



Guest

Dr. Pramath Sinha has worked in diverse fields spanning business and strategy, consulting, leadership and academia. He spent 12 years with McKinsey & Company in North America and India, heading leadership and media practices. Passionate about education, he forayed into the field as the founding Dean of the Indian School of Business (ISB) and was instrumental in building ISB into a world-class business school in India. He is the Founder and Managing Director at 9.9 Mediaworx Pvt Ltd. He is the Founder and Trustee of the recently launched Ashoka University (ashoka.edu.in), India's first liberal arts university. The Young India Fellowship (youngindiafellowship.com) launched under its aegis in 2011, was another first of its kind scholarship programme in the country. He has recently started the Vedica Scholars Programme for Women with a vision of creating a cadre of successful women professionals for the 21st century. Pramath mentors and advises various educational groups that seek his expertise. In addition, he is currently a Senior Counsellor with Albright Stonebridge Group, helping international businesses set up operations in India. Pramath holds a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, and a B.Tech degree from IIT, Kanpur.

In this conversation, he shares his perspectives on consulting as a career path, how people should think about transitioning from consulting, education in the context of building future leaders, his views on authenticity, building women leaders, and entrepreneurship as a way of life, his personal Board of Directors and much more.

Context to the conversation

Hello and Welcome to the 14th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast series. I am Deepak Jayaraman - The creator and curator of this series of conversations. I am an Executive Coach and do work in the space of Leadership Development but with a focus on Leadership Transitions both in the context of companies and careers. My objective from this podcast is to have "Learning conversations" with a range of people and share those curated insights with you. This time, I am excited to be talking to Dr. Pramath Sinha. Pramath has a B.Tech from IIT Kanpur and a PhD from U Penn. He then joined McKinsey and was with them for 13 years. He was the founding Dean at the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad where he is now a Board member. He has subsequently been instrumental in setting up Ashoka University a liberal arts university that aims to be at par with the best in the world and Vedica Scholars Programme for women a unique alternate to MBA to prepare women leaders for the future. Today his portfolio of work includes helping people set up institutions of excellence, includes Consulting work with Albright Stonebridge group and some Board positions. We spoke about a range of topics including his thoughts on a career in consulting, transitioning out of consulting, entrepreneurship, how he thinks about leadership of the future and the link with education. Without further ado over to the conversation.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You wear multiple hats. If you had to talk about the pie-chart of the different things you do, give us an insight into what that looks like.

Dr Pramath Sinha (PS): So, at this point in my life, I think there are three, kind of, legs to what I do. One is that I am an entrepreneur and I started something called 9.9 Media a few years ago. That takes up some of my time. And we continue to operate in the specialist media space where we have some very prominent brands like Digit, CIO & Leader, IT Next, CFO India. Our business is really focused around those four brands, so I continue to do that.

My second leg is some interesting consulting work that I continue to do, which lot of people here don't know about because my clients are generally multinationals. But I work with Madeleine Albright, former US secretary of state on a firm that she started, called the Albright Stonebridge Group, which advises multinationals on challenges that they face in international markets, and in our case, I lead their team in India. On the face of it, it is consulting but it's very different from the typical McKinsey consulting, where it's really at the intersection of politics, business, policy, and the social sector. So, the problems are very multi-dimensional and the solutions are not obvious. It requires multiple stakeholder management and a fairly holistic approach. There, we don't only advice, but we actually execute a potential way forward. So, that's something that takes up a chunk of my time.

Then, the final thing is the obvious higher education space where I spend time. There, it's really between two sets of things. One is a philanthropic, more volunteer, set of things, which includes ISB and the two campuses, Ashoka, and something I started a couple of years ago, called the Vedica Scholars Programme. In addition to that, I am now starting to do stuff which is more in helping other people improve or build new institutions. That again is more project management mode, of literally going and doing a BOT or becoming a BOT partner for people who already own institutions or want to build institutions to say, 'Given my experience, let me do something for you which is really high quality, either to improve what you have or to build something new'.

DJ: You have a portfolio of different things, high-impact things, you do. How do you think about impact and success? Is there some sort of a yardstick you set for yourself, in the context of what you are doing?

