

# Meet the Boss: Pradeep Paunrana, managing director, ARM Cement

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## Pradeep Paunrana, managing director, ARM Cement (Kenya)

*Meet the Boss is a How we made it in Africa interview series in which we pose the same 10 questions to business leaders across the continent.*



*Pradeep Paunrana, managing director of ARM Cement*

### **1. What was your first job?**

I used to make ice lollies in our fridge at home when I was about nine years old. I used to make ice lollies with orange flavoured drink and take this in a thermos and sell at school. For as long as I can remember I was always looking at ways of doing things which other people did not do, making a few cents. I carried this right through high school and my university days as well. My first job was with a software company in the US in 1983 when I completed my MBA at New York University Stern. I was working for a company designing software for small hospitals and nursing homes. I was the bridge between the marketing team and the programmers, being an accountant with an MBA.

### **2. Who has had the biggest impact on your career and why?**

My father. When I came back in 1984 to join his business I told him he couldn't afford me because I was making much more money working in the US. He said he wasn't going to pay me a salary, [instead] he was going to give me an opportunity to grow the business and to own my own money out of the business growth. I think that was a turning point really in the way I looked at things.

I have had many mentors along the way. One of them is Alan Pickering who was managing director of NIC Bank. I used to borrow money from NIC for our growth and we got very close to him for the first 10 years that I was at ARM. When he retired he became an investor in ARM and later our first chairman when we went into the cement business. He was a great mentor. I have had many others

whom I have asked to join our board like Palle Rune, Brian Rogers, Wilfred Murungi and even Rick Ashleys who is our current chair.

### **3. What parts of your job keep you awake at night?**

I would rather put it differently. What part of the business gets me out of bed very early because we have so much to do. Although we have a very professional team that manages the very different parts of the company, my job is to see how we can put everything together so that the company still functions as one. So, integrating the company is what I really spend a lot of my time on, and a little bit of worrying.

### **4. What are the top reasons why you have been successful in business?**

Rather than me talk about my qualities I think it is for others to say. We all have our faults and shortcomings but the one quality that I think we all need is a little bit of an attitude of service. We need to look at ways to make a difference in the world, to have respect for people who don't have the same opportunity as you do and to take a view of the world with a little pinch of sanity in that we are fortunate for where we are because of other people's help. Clearly, without somebody else helping me with my business, I would not be where I am. I think that recognition is very important.

### **5. What are the best things about your country, Kenya?**

I met [an] ambassador [last week] and he said Kenya [was] a plane ready to take off and soar into the sky 50 years ago. He said we are still on the runway because we haven't done enough. Whilst I think there is some truth to that, the analogy is very appropriate. This is a country which is ready to take off and I would like to be one of the 40m Kenyans who help this economy take off. The country is endowed with passionate people who believe in the country, who are highly educated and are committed to improving the livelihoods of their families and communities. I think that is the best part of Kenya.

### **6. And the worst?**

Like every country... we have our bad elements, we have security problems, we have people who only care for themselves or who are corrupt. We have to accept that it is not just Kenya. Everywhere in the world those elements are destructive, they stop development and are bad for the rest of society. We have got to work, make the change and improve.

### **7. Your future career plans?**

I am 54 now. I still have a few years for active growth. In the next six years I will double the size of the company. After that I don't know, I may slow down a little bit. I would like to grow our fertiliser business at some point as a separate company. That is a major area of the economy where we believe we can serve our country and create a good business as well. That may be my next career.

### **8. How do you relax?**

I like nature walks and bird watching. I enjoy a little of gardening but I do that as I work. No, I don't have time off for relaxation so every opportunity during my work is a welcome break. I also enjoy cooking. My wife and I enjoy cooking together. That is great fun too.

### **9. What is your message to Africa's young aspiring businesspeople and entrepreneurs?**

I recall the words of Dr Geoffrey William Griffin, founder of Starehe Boys Centre (one of the best performing secondary schools in Kenya). He said that whatever you do in life, do it to perfection... find a little time to help somebody else and the community. In that you will find true success and happiness. We all make mistakes, nobody is perfect. I have four children, they all have different temperaments from each other and different experiences will mature them in their own way. I think young people are doing fine. The only advice is do whatever you do well, do it to perfection, give it your best and make sure you find time to help others as well.

#### **10. How can Africa realise its full potential?**

We need rule of law and good governance. We need governments that are run by people who are there to serve and to make a difference in the lives of the people. Those are the qualities that will see us taking off and surpassing many of those we call the developed economies now. There is no shortcut to that. I think we all need to make sure that the kind of people who are in leadership positions are the ones who are there to serve and to make a difference.

*Pradeep Paurana is the managing director of ARM Cement, one of the largest cement manufacturers in East Africa with an annual capacity of about 2m tons. ARM Cement has operations in four countries and distributes its products*

*in **Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Madagascar** and **South Africa**. Paurana joined the company in 1984 and is largely credited for transforming a small, family run producer of agricultural lime into a major, publicly listed cement company. In 2010, Paurana was awarded the Africa Business Leader of Innovation by the Africa Investor Group. He is the current vice chairman of the Kenya Association of Manufacturers and is set to take over as the chairman in June.*