



**FACTOR
DAILY**

Outliers Podcast Ashwini Asokan, Founder & CEO, Mad Street Den

Hi Everyone, welcome back to the Outliers podcast. I'm your host Pankaj Mishra and we are back with a new season of Outliers, called the season of resilience. These are uncertain times and everyone is trying to cope with uncertainty, anxiety and so many unanswered questions. We thought we could be useful to all of you by doing a series of conversations with Outliers and new guests. Please stay safe and I hope all of us get out of this stronger and more resilient.

Pankaj: I'm really excited to be having this conversation today with **Ashwini Asokan, who is Founder and CEO of AI start-up Mad Street Den.** Is someone who spends a lot of time in the ecosystem across different communities and has fought many battles, I recollect over years, in steering Mad Street Den to where it is. Ashwini, thanks for joining us in these times.

Ashwini: Thanks for having me, Pankaj.

Pankaj: Great. Clearly what's playing around us is really sobering and I wish we chatted in better times but, this is also the kind of time when we start talking about resilience and you know I just wanted to have this conversation to understand, where are you? What is the war-room like? And help others to learn from it.

Ashwini: Ya. I think everything that has happened in the last 4 weeks has been, I don't think anyone could have anticipated it, predicted it, forecasted it in any way. I'm almost certain that in all of our projections for 2020, it never came up. I think it's time for all of us to kind of stop, kind of, being on the wheel, a bit of a non-stop on the treadmill at this point and **ask ourselves, what's going to come on the other side of all things COVID at this point. I think people are not going to go back to the way things were.** It's going to be a very different world. People are, we are already beginning to see just you know millions and millions of people without jobs, entire companies, entire industries being shut down and many of them are not going to come back. We are losing people, greater than 20% of all deaths in the US right now from COVID is actually doctors, if we are losing doctors to diseases instead of supporting them and saving them, with so much happening around us at this point, **I think the first thing is reflection and I've been very actively talking to my team about reflecting the change we are going through every single day whether it's in the form of humour, whether it's in the form of active discussions or in the form of simply just voicing our opinions or venting or coping, whatever it is.**

I think being able to actively reflect on what's happening and taking the time to think, engage, talk to other people about what's going on so that everybody forming an opinion has been a top priority for me. **There is no change if you cannot articulate what is going on around you and I think we've definitely been doubling down on that as a priority as almost like step 1 of this process of change, the way I look at this, this is an exercise in change management,** that is what is and it's not just change management at the level of the work you are doing for a particular customer or a product roadmap or something like that. **It's change management at the level of the economy, at the level of humanity.** The way people are going to be, the way countries are going to be, entire professions and industries are going to be. **You cannot go through change management if you have not gotten to the bottom of exactly what is the change that's happening because the people that are involved as part of the change, what is expected**

of each one of us as we go through this process and what lies on the other side of change. I think I want to call it out as step number 1 in this process.

Pankaj: So, what are the steps, other steps Ashwini? Let me look at your survivors' checklist itself. How would it stack up? In your war room, what's happening?

Ashwini: Change and articulating change and reflecting is definitely the first thing. We've been talking about it internally, we've been talking about it with our customers, we've been talking about it with our investors, anybody who has basically touched who this company and the people of this company engage with, we've been kind of articulating that and that's definitely step 1.

Step 2 has been just discipline, knowing that and this is again you'll find it in every book, you'll find it in Andy Groves "Only the Paranoid Survive", you'll find it in every other book that you'll read from anyone who's built really large companies over the course of the last 20-30 years, you'll find this in their bios. ***I think learning to be disciplined, the only thing that I hope for most companies and most people that go through this change is that this is not something they are just beginning to learn, it's a tough lesson to learn if you've not been disciplined all along.*** If you've been used to spending a lot of time, if you've been used to growing completely unchecked, if you've been used to not necessarily being in hard situations before, I think learning discipline while you are going through times like this is very-very hard. Not impossible but, definitely hard.

At MSD, I can tell that you this has been, kind of, everybody has areas to optimise on and learn and we've been doubling down, whether it's process, whether its communication, whether its documentation, whether we're learning what it means to be a 200+ people company working remotely across multiple different countries across the globe. While the global thing has been there from the get-go, the majority of the people inside the company are fairly young and are really used to coming and spending weekdays, weekends, just about everything at the office. Like they hang out together, go out for lunch together, dinner together, their families hang out together, their dogs and cats play together, like it's pretty intense in the office world for our team. We have definitely had a lot of things to learn in terms of just being very disciplined about the work that we do, whether it's on the product side, the engineering side, the AI side and we've just seen this whole remote work as a huge opportunity to get more disciplined.

