



Guest

Third guest on the Play to Potential Podcast series is Captain Raghu Raman. Raghu spent eleven years as an officer in the Indian Armed Forces, followed by another eleven years in the corporate sector before joining the Government as CEO of the National Intelligence Grid.

Raghu started his career with the Indian Army. During his stint, he was in active combat in Punjab battling terrorists and in Siachen Glacier facing Pakistani troops. He has served as a UN peacekeeper, as well as been an instructor teaching leadership and strategy to officers at the prestigious School of Armoured Warfare.

After leaving the Indian Army, Raghu joined the Mahindra Group in 1998 and helped set up Mahindra United World College. Over the next ten years he led various companies, including First Choice, Mahindra SSG and finally DLSI, a Mahindra joint venture with British Aerospace before being handpicked to create and head the National Intelligence Grid, Ministry of Home Affairs in the Government of India. After his five year stint as the founding CEO of NATGRID, Raman joined Reliance Industries as Group President, Risk, and Security & New Ventures.

Raghu is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, a frequent guest faculty in business schools, keynote speaker and columnist on National Security Strategy and Leadership in leading publications. He is also the author of "Everyman's War" - a book published by Random House.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 3rd conversation in the Play to Potential Podcast Series. This is Deepak Jayaraman here, creator and curator of this series of conversations where I talk to leaders across walks of life on topics around Leadership, Transitions and Careers. My guest this time is Captain Raghu Raman, a man who has re-invented himself several times over. He has had stints in three very different environments - He spent his initial decade plus as an officer in the Indian Army, With the Government as CEO of National Security Grid, With the private sector in Leadership roles in the Mahindra Group in the past and now with the Reliance Group. Raghu is a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, a frequent guest faculty in schools, a columnist in leading publications and the Author of Everyman's War - published by RandomHouse. Without further ado, over to the conversation.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Raghu, thanks for your time, excited to be talking to you.

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): Same here.

DJ: And I must say before we dive in, I must provide a little bit of personal context. I grew up in the civilian world like a lot of the other Indians and with relatively no clue about some of the other parts of the world like armed forces and government services and so on and army didn't even enter the consideration set when I was thinking about career options. But 13 years back something significant happened. I married an army officer's daughter; it was like a Ben Stiller and meets the parent's kind of a moment. But I think jokes apart over the last few years I have had the privilege of interacting with my father-in-law and really learning a lot about the war stories quite literally and in terms of what the corporate world and some of the other areas could learn from the armed forces. And I have heard you speak passionately on this topic in different forums. So, I am excited to be talking to you. Before we dive in Raghu, would be great if you could provide us a quick background of your career path over the last several years.

RR: So, well I guess about three decades of work divided kind of almost equally between the army; I was in the army for about 11 odd years, that's my first career. The second stint was with the corporate sector and largely again with one corporate but doing different pieces of work in the Mahindra Group. Then I went back into the government but this time I went back to Ministry of Home, which is literally and figuratively on the opposite side of Ministry of Defence and I spent five years there as a bureaucrat and then again, I came back into the corporate world. So, it's been a sort of an environment where I began was very authoritarian and very regimented where you largely lead with elements of authority and in the corporate world as you are aware, the leadership is more in terms of material incentives and of course, there is an element of... but the tools on which you rely are much more in terms of material incentives and financial gains and benefits. And then the government where again the ecosystem and the environment is completely different, where there is actually no material incentive, you cannot... and there is a very highly developed sense of consensus-driven ecosystem where to get anything like I often say that in the government if you want to get anything done, it's like pushing a string; it's not like pulling a string, you need that kind of consensus. So, very interesting way, a very interesting prism to see it from three different directions and deepest of respect of each one of these professions once you see how easy or tough it is to get anything done in each one of those ecosystems.

DJ: Let's rewind the clock Raghu if it's okay. Give us a sense of how you got in the armed forces.

RR: Well, so, I mean, I wish I could tell you that I had thought it through and all of that, but honestly, that's not the true answer. I was like many young people when I was young and I was in college I used to listen to the last guy talk to about my career options. So, one day it would be a merchant pilot another merchant navy another airline pilot then an MBA whatever. But I guess something did happen in my life, which was quite a seminal event and I kind of decided to join the army. And I must admit that the first few weeks when I entered the academy, I thought, you know, where have you got stuck because obviously your father-in-law will tell you that in the first few weeks, they are slightly harsher because they want to weed out all these tourist soldiers who have watched a movie and decided to join the army.

DJ: Saving Private Ryan.

RR: Yeah, well those days actually John Rambo and something like that. So... but within the first few weeks I realized that this is what I was meant for and I think to that extent the army is possibly one of the only careers where when you go through the process of the SSB, this Services Selection Board, they sense whether you have it in you or not, I mean, they evaluate and they come with a very accurate diagnosis of who you are and perhaps much better. I don't think at that level which means when you are in your early 20s as an entry-level job, there is any other organization which spends five days in testing you physically, psychologically, emotionally from an attitude point of view, culture point of view, leadership qualities point of view, and that's the kind of intensity with which your own diagnosis is done. So, yes, I guess, that was sort of the start point into that life and I had various different opportunities within the army and there again I would say that I was possibly one of the luckier ones to have served with different arms. For instance, I was commissioned into what is called the mechanized infantry which to a lay person is more of tanks and light tanks so to speak, but I had the opportunity also to do two stints: one was with Infantry Battalion called the 12 Jak Rif, 12 Jammu & Kashmir Rifle and Siachen Glacier, completely different style of functioning in an infantry battalion, mountain warfare, lot of learnings, going into a new environment and new unit and within one year having to learn enough over there to command their respect or at least be tolerated by them so to speak. Then I had another chance to go as a UN peacekeeper in Angola; that was again with another battalion. And my last sort of big stint with the army was as an instructor in the Armoured Corps Centre and School, which is yet another sort of it's another arm of the army. So, in the 11 years that I spent I had a fairly diverse exposure and that's when I sort of left from the army and joined the corporate world.

DJ: A lot of us spend the initial years focusing on acquiring the hard, technical skills and the notion of leadership starts kicking in later in life. In the army, from very early on, the principles of leadership start getting drilled in. So, from an individual standpoint, how should somebody think about a career in the army?

RR: For a career in the army, there would be three drivers and these aren't mutually exclusive. You can have all three or even if you had one of the three, I think, it should be considered as a serious career option. The first, of course, is if you are passionate about serving in the forces and wearing the uniform and leading the troops. I mean, which other career gives you the chance to jump out of an airplane or take 16 tanks into the desert? All your foreign missions are jumping out of a plane or jumping out of an amphibian landing craft or stuff like that. That kind of a high, that kind of a thrill, no other career can give it to you. For people who stand on the top of a mountain and look out and say that this is the ultimate goal of my life or a view that I have never seen... Imagine the fighter pilot who sees the curvature of the earth, who actually sees the sun rise over the curvature of the earth and not over a mountain or something. Or imagine any college kid who says that I want to drive a motorcycle, which is a Harley Davidson or whatever, which is 100 horsepower... Imagine the honour of driving just one horse and sitting on top of it and escorting the President to the presidential dais and bringing him back. We can only do these things in the Indian Armed Forces. So, there is definitely that piece, to touch the limits of your own potential, whether they are physical, mental. If you go for a commando course, as I did, those 30 days and 30 nights, they help you discover yourself, they help you discover reservoirs of you that you never knew you had. The bonds that you will forge, they are blood brothers, like you have, probably in colleges you have course mates. But the moment you come out of the army, you have blood brothers. They are not course mates, they are blood brothers. So, for the rest of your life, you just have to say, in my case, I just have to say 81st Regular, and whoever is part of that course is honour-bound to help me. There is no debate in his

mind whether he has a choice. There is no conditionality. You are sworn brothers, so that band of brothers, that phrase actually goes back almost to King Henry's time, he is the one who actually coined that phrase and it is truly a band of brothers. So, that is one driver.

