

Nikhil Arora

EPIGNOSIS: The Power of Learning and Spirituality in Entrepreneurship
Season 5, Episode 6

Panagiotis: Hi Nikhil, welcome to the Endeavor Greece offices.

Nikhil: Thank you for hosting me and it's always a pleasure chatting with you. We had the opportunity to be on a far side chat in Mumbai a few months back and my opportunity to actually learn a lot about the Greek tech ecosystem. Being on that plane with probably 60-70 Greek entrepreneurs from different backgrounds was perhaps what for one year I learned in 3 days. So it was just amazing.

Panagiotis: You were only a few weeks.

Nikhil: I was three-four weeks into the job.

Panagiotis: You relocated from London to Athens and you are coming with an already amazing experience, which I can't wait to dig into with you; from India and UK and now into Greece. I don't want to say - I'm not 100% sure, but I think that you are the first one of the few international CEOs that is taking over this position in a Greek startup, EPIGNOSIS. We shouldn't be even calling it a startup. Now it's a scale up and an international business. So, it's probably although you're based in Athens, it doesn't feel like you're taking over a Greek startup. You're taking over an international company nowadays, but still you are one of the few international CEOs in the Greek tech ecosystem, i.e. the Greek innovation ecosystem and I think this is completely newsworthy and something that we should explore it a little bit, i.e. what's the company about.

Nikhil: EPIGNOSIS, it's been a great honor to take over the wonderful work from Thanos and Dimitris. They've built a wonderful company founded on learning. Our goal is to really enable learners around the world to be the best versions of themselves. What EPIGNOSIS does is that it provides skilling to employees of small and medium-sized businesses around the world both from an internal perspective when companies need to skill their employees for compliance reasons or for other mandatory reasons they need to be skilled, and also external where you're getting them skilled on marketing, sales, AI and also some of the softer sides of life around mental wellness, around how to be balancing your personal and professional lives. So, it's the whole world of skilling and trying to be the best version of yourself.

Panagiotis: How does EPIGNOSIS come to your radar?

Nikhil: There's a very famous quote by Rumi: "What you seek is seeking you".

Panagiotis: What are the things that really made you decide and steer positively to this

Nikhil: So, just as context. This is the 11th country I'm living in. I've been moving around since I was 18. Embracing new cultures, new opportunity was something I really seek because it gets me to be better. Specific to this opportunity, I think first is what is the company doing and what is the impact it's making. I always seek opportunity, which is both missionary and mercenary. When I say missionary is all about the purpose and what is it making an impact on the world, the business and people. Mercenary is about the commercial side of things. How do you monetize and make economic sense? I found EPIGNOSIS in the intersection of both. It's missionary because there's nothing more powerful than learning and teaching people to be better. Also, from a mercenary point of view, the business is diverse and global and it's in North America, Europe, Asia and it was as diverse as it could get. Firstly, it was more about what EPIGNOSIS does and how it is doing it; and secondly around people at the end of the day. People and culture make what a company is about. Coming into Athens and meeting the people, going to Crete, I met few of our employees there and of course some of the people in London and Atlanta. To me it was very clear that the culture was very -I would say- passionate about what it does and also in some sense the intentions of the culture. Intentions matter when you meet people and are very much at the right place to make this company the best in learning around the world. So, starting from the purpose to the people and the culture, and quite frankly Greece and Athens spoke to me in my first visit. I'm partly very spiritual. So, the energy of the place matters. Within a day or two, I could easily sense that this is a place, which speaks to me very closely.

Panagiotis: We can build on that and can start to attract more foreigners and international talents.

Nikhil: Yeah, I think Greece to me is an untold story yet still. While after all the wonderful work Endeavor Greece does and some of the other work going on I think it's still an untold story because of the amount of talent the country has based on tech and science; I think the value system is pretty strong. If you look at the worldwide ecosystem, and having lived in like 20 cities, the intentions of how startup ecosystem become successful is either grounded on are you building something which will change the world, make it purposeful and then make money or you are just building something to make money. I find that in Greece. It's a good balance there. There is a purpose and there is the mercenary part of it. Many ecosystems around the world have actually lost that. Everybody's saying: "I'm going to build something, I'm going to sell it in three years, and I'm out of it". I think Greece has that wonderful opportunity, the education system is very

strong, the value system is very strong, and the ecosystem and people are very open to help each other. There's huge upside for Greece to go from here.

Panagiotis: You have a fascinating story. You've been around the world; you've worked in different amazing tech companies and different organizations. It's important for us to understand a little bit about you before going into what you're up in EPIGNOSIS and what you're going to do in EPIGNOSIS. So, take us a little bit back: where were you born? how were your childhood years? Tell us more about you.

Nikhil: I was born in Delhi, India. My parents were immigrants from what used to be India back in the days. India was one country. Then, the British divided the country into India and Pakistan. All my dad's and mom's family are on the other side which used to be Pakistan. So, overnight everybody had to leave and land back in Delhi with a suitcase, and all their life belongings were gone. They all started like immigrants living in one house with 15 family members and starting from scratch. Some of the value systems which helped me were what I inherited from my dad in terms of what's important in life; things that can be taken away in a given time. Never take anything for granted, but what you have is your own process and your own ability to change your future course. So, his immigrant mentality really helped very much shape a lot of my childhood. I spoke about it recently at EPIGNOSIS offsite, of life moments, which change me. One of my life moments was that I used to always look at my dad when I was maybe 10 or 11, that he's not doing something. As a child you always look at your parents to say what they are doing wrong versus what they are doing right. My dad used to be head of the Delhi electricity board. Think of the public sector board, which controls the entire electricity of the city like Athens. We didn't have electricity in the house for many months and I used to wonder what my dad was doing wrong. He heads the electricity board and we don't even have electricity for 3 or 4 months. Later on I realized because he was a man of principles and integrity, he would take on the political system at that time, which was trying to push him in a different direction, but he would stand by his principles, which meant he would pay a price not having electricity. So, you start appreciating these things about you, where you come from and what you do and your parents. It was like a very learning moment for me about why it is important to have guiding principles in life; otherwise you could stray wherever life takes you. He had guiding principles, he stuck by it willing to pay a price for it and that was a big kind of learning moment for me.

