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Context to the conversation

Roopa speaks about how she toggled between the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view as a leader depending on the business context and the people she was leading.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other theme I wanted to pick on Roopa was the phrase you used getting the altitude right. I find that as a leader sometimes it's just important to figure out between the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view, how do you really straddle that balance but also operate at the right level of detail and prioritization. And you've had an opportunity to sort of think about Altitude as an MD at Crisil, as a managing partner at Omidyar, and as a board member in various organizations. Can you expand on that and what's the nuance here and how people can figure out what's appropriate Altitude?

Roopa Kudva EP2 (RK): Yeah, I think the answer and the approach is very different for each of those three roles that you talked about. As the head of an operating company, I think you need to make choices about... where you will get into the detail and where you will operate on a more macro basis. To take a few examples in CRISIL, there are some areas I would get into in great detail. Customer feedback was one of them. I would read every single bit of feedback that we got. Board meetings, for example, and this may seem, not only was I very closely involved in every single detail of what was presented to the board, I also paid attention to little things like who liked what kind of coffee, for example. Now, because I think it is also a way of showing care and respect. So I didn't find that detail too small for me. On the other hand, there were certain leaders and certain businesses who I felt, where I felt that the leadership was extremely competent and, you know, I wouldn't be adding value by just getting involved for the sake of getting involved. So I was pretty, I was more hands off where certain leaders were concerned and certain businesses were concerned compared to others. So it is very situational. It is very contextual. It is driven by the issue you're dealing with. It's also driven by the people you're dealing with. Right? But it is important to have both muscles. It is important to be able to take a big picture view, it is also important to be able to get into the detail and move seamlessly with it between the two. I think that's a core skill, is not easy, but it is essential. Now, let's look at another situation altogether, which is a situation if you're a managing partner of an investment firm. Now, this is a very different kind of business. You are hiring people who are very independent minded, their job is to take high stakes decisions, their job is to combine a lot of information and analysis with a lot of ambiguity and take high risk calls. So how do you create an environment where you empower them and trust them to do all of this?

DJ: There is a seven year feedback loop, right? Sometimes you do know if you made the right call for a long time.

RK: You don't know you made the right call for the lot. So I think the first thing that becomes important is clarity. What is our strategy? I talked about who we serve and that became the touchstone for every IC decision. What proportion of this company's customers come or will come from the next half billion, right? And if the answer was not up to our expectations, maybe that's an opportunity we might not take up even though it might make us a lot of money because we had a purpose. So I think that driving that clarity of what is our strategy and therefore what is our investment thesis becomes important. The second thing that becomes important is trust. Precisely for the reason you said, you have to hire a bunch of people, you have to build that connect so that you can trust them to go out there and do what they do best. Again, as an investor compared to being an operator, as an operator, you're supposed to have all the answers. As an investor, you back people who have the answers. So you're one step removed. So you have to resist the tendency to jump in to try and solve the investee's problems. Add value. So keeping that value, right? And so that keeping that distance also becomes an important part of leading an investment firm, particularly if you have come from an operating background as I did. So I think these are some of the things that work. And ultimately at the end of the day, I think it is about creating an environment as we discussed earlier, where there is a healthy discussion, where there is a healthy debate, where there is a push and pull, where you're asking the right questions that make people think. So at the end of the day, you believe you're making the best possible decision you can with the information that you have.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of the insight from Carol Kauffman (CK) and David Noble (DN), the author of the book REAL Leadership. They talk about the notion of a vantage point for every situation which is parallel to the idea of getting the altitude right.

CK: *To validate your vantage point, the first question is, how do I assess if I have a good vantage point, as a leader how do I assess if one of my reports has a good vantage point, so what is the cure for naive realism. And we think first, four ways to describe what a 10 out of 10 in a good vantage point is and then, we have another section on what is it that can distort your view and how to be grading yourself on both of these. The positive one is, is your vantage point and I will describe each one, is it clear, is it at the right kind of resolution or definition, is it broad enough or narrow enough or is your altitude right. And it would be clear, okay, am I looking at the world with rose-colored glasses and I am thinking everything is going to work out, of course, I am right. Or are you working with charcoal-colored glasses and nothing is going to work right and you are not going to be happy at this, so the emotional tone... Then, are you near-sighted, so you are maybe great with tactical things but not good with strategic, or you are far-sighted, you are really great. Here you are at the top of the skyscraper of your career but people are like little ants and you have lost track with your frontline people. So, these are things to be thinking about, you know, rose-colored glasses, charcoal glasses and are you near-sighted, far-sighted. And sometimes with one leader, you will basically, one person is like near-sighted and far-sighted but nothing in between, so that is clear. The next one is basically resolution, do you need a high-definition view, do you need that, 5,000 super high clear but we all have an attention budget, so you can blow your wad too early if you are that level of attention*

on everything. So how do you make the choice of what do I really focus on clearly and where is it okay to have an impression as a view, so that is resolution. Then, breadth and depth are a little more obvious which is, to do what I am doing, can I look at the entire horizon, is that ideal or do I want to narrow in. If it is creative brainstorming, you want a wide view, peripheral view because two dots may suddenly, you can see them at the same time but if you are doing a budget, you better not be doing blue sky thinking. And the same with altitude, Rosabeth Kanter's work on zoom in zoom out, do you want to be a hawk or a hummingbird in this situation. So those are the four things to look at like four ideal vantage points. But then, what can distort your vantage point and we need to be very much aware of that, some things are conscious, some are unconscious. Some of us, we all have biases, familiarity bias, attribution bias, but we also have cognitive styles that are not necessarily content biases but there are just ways we think. And then of course, there is unconscious bias and things that we do not even know that we do not know and blind spots. And in the book, we go in detail on all of these, including the I do not know what I do not know, or the one that is really interesting for coaches as, what is it that I do not know that I actually know and how good coaching questions or self-reflections can go, oh, that is what I think. So that is the V, that is the vantage, and as David says, whoever sees things first has a, pardon the pun, advantage."

DJ: Do you want to be a hawk or a humming bird in this situation? Useful meta-question to ask as a leader before we jump in to engage in the problem.

End of transcription

Nugget from Carol Kauffman and David Noble that is referenced: [Validating the vantage point](#).

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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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