make it much simpler. Make it frictionless. Make it fun. Make it entertaining, exciting. That way, you will be able to really try that kind of innovation across the board. And within a quick time frame, you will be able to completely transform the entire culture on the campus.

Michael Lee

You've put everything in your life into Innovation Minds. You do sleep, but when you're not sleeping, you're doing Innovation Minds. Why? What is it that you want to bring the world that nobody else is doing?

Bala Balasubramaniam

I wouldn't say that I figured that out, it but at least I started going in the right direction. Whether we agree or not, I would say most enterprises and institutions, they are starting with good intentions of implementing an innovation programme. They are actually trying to bring in the right support enablement. But in the course of execution, slowly it's turning into innovation theatre. The reason is, they're not actually focusing on the right things, they may not be actually focusing on the right focus areas, or the enablement in terms of the technology, the programme, the framework. Even though the intention is right, slowly it's becoming a punch line and then your talent starts asking questions like, "Yeah, I keep hearing this, and I've seen this movie multiple times, but I'm not actually seeing where it is going."

At Innovation Minds, what we are trying to do is, how do we move away from innovation theatrics, towards the notion of making innovation real, fun, and exciting. So that's where, if you just look at our tagline we say that innovation is for everybody. And also it is for all the time. And also everywhere. So that is our tagline. Everyone, Everywhere, All the Time. So it's not like, okay, it's Monday or Tuesday, I'm going to be spending one hour for innovating. That is not going to work, it's not going to take you anywhere. Whatever you do, try to approach it in a different way or constructive way and ask the question, Is this the right way of doing it? Are there any alternatives? Ask the questions and then the more you're bringing in, that's where you will be able to become the innovator. And that's what Innovation Minds is trying to help our clients do. I'm not saying that everybody is doing innovation theatre. Our first approach, our first problem that we want to tackle with our clients is, how do you overcome the notion that innovation is a namesake, towards innovation being real, innovation being the transmission engine. So that is our end goal.

Michael Lee

Innovation for real rather than innovation as theatre.

Bala Balasubramaniam

To put it simply, yes.

Michael Lee

And so to close off, if you were to tell the people that are listening to this one message about innovation?

Bala Balasubramaniam

Innovation is not scary. Innovation doesn't need extra time. Innovation doesn't have to be coached to you or taught to you by someone else. It's fun. It is exciting. And it's going to give you the eventual outcome to be the hero. And if you try it sincerely, and approach it with an open mind, you will be able to master that game rather than actually waiting for someone to come and mentor you or coach you. So just go out with an open mind, and look for all these kind of opportunities out there with the notion that it is fun, exciting, I'm going to go and master it along the way, trying to get all the support enablement, so you're going to be the true innovator.

Who knows? You can become the next Elon Musk or the next Steve Jobs as far as the business model is concerned, there are so many good examples, right? Pretty much every one of us has Elon Musk or Steve Jobs within us. The only thing is, we need to sincerely look into our self and then try to get that mindset to start challenging the status quo in a constructive way, not stopping with that, work towards getting those ideas to the finish line. That is really important. On a planet of seven billion people, everybody has an idea. But what differentiates us versus the successful folks are that you have an idea, you're really following it up, following through it and then trying to get to the finish line. Having an idea is just the beginning of the journey. Getting it to be successful, even if you're going to have a

failure here and there, don't give up, continuously improve, don't get into insanity, and finally fulfil your dream to the finish line. That is possible for everyone as long as you have the right mindset. Go and innovate. Let's solve world hunger.