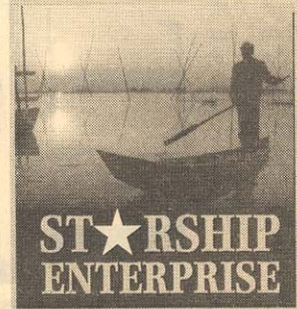


# Stepping into the mind of a woman entrepreneur

**E**NTREPRENEURSHIP is gender neutral. However women have natural strengths in management," proclaims Hema Hattangady, 42, the managing director of Conzerv Systems, maker of digital meters, which has carved a niche for itself in the market.

Ms Hattangady says that women can keep egos in check, are practical and resourceful, are not political and are quicker in decision making, and hence make better managers. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, is about judgement, intuition, experience and intelligence, she adds.

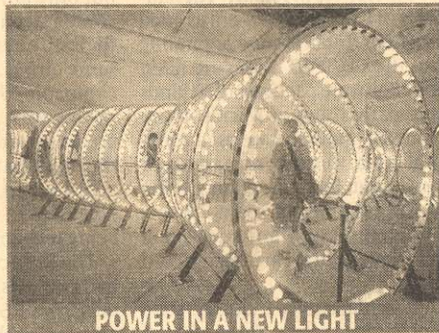
Hema joined Conzerv in 1989 a family firm selling electrical meters. She was given small roles in various functions till 1992, when the marketing agency through whom they



sold, insisted that Conzerv be merged with them. Conzerv declined and Hema was in front line sales selling digital meters till a sales force was set up. In 1996, with sales at Rs 1 crore, losses having eroded all the net worth and morale at all time low, Hema was made managing director. Hema has since grown the business from Rs 1 crore in 1996 to Rs 65 crore in 2005-06.

Conzerv today has over 23,000 customers, 260 employees, 230 installations of energy management networks, 123 dealers in 22 countries, 8 country representatives in south east, Middle east and USA and a market share of 40% in digital meters in India. What is entrepreneurship? Hema says entrepreneurship is creating something out of nothing. There is an idea, one sees its potential and makes it a reality.

What then is management? Hema has an answer to that too. Management has some givens — you optimise resources to get best results. Could one, say, argue that her



success was about management rather than entrepreneurship? After all, was there anything remotely entrepreneurial about Hema's success? Hema defends herself and asserts herself as an entrepreneurial success. Hema says entrepreneurship in context of Conzerv, was changing a company selling boxes to creating a company offering energy-saving solutions. Point taken.

Hema is considered by many of her peers to be a success — entrepreneurial and managerial. Conzerv's products are certified in many countries of the world. It is the first Indian metering company to get European and American certification. Conzerv is also, today, visited by groups of students from business schools in the US and Singapore as a model of entrepreneurship. Conzerv has large corporates such as Pepsico, Unilever, Taj, Lafarge etc. as global customers. Most customers recover their investment in less than one year through savings in energy bills. The company focuses only on industrial and commercial users of power. The CAGR has been 35% in sales and profits in the last 5 years and annual growth rates range from 35-40%.

For the last three years alone, Conzerv has grown from Rs 25 to Rs 40 crore and will go to Rs 65 crore this year (2005-06). Conzerv's exports have picked up, and with the need to conserve power going up every day, the company aims to hit Rs 100 crore by 2007-08. Ashok Hattangady is director, technology development, Conzerv Systems. And Hema says the success of Conzerv is due in large measure to innovative technological solutions from Ashok. He also happens to be her husband.

So does the husband have a role in wife's success? Ashok says that husband cannot be an overbearing 24x7 person. He

must provide freedom and space. And there is need to let go. Did we hear someone say that behind every successful woman is a man!!! "Hema has vision combined with efficient execution, drive, initiative,

focus, energy and compassion" says T Thomas, chairman, Conzerv Systems. Mr Thomas was formerly chairman, Hindustan Lever and also chairman, Glaxo. Ashok says "Hema is both an entrepreneur as well as manager." He adds she can take risks and enter new areas. She has gut feel for business. She has entrepreneurial spirit. But Hema also has finely honed managerial instincts he points. And management is important Ashok adds.

Management is about putting systems in place Ashok says. And without management entrepreneurship can fail, Ashok points out.

"But isn't entrepreneurship about taking risk and embracing change? And aren't women risk averse? Again women do seem to resist change, don't they? Hema has ready made answer for that too. Hema says, "Entrepreneurship is about knowing what risks to avoid and what risks to take" She adds, "Women are practical and result focused. They see things as means to end and do not even see things as change, whereas men could be comfortable in status quo."

That was pretty convincing. But then why do men dominate business? Hema says "Men dominate because of the ecosystem of domination by physically stronger species." Stereotypes still rules she complains. But she says that in the new genre of industry — financial and IT-based — there are no stereotypes and women can succeed. But she admits that even in European board rooms, there are barely five women. "The glass ceiling is even thicker in developed countries" says Hema. Hema's final advice to women entrepreneurs — "Think Big, Focus, Never Give Up."

■ PRABHAKAR DESHPANDE