In the early 1990s, PR Venketrama Raja, the current managing director and CEO of Ramco Systems, was in the management team of the company. Raja always had a keen interest in chess and at the time suggested that the company should look at sponsoring Viswanathan Anand, then a Grand Master who was ranked the 3rd or 4th chess player in the world. The company signed him on and as Anand’s exploits in the international chess circuit grew, so did Raja’s passion for the game.

Around this time the internet was gaining in both accessibility as well as popularity. So Raja ventured into playing the game online. “There are a few good online chess sites. I play on one called the internet chess club, which is where a lot of Grand Masters play. Playchess is also another popular site. You get to play against a real opponent. They have a bulleting board with lists of people waiting to play. You can pick the kind of game you want and choose your opponent. The site grades and ranks players so you can always find an opponent whose skill levels are at par with yours,” says Raja.

Checkmate

Ramco Systems’ Venketrama Raja learns boardroom tactics from a board game

Veena Venugopal
Though Raja wishes to start playing at chess tournaments some time soon, he is all too aware that it involves studying chess for at least three or four hours a day. With his work commitment and his other hobby — photography — he does not get the time to do it. "Yet it is not something I will wait to do after I retire, because you need to be as sharp as possible, a trait that fades as you grow older," he says. Raja believes experience does not count for much in chess. It is one game children take to as early as seven years of age, and with various chess academies sprouting up, the level of competition is high. "You should see the players at these tournaments, even children as young as eight and 10 play a very advanced level of the game. What counts is just imagination and a really sharp brain," he says. Raja now spends 8 to 10 hours a week sharpening his game.

But it is not just play for him. There are lessons from chess that Raja applies to his job and his management style. Chess helps him understand how to catch and avoid errors. Lapses in concentration are immediately apparent in chess. "When your brain is tired, it may not be apparent, but you realise you are making the same mistakes repeatedly." The game helps you evaluate how alert you are on any given day. "One of the things I've understood is when you are doing something important, it is necessary that you stay relaxed," feels Raja. He is of the opinion that most management is done on the basis of how well you make the best out of a situation, but it is just as important to know how can you avoid something that can be potentially disastrous.

The other aspect of chess that appeals to Raja is that all the information is available to both players. There is no information advantage and you are not playing with a lot of uncertainty. While this is different from how the business world operates, it teaches you to think differently, he points out.

"The thing about chess is it's easy to learn but after that it is so intriguing. I am fascinated by the depth, the variety and the beauty of chess," Raja says.