



Context to the conversation

Neeraj speaks about the vision behind Plaksha University, a state of art institution that has come up near Chandigarh. He also reflects on the nuances in the leadership ask at a Plaksha versus BCG

Transcription

Deepak

Neeraj, I wanted to change topics Plaksha. Again, I've had the opportunity to attend some of the sessions. I would love to visit the campus. spoke to Arvind Agarwal a few times. So, I would love to visit. It's been on my list. But curious about where the seeds were sown, your vision for it, you know, and maybe... subsequently, you know, what have you learned about leadership in this context as compared to let's say leadership in the context of BCG? I'd love for your reflections on that as well.

Neeraj

Got it. So I think it's been a decade since I got involved in this journey. So it started in a very modest way in 2015 when three, four of us who all went to IIT Delhi were one or two batches apart got together. But I think the core driving factor was a belief that, a couple of beliefs. One is that technology will shape the future of the world. And hence we need, but our current leading institutes were not evolving enough to keep pace with the changing times. And hence we needed to create a new playbook. And the theory of change there was, if we create something which is an iconic playbook, it will lift the water level of everything. And I think the inspiration on ISB changing, pushing the IIMs to a different level was certainly there behind our minds. And maybe perhaps to a certain extent, even Ashoka doing that on the liberal arts side was behind our mind. That was one.

The second thing was, we all talk and I mean, I've told you about, I'm very passionate about playing a role in shaping India in whatever form or shape I can, was we should use our best years to not just to give time to shaping that not in a day job, but beyond a day job. So the biggest, the hardest part and the biggest commitment was to say, you know, when I started thinking about Plaksha in the early forties that, you know, and it wasn't a lightweight commitment to say it will get done in a year or two, toward the next multi decades, we will invest some quality time.

And it's been a decade and at least I feel I've at least given 20 % time to that magic time particularly often a lot on the weekends which is taken away from other things but that was a commitment because nothing gets done if we don't give it at least a decade if not multiple decades.

Deepak

Got it. And what's the vision for Plaksha Neeraj? When you say re-imagine, could you give us a sense of in what ways are you sort of re-imagining technology education, is that fair to say? Yeah.

Neeraj

I think we are reimagining on multiple aspects.

a lot of magic happened at the intersection of disciplines. So, you know, more interdisciplinary. So most of the majors at Plaksha. So one is, for example, robotics and autonomous systems, which is the intersection of computing, electronics and mechanical engineering. One is biosystem engineering, which is the intersection of biology and computer science. One is data science, business and economics. So we spent a lot of, we have a global academic advisory board, which is some of the best and the brightest minds in the world. And we felt the magic happened at the intersection.

They didn't have the legacy of any department. We don't have a chemistry department, a physics department, math. So most of the, if you go to any top university in the world, you will have one building which is one department and another building. And oftentimes these departments over a period of time become silos and they don't interact. I mean, they're excellent in themselves, but the intersections have to be forced along, you know. So we said we will build that from day zero, right? The second innovation was back to the point about technology is a big unlock. We said we will focus on a few sustainable development goals in India and focus our research from the early days on those. So we picked four. We four is a good number. One is clean energy, but not at the big level of green hydrogen and fuel cells and all those, but you know, more grounded things like smart district cooling, know, cool roof, things which people can implement on the ground at scale. Precision agriculture.

So that you know think of the next technology initiating the next green revolution equivalent Grassroots innovation, clean water, lot of water contamination and the fourth one was personalized and equitable health care so we said we will focus a lot of undergraduate research also on those and we will stay with these over a long period time because we felt India could create at scale models for at least a global south to emulate if not the world to emulate.

Deepak

So this is out of grassroots innovation.

Neeraj

world to emulate. So those were very... And then we imagine all part of the Valley chain. How do we select students? What... So for example, one more thing. We have a fresh mode curriculum. So it's three terms, 18 months. Nobody has to choose their major getting in. After 18 months, nobody has

done this in India. After 18 months, you choose your major. And the courses in the freshman curriculum range from nature's machines. So it's not physics 101, physics 102, or applied math 101.

So Nature of Machine for example is the course we're saying Grasshopper is the machine. Applied machine. Applied machine. So what can you learn from that? So not every course is of that exotic in nature but we've spent a lot of time reimagining the course work itself. So I can go on and on but you get the...

Deepak

But is there a benchmark in the West or another part of the world that or is this really one of a kind?

Neeraj

This is one of a kind and hence it has been we are doing and learning, we making some mistakes as well I would be honest to say and we are re-evaluating and learning and going forward.

Deepak

And in a way you've had an opportunity to see what it takes to be effective as a leader in this context versus let's say BCG context versus the clients you serve. What have you learned about, let's say, a group of people in such a mission-driven organization like Plaksha? In what ways has it shaped you as a person?

Neeraj

I think some facets have been similar. I was just reflecting, know, tough question. Some have been harder or some have been different. Let's not say harder. The similar facets are a larger cause which you're all drawn towards and the ability to connect the dots. I talked about both these. I think the academics look at the world in a particular way, a startup CEO looks at the world in a particular way, a private equity CEO looks at the world in a particular way, a startup CEO. you know, so, but how do you see the commonality and the differences in connecting the dots? Those two have remained the same. But I think what I've learned also is that everybody comes in and out. We have a collective model.

So my part running a partnership has been a great skill because we have 100 plus founders in Plaksha. They're all incredibly accomplished. Incredibly accomplished. Some of the best in their professions. But they all come in and out and they have deep beliefs in when they come in and out. So what do you listen to and what do you listen to but reject and what do you listen to and retain has sometimes been hard. It's not been the easiest because they come with good intent. But everything is not always right in that very moment. It may be right over a long sequence of time. So that has been, it has pushed the degrees of learning to the next level. It has also given me more patience than my even job taught me. And it has also, but it also provided a newfound appreciation for the world of academia as well.

Deepak

Correct.

Neeraj

I think they have a very different playbook, but a very remarkably lovely playbook as well. But also some frustration with that word as

Deepak

One of the things that stayed with me if I may bring in is when I spoke to Nandan Nilakeni on the podcast I asked him, know, does it take to make this co-founder relationship work in the context of Infosys and he said something very interesting. He said one is of course complementarity of skills, similarity of values. The third he said was interesting. He said alignment of the duration for which you're playing the game. You know, someone might be playing a 10-year game, somebody might be playing a 50-year game and the way you make trade-offs is very different.

Neeraj

That time axis has a challenge because look funds are hard, right, to raise. So how do you make an operating breakeven happen faster so that you're only putting money for doing the new stuff and not doing an operating bleed versus staying true, pure to the vision. And how do you straddle that has been a hard act. Because if you look at, you know, most of the universities in India, they have large donors, particularly the government of India. And if you look tore apart their economic model, the economic model is actually badly broken. creating a new playbook is hard in that context.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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- 104.03 Neeraj Aggarwal - Leadership nuances in Asia
- 104.04 Neeraj Aggarwal - Managing your energy
- 104.05 Neeraj Aggarwal - Adding a delay function
- 104.06 Neeraj Aggarwal - Managing dual careers
- 104.07 Neeraj Aggarwal - Cultivating optimism and trust
- 104.08 Neeraj Aggarwal - Striving for excellence
- 104.09 Neeraj Aggarwal - AI and Impact on Leadership and Careers
- 104.10 Neeraj Aggarwal - Vision for Plaksha University
- 104.11 Neeraj Aggarwal - In Summary - Playing to Potential

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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