

Ahmed R. Ali

Grounded in Service

In a small Bangladeshi village located at a bend in the Tista River, 50 orphans were given a new lease on life when a new orphanage opened its doors. They now receive three meals a day, shelter, education, and medical care—gifts that will mean the difference between life and death for many of them.

The initiative was funded and led by Ahmed Ali, and the village is his father's hometown. It's a stone's throw from the village where Ahmed, himself, was born—a small farming community where the Ali family buried their firstborn son, dead from pneumonia that would have been easily treatable with even minimal resources. Fueled in part by the loss of his child, Ahmed's father committed himself to bettering humanity, with particular focus on the plight of children.

Ahmed was able to honor his father with the founding of the orphanage thanks to the vision and success of his company, TISTA Science and Technology Corporation (TISTA). As its founder and President, Ahmed named the business for the river he left behind when he was only four years old—a constant reminder of his roots that keeps him grounded in the fast-paced world of Washington government contracting. "I started TISTA, first and foremost, because I care deeply about our federal government and our company's mission to support our nation," he says, echoing his years of service in uniform. "I'm grateful that it gives me the opportunity to give my three children a better, more stable upbringing than I had. But beyond that, it allows me to engage in the meaningful work of giving back to humanity—the kind of work that will last long after I'm gone."

Ahmed launched TISTA on September 19, 2005, when he decided to leave his post as Information Assurance Manager at Alion Science and Technology. He was so valued by the client

that the company asked what it would take to make him stay, so he gave it some thought. He had always wanted to start a company, so he asked if they would consider him being a subcontractor. They ultimately agreed, and for two years, Ahmed's company was a one-man show. Then, as TISTA started to grow, he brought in two consultants who are still with him today as his business partners. "It took blood, sweat, tears, heartaches, hospital trips, and three near-bankruptcies, but we got through it to become a force to be reckoned with," Ahmed details.



In the beginning, TISTA focused on Ahmed's core skill set of IT and cybersecurity for the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA). Over the years, the company expanded its expertise to include healthcare IT as well. "Under the cybersecurity umbrella, you have certification and accreditation, identity access management, systems integration, enterprise architecture, disaster recovery, and more," Ahmed explains. "Then the healthcare IT space includes IT, cybersecurity and application development for agencies like the Center for Medicare and Medicaid, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. We accept other work when clients ask us to, like support of training, logistics, administration, and procurement, but strategically we're really focusing our growth on our core competencies in cyber and healthcare support for DOD and civilian agencies."

Ahmed resolved to make his dream come true from the grassroots up, refusing to accept venture capital backing, angel investment, or loans from family and friends. Guided by this philosophy, TISTA has a record of growth every single year since its inception, but the road has been far from easy. Ahmed remembers the fears that plagued him in the company's early years—

anxiety about how he would make payroll, or how he would pay his bills, which kept him up at night as his wife, Sonia, slept peacefully beside him. “She’s very risk-averse and didn’t want me to start my own business because she knew it would be hard on me,” he remembers. “She just wanted a simple life for us, and she had just given birth to our second child around the time I started the company, so it was very important to me to shield her from the stress and uncertainty I was going through. No matter what was happening at work, when she asked me how my day was when I got home, I’d tell her it was fantastic.”

Ahmed also remembers the chaos of sequestration and the government shutdown—challenges TISTA survived by remaining true to its core. The company had sixty employees at the time who would be required to stay home from work, so Ahmed decided to forego his salary and donate his vacation hours to help free up resources to pay them. All of TISTA’s executives followed suit, and in the end, all sixty employees received their normal paycheck during the three weeks the government was closed. “Employees are the foot soldiers on the ground doing the work of the company, putting forward its best face,” Ahmed explains. “As the company’s leaders, we wanted to take the hit for them because we know that a company is only as good as our employees. We value them deeply and recognized that they had mortgages to pay and mouths to feed.”