The second driver, I believe, is, as you rightly put it, the fundamentals of leadership. If you want to learn how to take men into battle without ESOP, pay hike, employee of the month, or any other material tool but purely your own personal leadership quotient. The stakes that you take them into, they are not about losing market share or a campaign going wrong and you losing a key account. Here, if a campaign goes wrong, you make widows, you make orphans. So, the stakes at which you are being taught leadership, at an age of 20-21, you are holding the lives of sometimes up to 100 men in your hands. Now, to my mind, when you are learning any lesson, whether its leadership or otherwise, the key differentiator in learning it is the stakes at which you are learning it. It's a bit like you draw a chalk line and walk on that chalk line. Big deal! But if that line is a tightrope between two buildings, the game changes completely. So, it's not about the width of the line, it is about what will happen if you fall off the line. I think that element, no other career can give you, where you actually carry the burden of command, and you carry at times the body of your comrade on your shoulder, not just literally, but also as a metaphor, because your decisions will have the potential to create widows, to create orphans. Now, in that context, when you look at leadership, every lesson is a lesson drawn in blood. So, in terms of just learning how to lead people, learning how to communicate, learning how to create a shared reality, learning to create a vision statement that can get people to jump on a grenade, learning how to motivate and create a larger-than-life mission which will get people, soldiers under your command, to volunteer for a mission in which they know the attrition rate could be as high as 80%, which means that eight out of 10 people will sort of buy it in that operation, and still they volunteer. To my mind, there isn't a better school of leadership to learn that, and that should be the second driver. I think the army now gives that opportunity in terms of short-service commission where you can join for five to eight years, and after the eighth year, you can take a call whether you want to leave that and pursue a second career, as I can personally vouch for. Everything that I did, whether it was in the corporate world or in the bureaucracy, a large part of that training happened in the armed forces, so it gives you a rock-solid foundation for rest of your life and that should be the second driver.

The third driver, interestingly, if you look at the B-schools and the education whether it's in terms of management, frameworks, and all of that you realize that the fountainhead of all of this is in the armed forces. I am not necessarily saying just the Indian Armed Forces. If you look at the grouping of a platoon, it's 40 people. And it's 40 people across the world; it's not just in India, Pakistan, or Commonwealth countries. It used to be 35 to 40 people, whether it was the Incas, the Mayans, the Mongolians, and the Tatars, who didn't even know of each other's existence. So, when you look at a company, for instance, a company is what is commanded by usually a captain or a major and that's about 180 to 200 people, the span of control, and that's roughly the size of a Facebook group. So, you suddenly realize that the basic fundamentals of management framework. James McKinsey is a colonel. He basically took the logistics which was used in war planning and converted it into a company. So, all these companies that swear by McKinsey today are basically listening to an army colonel. So, as I tell a lot of young people, if you have to learn these management principles, then why not go to the fountainhead? Why are you learning it second-hand from a B-school? Because the origin of all of these principles is in many ways more contenders fighting for less resources is the definition of war, more contenders fighting for less resources is the definition of business.

So, I think, for a young person who is looking to embark on a journey which allows him a multitude of options, I think the fundamentals of learning how to manage people, how to manage frameworks, how to think out of the box, how to communicate under adverse circumstances, how to reach into your own self and find that extra few ounces of strengths that you need to tackle the adversity, there isn't a better institution which can teach that. I think these should be the three drivers, sort of, why people should consider the forces as a top three career option. Because it gives you the option of doing that and going out and doing anything else as well.

DJ: As a corollary, what are the lows in a career path? What are the types of people that joined the army for the wrong reason or joined the army and very quickly realized that it's not for them? Any insights on what questions people should ask themselves to ensure that they don't make the wrong choice?

RR: That's a very good question. I believe that one of the strongest filters that exist in the system to make sure that the wrong people don't join or rather there is no wrong or right, the people who are not suitable don't join is the Services Selection Board, SSB. That intensive process, which is, you've got a group task officer, you've got a psychologist, and you've got experts who can understand where your heart lies, where your mind lies, and will you crack under pressure. These people, I think, do a very good job of seeing whether you have it in you or not. Now, fact of the matter is, I actually encourage a lot of kids of my friends to give the SSB at least once. Whether you decide to join or not is a subsequent step, but the very act of appearing for the selection board gives you a very good insight into yourself, whether you have it in you or not. I must say, one of the most fascinating things I found at the Services Selection Board and I think a lot of companies can learn, HR especially, can learn from that is they have this five-day process and at the end of the five-day process, out of a group of about 50 to 60 people, one or two people get selected. After all processes are done, they are reassembled in the hall and the names that are read out are the names of the people who did not make it. And it is not about that batch. They will begin by saying Amitabh Bachchan did not make it in so and so board, in so and so year, or a Kapil Dev did not make it. So, it's an amazing way to tell the 48 people who have not made it that there is another career waiting for you, and this is not the end of the world. Finally, they talk about the two who have made it. So, I think, that in itself is a great lesson. How do you send back 48 disappointed people, but send them back with a high, with wind under their wings rather than telling them, 'Yeah, buggers, you did not make it'? So, I think starting from that moment, in many ways, the decision gets made for whether you have it in you or not.

Having said that, obviously, the army is not a piece of cake. You are learning how to lead people through life and death situations. The training is traumatic; it's not a piece of cake. It draws upon your reserves and your mental toughness, mental robustness; it tests it to the limit. There is obviously separation from family. That's one way to look at it. Another way to look at it is, you redefine family. So, an Indian army jawan, for example, will spend two months in a year with his family and 10 months with his unit, and he will do that for 20 years of his life. So, I think, that's a redefinition of what family is. There is, obviously, a lot of instability if you look at it one way. I choose to look at it from a point that every two to three years, you get a different exposure. You are in, physically, a different space, in a different portfolio. You are dealing with different kinds of challenges and that brings a kind of a diversity to your thinking, your growth, all of that.

So, I wouldn't really say that there are any downsides to it. It depends on how you look at it. If you look at every two years as being unstable, then yes, it's a downside. Then, you are probably meant for a career which you are not going to move down, or you are not going to have too much of instability over, or separation from what you consider to be an essential part of your family, if you define it that way. But if you say every two to three years, you are given a new assignment, a challenging assignment, and usually a one-up assignment. That's another thing which happens in the forces. Willy-nilly, because of shortage of officers, officers are thrust with responsibilities more than what the org structure has determined, so you do get a lot more exposure at a much younger age. And you start discovering that your rate of growth is not determined necessarily by a rule book but by the opportunities that are thrown your way and how quickly you sort of master those opportunities.

DJ: As we look to identify potential, what are the three-four things the corporate world can learn from the SSB process which can help companies bet on these horses for the long term?

RR: In the forces, probably the army, in some sense, I won't say uniformed forces, because the police don't work that way, but in the army, even the chief of the army staff has to join as lieutenant. There is no question of doing a PhD and coming in and joining as a brigadier. It doesn't work like that. So, the police have IPS officers who come in laterally and they join at a fairly senior rank. But, in the army, for many of the officers of the Indian Army, it is their first job. So, in the game of SSB or in the game of army, there is no way to do anything about previous experience. It doesn't really matter. What matters is only the potential! So, the five days, the aspects that are being looked at there, I think, its better we understand that and then look at how the corporates can leverage it.

Of course, there is general physical fitness. I should tell the listeners and kids who are listening that anybody who thinks that he is not physically fit and therefore, should not apply to the army, that's a myth. Because so long as you are sort of OK, in the sense that you have your arms and legs and you are not dramatically invalidated physically as a matter of fact, physical fitness is the least of the scores in the SSB, because these are trainable skills. I used to be a college kid in Delhi who wouldn't run after the bus saying that a second bus will come. Within 18 months, I was running 16 kilometres in cross country, and that's something that the army will do. That's not a problem.