Panagiotis: What do your father and mother do as an occupation?

Nikhil: My dad had a great career. He started as a magistrate, a judge of one of the biggest courts in Delhi and then he was with the government -what they call Indian administrative services, which is the biggest post of secretary-level, ministry positions. Then, he retired as a chief vigilance officer of one the largest oil companies of India. He had a lot of career transfers because he stuck by his guiding principles. He would get transferred every 3 years because he was taking on the system and the corruption, which again helped me learn things. My mother did hotel management, but music was her passion and so she taught music a lot. That's one thing I am still passionate about. As a hobby, I actually produce some music, and music is such a gift to give to the world. That was what she really in and she was a lot into charity and children. She used to teach Basic English at underprivileged schools, which wasn't very common in India in those days.

Panagiotis: I know that you also sing and that you have a nice voice, but I'm wondering what's your connection with music.

Nikhil: I think it breaks down barriers around the world because if you listen to any music for any part of the world, it connects people instantly. I can listen to Greek music, Italian music, Bollywood music and in a second I don't think of countries. You think of music and people. So firstly, it just brings the boundaries down. Secondly, it's a connection to your own divine self whether you want to call it God or your own self. I call it like a healthy drug, because it takes you in a journey, which is a connection to your own self because you can relate to the words, the music and your soul. Then, also it's upliftment. If you're down and you're trying to bring your mood up, there's nothing like putting that favorite song of yours and it just brings you out. For me also in my physical fitness activities - I run and all that stuff- music is a great enabler to stimulate that focus.

Panagiotis: How were you as a student? How did you make your decision to go to the university?

Nikhil: You've heard this famous quote from Steve Jobs that "you cannot connect the dots looking forward"; you can only connect the dots looking backward. Later in my life somebody had taught me this concept of a journey line. If you draw your journey line of your life, which means look at the inflection points, where things went well and look at the inflection points, where things didn't go well, you can learn a lot about yourself. These are inflection points which actually change your life at that point you didn't know. For me, I drew this journey line a few years back and what I realized that I was a person, who really liked a lot of uncertainty. I wouldn't call it indecisive, but I wanted to make sure I'm not going to be committing myself to something if I don't like it. For example, you talked about college. I changed four colleges in first year in my

life. What it did teach me about myself was that I'm willing to take risks. At that time I didn't know -now I know- that you're willing to take risk and then also that it's okay to quit if you don't like something, but understanding having a plan to take what you're going next.

Panagiotis: Changing paths so easily and especially at that age it requires a lot of self-trust, right?

Nikhil: Yeah, at that time I can say I had no idea, but there was some madness in me to do that. So, now I know that I have that self-belief and trust today. If I have to change something tomorrow to go to a new profession, it'll be fine. I mean I don't need to be the topper, but I'll be fine.

Panagiotis: How do you make your decisions? How do you choose these paths?

Nikhil: Same thing. When I left Russia and went to the US, I had as a sponsor my dad's friend, who sponsored my education in New York. I landed and he backed out in a week. He said he's not able to sponsor me then. So, I was in New York with 200 bucks in my pocket and I had to figure out to go back to India and just pursue education there, to call my dad, which I know that he wouldn't be able to support me because he comes from a very public sector hard working job or what do I do. Then, I said: "Okay, I'm going to just deal with it and stay with it". That's when I did four jobs in my bachelor's degree. I used to wake up at 4:00 a.m. and distribute newspapers from like 4:00 to 7:00 a.m. every morning for 4 years in a row. Then, I would go to college; I would work at a petrol station in the evening and the same thing would happen. That all just built the same character, which I felt would have been important. My first job which I landed was exactly an outcome of this. I was working at a petrol station in the evening and this gentleman pulled over in his car. It was snowing; it was probably 8 or 10 inches of snow. His car broke down, he tried to call a cab; no cab available. So he said: "It's my daughter's birthday. Would you be able to drop me?" I think he lived 20-30 miles from this petrol station. In New York you never do that; you don't drop a stranger in your car -right?-, but I was closing the shift and I said: "Okay, it's just being in my own kind of craziness". "Okay, I'll drop you". We started talking. Before I dropped him, he offered me money. I said: "No, of course, I'm not going to take money from you". He gave me his business card. When I was graduating, the war was going on in the Middle East and there was a recession in the US. I remember picking the business card and calling him and saying: "Hey, do you remember me?" He said: "Of course, come into my office". The guy turned out to be the CFO of Miramax Films, the company which made the movie *Pulp Fiction*. I ended up getting my first job because of that incident. So, it goes back again to your intentions, and sometimes when you meet people you don't know what you're going to be and

never have that thinking that you're going to get something out of them, but if you're building a good intention around it, goodness comes out of it.

Panagiotis: What year is that? It's 1997?

Nikhil: Yeah, it's the early '90s.

Panagiotis: Early '90s. First time in the States, first time in New York, you're working four jobs. What did you learn for yourself?

Nikhil: Sometimes ignorance is a blessing. I have this confidence to say: "Okay, I'm just going to deal with this". It was more about proving other people wrong' like my sponsor backed out, so, I'm going to prove him wrong. Sometimes you need -I won't call it like an enemy- something to fight against and it's important in life to have something to fight against because that helps you move forward. That thing may become irrelevant, that person became irrelevant, but something to prove something about is very important. So, it was more about "I'm going to prove him wrong". I can prove to myself that I can do this on my own. It was about self-belief. I can say now I had great self-belief. Then, to be honest I didn't know. What I knew was "OK, here's a process. I can work hard. I can do four jobs. I can wake up 4:00 a.m. in the morning four years in a row. Yes, I can". Just keep doing that and see where it takes you. So, being breaking down life in small moments, let me get through one year, the second year, the third year, and things

Panagiotis: Were there any moments where self-doubt and fear prevailed at this point?