Thankfully, we've been very disciplined about finance, we've been very disciplined about our engagement with customers, about the way we deliver, I think a lot of things we were already ready for, so in many many-many ways this part of my head for the last 3-4 weeks that's just been going, this is what we prepared for, this is what we've been preparing for, for years now and just continuing ***to demonstrate that level of discipline at all levels of the organisation is very important as you get through this.*** So, that's almost the second part of the playbook.

The third part is really focused on customer first. You know these are hard times and if you as a start-up are thinking it's a horrible time for you, you're customers are going through a lot of horrible things right now, depending on the industry they are in and who are customers you could say yes, they are large corporations but, large corporations are made of people and people are going tough. We've been on customer video calls with customers in the last 3 weeks where they are literally sitting on their bed, there is a toddler running around and you know people are going through stuff and ***I think being customer-centric, at this point in time, is probably the best thing you can do as a start-up, to kind of***

make it all meaningful and if you don't let them down at this point in time and let go of them, then they are going to stick around, they are going to stick around because people remember how you behave at the worst times. It's almost cliché but, your personality, your character comes out the best, at times of difficulty and it's no different for companies, it's absolutely no different for companies. So, one of my biggest goals here has been to train the entire company to be customer first. *Being there for customers in every single way that we can, whether it's equipping them with new skills, whether it's giving them free products, whether it's taking on a bunch of things that they want to get done that's mission-critical for them, just calling and saying are you and your family okay.*

In a recent newsletter, we got about 50,000 retailers that sign up for specifically the **view.ai** newsletter and the letter with the highest open rate to date is the one we sent out 3 weeks ago saying **“We hope you are okay”**. Who would have guessed, right? It was insane the number of openings and *you can tell that people are looking for support and people are looking for someone to just hold a hand out.*

Not everybody has people you know, you could argue almost that in India we are almost spoiled by the large community of people that we keep company. You can always call someone, you have someone, you have each other but, it's not always the case everywhere else and I think being there for people and just making sure they are all okay is huge. So, customer first has been kind of our third mantra.

Pankaj: So, Ashwini do you see any kind of opportunity from where you sit in terms of where you are as a company and the kind of road you are looking ahead?

Ashwini: For sure, absolutely and I think, especially being an AI company for us the road ahead more and more, no matter which industry you take a look at, they're looking to take their companies online, everybody is looking to digitise their companies across the board and most of these industries have been offline and I think it definitely is, and I can simply tell you by the inbound interest and demand there has been for AI products over the last 3-4 weeks.

But, on the other hand there is a big picture piece here right, and I want to kind of zoom out from the specific set of opportunities that we've been looking at to kind of looking at it as a trend and if you look across history whether it was war time, whether it was recession, no matter what the big event was that led to a recession of some sort or large scale unemployment or a series of kind of events, there has always been change. *All of this has always been associated with change and when you come out the other side of a cycle like this there is typically leapfrogging* and I think this is something we don't need examples, you just have to go back in history and sounds like just about everyone is writing about this today, *that there is change and coming out of this change and this downturn is a lot of opportunity and the way you need to look at the opportunity is not it's not going to be a linear extension of the way people did things it's actually going to be fundamentally different and I think knowing and understanding what leapfrogging looks like for every company is going to be very important and leapfrogging is always associated with the way people live.*

So, if you really think about technology or technology start-ups, if you think about anything that any company out there is doing, it's basically giving people who are at a particular point of time in society that are driven by a certain types of cultural traits, people are all in a particular moment in time and they do things a certain way and *when something as big as this pandemic happens, people change, people's behaviours change, what people thought of safe, changes, what people fear changes, what people believe in changes and you are talking about a systemic change all the way down to the level of each and every human being across every country* and as companies it's important for us to sit up and ask ourselves not just “Hey, how can I make sales happen coming out on the other side?”, “Should I just

wait until I send them more marketing material?”, I think asking any of these questions at this point is irrelevant, I think asking much bigger questions surrounding “what is happening to people?”, “How are their beliefs changing?”, “What is going on with large corporations?”, “What is going on with larger systems?”, “How are they changing?” and I think when companies ask those questions, that is what helps you build something that allows you to leapfrog where you are today. I think at MSD we’ve definitely been chatting about this, for us in a way I can tell you that it is, 2017-2018 was peak AI, everybody was just wanted talk about it, everybody bought a domain “.ai”, so this has been going on for a while, I feel like ***you are going to start seeing the difference between companies that were sustainable to begin with, that had practices, that had a good foundation and as well as the ability to think on their feet and think through change and I think learning to leapfrog is again an entire skillset that companies have to learn and starting off with the assumption that this is not simply a linear progression of growth anymore.***

