

Nothing is impossible

An interview with Rani Borkar



Rani Borkar, Corporate Vice President, Azure Hardware Systems & Infrastructure at Microsoft, brings extraordinary perspective to leadership, technology, and meeting the challenges of the future. With two Master's degrees and a career of more than 30 years at the cutting edge of hardware engineering, her journey can help inspire the next generation of women and technology leaders.

Rani Borkar has been faced with a multitude of “unsolvable” problems throughout her life and career. With a love of learning, a formidable will, a can-do approach, and trust in the power of community and collaboration, she has solved many of those unsolvable problems, and been inspired by seeing just what can be accomplished when you are willing to try.

From astrophysics to hardware engineering: Meeting the challenges

Rani's career has not been a straight line; she thought as a girl growing up in a small town on the outskirts of Mumbai that she would go into medicine. But her first Master's Degree was in physics, and when she came alone to the United States as a young woman, it was to study for a Ph.D. in astrophysics. Then she changed course in a decision that would set the stage for her career and instead studied for a second Master's Degree in electrical engineering. Though it felt like uncharted waters, she took on the challenge and has no regrets.

“I use challenge and opportunity in the same breath,” she explains. “Challenges are so important for every single one of us.” It was “certainly not a cakewalk” to enter the field of technology — not just technology, but hardware engineering — where there were very few women when Rani launched her career. But she wanted her work to have its share of challenges, recognizing that comfort can often mean stagnation. “It was the difficult moments that made me a stronger person. When it comes to challenges, you have to look at the whole equation: what came out of the challenges?”

The obstacles she faced were her training ground for approaching the impossible.

“I USE CHALLENGE
AND OPPORTUNITY IN
THE SAME BREATH.”

She wanted to work on the world's most pressing problems, on building the technological solutions that would create our future. Through constant learning, she has gained prodigious skills and knowledge, but there is no degree or course when it comes to facing new problems that have never before existed.

At the leading edge: Solving the problems of tomorrow

Rani's first computer was 386-based, before the days of smartphones and laptops. With a 32-bit microprocessor and 4kbs of memory, the cost at the time was in the thousands. “When I look back at my career,” she says, “it's incredible that I've had the opportunity to play a role during the most game-changing era of the industry.” She has built chips and processors for desktops, and been at the leading edge of hardware and technology when the world transitioned to laptops and then handheld mobile devices. Now her leadership will be important for the integration of artificial intelligence into the technology landscape. “Microsoft is putting the most cutting-edge AI in the hands of people around the world, and doing it responsibly, with world-class infrastructure, allowing them to be more productive as they look for ways to solve the world's most pressing problems.” She's proud that she has contributed to making lives better, in very tangible ways.



Nothing is impossible: An interview with Rani Borkar

Microsoft has also been at the leading edge of building carbon-negative, water-positive, and zero-waste solutions, and Rani has found the most fulfillment of her career in being part of the community of technologists who are having this profound impact on society. “We come together to design systems that truly empower everyone on the planet,” she says. “I’m honored to have contributed by working to help customers and partners with innovative sustainability initiatives.”

Leadership: Mission first, people always

How do you lead when you are dealing with problems and technologies the world has never seen before? “A leader has to be able to look in the rearview mirror to learn from the past, but also be able to look forward to the unknown,” Rani remarks. “You don’t know what you don’t know, and must be willing to learn completely new skills and explore new ideas.”

The key to this, she says, is in building a community. No one person can solve impossible things on their own; you must be able to leverage other peoples’ skills and knowledge by creating a space where people feel safe to collaborate openly. The power of diversity of thinking — of bringing together different skill sets, perspectives, and ideas — is amazing and can result in incredible outcomes.

The greatest success of Rani’s career, she says, is that she has established a work environment that fosters real community. “A team is a group of people who work together because they have to; a community is a group of people who come together because they want to.” Every successful launch she’s been a part of came out of a committed group working collaboratively as a community. Rani recognizes that people are her greatest asset, which is why her motto is “mission first, people always.”

When Rani’s work group gathers, she prefers to sit at the center of the table, rather than at the head of it — sending the message that she’s one of the group, and that they are all coming to the table equally. She is not a fan of hierarchies. She will often circle the room and ask each individual their thoughts, ensuring that



everyone feels valued and participates by making a contribution. She is careful not to create “mindblocks” that prevent people from speaking up or feeling that they shouldn’t be part of the conversation. These habits harken back to the early days of her career, when she endured internal battles of questioning whether to speak up or remain silent among her peers. She credits her strength and confidence to having had mentors who encouraged and coached her to help make her voice heard. Now, she provides that same mentorship and coaching to the next generation.