Nikhil: Of course, there were always both around. If I lose one or two or three jobs, how am I going to support myself or what if I don't do well in college, am I able to balance putting the right amount of time for studying versus these jobs? There were always there, but somehow I felt the madness overtook a bit more of the fear there. Maybe when you're a little younger, you feel like you can deal with it. I think also having good ecosystem support. I didn't have financial ecosystem support, but I had a good network of friends back from India or few I met. I generally believe if you put out the right intentions you end up meeting good people. It's so true even now. Just coming back to what were the odds I just moved here, joined EPIGNOSIS and I'll be going with a Greek delegation to India. Think about it. If I try to write that script any day, it won't be possible. So, I think that really is about - if you build a good intention and good ecosystem, it just things fall in place. So, fear of course you always deal with all your life, but just having a good ecosystem of support of people is important.

Panagiotis: So you have friends; you build relationships while you're there.

Nikhil: Yeah, that's one thing I think it was the way I attribute to it because I was in a caretaking position of my mother earlier and I realized that the ecosystem is important. You can't do it on your own a lot. So, I've kept in touch with almost everybody I've known in my life; from my childhood like my school friends, my teachers. I make it a point every year and I reach out to all my teachers whether it's New Year's or Christmas or Diwali. At least once a year I'm acknowledging them. I journal everybody, who has had an impact in my life to make sure I'm reaching out to them. I remember when I was in New York I called an uncle of mine in LA and asked him for \$100 or something. Until today I make sure I remember that and I'm appreciating him because that time it was a big deal for me; today it's not. So, cultivating and nurturing relationships is time and effort, but with the right people. If anybody who's been in a material part of your life here, I mean everybody I've met it's just how you nurture them because it may not turn into business opportunities, but you're still learning and interacting with each other. I think the ecosystem of personal and professional people is one of the biggest ingredients for you to succeed.

Panagiotis: Is caretaking any part of your leadership style now as a CEO or in your business career?

Nikhil: It's very much because especially after Covid the boundaries between personal and professional lives have gone. I mean you're dealing with - everybody's gone through something and the leaders can no longer say: "Okay, this is a professional matter; I'm going to deal with it. This is a personal matter, you go deal with yourself". In all sense all leaders are in some sort of a position of not only managing the professional work of your employees, but also to some extent personal side. I mean caretaking more about mental wellness, giving a safe space in the company, being mindful of everybody's circumstances, what's going on. So, what I call the empathy part is very important. One of the mentors I learned well was that kindness is not a sign of weak leadership; it's actually strength. Old school was that kindness is viewed as you have to be cutthroat, brutal. That's what leadership is about. I think that's old and it doesn't exist anymore right. You can use kindness and empathy to your strength, while keeping employees accountable because we're all in the business of serving our customers and shareholders.

Panagiotis: So, did you finally graduate or did you drop off because of the four jobs?

Nikhil: No, I graduated. I got this job with Miramax films. My first project was working on *Pulp Fiction* with John Travolta. What are the odds there? Yeah, I was a backend guy doing the spreadsheets. Nevertheless it was a big opportunity I would have never thought of. Then later on, of course I pursued my masters and MBA in the US but all in all I think I made it through.

Panagiotis: Walk us through a little bit of your early professional career. What are the steps that are leading into the things that you've done so far?

Nikhil: Two things, which I wanted to do was that I wanted to get cross functional experience because I felt like getting stuck to a particular function like finance or marketing or sales that limits you. So, I was looking for opportunities to go from one function to the other and also cross industries because then it gives you the best practices of all. I went from Miramax Films to CBS Television, which was one of the largest television networks in the US and then -talking about the crazy stuff I had in my head- when I left Russia, I always had this idea in my mind to come back to that region and work as a professional. I was a student when I was in Russia, but I was going to come back. I got this opportunity to go back to Kazakhstan after CBS Television, where the World Bank was putting a lot of money and they were building the first stock exchange, the first Public University and they were putting a team of people. There were not many people who wanted to go back to work in that region and who spoke Russian. I got this opportunity and I ended up living in Kazakhstan for three years. We built the first stock exchange and the first Press Club of Kazakhstan. I was doing more of a finance role, but I was working with very smart people. That opened a window of new opportunities for me. I came back to the US, did my MBA, worked for General Motors and automotive in mergers acquisitions. From there I went to technology, ADP, where I was leading the strategy and M&A. Then I went into education, moved into Asia and then went into technology back and then was back in learning, so about seven or eight different industries.

Panagiotis: Definitely, mobility is the theme here. This career path must be appealing to a lot of people, who are listening to us right now. I'm wondering if you have ever reflected on what enables people, what keeps possibilities open, what do you think that you you've seen yourself to, that you have taught yourself to, that keeps your possibilities as open as possible. What makes people flexible and mobile like you are?

Nikhil: We are creatures of comfort. After some time we settle in what we feel is a comfortable lifestyle or comfortable job. If you get in there, you're going to only do disservice to yourself because you only get to half your potential. The world is an oyster; there's so much out there and

the more you are open to experience- The biggest learning in your life is travel and working with different cultures. I mean rest is great, but that's really what opens up your window of awareness of how different things happen. So, not getting stuck in your comfort zone and not getting fixated on being successful as you define successes, because when you go to new places you probably fail, but you still end up gaining. Today, I can go into most of the places and I can have a conversation about many different parts of the world, which is a gift.

They were able to move to different places. What I tell young people now is that the more you can travel now, the more jobs you can change, the more functions you can work in, the more industries you can get exposed to, because in your 20s or maybe even your early 30s you have that risk taking appetite, because nothing worse can happen. As you grow older then of course you have responsibilities, you have to be a little more guarded. So, not defining your own comfort zone. People feel that when they have worked five-seven years hard, they can say: "I've arrived; this is what I worked for. This is going to be my prize". The prize keeps changing; the goal has to keep changing.