What they are looking for are unattainable skills, which are more in terms of officer-like qualities. Will you crack under pressure? Do you have the ability to work as a team? Can you get other people to work with you, without being threatened by you? You may be a great performer, but if you piss off everyone else in your team, or if everyone else in the team views you as competition or as a person who likes to hog all the limelight, you will not go beyond an individual contributor. You will never be able to run a team, and in the army, it's all about the team. Nobody gives a jack shit whether you got your stuff or not. It's whether the team won or didn't win. It's as simple as that. It's all people together. It's never eight of us got in, but twelve didn't get through. That doesn't make sense; all 20 have to get in. It's all or nothing. Now, that format requires people to be able to look at the bigger picture. It requires them to think out of the box for problem solving. You must remember that in the army, I think, what they teach most people is fundamental problem solving. That is why you are able to take the same troops and send them for flood relief in Chennai, and for earthquake relief in Nepal, for building a Commonwealth bridge in Delhi, for taking children out of a bore well when they are stuck there. I mean, there is no training given for taking children out of a bore well. That doesn't happen in the academy. What happens is you are taught how to solve problems as a

group, and I think, that's what they are looking at. They are looking at whether people have an open mind, whether they can do that kind of stuff or are they too fixated, are their cup too full, and are they too self-centered? Those are the traits which will probably be a sort of disadvantage.

They also have a very intensive psychological profiling. They have tests which I am sure you can Google and find out about. Word association or writing a narrative based on a picture that you've been shown and this is more to look at... but the interesting thing is that there are three different vectors that happen. So, there is a group task, there is an individual psychological assessment, and then, there is an interview. What they also look for is inconsistency between the three. That's why I recommend that you might want to take some basic guidelines, but don't try and get coached on it, because it's a waste of money. They can straightaway spot if you have been coached and often, people who have been coached will start showing inconsistencies between their three or four tests, and that will be actually worse off than being consistently... You can't game such a system and these people are doing it for living, I mean, they can look into your eyes and figure out what you are thinking. So, it's pointless trying to game them.

So, that, in a nutshell, is what one expects in the SSB, and of course, the elements that I spoke about can be derived into corporates as well. Many corporates are doing it now. So, you have a lot of these YSC and those kinds of tests to look at a cultural and aptitude fit. Even construction of a team, by the way. So, in a team you don't need everybody who looks like each other in their thinking or whatever. Now, in the forces, they do that. So, when they populate the battalion, they will take a look at the OLQ, the Officer Like Quality, scores of the previous three officers who have gone there, and they will calibrate the fourth officer in such a way that he complements the previous three rather than becoming a clone of the previous three. Even in organizations, I think, in the corporate sector, my sense is, a lot of the times when recruitment is being done, you are basically carbon copying one or two individuals and saying, if I can get 10 more of these guys, I am OK. Often, JDs are designed that way. A manager who doesn't have time will often pass the CV of an existing employee and say find me three more of these. But I think, that's the wrong way to do it, because unless you really do need three more of the same people it might be better to get skills which are complementary or perhaps, at some level, diametrically opposite. Look at the portfolio of leadership qualities rather than saying that I want that 9-point leader, I want four of them. That is usually a very bad team. If you get four alphas in one team, that team will start competing within itself.

DJ: You've transitioned from very different worlds. What have you learnt in terms of lessons in how you managed the transitions especially in the 1st 90 to 100 days?

RR: In hindsight, I can put a structure around that learning. I must confess though that when the transition was happening, I consider myself extremely fortunate that I had a few people, who serendipity brought into my life, who were able to guide me and help me not make mistakes which I could have made. In hindsight, if I were to look back and say this process could be done much better, then this is the way I would probably do it today. To my mind, any organization, regardless of where it exists whether it's in the private sector, government, or the army it falls into one of these four categories: it will either be a start-up, or it will be a turnaround, or it will be an organization that requires realignment from where it is, or it is a steady-state organization. Now, all these four require very different styles of leadership. In a start-up, you require some sense of energy and a shared reality and a chutzpah and say, we need to head in this general direction, but you really don't know what the real goal is going to be. Any start up, if it starts trying to figure out plans for more than 12

to 18 months is basically going to go wrong, because it's more about choosing to do something different, having a general line of direction and going with that. If you are doing a turnaround, for example, then the leader, when he takes over the turnaround, he will give some arbitrary decisions just to indicate that there is a new sheriff in town. That's more a strategy of ready, fire, and aim. You make your presence felt by doing some brisance in the organization. You shatter something's to indicate that there is a new leader; it's going to be new. You can't try that in a steady-state organization, because in a steady state organization, you need to spend the first 90 days just learning what makes them tick and not tweaking anything which is working fine, because you don't know what string you will pull and which part will unravel completely.

Now, none of these situations are more difficult or less difficult. A start up is as difficult as a steady state. Imagine stepping into the shoes of Steve Jobs. A steady-state organization and the expectation from you is that you are going to deliver something dramatically different, right? So, I think, the first element that any leader needs to do, is to decipher or diagnose what state the organization is in. Which one of these four states the organization is in? Also, what the leader needs to do is to decipher what state he or she most comfortable is in. So, if I am a start-up, my affinity is towards start up. Turnaround leaders are people who will give their commitment and then seek clarity. Steady-state leaders are people who would give their commitment only after getting clarity, so they would seek a lot of clarity before they give their commitment. Now, if you try to apply a start-up model on a steady-state organization, you will obviously go wrong, dramatically wrong, no matter how great a leader you are, because you will try to buck things. So, if I went into, let's say the government and try a start-up mentality there, it's unlikely that it will do well. I need to recognize that this is steady-state, this is a super tanker. If you want to turn it, you will have to first get consensus and then begin the turn. You can't stand at the bridge one day and say we are going to do a hard turn right. That's not going to happen. Whereas in a start-up or in a turnaround, you will have to take decisions of that kind.

So, I think rather than the transition from the army to the civil of course, there are certain nuances there; there is no doubt about it. All said and done, the Indian Army doesn't run the risk of 20 of our soldiers quitting and joining the Pakistan Army. That doesn't happen and that happens all the time in the private sector, so you will have to, sort of, factor those kinds of nuances, but other than that — I think, the base framework is the framework that I just spoke about. You first diagnose the state of the company or the organization or the sub unit. And by the way, these cultures can co-exist in the same company. So, you can have a massive company which is a steady-state, but two of its units or two sub-companies might be going through a turnaround. Subcultures will exist, by definition, they will exist in large countries and large companies and larger sort of establishments.

DJ: Clearly, there is a reservoir of leadership in the army and the civil world is very different. What could some of those leaders do to ensure they settle in well because the corporate world could benefit a lot from alumni of the army? So, any thoughts on how to bridge the two worlds to ensure that the corporate world could benefit from the leadership expertise of the armed forces?

RR: I have always been quite passionate about this area not because I am ex-army and therefore would like to sort of advocate the case of forces officers coming in. If you study countries like the US, or for that matter, even Europe, you realize that a large part of their spurt in growth happened immediately after the Vietnam War or after the Second World War. Of course, there was a lot of nation rebuilding happening, but what a lot of social commentators and contemporary historians

have not paid enough attention to is the fact that immediately after the Vietnam War, for 15-20 years, every able-bodied man in the US had served in the forces, and there was a common vocabulary. They were course mates and comrades and one could just pick up the phone and reach out to someone else in another organization and get that extra leg up, because of another relationship which was there. The ex-forces people are doing exceedingly well in the US. As you are probably aware, Harvard ran a cover story on how servicemen who are coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq are being snapped up by the corporates, because they bring a completely different kind of leadership skill. So, the potential is clearly there.