For us we’ve been asking ourselves, so many of these companies that we work with their teams are going to be out of jobs and we’ve been asking ourselves “How do we equip them?”, “How do we equip them with know-how about different things?”. We started an online course, we started a digital summit, we’ve been putting out a lot of content that basically helps different types of retailers really help reskill their employees and you should see the signup, within the first few hours of opening this up, we’ve never had people show up for any of our marketing event at this scale at which people have signed up and that’s a sign that ***people are looking for a way out, there are so many problems to be solved***, so calling it a silver lining is almost like, it’s not right. ***I think it’s a great opportunity for start-ups to truly believe in doing good and coming up with ways to kind of help where the world is. So, there’s always an opportunity coming out of situations like this, an opportunity to do good and not evil.***

Pankaj: What you are saying is very-very fascinating, Ashwini. What you are saying is basically this is also the time to go beyond the to-do list of customers and the kind of things you are doing, everything from checking on them that they are doing okay, to offering help beyond just the core product, which is where you were talking about learning modules and so on. I think this is really-really interesting.

Ashwini: I think it comes down to this, ***“hope is not a strategy”***. We had a fantastic session where Sequoia brought together all the 200+ founders in the portfolio and brought-in people from China to talk to us about how China coped with this and what was going on. What was going on, on the ground? How did all the people, the start-ups, employees, how did everybody go through this change? And to me hearing that story, ***it’s ground zero and there is hope. There is always hope on the other side, which basically brings me to the fifth part of my playbook which is that “Hope is not a strategy”.*** ***I truly believe that death is a distraction, sooner or later everybody dies, sooner or later all companies die and it’s a question of when, it’s never a question of if and it’s a distraction and it’s the same for companies. If you are making all the right decisions, if you have been disciplined about how you spend your money and how you track your growth and if you’ve not been living larger than you should have as a company or a start-up to begin with, you get to do a lot of things right now that help you and your company and your customers and all your stakeholders kind of come out of this better.*** Obsessing about death of your start-up, obsessing about runway and again ***it’s a great time to learn, right? To make sure when the next one hits, you are ready.***

So, thinking about death I think is a distraction to be honest. I don’t waste my time on that and I don’t just waste my time sitting and hoping for stuff because that is not a strategy and like you pointed out right, ***it’s not a great time to be sitting and doing to-do lists, it’s not.*** There are definitely teams who have to keep the ship running so hopefully, everybody has the team who does that. But, ***this is the time***

for leaders to take a step back, think about what that change looks like, get an army ready to go after this and think non-linearly. What does a non-linear approach to leapfrogging look really like and that is the question we've been asking. These 5 things we've been going over and over and over again and the underlying theme across these 5 things for us has been ***communications and coming together.***

At the end of the day my team is my family and we've been together spending an unbelievable amount of time and together even when it comes to playing, when it comes to online games, when it comes to talking through what we are going through. There are young 20-somethings everywhere in the company who are sitting alone at home on week 3 and week 4 and you know it's not been easy and ***I think supporting your teams and making sure everybody feels comfortable and is taken care of, that's number 1. None of the other 5 things that I spoke about hold good if that doesn't hold good.***

Pankaj: Final couple of questions, Ashwini before I let you go. The crisis that we're talking about and we're talking about the other side or post-COVID world and so on. Now, there are two things, one, for the company itself how does the culture of the company survive? Is there going to be a moulding, remoulding coming out of a crisis like this? So, how does the culture of a company, in your case for example, come out on the other side? And the second thing is, what does this mean for the individuals or individual founders, for people like you, for example, how do you stay sane? It is understandable that in these times, you have to stay firm and resolve and so on but, we are all humans. So, can you spend some time on both these things? What does this crisis mean for the culture of a company like yours, on the other side? And what does this mean individually for you, as a founder?