Panagiotis: Trying to understand your decision-making process when you're making the next step.

Nikhil: When you made a decision, you had certain information. When you land in that situation, you have more information and then again that comes back to your courage to say: "Okay, I have more information; now I'm willing to do something with that information" and then you get more and better at making faster decisions. I mean the only thing I've learned is the faster you make once you have all the information that's not changing. What changes is your ability to make that decision sooner or faster.

Panagiotis: Yeah, or the stories you tell yourself. Anything else that you have as advice here?

Nikhil: I think you always are a function of maybe the four or five people you're surrounded by; you become that. So, it's very important to have those four or five people, who are going to be honest to you and those people make changes in life. I realize that your close friend is your close friend, but on the professional side you need to probably look at who you want to be surrounded by, when things are going wrong and if you want to go for objectivity and you want the right mirrors in front of you. For me, maintaining those relationships with a few of my old bosses I've worked for is very important, because even today I would go sometime to say: "Hey, here's what I'm experiencing". And don't let your experience be your handicap because we get so caught up

like “I’ve worked so many years, I should know this” and sometimes you don’t know it and maybe you just caught in your own blindness. So having a good set of people you can go to ask for advice. And then I think lastly about going back to your decision-making or why you take something; what were you like when you took a particular job or you started what were you’re trying to achieve from that and where is it not working out. Is it not working because of the people you’re working with? Is it the product or is it just the culture? So what is changeable and what is not?

Panagiotis: Who are the people that you reach out to get support whether you need to make a decision or you’re facing something that you need input with?

Nikhil: I look at that statement very differently. I don’t think friendships or relationships are a function of the time you spent. I can say this with pure honesty. I’ve met people for two days and they’re still very close friends of mine in my life. It’s a quality of conversation and a quality of connections you make with people, especially in today’s fast-paced world. As you’re growing older, you are not able to spend the time you spend with childhood friends. So, how do you connect with people in a way they see you as an authentic person and you see them as an authentic person. I think that’s important.

Panagiotis: I have across me one of the most open positive people that I’ve connected with and I’m wondering how you think this supports people going deep into relationships.

Nikhil: The hardest thing to learn has been deciding what not to do, what not to associate with, what not to feel left out with, the feeling of FOMO, which you were used to when you were younger. All these things are the hardest things to learn. Once you get past those, you realize that the narrower you become in kind of your time and energy, the more effective you can be at things and quality of things you’re doing.

Panagiotis: Do you have any benchmarks or methodologies that work?

Nikhil: Of course simple things like I keep a pie chart of my calendar time, what’s my say- do ratio. If I’m saying I’m going to do this, I look at my calendar. I’m going to spend this percentage of time with my customers, my employees, my shareholders or certain important areas. How do my meetings align with that? So, I just tend to look at it every week to say “okay, if I said 30% of my time needs to go, are my meetings aligned with that?” Also, be able to delegate things and let go of things because you become a leader. And also working on your own self. I’ve invested time in what I call mindfulness which just talked about a lot. And again, I said I’m pretty intrigued by

the spiritual world and so I go to conferences, I listen to a lot of spiritual people from around the world. Spiritual doesn't mean religious, but it's about a way of life and methodology. There's so much you can extract out of them. Doing meditation is a simple thing, but it's more about your own self. You can observe yourself a bit; reflect to yourself. So, allocating an amount of time to your own betterment every day is important both physically and mentally.

Panagiotis: Absolutely. Would you walk us through your mindfulness habits that work for you?

Nikhil: Yeah, I can only share what I learned or still learning. Of course, there is the physical part and the mental part. I don't miss a workout at least maximum one day a week, but I would work out 6 days a week. It's not about building a muscular body or whatever. For me it's a way to take care of how you keep performing at the levels you are physically as you grow older. I want to compete with a 20-year-old every day and that's the mindset I have. I know the body will age, but what can you do there? So, that's about discipline and willpower, especially when you travel a lot and you go to a hotel gym at 8:00 p.m., where you're the only one in the gym. You need some sort of discipline and willpower to stay there for an hour, but that's something I've developed over many years' and also eating habits. I tend to be very disciplined about what not to eat. As you travel to wonderful parts of the world the food is a gift, but you want to be making sure you're managing in moderation. So, making sure you're putting in 40-45 minutes of physical wellness time is very important. A lot of young people say: "I don't have the time". Everybody has 24 hours of the day and you can find time for that. On the mindfulness side, I think deciding where you want to get involved in your energy which again it's a very talked-about topic. How do you manage your own energy and how do you manage your energy around people who you are associating with. I don't think anything is a negative or positive energy but it's relative to you. Now you could be an extremely positive person relative to me and somebody else could be an extremely negative person. Not that person is bad; it's just the attitude; the things you want in life. It's very important to carefully manage what uplifts you and what brings you down and what kind of people uplift you and what bring you down and make the decisions not to kind of invest a lot to the things that bring you down. Especially when your relationships have been for many years you get caught up in that guilt factor and so it's important to do that. Then, I think meditation of any sort is important. It's more observing yourself, reflecting yourself. I tend to reflect on myself at the end of day; what did I do well, perhaps what could have done well, whether it was in a meeting, whether it's an employee, whether it's a communication or anything. Having that openness to self-evaluate and be a critic of yourself, but also remembering your strengths to say: "Okay, this went well, I'm going to build upon that". Whether you call it journaling or something

similar is important because when the moments of doubts come in, those are the things you want to go and read back to say: “Okay, I've done that”. So, I don't think mindfulness is very complicated, because you can go as crazy as you want, but if you stick to the basics it's about the ability to look at yourself as a third party.

Panagiotis: I know that you're also the author of a book. It's called the “Subtle Shifts of Radical Change”. Tell us more about what made you write this book and what you introduced to the world with this.