Now, honestly, I think, in India, that potential has not been leveraged. Cases of people who have come from the armed forces and had a commensurately successful career in the private sector aren't that many. There are some fundamental reasons for that. One of the reasons is that in India, unlike in the US, we've had a very wide chasm between the forces and the civilian counterparts; at times, it's almost a disdain. There is a sense of disdain for the civilians or the army guys, and there is a huge lack of knowledge. Or for that matter, the bureaucracy; I mean we all have these stereotypes about '*army main rasion free hain*' and bureaucrats don't work. These are wrong stereotypes. They are not even true. Even if they were 30% right, one could say it's a broad brushstroke, but they are completely false. These are factually incorrect in many ways.

So, I think one of the challenges or one of the areas where forces officers would probably... three things. One is for them to realize that they are going back to a second career and they are going to restart, at least in some areas, as a lieutenant all over again. So, it doesn't matter where they retired from. If they think, 'I am a brigadier or a general in my head' and come with that element into a completely new domain... It's a bit like saying; I am very fluent in French, so I should be treated with respect in Egypt. You are not going to be. You'll have to learn Arabic there. You'll have to learn the lingo, and then, you will have to start all over again. And if you have to learn, you have to bend; that's the only way to learn. You have to have the humility to say, 'I don't know this and I need to be taught this'. So, that transitioning into a civilian career is, I think, the first step where the forces need to be educated on the transition.

The second is, I think, the people need to choose the kind of portfolio that they would like to... To my mind, when people come from the forces into the private sector, there are five major categories in which they can come. The first and the most obvious choice is security, and to my mind, that is very underleveraging of the potential. The second is adjunct to that, which is more in terms of administration. The third is HR, because you have been leading troops and all of that. The fourth is operations, because that's a large part of the forces. The fifth, and the Holy Grail, is the P&L. You run a profit and loss, sort of, there is a score being kept, literally on a quarterly basis, on how well you are doing. I think that is the holy grail, but to get to that holy grail, I think, there needs to be grounding, re-education, understanding many elements. So, for example, cost and finance is something that most of the forces are completely, sort of, insulated from, because we really don't care how much a tank that we operate costs. I mean, it's not done on a, sort of, P&L basis. You don't hire people based on P&L. If you're authorized 800 people, you fight to get those 800 people. It's a very different context. At an operational level, there is no commercial context to it, and I think that's extremely important in the private sector. So, unless those elements are learnt, there would be dissonance. So, I don't think any army officer should think that they will be able to automatically morph the learnings that they have got from another world into this world.

Similarly, I don't think any civilian leader should believe nor have a false expectation that just because he's brought somebody from another domain they will hit the ground running. That's not going to happen. There'll be some mistakes that they'll make in the beginning. There'll be some sort of acclimatization and part of acclimatization is actually making some mistakes. So, if both sides expect a zero-error syndrome to work from day one, then it's a wrong expectation. I think that part is something that, at the jawan's level, we do it pretty well, not as much as we should, but we definitely have reskilling programs and all. Among officers, now, they have started a kind of a mini MBA in some of these B-schools. To my mind, that's really not enough, because the mini MBA only teaches you theoretical knowledge; it doesn't teach you the mechanics of how things work, the unarticulated power structures, for example, in organizations, or navigating the politics of the organizations. And politics, to my mind, is not a bad word, because politics is the art of polity. It's not necessarily a dirty word, just because it has been dirtied by some people. The science of politics is not bad, so I think learning that, learning how to lead without authority, leading only by your influence, these are some of the things which military leaders also need to make a transition in. They have to realize that in this new career they are literally drinking through a hose, so that's the kind of learning that they have to do.

DJ: And any lessons from the other market. You mentioned US and some of the other countries, so any lessons on how they bridge this cultural gap?

RR: One of the areas where I believe India is at a disadvantage is that formally, in many of the Western countries, there is education about the defence forces. So, if you were graduating from, say, the US, you would know far more about military in general. You would know about the D-Day landings, you would know about the Vietnam War, you would have been brought up on a diet not just of war movies but historical movies. There would be hundreds of books written on the Vietnam War and what happened in World War I, World War II. It's part of the civil society's consciousness. I have a theory for that, and I believe that's because all those countries have faced an existential threat. So, whether in hindsight you say that Japan could have never threatened the US, after the Pearl Harbour raid, even as deep as Chicago, people were diving into air-raid shelters. Because that was the fear, the existential fear that the Soviet Union would take you out. And that is why the entire country as a whole needed to be made aware about defence. Now, India, fortunately or unfortunately, has never had an existential crisis, so even when you are waging a full-blown war with Pakistan in 1971, large parts of South India is completely unaffected. When you have something happen in Sri Lanka, with the IPKF, large parts of North India don't even know what's going on there. So, I don't think as a nation, we ever have got together to realize that we can have an existential crisis. That, to my mind, has created this whole sort of insulation of the forces from the rest of the country. Not even us versus them but 'cantonment', the word comes from containing troops in another location and they are in their own la la land and the contained troops also think that they are in their own bubble. I think this osmosis advantage we have not had, which is what happened in the US.

The second is, I think, again a derivative of the first point, where many of the leaders in the US or in the UK or in Europe, until about 10 to 15 years ago, were from a generation who actually fought wars themselves. They've been involved in the Second World War, they have been involved in the Vietnam War, or they've seen the Korean War and all of that stuff. They have a very high representation of forces in their political establishment and business establishment, in industry. Unfortunately, that's not the case in India. Most of our ex-servicemen who do come out, they are,

sort of, relegated to security duties. They will only handle security or there will be that one odd token general in some board, but that general will still be leveraged only for his security expertise, or man-management expertise at some level, or little bit of operations, but never in terms of strategy and stuff like that. So, I think that osmosis has not taken place and it's not something that we can start tomorrow. It will take a generation of officers to come out, to earn their spurs, to earn the respect, to speak the same lingo, and to demonstrate to their civilian counterparts that they are equally good leaders in a P&L environment, that they understand profit, they understand loss, they understand money. As you probably realize, there is almost an unspoken culture in the army not to be concerned about money. It's almost a disdained aspect, talking about money is considered to be, that's important in the army, because obviously you are not being driven by material incentives there. But that's what keeps the score in the civilian street. So, you can't say that I'll play by the same rules here. So, it's a complete re-wiring, and more importantly, it's an understanding that there needs to be a re-wiring. It's not just the rewiring itself but the consciousness on the part of that leader who is transitioning from one place to another that I need to be re-wired. That's true for any transitions, not just from one sphere to another; it's any transition, even life transitions.

DJ: I am curious to discuss some of the elements of leadership that we can learn from the armed forces. I have heard you talk about the skill-up technology that the corporate world, specifically the start-up world, can learn from. I'd love for you to elaborate on that.

RR: Like I've mentioned in a couple of my other talks, if you look at the technological development that has happened during the times of conflict. Try and visualize that before the Second World War began, the world was in propeller planes and by the time it ended, more than six countries had their own fighter jets developed, production lines, and industrialized to a number that they could actually be fielded in the Second World War. That doesn't just mean producing the aircraft. It means the whole ecosystem of the MRO, and pilots, and strategy, and logistics, and all of that. Every piece of technology you use today, 90% of it comes from conflict, so whether it's radio, sonar, radar... Internet was developed largely to prevent a nuclear war, so that in case of nuclear fallout, you didn't want to rely on a system which was point-to-point failure system. That's why a gridded system, the DARPA basically, created that. Now, there is some logic in that. When human kind is fighting for existential reasons, they are likely to put their best minds on whether it's the harnessing of nuclear energy itself or for many of the sorts of technological marvels that we today take for granted; their origin is in conflicts.