Ashwini: I would almost argue that our company has broadly been absolutely ***comprised of a lot of misfits in the industry and I say that with a lot of pride.*** These are young people that you know come in with the kind of ambition that you don't get to see otherwise, you just don't. ***So I would argue in a way that the culture of this company was moulded just waiting for a time or a change like this.***

Think of it this way, it's not a conversation of capitalising on horrible things happening around us but, it's more, ***we know how to work during tough times, we know what it means to be in a world talking about things that most people around us don't understand or don't see.*** When we started this in 2014-2015, people used to say what computer vision, what are you talking about? We've already gone through that journey of people just looking at us and going 'I have no idea what you are talking about, it sounds like a science project' and if anything I'd say, this is the time that the team has been, we've been learning this and unlearning this and getting ready for just this and the way I've been, again coming back to culture, this is a great time to actually test and learn about the culture of your company.

How resilient are your people? Where would you put them if you had to think about persistence, what would that look like for your company for the people you've hired? What kind of hiring choices have you made as a leader? What kind of camaraderie? What kind of support system? What kind of skill have you nurtured across? How do multidisciplinary teams work with each other? Is it hierarchical? Where does this break?

I think it's a fantastic time to take a step back and ask these questions about the company and the people that you've hired and the org you've built and evaluate and reflect on the culture of the company and I mean this in the most, Anand and I were definitely very worried and the whole company went online 3-4 weeks ago, they are young and people tend to run a million miles an hour and just slow them and make sure that other people are running along. For us it was surprisingly smooth, it was surprisingly smooth and I think a lot of them took this as an opportunity to fix documentation, to fix ways to reduce meetings but on the other hand use meetings in a much-much more useful, wise manner and built-in, just hanging

out, like I can't tell you the number of times I've been posting on Instagram, people just hanging out and having coffee together, you know that space at the back of my office where we have that little coffee place? People are recreating those moments. They are hanging-out. It was amazing for me to just sit back and watch the way the team has come together, the way the team has gone big, they are having cook-offs on Instagram, they are sharing recipes, all kinds of stuff going on. I'm starting to see ones on *TikTok* dancing, like all kinds of stuff going on and I think whether it's the serious stuff, whether its work, whether its process, whether it's their homes and their families and their personal lives. ***I think it's a great time to sit and reflect on the kind of culture you've built and fix it if it needs fixing.*** You know, Anand and I have been very-very thankful, very thankful for the kind of people that we've succeeded in surrounding ourselves with in the last few years that we've built his company.

So, culture has always been number one for us, more than anything else. I think it's what gets you through these hard times, it's why we are able to suddenly support customers left, right and centre and in whatever form that we need to because everybody is ready. Without that kind of culture of just rolling up their sleeves and getting down to work no matter where you are whether it's my Redwood City team, people all over the west coast, be it my team in New York, Germany, Japan, Bangalore, Chennai, doesn't matter where. The team has been on and relentless, like just absolutely relentless and I find myself being very-very thankful for that. Which kind of leads to your second question about how I'm keeping my sanity.

Pankaj: Let, me re-phrase my second question again, at any other given point in time, I would've asked you, Ashwini, how do you stay so insanely, but now, I have to ask you this, how do you stay sane?

Ashwini: I think I am continuing to be insane which is what is helping me keep my sanity. I think, if our insanity had been, if we had been asked to hold back on just, sheer intensity of insanity of most people at MSD, I think, that is what would've driven us insane, to be honest with you, that would have made us really upset, that would have made us, ***and I think the fact that I am continuing to do what I am able to do, is definitely keep peace in helping me hold on to my sanity. That's one.***

Two, ***I've actually taken this time to also reflect upon myself,*** my schedules, and it's interesting as we've all gone online and remote. I have to argue, we're like 4 to 5x more productive than we've ever been in the office and this is also a conversation that all of us are having is, how quickly we are doing things that took much longer when we were in the office, right and it allows you to think and I have been spending a ton of my time using this opportunistically to think about what comes next.

But, also on a personal note, you know, I have 2 children, 5 and 9 or 6 and almost 10, constantly pulling our attention, staying at home, I work with my husband, whose my co-founder and we keep joking, if 20 years of being together, you know, didn't create a crack in our relationships, try working out of the same study day in and day out, while in quarantine, who gets the study, who gets to step out, it's a lot of change, it's a lot of change and I have been spending a ton of time, literally, learning to engage my kids in really interesting ways, we play games, we play games, board games and card games like crazy people in this house. We wake up in the morning and we start the day with a board game or a card game, we end the day with a board game or a card game. We've been cooking together as a family. I have a little urban garden so we constantly. So, we've got our own routine. We play badminton every day. I've been trying to keep fit. Downstairs, there is a little place, that we get to go down, you know, ***you have to do things that heal you, right.*** You can't just be running at a pace at which, for me not being able to travel, is it's interesting, I never. Mildly put, it's interesting and you know, I am enjoying it, to be

very honest with you, like not having to travel and just focus on a whole lot of other things that I have not had time to do.