Nikhil: This was during the Covid time, the first lockdown and everybody was coming on Zoom calls and everybody was talking about the world, how it'll shape in the future but nobody knew how it could. This kind of idea came about, like what if I want to capture different viewpoints of different people, because everybody was talking about how business life will change, the world will go online, everything as we know in the world will suddenly disappear. There's a lot of theories at that time and I started kind of - thought let me start writing an article and the article started becoming bigger and bigger. Then, I thought that maybe this could be an interesting topic for a book, and the book really was about capturing the small shifts, like when you're locked down in a home. Well it's a small shift, but it's changing your fundamental way of everyday life. Everything is online. Things you never knew about. You knew a few stores around your neighborhood, but now with everything online you need to know everything; where's the hospital, where's this, where's that. Suddenly your awareness as an individual and as a professional business person changed, even with my teams. Now everything is on Zoom or Google Meet or whatever. How you operate as a leader, now that you never meet your people every day, how do you keep them motivated, how do you keep them productive. It was all to capture different viewpoints and learnings around the shifts of what is going to change the world now and what it could be perhaps in the future.

Panagiotis: I'm going to take us to Bangalore, where you took the whole Greek delegation in WeWork in India. I know that because we work together for this Greek delegation and you told me that you know the CEO of WeWork India, which is now a standalone company and I know that you've worked at WeWork. You were the guy who made this sell-off possible to one of the leading families in Bangalore. You made a phone call and then 20 minutes after we were in WeWork. We were in a huge mansion, where the owner of the Embassy greeted us and we had coffee with him and a really nice discussion. I've seen how close people get to you when they

work with you. Walk us through the WeWork experience. What did you do? What were your responsibilities? What was your experience and how did this WeWork India come about?

Nikhil: Anything is just going to happen very coincidentally and at some point I'd gone and met the Airbnb founder back in San Francisco many years back. At that time they were planning to expand Asia and they wanted somebody to lead Asia. We talked, but it didn't work out. Later on, somebody recommended me to WeWork at that time and WeWork was trying to build a senior leadership team. I got a call and I didn't even know what WeWork was. I started researching. I remember at that time Adam asking me to come and visit him in New York and I said: "I'm not a real estate guy. I don't know what I can bring to the table. I'm more in the technology," but he said: "No, come". I spent a week in New York at WeWork and it really amazed me what a great concept it was because you're bringing people of small- and medium-sized businesses under one umbrella and they are all working. It's like LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook combined physically. You get all these people working in different offices. They can network in the coffee area, they can do business, but they can have some fun and events and so the energy was very high and it was just an amazing concept. I thought that this is really going to change the way we work versus previously we had offices that were very boring. Old school, people walk in, nobody wants to come to the office, but they come. So, I got excited and from there I was working with the team and Adam around. We opened a few buildings in the US, and then Europe and then Asia came along. India was of course a big geography on the map of WeWork and so that's when the whole journey started. I relocated to Hong Kong and open Hong Kong. That's when we started talking about WeWork in India. One of the guiding principles I shared with Adam around knowing India. Also, I said you would want a local partner who of course knows the system well. Unlike other parts of the world, where you can lease the buildings on your own, India is not that easy to operate. India was the only place where we ended up doing what we call an agreement, where the local partner would own the entity, but they would give more of a product license fee and other royalties to the parent company. The operation and the entity would all be run and operated by the local partners. It's like hospitality. You are Hiltons of the world in different countries, but Hilton doesn't own them. They give them the right to use the brand name and some of the other product stuff. Today, WeWork India is doing far better than globally. Karan, Jitu's son –I met him- is a phenomenal entrepreneur and it's just built phenomenally well now and with the way the work has changed post-COVID; it brings so many small medium-sized businesses under one umbrella.

Panagiotis: How big is WeWork India right now? Paint us a picture of that.

Nikhil: Yeah, I think last I heard Karan had just recently put something out, but they probably would be close to -maybe I would even say- 100 locations. I got to go and look it back.

Panagiotis: You brought the CEO for a session with us in the Greek delegation.

Nikhil: Yeah, Karan is Jitu's son.

Panagiotis: In the same day call. This shows to me that you're still very close with the people who you do business with and you meet alongside your career path. Do you use any of your WeWork learnings and experience? Has it affected your leadership style in any way?

Nikhil: The energy of the workplace is very important. What WeWork taught me was how you can take the same concept to other places. Simple things, like having an open area in your workplace, where people can come and have coffee and have chats, are very important because you converge people. When you build an office space, having an open area is very important where everybody comes together and does these chats and learnings and so on. Having an event every week is important because everybody wants to learn. So, how do you replicate that in other places where you go. Even visuals like the quotes or the pictures in an office matter because some people really walk past and say: "Do the best work of yourself". Somebody may get inspired by that. So, how you create the environment in which - physical space matters because it creates energy. Those are the great things like "Okay, how can you make the workplace a great place for people to come?". Due to the physical things you're putting in the infrastructure.

Panagiotis: I couldn't help but think about our office while he was saying it's exactly the same mentality. You led the expansion into new markets at GoDaddy as well. Can you tell us a little bit about GoDaddy? What did you do there?

Nikhil: Well, GoDaddy was a great brand in the US; in the Asia region, it wasn't as well-known. People just knew it for a domain. People just buy a domain. So, there was no flashiness or excitement about GoDaddy. It's a commodity. The first thing I wanted to do was how we build a purposeful mission around having our employees and customers get excited. One of the things which I learned was that when you go to a bar and people are talking about an idea, the business they want to start, the first thing they think of is the name. What should I call my venture? It's like naming your baby. As we were doing marketing, we were telling people by our domain names. Reality is that we were telling people how to name their dream. Just that small shift of narrative, of telling employees and customers that we actually are enabling your dreams to come true and get an identity. Ultimately you're calling something their dream and we are just enabling that.