Similarly, if you look at nations like Israel which is known as the start-up nation. One of the contributing factors is the fact that young kids are given exposure to technology which in the civilian street they will never get. So, that two years' conscription, or three years' conscription in the case of men, gives them an exposure to leading-edge technology — very, very expensive technology — which they would not otherwise get an exposure to in normal other careers. So, there is a whole element of technology that is used in the forces, and it's a great platform from where you can begin thinking about some of the elements of innovation. Whether it's innovation of technology, innovation of processes, innovation of thinking out of the box, it provides a very strong foundation there.

Now, the example that you are referring to is more an example of how you may create a framework. See, one of the challenges in an organization which is trying to scale up is that... When you look at a small team, when it starts up, it's typically three-four people, founders who get some administrative

help, logistics help, sales help. A typical start-up is 10 people and that's a section in the armed forces. Usually, the second stage will be anywhere between 35 and 40 people. That second stage is roughly the size of a platoon. Then, when you move from there to your next tranche, it will usually be 150 to 200 people, which is the size of a company in the army; it's also called a company or a squadron in case of the armed corps. The fundamental spans of control and expansion limits and boundaries are already sort of defined. They go back a few 100-1,000 years; it's not something that is happening anew. Span of control is not something that's new. That's been happening since many, many 100 years ago. So, rather than reinventing the wheel, one could look at these models and modify it wherever required and be able to implement it in today's world as well. That's what I meant by saying that there are certain frameworks and certain vocabularies that if you just transition or morph from another world and bring into this world, you straightaway can hit the ground running rather than trying to re-create it from scratch.

One of the models that I strongly advocate is for any organization and a team of people to have what is called a common vocabulary. By common vocabulary I don't mean that organizations have to become clones of each other, but just like there are certain protocols — in say, the IT system and that's why an MS Word document is able to talk to an Excel sheet which is able to talk to a PowerPoint presentation, because those protocols allow these different programs to talk to each other seamlessly similarly, I think, organizations need to have their individual characteristics, their idiosyncrasies, their own cultures, but at an operating level they need to have a common lingo. Suppose I say, give that document to me ASAP. Now, as soon as possible, for me, may be 45 minutes, for you it could be three days. If I tell you, take a look at this document, for you, it could be the font is OK, there is a lot of white space, the grammar is right; for me, it could be run it past the regulator, run it past the compliance guy, run it past the legal guys. That's what I mean when I say take a look at that document, because that's what I would do. Now, if we don't have a common vocabulary within an operating system, then a lot of things will fall through the cracks, a lot of people will get frustrated. You hear these sentences very often incorporate: 'He just doesn't get it!' This is two different vocabularies clashing with each other. Now, one of the things that I think the forces focus a lot on is that they will allow the regiments to have their own cultures and their own characters and their own idiosyncrasies, the way they will greet each other, the festivities that they will celebrate and all of that stuff. But when it comes to operations, when someone says half right turn, there is no debate in anyone's mind that it is 45 degrees; it's not 43, it's not 47, it is 45 degrees. Now, if organizations start absorbing that framework at their initial stage, when they are in the start-up mode, then scaling becomes much easier. It's like having an alphabet set. So, you say, I am going to use A to Z as my alphabet set. But typically, what happens in an organization is that they use A to Z during their initial stage, and then they decide to change the vocabulary when they are going to the next stage. When they subsume another company inorganically, then again the vocabulary changes. This dissonance which it causes within the organization, it's a bit like five horses pulling a chariot. Each horse's just off by 5 degrees, so there's a lot of pulling and dragging happening and each horse believes that the other four are not pulling their weight, and the chariot isn't moving forward. I think that's what I mean by having a common vocabulary and frameworks which can which act as the skeleton of the organization on which muscle can be added and flesh can be added, but the skeleton sort of holds the entire shape together.

DJ: I am particularly curious about the acronym Z-KITBAG. In McKinsey, we used to use a term MECE, Mutually Exclusive and Collectively Exhaustive. So, it felt like a holistic framework. If you could expand on that for a couple of minutes.

RR: Like the MECE framework, this is a framework that's got a great flexibility, in that, it can be used by a section commander of 10 men and he does use it right up to an army commander who commands millions. So, the framework also makes sure that every aspect of your briefing is covered in a sub-heading. It also makes sure that your subordinates or your peers, who are listening to your briefing, or even in your own thinking, know exactly at what point they have to pay attention. Because if I am a logistics person, I know that after this, is my turn, and after this has been covered, it will come. The Z-KITBAG is an acronym that we use very often in the army to teach people how to think, how to give orders, how to plan, how to build strategy. And like the most things in the army — most things that really, really work well — the fundamental structure is very simple, and it has to be, because it has to be taught to a 12th class pass jawan; he has to understand it. How do you create a framework within an organization where the last trooper on ground is aware of the strategic intent of his overall commander? How may he assume orders in the absence of orders?

DJ: Which is equivalent to the sales guy on the street knowing what the CEO is thinking, right?

RR: Not just what the CEO is thinking, but if my CEO is not here and I need a direction, what would my CEO give me as a direction? So, how to assume orders in the absence of orders. That is the fundamental reason for a framework like this. So, it's a very simple framework. Its origin lies in the orders and the briefing of the Indian armed forces and as you probably are aware, the Indian armed forces' heritage is largely from the erstwhile British Indian Army. So, the use of the lingo is peppered with Urdu and erstwhile Hindustani and, of course, some elements of English, because it was British officers and Hindi-speaking, Urdu-speaking troops.

So, Z stands for *Zameeni Nishan*. The loose translation of that in the civilian street would be environmental scan. So, before you begin an operation, you've got to give the troops an orientation: you are fighting in a desert, what does that mean, the day time temperature goes up to this much, in the night time it plummets to this much, these are the canals which describe our boundary so if you cross this canal it means basically you've gone past your target. So, you're orienting them to the environmental scan. That has an application in the civil street as well. If you are trying to decide the strategy for, let's say, the Pharma sector, then your environmental scan will talk about what are the regulations in that space, who are the regulators, what are the boundary conditions, what are the patent laws, you need to understand all of that kind of stuff.

The KITBAG as an acronym is also chosen so that soldiers remember. KITBAG is simple to remember; you'll never forget KITBAG. And Z, of course, if you just prefix it, you will remember Z-KITBAG. K stands for *Khabar* and *khabar* is information. It always starts with your competitor's information first, so you will always brief your team on the org structure of the enemy, the enemy commanders, what are their strong points, what are their weak points, which are their hot buttons. So, you could mess with some of your, say, competitors in all over India, but if you mess with them in their home town, the response will be disproportionately hard. So, understanding your competitors' *khabar*, information. Then, it's followed by your own *khabar*: who are you, what are your strengths, what are your sister organizations, what are the boundary conditions between your sister organizations, so that two of the sister organizations are not pitching for the same account, so you understand whom can you call for support in case you require assistance in, say, digital, there is an arm which can provide us with that support. So, it's *khabar apni*.

'I' stands for *Iraada*. What is the strategic intent, what are you trying to achieve out of this entire exercise? So, it's not just the transactional steps; it is what is the overall intent of the commander, how that intent is sort of checked back. So, you actually give out an *iraada* and then check back with your troops that repeat the strategic intent, so that verbatim they are able to repeat it. Then, it becomes ingrained in every person as a north star that this is the strategic intent of my commander, not the interim steps; those are only ways to achieve the strategic intent.

'T' stands for *Tareeka*. *Tareeka* is methodology. How are you going to achieve this strategic intent, what are the various phases in which you will do that, how will you hand over from one phase to the next phase, who will be the phase two commander, what will be the sign that phase one has ended and phase two has begun, what will be the milestones and how will you communicate with various different teams, if there is overlap who will be responsible for the overlap? And the *tareeka* goes into those details.

