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With 85% of internet traffic travelling across its systems, Cisco justifiably lays its claim of heritage on the global networking industry by being a developer, manufacturer and seller of networking hardware, software, telecommunications equipment and other high-tech services. Headquartered in Silicon Valley, Cisco owes its transformation to the visionary John Chambers, who led its evolution from a single-product company with 400 employees and revenues of about \$70 million in 1991 to a \$47 billion tech giant that became the backbone of the internet and a leader in areas from cybersecurity to data centre convergence, at the time of his stepping down as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 2015. This book chronicles his early lessons and struggles with dyslexia to bold bets and battles with some of the biggest names in tech. Written in a cogent manner, *Connecting the Dots* is sure to become a business classic, providing immense insights to professionals, entrepreneurs, academicians, researchers and thinkers seeking to be successful in the midst of accelerating disruption in this digital age.

The book is divided into 13 chapters, organised into four sections and for the benefit of the readers, a replicable innovation playbook is captured at the end of each chapter which presents a set of suggested action items—inspired by the playbooks developed by Cisco for everything from how it acquired companies to how it managed people, how it dealt with customers and how it digitised countries.

The first section focusses on the connected leader, starting off with the lessons that John learned in West Virginia, the first one being the ability to ‘manage fear’, thanks to an incident in which he almost drowned as a six year-old kid, giving rise to his belief in staying calm under pressure. This was later reinforced by his parents, both being doctors, through the numerous challenging situations that they faced while attending to emergencies. This he says had a profound impact on his development as a leader and helped him stay focussed and serene. The ‘near-death experience’ is what distinguishes a company or a person/leader from good to being great.

Cisco faced the 2001 dot-com crash along with five other downturns that could have killed its business, thereby forced the firm to reinvent itself again and again—the lesson being that either ‘disrupt or get disrupted’. John describes the dot-com crash as a ‘100-year flood’ which led to a \$2.5 billion inventory write-off, laying off 8,500 people, plunging 80% of the stock price and wiping out one-fourth of the customers and many of its competitors. The swift reversal of fortune during the dot-com led many to reconsider whether Cisco was an innovative, well-run company portrayed by analysts, the press and its own public relations machine (Kraemer & Dedrick, 2002). The company, however, learned its lessons, and in the next crisis—the global financial crisis of 2008—it continued to be on the side of the customers, mostly automakers, often going against conventional wisdom. This was driven by his philosophy: ‘in life or in business, you need to be there when your family, customers or friends need you the most’.

The worst mistake as per John is ‘to do the right thing for too long’, taking risks, moving fast even if it leads to ‘stumbling rather than arriving last’ is the key. He calls upon leaders to be bold and dream big, reinvent themselves. Each of the setbacks helped him to become stronger, and he was renamed ‘The Comeback Kid’ as a result of restructuring. He stayed focused on where the market was going and remained committed to investing in new products and services before transition happened, which meant Cisco would always be in the lead position as others attempted to catch up.

John candidly acknowledges his struggle with dyslexia and the challenges that it posed including the reading disorder. He, however, used it to his advantage by developing unique capabilities like the ability to process the vast amount of data and connections, creating the visual maps and delegating the tasks hindered by this disability. Holding on to the teenage mindset (not to accept the status quo and incremental change)

and the dyslexic ability to connect the dots are the differentiating factors between ultimate winners and losers in Silicon Valley. The episode with the then prime minister of Israel, Shimon Peres, who displayed a high level of enthusiasm to experience new things has been quoted for the next-gen leaders who are not just more than just tech-savvy but are brave, curious and hungry for new ideas, too impatient to a standstill. In his words ‘my curiosity about things that I don’t understand has been a critical factor in my success as a leader’. Playing the game of chess till the end even before it starts, keeping the outcomes in mind (writing the headline of the press release of the project underway) have helped him remain attentive to the big picture.

His associations with the world leaders including the former United States’ Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, efforts to transform government and help global leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to create new models for growth get a fair share of coverage in the book. These names and the learnings captured from others like Jordanian King Abdullah II, Shimon Peres, Bill Clinton do appear in many contexts. In one such incident, John quotes the Jordanian King having given his fully armed Black Hawk helicopter to him to fly, to underline the importance of trust leading to risk-taking abilities.