That marketing message certainly changed the concept of brand awareness. It went from like 20-25% to 80-85% because we connected to a purpose rather than a product. From there on, we obviously expanded. We went from 40 employees to over 700 market shares and went up to 85%. We became the leader by far, like 65% market share. We became profitable in the region. Everything started following, once we had a good process of the purpose and then again engaging the team. One of the things I generally feel very proud of is the people who've been working with me in many companies together. They worked with me at WeWork, they worked with me at Intuit, and they work for GoDaddy. Sometimes you also build a good network of people, who love to work for you, which you feel good about because you've kind of created this stuff. Then, of course we expanded into some of the other markets in Asia as well.

Panagiotis: Incredibly fascinating growth journey at GoDaddy. I'm wondering if there are moments or things that you've taken away from that experience that stand out till this day for you.

Nikhil: So, one was how do you create purpose for a company in the region, which is not the home region because there is US and everybody. Also changing the brand narrative. GoDaddy had some history around its branding in the US, which was both good and bad because of the controversy it had. So, we wanted to build a very clean, but purposeful image in the region. That was establishing a clear sense of purpose and what we do. I think customer centricity was very important because I do something that I used to call "follow me home", which means you literally need to follow your customer to their home. What it means is that in any business very soon we forget what we are building the product for and who we are building the product for. It's for the customer. So, who is the single source of truth? It is the customer. If you ask any organization about how many people are talking to the customers, they say that 10%-15%; hardly anything. Even now at EPIGNOSIS I talk to 15-20 customers a month personally, whether it's on Zoom or whether I can get hold of them in any form of structure because that becomes your single source. For the same thing at GoDaddy, like ground people back to ultimately who are you building the product from and do you go and understand how they're using the product and observe both the usage and the ones they are not able to capture and make the company better. That brings everybody together like Jeff Bezos in Amazon, too. He always used to have an empty chair in a conference room. What does the empty chair represent to the customer? Every time you're having a meeting, having an empty chair reminds you who you're building for. So, bringing customer centricity, the sense of purpose and also very good marketing. We did a lot of interesting marketing stuff. We engaged in sports a lot. At that time we sponsored the World Cup Cricket. We had a brand ambassador, who was the Messi or Ronaldo equivalent of cricket and people started

connecting to some story they can relate to. We also used our brand ambassador in a very different way. We didn't put a sports personality just on the top of the brand, but we created a storyline of small and medium-sized businesses because we were serving those businesses. So, we created a great -what we call- a commercial around, what a small business would do and how would they succeed. I think among purpose, customer centricity, great marketing and really building a strong employee engagement. These are the four things.

Panagiotis: Going to the present and EPIGNOSIS, how do you envision your impact in this company? What do you want to achieve?

Nikhil: I think EPIGNOSIS has a right to be the leader in the small and medium-sized business space in the learning world for employees and other stakeholders. So, if I look at four years from now, we are already the leaders, but I don't think we are as well-known as a leader. Anytime a small and medium-sized business around the world thinks of skilling their employees, they should think of EPIGNOSIS and TalentLMS because that's what we do. I think having that story of -what I would call- Greek startup creating learners around the world at a global scale is going to be a phenomenal vision and I think we are certainly on the path to achieving it.

Panagiotis: Guessing that you probably had to pitch EPIGNOSIS to many of your friends and family, I'm wondering what the top liners are; what the two or three things are that impressed you and that you are using to pitch to other people.

Nikhil: Just imagine a small and medium-sized business and you have employees you need to train and skill. A recent survey done by the World Economic Forum says that 90% of employees are going to stay and be engaged with your company if they continue to learn. So, learning is the number one factor of keeping employees happy, keeping engaged and retaining talent. So, we play in that space. There's no more powerful place to play than learning. Just imagine if you're a small or medium-sized business, maybe 500 users, a thousand users or 100 users, you need to train your employees both for compliance reasons and also for upskilling them. Our dream is that the minute you think about training, you think about EPIGNOSIS, whether you're a business in the US or Australia or Canada or the UK. We're the solution. Today when we speak to customers, it is the easiest to use. We are not complicated, because a lot of time learning can become very complicated. So, it's very simple to start and easy to use. We're very affordable, which is very important for small and medium-sized businesses. We understand the small and medium-sized business because they are time-poor, i.e. they're trying to juggle a lot of things, the small and medium-sized, and economically much tighter on budgets. They're not big companies and need to

only get the most out of a limited budget. We really answer those two questions very well for them. So, it's all about how we get more and more discovered at scale and that's where -you know- the next road map is about that. It's the word of mouth. It's the community building. It's the virality of the brand, where anytime somebody thinks of learning in SMB space. Here's the gold standard, which is EPIGNOSIS.

Panagiotis: What are the biggest accomplishments of the company so far?

Nikhil: I think one is that we got 22 million learners around the world. That's not a small number, when you think about the reach across 158 countries. So, 22 million users, 158 plus countries, and you have names all the way. We have obviously the SMB names, but we have also had names around the United Nations, even Google has used us at some point and Schneider Electric. They're just names from all over the world. Thinking of a company, which is out of Greece, but now having pedigree names like this with the geographical reach of such magnitude is really phenomenal. Think about that. Secondly, when we look at the kind of reports we publish out like on TalentLMS, which is a flagship product, some of our reports are really industry standards when we talk about where is a skilling leading towards, what's going to be the impact of AI, how should employers think about their own employees to keep them motivated, engaged and skilled for the workforce of the future. So, our reports are really the gold standard today. Just from a product market fit, where we are able to get companies to ease our product with very little human touch. We are very easy to start with and train with the platform and then get used around the world without much -I would say- branding at this point, which we want to do more of. In itself is a big success metric.

Panagiotis: Looking into the next couple of years, what are your top priorities as a CEO and as a company?