Bandobast is resourcing, troops to tasks, as we call it. To achieve this objective, how many troops to task do you need? Do you have sufficient troops? Is there a backup if the first piece doesn't work? Do you have enough resilience in, say, your cashflow, to take care of, say, six months of your sales plan not actually fructifying? What we call troops to task means for this task, how many troops do you need, what are the resources?

'A' stands for Administration. Again, many companies fail because they don't look at that part. They do the hiring, but they haven't got the laptops and PCs in place. That's in a dissonance. So, you suddenly have 40 employees whom you have given employment letters to, but you have seating space for only 13, so 27 of them are supposedly working from home or not working at all, or are drawing pay and waiting for... Administration basically talks about all the administrative requirements which need to be done.

'G' stands for one of the most important aspects, which are unfortunately ignored several times in organizations and that are *Ghadi Milao*. What that implies is... If I am an infantry commander who is going to launch an attack at my target, let's say, at first light, which is 6 o'clock in the morning. Before I launch my attack, I want that complete area to be softened, as we say, by artillery fire, and I want the firing to start from 5:50 to 6 o'clock. For 10 minutes, I want intense firing on that target. As soon as the firing lifts, when the troops there are badly damaged and dazed, then I launch the attack. Now, you can imagine what could go wrong if my watch and my artillery commander's watch are off by just one minute. In that one minute, I will launch the attack and they will be firing, still firing. So, it's extremely important to synchronize our timelines. Time lining, I think, is extremely important but often ignored, especially when you are looking at large enterprises which have many moving parts.

So, once again Z: *Zameeni Nishan*, K: *Khabar*, I: *Iraada*, T: *Tareeka*, B: *Bandobast*, A: Administration, G: *Ghadi Milao*. Now, if you just remember this acronym in the back of your head, then whether it's a talk that you are going to do, whether it's a strategy paper you are going to write, whether it's just collecting your thoughts together, whether you want to do an exercise of this nature that you are doing, you would have a fair point-by-point thinking in your head. More importantly, your team will know, so your admin guy will know that my turn will start after *Bandobast* is over. After B is over, my turn will start and I, therefore, need to pay attention from this point onwards or I need to factor in

for these troops to task. So, it's a very ordered mechanism. This framework can be used, as I mentioned, from a section of 10 men right up to an army of half a million men.

DJ: On the intent part, because you mentioned the man on the street needs to know the intent of the CEO. Any thoughts on how do you ensure that the chain of communication two-ways, the CEO has viewership or visibility to what the salesman is thinking and vice versa any lessons to be learnt on how that chain can be efficient?

RR: Lot of lessons, and they are not necessarily in the component of Z-KITBAG. If you see the fundamentals of leadership in combat, they have certain fundamentals for a leader, and one of the fundamentals is that a leader should be upfront. The reason why leaders should be upfront is basically because then they can spot those fleeting opportunities in the fog of war. They can actually see... the chain of information coming to him is not a distorted and a long chain; it is instantaneous, on the spot. That is why you have what is called field commanders. So, when you say a major and above is a field commander, it means in the field, he can take certain decisions, whether they are promotions, demotions, changing of command, handing over charge — you think someone is damn good in logistics, but he is slotted in the wrong place; on the spot you can make that change and sort of give your directions. It doesn't have to go through a committee and a board and all of that stuff. Now, that is a trait which, I think, we need to encourage a lot more incorporates. Some companies do it. They have this line of control... like Tesco, for instance, some of its most senior management, for two days, they turn into tellers, they stand behind the counter and do the tellers' job and they get some great insights and ideas on how to improve performance.

The second is the entire enterprise must always physically know the leader's location. That's again very important, because when we are trying to create an organization, we are essentially creating a shared reality. The shared reality has to pivot around either a thought or a leader. Now, if it has to pivot around the leader, then the leader's location is important, because otherwise you don't know where the centre of gravity is. So, the physical location of a leader at any given point of time must be known by the subordinates. Similarly, the leader must have his advisors always physically close to him. So, if I have to take a decision, I need to know whether I will have sufficient artillery support for that or will have sufficient logistic support for that. For me to be able to take that decision, I cannot say, 'OK, now my advisor will give me this advice after two days'. Then, that decision cannot be made. So, these are some of the basic principles using which the forces make sure that the commanders have a very good understanding of what is happening on ground.

There are also, for example, certain portfolios. For instance, in the armoured corps, and especially in mechanized warfare, there are certain officers who are called recce platoon commanders. Now, recce platoon commander is somebody who is responsible for going out into the no man's land or the areas where you are going to advance and actually carry out a reconnaissance. He may be the junior-most officer but when he comes back and gives his report, that report is listened to by the senior-most of army commanders, because they know that it's not about the seniority of this individual, it's about the fact that he has the feel of the ground. He is the man from the streets. Again, sometimes, I see that incorporates. People are dismissive of ground reality. And why? Because they are senior.

I do a very popular exercise now. Sometimes, I ask questions in B-schools. For instance, one of my favourite questions in B-schools is, tell me why is it that the cheaper models of phones in India have

dual SIM? You would assume that, intuitively, it would be the more expensive models which would have multiple slots. Why would a poor man who is struggling to pay one bill need two slots? I have found that the people in the class, the students, they proceed on two vectors on this. One vector is that they think about the various possibilities and they postulate those possibilities and they discuss it themselves — and I give them sufficient time; I say, you know what, I'm asking this question and you can answer it after lunch. The second school of thought, which I find very rare, extremely rare, is a kid actually going and asking a security guard or somebody or the sweeper, '*ke bhai, kyun rakhte ho aap,*' why do you have two SIM cards, and get the answer straight from the ground. Very few do that. Most of them want to do the five forces and Peter Drucker, because they have learnt that. So, they want to treat every problem with a Michael Porter's five forces. Whereas the simplest way to get the answer would be to actually ask a poor person, the *chaiwalla* outside, anybody who is affording a phone of 2000 bucks, why do you have two SIM cards? And he will give you the answer. He'll say that one of the SIMs is for incoming calls which is free and that's a number I can't change because you will call me for *chai* every day. I can't change that number. The other SIM is for outgoing calls, because that I will keep doing 'scheme'. If Jio is giving free now, I will use Jio, if Airtel gives a discount, I will use Airtel. So, for outgoing calls, I will use... And that's the reason why they have two SIMs. So, rather than trying to figure it out fast I mean you can figure it out, but the easier way is to actually go and ask the soldier on ground, 'Why are you doing it this way?' and you probably have a much more accurate actually the accurate answer of why it's being done. So, I think that framework is what allows the seamless communication between the frontline. Of course, by all of this narration I don't mean that the army does it perfectly. There is room to improve everywhere, but that's the underlying framework which allows it to happen.

DJ: There is a lot of talk in the corporate world about building culture. I am fascinated by the armed forces because you don't have incentives. All you have is culture, to carry people with you. What are the two or three things that we could learn in terms of how to build a culture and how to build followership?

RR: So, firstly, I think I'll correct you there. It's not that the army doesn't have incentives. They are not material incentives, they are different incentives. It's very interesting that. There are certain units, for example, the special forces or let's take the NSG, National Security Guard, for example, which is a purely deputations force Rashtriya Rifle, another great example where soldiers will come only for two to three years. So, you will join that outfit for two to three years, which means, at any given point of time, even the commanding officer of that unit will not know more than 50 to 60% of his people, because he is himself getting rotated. Despite that, organizations have a very strong sense of cultural Identity.