While technically on leave without pay, Ahmed and his executive team worked 15-hour days to help pull the company through the shutdown. Grateful and happy, the employees passed the team’s good will on to the clients, filling them in on what TISTA had done to help them. Ahmed began receiving phone calls from agency leadership—people so moved that they wanted to call and personally thank him for taking care of his people. “We aren’t a publically traded company, so we can operate the way we want and can take care of our employees first,” he says. “We don’t pursue ‘lowest price technically acceptable,’ or LPTA work, because I firmly believe that you get what you pay for. We believe in quality and running a business that attracts and retains top talent. I truly believe that if we can make our employees happy, value them, and show them that they can have a long-term career here, TISTA and its clients ultimately benefit.”

TISTA is now a company over 150

employees that exceeds \$40 million in annual revenue, with plans to double by 2018. Under Ahmed’s leadership, it has been recognized on the Inc. 500 and the Washington Technology Fast 50 as one of the fastest growing companies in America, and was honored as the 2014 Montgomery County Maryland Veteran-Owned Company of the Year. Among various other awards, TISTA was named the NASA Johnson Space Center Small Business Prime Contractor of the Year in 2014, as well as the Service-Disabled Veteran Small Business Prime Contractor of the Year for the US Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), in 2015. Ahmed was named the 2014 Executive of the Year by the Tech Council of Maryland, the 2016 Washington Business Journal Minority Business Leader Award Honoree, and in 2016 was recognized as the Small Business Administration (SBA) Person of the Year for the State of Maryland. “I’m so appreciative of these awards because they represent the hard work and incredible talent of our employees,” Ahmed says. “Their dedication to our mission is so remarkable, and the community sees it.”

Despite the success and recognition, Ahmed remains down-to-earth. Touting the phrase, “American made, American muscle, American pride,” he drives a black Silverado pickup truck, busting out a Corvette only when he indulges his passion for racecar driving several times a year. His nature is grounded through the example of his parents, who have always been humble—more interested in making a difference in the community and for humanity than in materialistic concerns. “They remember when the Independence War freed India from British control and broke the land up into India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh,” Ahmed says. “Amidst the war, my brother died, and I was born. My parents had seen a lot of adversity, crisis, and death. They didn’t want to lose their second child, so my aunt in America sponsored us to come here in 1976.”

The Ali family eventually settled in Bethesda, Maryland. Ahmed’s father had earned his electrical engineering degree in Bangladesh but needed to be recertified in the U.S., so he and Ahmed’s mother were forced to work various odd jobs to make ends meet while he took classes at night. “Times were very hard,” Ahmed remembers. “We were living below the poverty line, on food stamps, and in dangerous neighborhoods infested with crime, drugs, and

gangs. We moved around a lot trying to find safer places, but things didn't get better until I was in high school, when my father started to become more established."

As a result, Ahmed attended five different elementary schools, two junior high schools, and two high schools, creating a fractured existence where he was able to form little sense of identity or direction. The moment he'd get settled in one school, he was moving on to the next, never able to cultivate a sense of belonging. "Because there was so much change, my memories from childhood are remarkably vivid," Ahmed says. "Unfortunately, a lot of what I remember was my father being held up at gunpoint, our apartment getting broken into, getting into fights, and my video game getting stolen."

The environment took a psychological toll on Ahmed, and he grew very introverted. When he fell in with a group of friends, it was often the wrong crowd. One bright spot, however, was Eric Kang, a brilliant young boy who had learned to play Beethoven pieces by the time he was in third grade. The two struck up a friendship, and after losing touch for a number of years, have reconnected and are still friends today. "My mother couldn't pick me up until 5:30 or 6:00 in the evenings, so I was left alone for three hours after school, just waiting," he remembers. "Eric noticed, and he started inviting me over to his house so I had a safe place to go. His mother was incredibly kind to me, and that really helped."