Nikhil: First, product evolution continues to be an ongoing thing with AI playing or continuing to play a big role. I think how a product becomes much better than it is now and also has the elements of AI both from content creation as well as ability to assess skills. One of the places where employees struggle is how do I assess the skill set of my employees today. So, our product in the next couple of quarters will have this ability to be able to assess your skills of your employees, then recommend using AI, what skills are better for employees and then of course have them trained on that. So, getting an awesome product is the first one. Second is really doubling down on our geographies, where we win. The US is still a big geography for us and we want to literally be the goal standard in the US market. It'll continue to be one of the core markets

in addition to of course what we have in Europe and Asia. Then, I think customer centricity is going to be a big part of our nucleus, where we want to make sure who we build the product for, it is a customer, so how do we continuously tell their stories. We talk about why they use learning and what impact it has on their business. We really celebrate our customer success because their success is our success. So, going more on the customer centricity side is a big opportunity and then -what I say- going from local maximum to global maximum. Local maximum has been where we've used the Greek ecosystem well, but now how do we export this and be the global player by leveraging the power of the Greek base.

Panagiotis: We have a game for you, which is really fun. Our producers came up with it, and it's been opening up the conversation. It's taking it to a whole new level. Choose one.

Nikhil: Scalability. To me it is about a repeatable process. Once you put repeatable processes in place, then the scalability will just follow versus having ad hoc onetime processes. That's the difference between -let's say- series A or B versus series D, where you're doing one time process one time fix and then you just never institutionalize that. When you have repeatable documented processes, then you're moving again and again doing the same thing, but it just becomes an autopilot. In Indian mythology, there are three guards; one is the creator, one is a preserver and one is a destroyer. When you draw this analogy to business, you have to preserve something which is working, when you're in the scale stage. That's going right. You do have to continuously create things because that's innovation and then you have to destroy some of the processes, when you were an early-stage company which worked, but they no longer work. So, to me scalability is about preserving, creating, but also letting go off some of those things which worked when you were -. Three people get in the room, when you are series A and decide what you need to do and next day you implement. You can't do it at series D in that sense. You have to figure out a way where it'll work very differently.

Panagiotis: What are the tactics that you've done and you've seen work and you've recommended to other companies that are looking to hire an external CEO or people who are becoming CEOs now?

Nikhil: So, I've done it I would say not from a founder to CEO transition. I've done it with GoDaddy when I took over. It was like a \$30 million business. We took it to 100 million plus back in the region and a couple of other 10 years. So, I've been on a scale-up journey. Of course, it's very different with the founder. I think one is to narrow down on the focus, when you're scaling up; what you win at and what you don't win at. The sooner you decide what you don't win

at and let it go - because there's always this next shiny penny you want to chase. For example, if you build a product for SMB today, you can do anything. I can do payroll for them. Let me do CRM for them. Let me do lead generation for them. Anything. The customer is the same, but what are we good at? We're good at learning; we're good at serving small and medium-sized businesses. The world is still big out there. There's 2 billion spent happening. How do we go after that? So, narrowing down to where we win and we have a successful track record -now it's about getting it better and faster- is the first thing. Second is making sure your teams are aligned in that journey of where you come from and where you need to go, what got us here is not going to get us to the next milestone. So, making sure the mindset of the team is fully aligned there and you have the right players in that mindset. Again, some people prefer the series A-B game because it's a lot exciting and there are a lot of pivots. Some people don't like the series D to the next game, because it's harder, more processed, perhaps less flashy. You're not trying to suddenly create 10 new products. You try to maybe sell the product at scale at much better velocity. Make sure you get the right team mindset in place, which aligns with the scale part. The third is really not to forget the customers here. That's the risk. When you scale, you tend to forget the customer pretty fast because you feel like you know them. Customers are also changing at the same pace as you are. So, how do you keep up with that?

Panagiotis: Did you use any tactics, while you were onboarding that really works for you? I don't know how to meet every single staff member. I bet that you did a thousand meetings with different stakeholders, but did you do anything during the onboarding process that you want to share with?

Nikhil: I always take a road show. So, I start with the customers first and I continue that because that gives you the end user perspective on what's happening. So, I've done a road show with customers and I'm continuing that. I've met every employee of the team. We did offsite with the team for the first time to bring everybody along together which was both strategic and inspirational and also to align what the future looks like.

Panagiotis: Talk to us about unlearning and the concept of unlearning.

Nikhil: Unlearning is the hardest thing to do because the more experiences you've had, you get fixated on what is true or not. To me the fastest way to unlearn is find a mentor who's 10-15 years younger than you. Who's going to be the future consumer? I'm 20 year-old or 18 year-old now. If you can do reverse mentoring, you obviously get somebody who's more seasoned than you, but you also get somebody who's much younger. They will tell you what the thinking is, for example

the Gen Z. Look at what the thinking is, how they make decisions, how they select products. That will keep you more connected to the unlearning part because then you're unpacking the things you think work. You see the world differently than the next generation.

Panagiotis: It's been six months now that you're in Greece and one thing's for sure that we could use all the international talent that we can get in our hands and I think this is a big part of the conversation. I'm wondering how you compare the ecosystems you're coming from. You've had experiences in all different ecosystems, mature ones, rapidly developing ones. What are the opportunities that you see here? What's your advice for the ecosystem, if we hope to be able to attract more international talent going forward? Also, I would love to hear your thoughts on the Greek tech visa that we've also introduced in the conversation recently.

