As a kid growing up in Mumbai, surrounded by a large extended family, Ash Dahod read Reader’s Digest from cover to cover. “That was my view of life in the United States,” says Dahod. “I was fascinated.” The thumbnail version of Dahod’s journey has many elements that would make a compelling story for the upbeat weekly: the value of education, changing the world through entrepreneurship, and finding meaning by helping others.
Dahod’s first taste of entrepreneurship came as a teenager, when he helped his physician father produce and distribute medication that he had formulated. “I saw that he made more money in his business than working as a doctor,” says Dahod, whose parents moved to the United States to help their four children to acquire an American education. Dahod, arriving in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at the age of 20, surpassed their high expectations, earning five academic degrees, covering physics, engineering, and eventually, management.

Dahod describes HBS’s case method as “a shock to my system,” and remembers a dark day in Aldrich Hall during his first year when he was called to open all three case discussions. Earning his MBA, he says, changed his life: “I arrived at HBS as an introverted engineer. When I left, I was an extroverted marketer.” After graduation, he turned down a position with Salomon Brothers in order to launch his own venture, Applitek, developing a cable modem. The year was 1981, a full decade before most of the world had even heard of the technology, and the company soon had $12 million in sales.

Over the next 30-plus years, Dahod built five additional companies, each capitalizing on his own insights into technology and what the future would require—be it high-speed switching (Sigma Networks), high-speed routers (Netcore Systems), mobile networks (Starent), or LTE communication (Altiostar). “I look at where customers are and where they will be three to five years from now,” he says simply. “I try to be objective and analytical as I look for market and technological discontinuities,” he adds, noting that comfort with risk, acceptance of failure, and a willingness to face rejection are job requirements for entrepreneurs.

“No one person can build a company,” says Dahod, reflecting that one of the most difficult moments in his career was when he sold Starent to Cisco and decided to build a new team. “I felt a moral obligation to keep the team together so they could continue our success as part of Cisco, but it meant I had to build Altiostar from scratch,” he says. By all accounts, Dahod has met the challenge. Altiostar is still in stealth mode, but the press recently reported that it had received a $50 million vote of confidence from Cisco.

“As a leader, your job is to set the direction and step back. You have to let people stumble. If you interfere, they won’t learn.”

Dahod and his wife of 41 years, Shamim, and their two married daughters and two grandchildren are devout Shia Muslims who feel fortunate to be living in the United States, where they can practice their religion without restrictions. One of the key tenets of their belief system emphasizes helping others. Their support for education and health care—particularly for underserved populations—can be seen in the Boston area as well as in Mumbai, where the couple met as teenagers.

Working with Shamim, a medical doctor who has survived two bouts with cancer, Ash Dahod has funded projects at Lowell General Hospital, Boston University, and Boston Medical Center. In Mumbai, the Dahod family helped build Saifee Hospital, a state-of-the-art facility that offers subsidized care for people in need, and they are involved in an “upliftment” project to provide new homes for 3,200 families by redeveloping a densely populated 16.5 acres of dilapidated buildings in the heart of Mumbai.

By bringing the same entrepreneurial spirit and passion for learning to his philanthropic endeavors as he does to his businesses, Dahod has helped countless others improve their lives. “I believe that you have to run your business to optimize its value,” he says. “Whatever you gain from that, you need to put toward helping society.”