In high school, Ahmed mowed lawns and shoveled snow for pocket change. A natural athlete, he excelled at football and wanted to play on the school team, but his parents wouldn't allow it. "They were too worried their only son would get hurt," he says. "So I played informally with friends, and I went to the gym a lot. Working out became my outlet."

Ahmed landed his first internship the summer after he graduated high school for a small engineering company in Rockville, where he filed draft engineering plans. Then came time for college, and Ahmed began his higher education career at Howard University. "Coming from an Asian background, education is everything," he says. "I actually didn't want to go to college at first—I wanted to take a year off to work and explore a little because I had no idea what I wanted to do or what direction I wanted to go in life. But my parents wanted me to go to

engineering school, and they would have been so upset if I put it off, so I went."

Because his heart wasn't in it, and because he was working to help put himself through school, Ahmed remained a mediocre student. He felt particularly drawn, however, to the few business classes he took. "I was fascinated by the process of how someone starts and grows a business," he recalls. Meanwhile, he flipped burgers at Roy Rogers on the weekends and spent his free hours doing drafting and clerical work for an engineering firm. Despite his best efforts, however, two years into his college career, he could no longer afford the tuition bills himself. "I decided my parents had already done enough for me, and I didn't want to burden them," Ahmed explains. "It was my responsibility to figure out. I had always wanted to serve my country someday, and I wanted to see the world, so I decided that instead of working odd jobs as my parents initially had done, I was going to join the Navy."

With memories of war-torn Bangladesh, his parents tried to dissuade him at first, especially his mother. But Ahmed had recently seen *Top Gun*, which he describes as the greatest recruiting movie ever. Ahmed asked for the most technical engineering job he could get and was given a post as an Aegis Spy Radar Technician—a rigorous assignment that took almost two years of intense schooling. Mastering the Navy's most advanced electronically-phased fire-control radar system even as many other students dropped out, he graduated third in his class, which gave him the opportunity to claim orders to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He was immediately sent to Bahrain to catch up with his ship, which was deployed in the Gulf. On the way back, they stopped in the Fiji Islands and Australia. Finally, Ahmed Ali was fulfilling his dream of seeing the world.

Ahmed excelled during his career in the military, graduating first in his class in boot camp, selected as the Sailor of the Year for his shipboard command, and then becoming the Sailor of the Year for his destroyer squadron (among six naval warships and 1800 Sailors). Ahmed's time in uniform proved to be among the most defining, positive experiences of his life, bringing the sense of purpose and camaraderie he had missed out on all through childhood. "To get anywhere in life, I knew I needed good skills and good work experience, and I knew the military would provide that," he explains. "But more importantly, it was

the first time in my life where I felt like everything was coming together and starting to make sense. For the first time, I understood what I wanted to do with my life, what I was good at, and what my passions were. For the first time, I had a steadfast set of people in my life—brothers and sisters I served with, deployed with, and put my life on the line with. We looked out for each other and shared a common goal, mission, and vision. It was powerful, and once I had that understanding of myself and my identity, I was able to carve out a path for my future.”

Through his multiple deployments, Ahmed worked shoulder-to-shoulder with government contractors responsible for supporting the day-to-day operations of the mission. He grew fascinated with the role they played in serving the country, and with the high-tech equipment they used to provide vital IT and engineering services. It seemed the perfect melding of his technical expertise, entrepreneurial spirit, and love of service, and he resolved to dedicate his post-service years to gaining the experience needed to launch his own company. “Anyone can start a company, but can they do it the right way?” he asks. “I knew I would need exposure across the gamut—small business, large business, government—to really build the company I wanted to build.”

Ahmed would have been happy serving in the military his entire life, but after he married Sonia in April of 2000, his six-month deployment starting in June was extended for another month after he was called into the Persian Gulf. As his six-year enlistment approached, the Navy couldn’t guarantee that he’d be stationed at a local base in DC if he accepted a commissioned officer route. In fact, they guessed he would be deployed for two more tours overseas. “Sonia and I wanted to settle down, start a family, and lead a normal life,” he recounts. “So I decided to get out after my six-year commitment was up. I miss the military, but it was a good decision.”