I think, how the forces do it is by storytelling, by creating a narrative of that organization which is so strong and so powerful, that any time a person puts on that uniform and he has got the shoulder badge and whatever it may be, Jat Regiment, Rajput, Bihar, Rashtriya Rifle, 22 Mech and the moment you adopt that, you sort of put on that clothing on yourself and you become part of that unit, you also are immersed into the legends of that unit. So, for example, one of the rituals that happen in a battalion is as soon as new soldiers are commissioned in and they may come in a batch of 15 to 20 or 30 or whatever, they are actually taken around the officers' mess and the quarter guard and they are shown all the trophies. Every narrative is 'To retrieve this flag, we lost 30 people in that battle; to recover the dead body of one of our comrades, we launched seven attacks and we lost several more in the process, but we did not leave the body of one of our soldiers behind'. By the

time you listen to the third or the fourth or the fifth story, your hair is standing on end, and you realize that you are in a temple; you are in the presence of your ancestors who have left this legacy behind, and that's the expectation from you.

I think that's a very important part of a corporate, where we have become, I think, very antiseptic. We've become very clinical, and these numbers and these sheets and these trend lines they cannot capture the story of an entrepreneur or of two brothers who decided that they are going to make a jeep in India and suddenly take on the British and create an empire which today is known as the Mahindra and Mahindra Group. Or a man who decides he wants to build a hotel because of whatever reasons. So, the legends of organizations are not, I think, spoken of.

The art of storytelling, storytelling is culture building. How do you build a culture? How do you know that you are supposed to have reverence for your elders? It's because somebody has told those stories in your ears, if not necessarily directly, then indirectly, in terms of the shape of stories and the shape of what happened earlier, before you. I think that is a very essential part when you want to forge an organization together. Shared reality is nothing but storytelling. That is what makes us believe that we are right, our country is better, my company is better, my community is better. I can do this because my ancestors have done it, and I can achieve it because in the past I have done it. These are all elements of storytelling and that is the fundamental, I think, cementing block to get a group of people together. That is basically what the armed forces do. They build those legends, those stories and that's what takes people literally to the next level.

DJ: There's a lot that's been written about grit and the role of grit in leaders. If I were to take a specific example, I was reading up on the 26/11 operation, and I was told that the people that fought it went without food or water for 72 hours but still had to do the job. You also alluded to it earlier, where you spoke of tapping into your inner reservoir. Are there any lessons to be learnt on how people can build that muscle, for them to be able to access that inner reservoir that a lot of us are blessed with?

RR: Of course, some of us are blessed with the reservoir, but all of us are blessed with the DNA to create that reservoir. Actually, there is a book called 'Grit'. The author there specifically mentions how people who are encouraged to fail often make much better leaders, whereas people who've never ever failed in life because life will hand you failure. There is no planning you can do to even for your child, for whom you want the absolute everything and you want to cocoon from every bad thing in life, there is no way you can do that, because failure will happen now, anybody who has not dealt with failure in the past will usually collapse catastrophically whenever there is a failure and will not know how to deal with that.

Grit, to my mind, consists of three or four things. One, it consists of constantly pushing your envelope. If you ask a civilian or a person who is not sports-oriented or someone who is not involved in physical activities, 'Why don't you run the Mumbai half marathon?' he will say 'Are you kidding me? Its 21 kilometres'. But I can give you umpteen examples, and I am sure you know of several people, who just decided that this year I am going to run the half marathon and ended up running the half marathon in a pretty decent time. So, the physical capability to do that was always there. It was just the mental lid that the person had: 'No, 21? How can I run 21? I've never even walked five kilometres, so I can't run'. These are self-imposed limitations that all individuals have. I remember one of our instructors used to say: If you stop, your body has won; if you fall down exhausted, your

mind has won. Because if your body is asking you to stop and your mind say, OK, let's stop, then essentially the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Whereas if you are able to keep... so, when you say grit it is that this is the pain that I can take, I can't take any more pain, and then you step one more and then one more element of pain, one more notch up I can take. That's one element of grit.

The other element of grit is actually failing. What I mean by failing is, it is not about an exam, or it's not about a promotion, or it's not about trying an idea and that not working. Failing is us setting, as an individual or as organizations, a set of conditions, boundary conditions, which if we safely cross, we have won. I like the metaphor of high jump competitions. So, when you do the high jump, the way it works is, say five people are competing. You raise the bar and then there are three left, and then you raise the bar again, and now there are two left and one of them is not able to clear it. It doesn't make the remaining person automatically a gold medallist. You raise the bar once again, despite the fact that there is only one person and he has cleared the previous bar. The bar is raised again and let's say he clears it again. Once again, the bar is raised, though for all practical purposes he is the gold medal winner already, so he can easily take that gold medal and go home and say that I won, but he is now competing with himself like you compete with yourself in a marathon. You can't compete with 5,000 people who are running; 3,000 of them will beat you. The point is, you are competing against yourself, against your previous timing. If it's not the timing, it is against your age or against whatever else, it's a relative target that you have set. I think it is very important for people I know this is almost a cliché to say it is important for people to fail. Organizations also tom tom about it, that we want to encourage failure. It's how you deal with the first failure that tells the rank and file whether you really mean it or it's a nice sentence to speak in board meetings and stuff like that. Because if the first failure happens and you come down like a ton of bricks, which is what in most cases happens, then you really are not looking to develop grit in the organization. Then, you are looking for a zero-error syndrome, and zero-error syndrome, by definition, means there will be no risk. There will be no pushing of the envelope and there will be no treading away from the beaten path because only that guarantees you a higher propensity of zero error. Going off the beaten path, thinking out of the box, pushing the envelope, taking a punt on hiring somebody with a gut feel even though the paper says that it doesn't seem to make a fit, but your heart tells you will fail, if you don't fail, then it's not a punt.

DJ: I want to move to a different theme, which is about staying present. Mindfulness in the digitally distracted world we live in is a competitive advantage. I go back to the 26/11 example, 72 hours without food or water and you need to open hundreds of rooms. In each room, you have three situations: a civilian, a terrorist, or a combination of the two, and what you do has to be different depending on what you find but you still need to keep your concentration. What are the lessons to be learnt, to cultivate mindfulness, to operate with thought, even under the most extreme of situations? What are the lessons the corporate world can learn?

RR: So, definitely, these 72 hours without food or water is something that happens because of training. In all Special Forces, in any commando training, you are deprived of sleep, you are deprived of food, and you are fatigued. As a matter of fact, in commando training, we are kept under huge stress and that starts from day one. One of the easiest ways of stress is that they never tell you what your next class is. So, you have no idea whether after you finish this, you should eat a hell of a lot or not at all, because the next could be unarmed combat which means you will vomit out everything that you have eaten, or it could be another 12-hour trek which means if you didn't eat you are screwed. That uncertainty is kept. Probably, one night you will end at 2 o'clock and your instructors

would wake you up at 4 o'clock, so you would get 2 hours of sleep. Or they would wake you up at 2:05, in five minutes. So, you have no idea when you lay down to sleep whether you are going to get five minutes of sleep, two hours of sleep, or no sleep at all. So, it is a part of training. There is no doubt about it; there is an element of training there. But like many other trainings, including your marathon training as you are probably aware, when you're training for a half marathon you actually never run 21 kilometres during your training. The maximum you will run is 18, because the last day, when you run for the main marathon is when you get into the zone and that zone takes you. So, if you are asking me, 26/11, how did those troops perform for 72 hours? It's part training, part being in the zone. Obviously, zone is an element of muscle memory, so the more you train... we have a saying in the army which is very, very popular that 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you will bleed in war'. So, the more amount of time you spend in trying to train for mindfulness...

For example, I know a lot of my friends who either run or cycle. They choose to run or cycle because it's a solitude sport for them; it's not a group sport. While they are running, they are thinking and when they are thinking, the body goes into that mechanical zone and then one leg after another and another and they don't realize that they have covered like 20 kilometres or 15 kilometres. So, you are able to disassociate from physical trauma and almost have your mind operating as if it's in another body. It's not getting these signals that your feet are hurting; your back is hurting and all. That's what our ancestors spoke about when they talked about meditation being able to disassociate from pain or pleasure or whatever, so this is nothing new. This is our ancient philosophy and all of that coming back together.