Nikhil: So, I think the first thing is the brand awareness and the brand called Greece. Not just as a country, but how do you get people to hear more and more about the successful as well as not successful, but just the vibrancy of the ecosystem, which I know is happening a lot as I've been on the ground. I don't think the rest of the world is as much aware of this as there is an opportunity for. So, building that brand in an aggressive way is going to be a great start to begin with. Secondly, I think getting more and more foreign students is always healthy because that brings in vibrancy to the ecosystem. There's a lot of cross borders. Collaboration starts happening. Some of these students may decide to stay back; some may go back and become successful entrepreneurs that may invest back in Greece. So, most of the successful ecosystems around the world have had good inflow and outflow of the foreign students. Thirdly, the funding ecosystem is there, but how can you build even more opportunities for the fundings coming into ideas, which are pretty much solving the problems of the world. So, Greece is solving for the world versus Greece is solving for Greece. They are two different things, but I think a lot of companies are now solving for the world which is great. Then, continue to nurture the tech ecosystem here like from a talent capability development point of view. So, how do you bring the best from the world, from not just Silicon Valley, but perhaps like the recent interaction we have with the India ecosystem. How do we build that? What's already been done in other places can be replicated and what's being done here can be exported. I think building that awareness of the brand and building the brand in a much more bullish way is going to go a long way.

Panagiotis: You have a family; a daughter, a son and a wife. What's their experience like from you taking over as a CEO of EPIGNOSIS? What are they experiencing so far?

Nikhil: My family is loving it. The biggest statement, which my daughter made, was that this is a blend between California and Delhi, which essentially means you have great weather, but you have a great unstructured vibrancy in the city. Some places are too structured and others are too unstructured. I think there's a healthy balance, where you go to a certain part of the city and it has a bit of European touch. The other parts have a very unstructured touch to it, which really speaks to the vibrancy of the city. Also, I think that climate-wise, of course, it has the gift of not just great climate, but blue oceans. By the way, I don't think Greeks appreciate as much as us who have never seen such blue water. The other day I was swimming near Glyfada. They asked me why you are swimming in dirty water. I said: "There's no dirty water; it's still the Blue Ocean". They said: "We don't swim here. We go further up to Lake Vouliagmeni". So, that speaks to the gift of Greece. It's what they call the diamond you have of blue water here. There's a lot of natural beauty and gifts, even the city itself. So, the family is really liking it and really embracing it because the familiarity of what I say back from India and the US -the combination- is quite unique.

Panagiotis: Book or podcast?

Nikhil: I prefer podcast now just because it's easy to process. Reading books with the commute thing becomes harder; and it's less taxing on eyes. They are easy to hear.

Panagiotis: Are you a morning or a night guy?

Nikhil: Morning.

Panagiotis: Do you prefer coffee or tea?

Nikhil: Shifting more towards tea. I've been a coffee drinker, but now I'm tea.

Panagiotis: This question has been revealed in the last couple of episodes. Everyone was giving us coffee answers. I was like why do we have this question. There you go. If you could have dinner with one historical figure, which one would be?

Nikhil: I would say Mahatma Gandhi, just because of the ability to take so many -I would say- millions of people on a journey towards independence and mobilize just about the ability to inspire people towards a common vision. What I would feel there's so much to learn from because it's about leadership. You're taking people from different backgrounds to one common goal.

Panagiotis: Is there a piece of technology that you can't live without?

Nikhil: Unfortunately it's the phone nowadays and my Garmin watch because I'm a big fitness guy. I have to measure my stats and my sleeping and all that stuff. I can't do without it.

Panagiotis: Are you a data guy? Do you need data to proceed?

Nikhil: Data combined with intuition. I think I will obviously go with intuition back at the data and then revalidate it.

Panagiotis: What's your favorite city for travel, business or leisure?

Nikhil: For business I would say New York. There's just so much happening in that city at a given amount of time, and so on. For leisure I think now it's hard for me to select among Greek islands. I mean I love ocean swimming. So, it's going to be one of the islands.

Panagiotis: We have a few. Give us a name of a book that changed your life.

Nikhil: "Mindset" by Dr. Carol Dweck. I highly recommend it to anybody who's not read it because it talks about fixed mindset versus growth mindset. A lot of us when we think we have a growth mindset, actually we have a fixed mindset. Sometimes we don't recognize it and the degrees of separation are pretty obvious. She talks in a very practical language in the book. For example, she gives an example even as a parent and says when your child does well in class and comes back home with the top marks, what do you say to the child? Will you say: "I'm so proud of you because you came first" or "I'm so proud of you because you put in the hard work to come first?". The first narrative is setting up the kid to become a fixed mindset. If you're validating the person to be "I'm so proud of you because you came first" that person becomes less risk-taking in the future because they will always fear failure of not coming first. The second narrative: "I'm proud of you because you put in the process, you put in the hours" validates the journey. These are the simple differences she talks about in the book on the business side and the personal side.

Panagiotis: So, changing the perspective easily.

Nikhil: Changing the perspective, but recognizing that all of us will become fixed-mindset as we grow old because we know it all and then we have to say that we don't know it all. That's where the growth mindset comes in.

Panagiotis: What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Nikhil: You have to spend as much time on reflections as you look forward. I think we're always looking forward, which is a good thing, but there's a lot of data and learnings you've had in that

journey line and it goes back to the journey line. Always keep redrawing your journey line and again look at the inflection points. When I say inflection points, which have really changed the course of your own way of thinking or life or workwise and keep that journal in whatever form, because those are the things you want to go read back, when times are tough. You've had moments of your strength. When the chips are down, you get too caught up with the negativity of why things are down and you have to remind yourself what are the things which really uplift and you make you better or were moments of success for you.

Panagiotis: Wonderful. If you weren't the CEO of EPIGNOSIS, what do you think you will be doing now?

Nikhil: I think I would be training for Ironman. I've done three of them, but I still feel I enjoy pushing myself to that. I have a bucket list. I'm not going to do it yet, but I do want to go to Mount Everest, the full one, but maybe 10 years from now and the odds of me not making it with age is okay on your side in a sense, but it takes again a lot of training. I've done three or four tracks. I've done like 5,500 meters, which are 15,000 foot level tracks, but mount Everest is a different game. So, maybe someday.

Panagiotis: Nikhil, thank you so much for joining us. It was a fascinating conversation.

Nikhil: Thank you for hosting and as always Endeavor Greece is doing a wonderful job. So, keep up the great work and we hope to see the Greek ecosystem on the top of the world.