I've just been treating this whole thing as one big opportunity for me to fix a lot of things I had a blind spot on, right. So, it just comes with the territory with the optimism and paranoia and some ways they kind of clash and yet they don't, and you know, ya, I have been very weirdly up-beat.

Pankaj: So, finally, before I let you go, Ashwini, we have been having these conversations over years about AI's coming, you know, in real business sense and you have gone through different cycles of AI's business need, actually, and it was only recently that, you know, Mad Street Den, started making those big in-roads and so on. What are we going through now, in terms of crisis? You also, seem to suggest that this could be a big tipping point for AI and automation in that sense. Is that the right way of looking at it?

Ashwini: Yes, absolutely, and I think you know, you've probably have been hearing the consulting world talk about the digital transformation for years now, right. There are entire thought leaders all over social channels who call themselves thought leaders of digital transformation. It is a pain. It was for a good 10 years and I think it didn't really get there. It didn't really get there with its promise.

I think, there was definitely, not for the lack of time, but you need a very specific type of an environment for it to work a certain way, right and you know, that environment is right up ahead of us. It's as simple as that.

People have realized that, people are all not coming, it doesn't matter what you look at. Whether you look at it as food and grocery shopping or you look at any kind of essential goods or you look at lifestyle goods or you look at services or content that people are consuming on their, across their home, across different devices, ***there needs to be sense of, you know, what's life like, post this world where you're people are not going to be shopping in stores like the way they used to. People are not going to, there is going to be a whole other set of things that people learn, right and I personally don't think it's all going to be gloom and doom. I really don't.***

You know, how people say, oh you know you don't introduce the iPad to your child really young and don't do this. Come on, they are digital literate. They grew just like, you know, you learn you know, people used to think telephones were, you know straight out of a devil. People had all kinds of opinions about every kind of every time there is new innovation, you know, ***I don't think what's coming up ahead of us, is a horror story of how technology is going to take over the world. I think it's an opportunity for us to really think about the world we are really living in and the generations that we are creating, right, then I don't know what comes after Gen Z, but there's clearly a whole, you know, they are calling it, "quarantween" and all kinds of things that are coming up for the new generations that are out there.***

Everybody is going to be very differently literate. Very-very differently literate than you and I are today and I think it's important for us to think ahead of what that world is going to look like and start planning for it and AI is absolutely going to have a role to play there and I think now is the time that a lot of companies asking themselves what is AI? At the end of the day AI really comes to a story about data. Whether it's product data, process data, work-flow data, you know, people data. At the end of the day, all things AI have to do with data and it's important for companies who've been talking about data for so long. Big data and all these jargons that have been thrown around, now is a great time for companies to double down and go, ok, what kind of data do we have, what does this mean for

building a business around a certain set of things, what can we do, how can we, everything from managing a supply chain to optimizing work flows in your companies, to the kind of products you produce to asking yourself what is the impact of this product to the climate or the environment or to so much going on out there, right and I think these things are going to be important.

You are not going to be able to find a consumer, who is not, *it's going to be very difficult rather, finding people who will buy a product hereafter, without asking about the impact it has on the world around us.* You are already beginning to see that happen in retail. There is a whole movement around sustainability, where people will only buy things that, you know, that are good for the environment, right. You are talking about slow fashion; you are talking about minimal consumption. That's where the whole world is headed which means *companies really need to re-think the way they are making, producing, engaging, selling all of that, right. These are very good things for us, for the world around us, for the environment and I think you know, it comes back to empathy, right.*

The entire organizations have empathy, they have the ability to articulate, who the people are around them and what systems exist around them, will shine on the other side, as opposed to this mindless consumption that we've been having in this mindless engagement been going through is such addictive in its form. I think things are going to be so much more mindful as we move forward, at least that's what companies should be trying to achieve.

Pankaj: This is very well articulated Ashwini. The journey from being mindless to being mindful and to what it really means for the new world. This is good to hear because you can say that we are desperately looking for signals that paint the future, so this is just one of them.

Thank you, Ashwini and stay safe. Stay insane as you are, and you know just stay resilient. Thank you for sharing this, really means a lot.

Ashwini: Thanks for having me, Pankaj. Thank You.