



Making room for life's unexpected setbacks

In sports as in life, it's perhaps best to accept that the best-laid plans can often be upset by the unexpected. That is certainly the approach that Essar Gabriel (MBA '96D), head of the Youth Olympic Games at the International Olympic Committee (IOC), advocates and adopts.

It's a sanguine attitude borne out of dealing with setbacks and the unexpected. In Gabriel's case, a passion for basketball, a civil engineering degree and an MBA from INSEAD couldn't get him an internship at the National Basketball Association (NBA) even after an interview. But a day after he signed a contract with France's 1998 World Cup organising committee to be the director of the international media centre, the NBA called to offer Gabriel his 'dream job', which he turned down regretfully.



The experience was all the more bittersweet because his classmates used to laugh at his self-coined professional motto at INSEAD: "From MBA to NBA".

"So there's so much you can plan and it's really about not planning. That's the first thing you learn

when you're a mega-planner is that you cannot plan everything. Same thing in your life," says Gabriel, who comes from a self-professed bourgeois Lebanese family.

Bowing to family expectations, Gabriel studied civil engineering. But his passion for sports, particularly basketball, spurred him to enrol at INSEAD business school with the idea of shifting to the sports industry. To gain practical experience, he dabbled in being a master of ceremony and a deejay to learn about organising sporting events.

"In my case, it was really trying to bridge my passion for sports and my professional life," says Gabriel, who currently co-owns a basketball team in Paris.

Pointing to his professional record - which includes working on the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 Sydney Olympics, as well as being the head of the 2003 IAAF Athletics World Championships in Paris and the chief operating officer of the Paris bid for the 2012 Olympics - Gabriel says his career trajectory could be viewed by some as like that of a shooting star. But from his perspective, it isn't quite accurate.

In reality when you look backwards you see a trend.

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But when you look forward, in my opinion, it is wrong to say that you plan things. You go through them with what's in you and things unfold.

“And that's where, for me, it's about being aware, being in the moment and moving ahead with that.”

Currently, Gabriel's focus is on ensuring that the work of the local organising committee of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in Singapore is on track for August. The games, which come under the aegis of the IOC, will be about a third of the size of the summer Olympics.

“What is nice in the case of what I'm doing is that this is a creation from scratch. This will be the first ever Youth Olympic Games in the history of our movement,” says Gabriel, adding that the aim of the games is to reach out to and engage with young people.

“It's not that the Olympic Games are losing steam and interest with the youths. On the contrary, it's interesting that recently research has shown that the 'X Games', which were created by a network for the youths, are eroding it themselves,” says Gabriel. “Whereas the Olympic Games, although they can look old school, they keep with their symbols, they keep being up there even for the youths.”

Asked if the Youth Games are keeping him awake at night, Gabriel told INSEAD Knowledge: “The paradox is you plan to allow yourself to be in a spot where you have enough under your belt and enough knowledge and you're on your feet so that you can anticipate and take what the moment is going to deliver – the unexpected.”

In mega-planning, he says, you have to factor in that you will not plan for everything. “If you do that, you can be well-focused and not be stressed but be on your feet and ready to go for it. That's the attitude I try to be into.”

But what if the NBA comes knocking on the door again with a dream job offer? Would he grab it?

Replying with a laugh, Gabriel says he'll see what the job offer is about and might well refuse it a second time.

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