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## Context to the conversation

Neeraj speaks about how he approached leadership when he was the head of India. He speaks about how he strived to move everybody a little bit to the right of the bell curve wherever they were. He goes on to speak about how the Asia leadership role is much more about inspiration than specific direction.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Let's double click on I evolved. I'm curious about many transitions in this process, but maybe a couple of transitions. One is maybe to the sort of the India leadership, managing partner of India, would that be the term? And then now subsequently Asia Pacific. I think particularly curious because two factors, right? One is even if I go back to my executive search days, one of the things we would look for is how people lead vertically, which is sort of in their team and how they lead horizontally, which is people like themselves who are as smart or even smarter than themselves and BCG, you're in a very sort of high caliber environment. And I think one of, as I was preparing for this conversation, one of our friends Venkatesh Srinivasan, I asked him, you know, what are the couple of things that inspire you about Neeraj? And he said, one thing that he mentioned and I also second that is that stands out, Neeraj, is just the intensity of focus and attention and the ability to really go laser, laser focused on a problem. But when you lead a group of people, you need to soften that intensity and you need to let others bring that intensity and sort of, in a way, create the climate for the problem solving. So, talk to us a little bit of maybe if you sort of, if I bring it back to the transition to heading India. What were some of the challenges? What were some of the adjustments you had to make in your ways of working, if you will, to be effective as a leader in India?

Neeraj Aggarwal (NA): I think it is a shift from managing your own pyramid of people in your practice to leading the whole firm. Firstly, think leading is a big word. feel we deeply talk about servant leadership in BCG and I feel that I embodied that and I feel it serves well in any professional services environment, also in an academic environment. So you're a bit about... slightly a first among equals. You don't have to think like I'm the boss, you know, that just does not work. So if you think of an org chart, you put the partners on top and you put yourself below and not the other way around. And you live that every day. So you are, so what does that mean? I feel everybody is looking in the world from their own box. The job allows you to connect the dots in a larger fashion. And the job, so I think I took them on two attributes particularly. One was to see, connect the dots and see the larger role we are playing in India and shaping the India of tomorrow.

I also took over at a time when you were just reaching about 20 years in India. So it a nice moment for us as a firm to reflect back about our contributions to India. And I'll talk about that later. And the second one was while everybody is a superstar or star for sure to get to where they are getting, but everybody has some blind spots. So my point was a bit of a human analysis, say what is he or she good at and what is here, where is there one blind spot? So I would focus only on the one- or two-blind spots to give them small nudges to get them to compensate and become. So if you take up, here's how I would describe it. But before that, just to put it in a concept, I think the role of a leader in general, believe, and certainly in a professional services firm, is there is a normal distribution. But to make everybody a 10%, 20 % better version of themselves. move, if you see a distribution rule, the role of a leader is shift everyone to the right, rather than say, this is correct or this is wrong. I think it's a fundamental flaw, certainly in my environment, which people make to say, this is acceptable, this is not acceptable. Interesting. I think, so I always embrace that it's not about right and wrong. It's about making everybody 20 % better than themselves. That was my core job. Interesting. I don't know if you hear that in other leadership discussions, but...

DJ: It's an interesting way of putting it to say move them to the right of the bell curve. are people that talk about tolerance to sort of talk about being non-judgmental etc. etc. But I like your framing of wherever you are, of course there's a minimum bar for performance and etc. But rather than being judgmental, being accepting and moving them to the right.