Ahmed took a research job at a small 8(a) company in Annapolis, where he worked on radio frequency engineering with the Department of Defense while finishing his undergraduate degree with a new focus in IT. After two years, he enrolled in an IT masters program at Capitol Technology University at the suggestion of an Army Colonel who had agreed to mentor him. As soon as he started the program, doors began to

open, and he took an IT security job with the U.S. Department of Commerce as a government employee. After completing his degree in Information Assurance, he decided to return to the private sector, where he worked in support of DOD and civilian agencies. “Those various positions gave me a lot of exposure and allowed me to understand the workings of small businesses, big businesses, the government, the military, and government contractors,” he says. “And I developed great relationships along the way.”

Ahmed was the first person in his family to serve in the U.S. military. He was the only one to forego a career in medicine, law, engineering, or government to study IT. And in 2005, he became the first one to start his own business and get his MBA. Over the next few years, his father retired after 33 years of government service, while his mother retired from her work as a teacher. Like Sonia, neither could understand why he would take on such a risky endeavor, but today, they’re deeply proud. “I was always the black sheep of the family, straying from the norm,” he recounts. “At first nobody can understand why I do it, but then when I come out on the other side, they get the importance and the impact, and they’re so happy about it.”

This ability to go against the grain and see his dreams through to fruition is a token of Ahmed’s leadership style, which involved thoughtful deliberation followed by resolute action. Never one to shoot from the hip, he thinks through a decision carefully and then goes all in. “I will either fail, or I will make it a success—there is no halfway mark for me,” he says. “I don’t just stop because I get tired or knocked down. I never want to look back in my career and wish I had done things differently, so once I made that leap into launching TISTA, I focused like a laser pushing forward, giving it my all, and never looking back.” This fierce resolve has been a defining force behind TISTA’s success, carrying Ahmed through the monumental risks that went into founding the company.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ahmed underscores the importance of honing expertise and demonstrating consistency. “You may land in a job you don’t like, but it’s advisable to stick it through for a year or two to learn what there is to learn from the experience,” he says. “It’ll help teach you how to

adapt to different kinds of work environments and people. If every job were easy, you wouldn't learn life skills."

He also encourages young people to think long-term in managing their money, making an effort to save for the future. "Like my father, I have a big heart and always try to help when they ask, even when I had nothing to give," he recounts. "Sometimes it would put me in even greater financial strain, so it's important to have a plan you can stick to." Beyond that, he underscores the importance of valuable experience before starting a business. "Young people have big dreams, but it's important to get the worldly experience that will enable those dreams to become reality," he affirms. "Nothing happens overnight, and TISTA would not be the company it is today if I had started it right out of the military."

Today, Ahmed still wears his Navy ring—a token of his service that reminds him of all he's overcome and all he stands for. Indeed, the leadership he brings to TISTA is grounded in the core principles of loyalty, commitment, and integrity that were cultivated in him through his time in the Navy. "Thanks to my Navy days, I've always wanted TISTA to have a culture of camaraderie," he says. "And I strive to be the kind of leader that employees truly respect as a person. When people respect you, they operate with a sense of pride and accomplishment in the mission, and they're willing to go above and beyond. When clients and business partners like you, synergy happens. When you focus on having an impact on the individual level, everyone is better off."

In some ways, Ahmed continues to serve

his country just as ardently and meaningfully as he did in uniform. It's a mission that grounds him, just as he's grounded by the memory of his roots every time he hears the Tista River referenced in his company name. "While I was in the Navy, I had a great sense of pride in being a service member in the support and defense of our nation," he says. "But there are countless non-uniform people—government employees or contractors supporting government agencies—that are also playing a critical role in supporting and protecting our country. We're all part of this ecosystem supporting a common mission. TISTA is my continued service to my country, just as it is the wellspring of my continued service to humanity."

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