I think, in our corporate world, the corporates to my mind need some of the, I don't really know what to call it softer side or a different side, but they do need a different side of training now. Our training has been so domain knowledge, so framework driven, you hear senior people talk about how they are Black Belt Six Sigma, they are quality black belts; it's technical, it's domain, it's acquiring three-letter acronyms behind your name, whether its certifications or whatever. But the softer side, negotiation skills, persuasion skills, storytelling skills, leading without authority, the ability to sort of become creative to say that 'OK, fine, I need an answer to this problem, I am going to take up my car, take up my bike, go off somewhere and in three days' time, I'll come back, and I'll come back with the answers to these major questions'. I don't think those aspects are being looked into. I think somewhere we got seduced with this absolute falsehood of multitasking and digital assistance and all of that, but I don't think that's true.

If you go back to your childhood, at least mine, I remember, on TV, there used to be three programs worth watching: one was a feature film in Hindi, one was one of those English programs, 'Secrets of The Sea,' or 'Here is Lucy,' and there used to be 'Chitrahar'. That 'Chitrahar' would have maybe about six songs and you would sort of look at the watch and look at the song and say maybe there is one more song, I could maybe just squeeze one more song that would come out of it. Now, you fast forward to an era where there are hundreds of channels but what do you do? Today, when you go to TV — just listen to what I am saying and map it with your behaviour you flip through channels until you stop at a movie that you have already seen, and you watch a little bit of that movie, and then you move on. So, you don't even invest in watching a new movie. You want to see glimpses of a movie that you have already seen. Now, this whole notion of multitasking and I see a lot of alpha leaders becoming almost macho about it, that I am able to do seven tasks I think a lot of our leaders in the corporate world don't take out the time to just think, just to introspect. They need their diary filled with activity to make themselves feel productive at the end of the day. So, if someone says, I

worked for 14 hours a day and I had like 23 meetings, he or she believes that that day was a very productive day. It may have been, from a mechanical point of view. They may have gotten more widgets done, but were they able to think out of the box? Were they able to come up with a seminal idea? I think the answer is, you can't come up with seminal ideas in routine; it's not possible. Routine is not an environment conducive to out-of-the-box ideas.

The ability to disassociate yourself from the mechanical part of it. Having the courage to do that, to say that I don't need to appear constantly busy to remind myself that I am a leader or to hold my own in front of my subordinates or, more importantly, my boss. I think it requires a little bit courage for the leader to say, 'It's OK, I may not appear frightfully busy, but whenever I implement something it actually moves the needle'.

DJ: Just too maybe make it real, any rituals you've seen effective leaders use, to create that space for deep thought?

RR: I think a lot of leaders now, at least some of the people who I know, they invest time in sports. To my mind, it's a surrogate for having quality time with yourself. So, when you are running, when you are swimming, when you are cycling, or when you are trekking, or whatever, you are actually pretending to do an activity, but actually, it's a very mechanical activity. When you're swimming 50 laps, you're not looking at the scenery. You are beginning that ritual and you are disassociating your mind from your body. It's just de-linking and the moment you de-link, your mind then starts going into directions that you've not.

Some other leaders actually take up areas or reading that is completely unrelated to their core subjects or they indulge in experiences which are completely away from... sports is one, it could be arts, it could be music. I know a CEO of a firm who does metal work; he actually makes metal parts. So, he is a mechanic, so to speak. By the way, he's found an alternate living there, because he makes customized motorcycle parts for Harley Davidson. You write to the guy and he'll build you a seat or whatever. He is a CEO of a Fortune whatever company and he does that as a hobby. Or someone else does carpentry or whatever.

The intent is to disassociate from your routine and go into another place. By the way, that is the essence of all great stories. I don't know if you've ever thought of it that way, but if you look at any great story, its essential components are: there is a protagonist and there is an antagonist and they have a first clash. In the first clash, the antagonist always wins, and the protagonist goes away to another place. In that place, he finds his Yoda, or he finds his guru, and he learns something there, and then he comes back, and he confronts that problem, and he wins. So, I think, this necessity of going away to another world, whether that world is a physical world or a metaphysical world, it's a disassociation. It's extremely important for heroes and heroines and leaders. It is extremely important.

DJ: In summary, any two or three nuggets you want to leave people with, for them to play to their fullest potential?

RR: Sometimes, in life, there are lessons that you know, but you are unable to implement. One of these lessons I will share with you, just one and leave it at that. We all know that anything bad that happens to us, let's say, there was this teacher who was a terror for you in school and who was this larger-than-life demon and you were afraid of physically, maybe even emotionally afraid. When you

look at him or her today, you laugh. You look at that silly thing that happened, that embarrassing moment in school or in college or that moment where you thought that you should just melt and disappear into the ground, it was so bad. When you look back it, maybe you squirm a little bit, you laugh about it today. So, in other words, you know that anything bad that is happening today, if you just fast forward it by six months or 12 months, it doesn't really matter. It's no big deal. Similarly, if you look at any of your greatest moments of happiness, whatever they are, the greatest moment of joy, and if you went sufficiently back in history, you'll find the origin of that moment of joy is in a moment of tragedy. So, if you are in a relationship with someone amazing, it is because you broke off from a relationship earlier; now if that break didn't happen, you would not be with this person. Or if you didn't quit that job, you wouldn't be in this place. If you were not fired from that opportunity, you would not be here. I think the trick which even I am still some distance away from is while we can understand this for the past, why can't we implement it with the present or the future? So, if some bad news hits me right now, why can't I just go back into my memory and say, hey this is the beginning of something good. I can always advise you, but can I internalize it for myself? I think that's the journey, to start implementing the stuff that we already know, in our lives. That, to my mind, is the journey of your full potential, because I don't think there are places where you need to acquire any new knowledge. Knowledge that is already in our soul, in our *zehen*, if only we implement it to a better degree...

So, I remember that I used to have this chemistry teacher many years ago. One day, I was trying to faff around and say why don't we do this or why don't we do that and discover something new or whatever. And he just said, this electric bulb is able to convert some minuscule portion of energy into lights — it's some ridiculous amount, it's some 3 or 4% if you just triple this or double this, you would have achieved a great leap. So, rather than wondering about some dramatically new skill that we need to learn, the skills that you already know theoretically and which you are able to advise other people on, if you can internalize and the 5% that you are following if you can make it 10%, you've doubled your potential anyway. Rather than trying to say I need to know one more language and one more programming code or whatever, just the knowledge that we have already in our head, if we are able to implement that to its fullest potential, I think we are out there anyway.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for tuning into this 3rd conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast series. In case you are interested, the first two guests were Vijay Amritraj and Amish Tripathi. For more, you could follow the twitter handle [playtopotential](#) or follow soundcloud.com/playtopotential. Thank you for listening.

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Mindfulness: Given we live in a world with exponential increase in content creation and with firms like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple vying for our attention, it is quite hard to reclaim our own space and attention. In this context, being mindful could be a key differentiator and a competitive advantage. Some leaders talk about how they created that space for themselves amidst the noise. You can access the playlist [here](#).

In Summary – Playing to potential: This playlist captures the essence of what the speaker is trying to say in their conversation. In a way, it captures the key principles with which they have approached life which has brought them to where they are today. They share their perspectives on the mindset we need to adopt as we navigate through life. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Capt. Raghu Raman - Nuggets

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- 03.02 Capt. Raghu Raman - How the army looks for potential
- 03.03 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning across cultures
- 03.04 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning from the army to the corporate world
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- 03.07 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transmitting intent down the chain
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock 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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