NA: And so hence it was, that's why my whole point about, and you move it right by two things, I feel. One is by looking at what everybody has an example of. So somebody could be, there are a lot of people who have great IQ, but they're a little low on EQ. I mean, that just, and consulting profession particularly has exceptional IQ and often not, you don't enjoy the time spent on the EQ, you consider this as a drag on your time, on your efficiency. So people are very measured. So I think often, So, often people find the EQ as a drag on their time. And hence, commonly my intervention used to be to make them feel like it is not a waste of time. All senior leaders have to spend time on that aspect as well. You know, that's just an important part of being a leader. And you do it, I feel I used to tell them you do it naturally with your clients. You don't do it naturally inside. Be inside like you are outside is a hack, but you know, people were not doing it enough. And the other thing was a magnet on the right to say this is the larger purpose. This is why we're doing this. So that also allows people to shift. So that's where my broader point about so I had this simple framework linked to air, fire, water, earth. Air was about you know our position in the market which was about you know we want to be market leaders but fire was about innovation like we want to bring the best ideas to our clients the latest idea the next practices not just the best practices you know like where do we push so India should be a hub for innovation where the rest of BCG should say we want to see how they do it and we want to get inspired not bring the other way around so how do we do that. Water was about ultimately ours is people business. how do we, people will go through journeys, they will have moments of truth in their life. How do we adapt to their moments of truth and how do we flow with that? And Earth was about giving back to Mother Earth. And in those days it was about can we impact a hundred million lives in India? So the work we do with education, with health, with rural development, etc. So I think that was, it was a simple construct, air, fire, water, Earth. We used to start every meeting with that. like, what are we doing to move the needle in that? At least all my leadership meetings. And it was a bit like a magnet. It was a bit of a larger calling and a purpose.

DJ: Beautiful and this you came up with this sort of you would say was one of your

NA: So, I mean, to be honest, it was me and a very young person. So, she was a designer in our team and I was doodling with this and somewhere I wanted to embed it in our basic elements and our

version of the way the universe is. And she came up with this insight, Neeraj, what you're saying is... So, it was a bit of a *Juggalbandi* of what she had and I had and we kind of built on each other. It was inspired thing and that's the beauty of the job. You know, one of things I've learnt is all the wisdom resides in the firm. It's only about unearthing

DJ: And listening with an open mind, without hierarchy and tenure. So, And talk to us about the journey from, let's say, heading India to leading Asia-Pacific. Again, if you were to talk about that transition, what were the, if I may say, the big adjustments you had to make to be effective? It's been what, two, three years in this role?

NA: No, no, no. It's been seven years almost in the 2018 is when I took it. It's been a long time. I think the India role, I was in the details, right? Because A, when I took over the India role, we were about I think I forget but roughly around 30 partners are there about. So I roughly knew what is going on in everybody's life. I knew the details to the extent I could. I knew what was going on in every class. I think you are one degree removed when you take on the Asia role. Firstly geographically it's very widespread. You are not native to everybody's context. So I think what it meant was how do you, so I changed my approach to how do you inspire people to find their best as opposed to tell them what I couldn't. It was about inspiring them by role modeling as opposed to always telling. You couldn't tell. You were not in the details close enough with the details by telling. think the vehicles or the tools were different. But every starting geography or context was different. One from across Asia, but our starting point in China was different from Japan, was different from Australia, was different from Indonesia. So you also then had to adapt it to our starting. Some places we were, our brand was very strong, our market position was very strong. Some places it had room for improvement. So you also had to adapt it to the content. It not one playbook. You had to have multiple playbooks playing all the time. you know, so was that, so yeah.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love what Neeraj says about many people feeling that some of the EQ elements being a drag on their time. I still remember when I was at EgonZehnder, every month all consultants from around the country would huddle up at one of the offices (Mumbai, Delhi or Bangalore) and the primary agenda for these meetings was often to discuss the lead pipeline and some strategic initiatives. But the first couple of hours were often spent in us sharing a bit about our families and the personal context. Many consultants would feel that it was a drag on their time and they could make that one extra call. But rituals like these, I notice are effective, but feel inefficient in the moment. And this is where the leadership comes in. How do you blend the right level of efficiency and effectiveness as you rally the troops and move forward.

Its lovely to hear Neeraj speak about Air, Fire, Water, Earth and defining the purpose along these lines! As he says, very often it is about unearthing the wisdom within. One doesn't have to go far looking for it. It resides within. Thank you for listening.

## End of transcription

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## About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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