“A TEAM IS A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO WORK TOGETHER BECAUSE THEY HAVE TO; A COMMUNITY IS A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO COME TOGETHER BECAUSE THEY WANT TO.”

Coming together to collaborate: The making of a community

The meaning behind community is powerful for Rani: “I am where I am because I grew up in a strong community.” She had family and friends surrounding her who

were encouraging and supportive. “They understood that my achievements were the whole community’s achievements, and were celebrated by everyone.” There was a sense of togetherness and shared purpose. Having that community changed her life and her career trajectory.

As she pursued her career, the community around her continued to be essential, especially as she sought to build a happy work/life balance, juggling her family responsibilities along with her career. She expresses gratitude for the friends who helped fill in with her children during moments when she had to be somewhere else, and the multitude of ways they all provided support for one another.



Nothing is impossible: An interview with Rani Borkar

The incredible strength that comes from a caring community of friends and family translates to a working environment as well. “Community transforms how organizations function and improves all the outcomes,” she says. “Not everyone can be an expert in everything; bringing every perspective to a decision matters.” When you are faced with the sort of complex, multilayered problems she deals with, every single interdependent function is critical to the process. “It’s not about how smart individuals are; it’s about leveraging individual strengths and having one another’s backs. No single person is going to accomplish anything alone,” Rani states.

Communities don’t always have to work in harmony — challenge and debate can be important — but they do have to believe in a common mission. Rani invests heavily in her people, nurturing the community around her. As a leader, she makes sure that her entire community celebrates their accomplishments together.

Building the future: Cultivating the next generation of leaders and developing AI infrastructure

One of Rani’s passions is mentoring the next generation, whether working with college students in technology fields or new employees at Microsoft. “I love spending time with younger generations,” she says. “Their approach and thinking is different, and I find it deeply insightful to hear about what problems they are exploring.” She notes that the world is evolving quickly, and is interested in how she can help prepare young people for the challenges they will face.

She is also excited about the potential of artificial intelligence, and the capabilities it can deliver in generating innovative solutions. “The possibilities for good are endless, and I am proud to be in the most cutting edge organization working with AI.” She is dedicated to helping build infrastructure solutions that

will put AI into the world responsibly, empowering the people who will use it across all industries. Following the evolution of artificial intelligence has been thrilling, as there are always new things happening. “I haven’t seen anything like what I am seeing now,” Rani exclaims about the AI tools and systems being developed.

“THE SKY IS NOT THE LIMIT.”

Leaving a legacy: Finding and being inspiration

Rani’s mother was one of her most significant role models. During a time when it was almost unheard of for women to be working, her mother emigrated from Pakistan to India and worked in a hospital. She found a balance between work and family, moving between her home and career with grace. Rani also gives credit to her father, who — with three daughters — never treated them as less than, but always encouraged them to follow their dreams and ambitions.

Rani also looks up to Indira Gandhi as someone she admires. Indira Gandhi served as India’s prime minister from 1966 - 1977 and again from 1980 - 1984. Most of her service occurred during an era when the majority of women were at home and out of the workforce. For Rani, seeing a woman in such a powerful position of leadership was a source of profound inspiration that lay the groundwork for her own career trajectory.

Now, Rani offers inspiration to future generations of young women. “Things will not always be easy, but you can do it. It has to start with you,” she says. She gave each of her children the book, [*The Little Engine that Could*](#), Watty Piper’s tale about a little train that makes an insurmountable journey over a mountain to carry her load to the children on the other side, all because she believes in herself despite her small size. For Rani, the book encapsulates the importance of being empowered to believe in and leverage your own strengths. “Wouldn’t the world be a better place if everyone brought their contributions to the table?” she asks. “It’s all within you, and starts by knowing in your heart that you can do it.”

But she also offers a reminder that nobody has to go it alone. “It’s not about how strong you are, but about building powerful communities around you. You can lean on your communities to find the support you need.” Her advice to those starting out is to find mentors who can listen without judgment and offer their guidance.

“Make the impossible possible as you move from ‘I think I can, I think I can...’ to ‘I know I will, I know I will...,’” Rani says. “The sky is not the limit.”