The 180 acquisitions by Cisco under his watch, two-third of which were successful as compared to less than half for others, needed a play-book. He followed and developed certain rules like protecting the underlying asset (mostly people in case of tech companies), the ‘Mario rule’, the role of customer’s voice in deciding which companies to acquire, apart from the basics of alignment of acquisition target towards vision and strategy, cultural match, focus on market transition and technology disruption. John makes a distinction between strategic partnership versus acquisition and the suitability of each of these under respective situations. The ability of the foresight system to correspond to a broad set of values and motivate people across departments and functions—its glue effect—has likely been a critical success factor in the case of Cisco (Boe-Lillegraven & Monterde, 2015).

John had been fanatical about customer success, with all ideas having come from listening to customers. The customer connect and customer-first policy is evident all throughout, be the way the feedback (complaints) from customers were handled, developing a winning proposition for the customers, rule of one is to five times revenue from services for customers and so on. ‘Customers before technology’ is his advice to

entrepreneurs—if they can build lasting, trusted, relationships with all their stakeholders, they will be best positioned to grow their companies. ‘Customers First, Second and Third in every decision you make’. He personally reviewed the critical customer accounts every night for 365 days.

Recruiting, training and acquiring talent being the crucial role for leaders, seven traits to look in candidates have been listed. Building culture has been paramount at Cisco and many of the start-ups, founders struggle on this aspect as noted by John. Replacing himself is the toughest job for any leader though it is the work of the board, the CEO can play a significant role. His advice: if the company is doing well, an insider/internal candidate could be taken as CEO, if not then look outside.

Academic research has also noted that Cisco not just invested in developing the next generation of leaders because it was the nice thing to do, but rather because Cisco’s ability to execute its strategy in a vastly different competitive environment depended critically on developing leaders who have a different skill set and who embrace a different organisational culture than the previous generation (Chatman et al., 2005).

Communication is one of the most important skills that a leader needs to have—this in fact, turns out to be applicable for most of the other topics covered in the book. John has given some good examples of the best leaders in the world with whom he got to interact and learn—Bill Gates being the best, among others. His engagement model with media also becomes a part of the playbook.

The last section of the book carries some advice for start-ups. Sticking around with founders for too long is a mistake done by many. John also gives some insight into how his new venture (JC2) shortlists the potential start-ups for investment—some factors being industry in transition, players having technologies, business model, network and be the number one or two in that space; leadership team being the most critical one, coming from his experience of having transformed Cisco.

The book carries some of the futuristic statements given by John during his tenure and some predictions for times to come—‘Voice to be the next platform and dwarf all other forms of user interface’ being the noteworthy one. He also forecasts that a billion-dollar company in the future might have two or three employees and build a core/context ecosystem of strategic partners (network of partners and projects) to drive its growth.

During the course of the narrative, some repetitive things like the 180 acquisitions, global leaders as quoted above and ideas on roles of CEO appear at several places though in different contexts. A bit of

careful editing and weaving in the texts could have avoided these. John has also effectively and critically portrayed the situation at the other two of his past employers (IBM and Wang), outlining the comparative reasons for their downfall. Some useful nuggets like the Diet Coke break, Bathroom breaks in between meetings to summarise the previous one and plan for the next engagement would be useful to one and all.

John left Cisco in 2015 after being its CEO for over two decades and gave up the position of being its Chairman two years later. The book essentially captures the growing up years of Cisco till his departure. Though he is no longer involved with Cisco, he has brought in certain aspects of the current set of priorities for Cisco, while giving a disclaimer that the present management is best suited to formulate the strategy. Widely recognised as an innovator, an industry leader and one of the world's best CEOs, Chambers has outlasted and outmanoeuvred practically every rival that ever tried to take Cisco on—Nortel, Lucent, Alcatel, IBM, Dell and Hewlett-Packard, to name a few. The book from this visionary leader can easily be a handbook for leadership and a tutorial for winning in a digital world at the same time.

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