PS: I think these things are all so different that it's hard to say that there is any one yardstick, but if I reflect on it, there's always an internal metric and an external metric. And there is a very personal metric, which I will come to. So, I think, on the external metric, my yardstick is really and a lot of this came out of the McKinsey experience that are the clients, are the people I am working with, are the customers or people I am catering to high-quality people with the right values and right intents, that I enjoy working with them and we have mutual respect for each other. I think, in all cases, there has to be high aspiration. So, I am not getting into those kinds of metrics: you have to be world class or you have to do something that impacts a lot of people. I think, those can vary and everybody would talk about them but for me the relationship and the quality of people — in McKinsey, we used to say quality of client and quality of impact have to go together. So, I think that is a one big metric that I try to use. Sometimes, impact may be small, but they are good people and you want to help them out. So, I think, that's very much something that guides me as I look at what I do externally or who I engage with.

The second is that I also want to do things where I am able to attract good people. I think, in my kind of model, where I am doing multiple things, it's very dependent on having a high-quality set of people. Otherwise, you possibly can't do so many things. So, to be able to say that listen, am I doing things in a way or am I working on things and I'm doing it in a way that attracts high-quality people to me, who, on one hand, I can depend on and can leverage and on the other hand, I can be a mentor to and help them be successful at what they want to do. That, I think, together with the quality of people you are working with on the outside, gives me the measure for what I am doing and why am I doing it.

Then, finally, it all really comes down, I think, as you grow older in life, to what is the sense of satisfaction and sense of purpose that you draw from these things you do. On one hand, it may seem that I do bunch of unrelated things which have a myriad of very different outcomes, problems, and context. But underlying all of this is that, for me, Pramath and not for you or other people what seems fulfilling, satisfying, purposeful, taking into account some of the practical realities of life that I have to earn some money or take care of my future. That's really what determines success or what you want to do.

DJ: Going back to the point in time when you joined McKinsey. You are an IIT alumnus and then you had a PhD from UPenn. At that time, why McKinsey?

PS: Sometimes, there are points in life where you don't know why you take something up, and it's often in reaction to not liking something else rather than knowing what you are getting into. So, it wasn't like I knew what I was getting into with McKinsey, but I was quite unhappy being an academic at that point in time. It was doubly disappointing because I had worked very hard up till that point to become an academic or to get the PhD. Then, to find that in the profession itself, there was a lot of politics, there was a lot of confusion about people like me who came from a very interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary background. I just think I was in the wrong context, in the wrong milieu. I had moved from the US to Canada thinking that that's where better opportunities were and that I could be a bigger frog in a small pond. They offered me a good position and so on and so forth. And it often happens in life. It's not just then. I now realize that every second move I make is a wrong move. Then, you correct yourself and find that that corrected move becomes the best move you took. This has almost been a pattern, at least, in my life. So, I think it was one of those moves that were probably a wrong move. If I had gone into another university, where the context was right, I may still be an academic today for all you know, doing research in robotics.

So, I had this very tough challenge where I was not enjoying the atmosphere I was in and what I was doing. It was then that a bunch of friends who used to work at McKinsey approached me and said, hey, McKinsey is looking for diversified hires that, interestingly, when you look at it now, were non-MBAs. It's like, we don't know what other ways to classify these guys who don't have MBAs, so it's like we are hiring non-MBAs and literally, the person who referred this to me said, if you are successful, I get to donate 500 dollars to my favourite charity. They have a referral program going. So, I was first very perplexed. I knew about McKinsey because I was at Penn and Wharton was there, and I knew all the Indians who went to Wharton all went to McKinsey. They lusted after McKinsey, so I knew it was a big deal for the MBAs but I never thought I would actually be looking at working there, but then I realized that they had been hiring PhDs. What really worked for me was that the Toronto office, where they sent me to interview once I applied, was, in fact, full of people who did not have MBAs. So, I suddenly saw people like me working there, interviewing me, and being very much like me and seemingly enjoying the place. I've always been a bit of a risk taker and I like doing different things, so that's how I said why not. And very quickly realized that was a good decision. That it actually felt more like my PhD days than my academic days, because it was people from all different backgrounds, it was very multidisciplinary. I was given a lot of respect for my PhD. From

day one, people started calling me rocket scientist, literally, because of my robotics background and so on. So, it was a great ride.

DJ: How should people think about consulting as the first job? I am quite curious about type 1 and type 2 errors in these situations. Who were the people that joined consulting but very quickly realized they are not cut out for it and who were the people that could have been great consultants but never ended up joining for the wrong reasons. Do you have a view on that?

PS: My view is that while there is a lot of emphasis on hiring a person who have very high IQ and that's what the McKinsey's and others of the world do when they go out and recruit. I think, while that is almost a necessary condition in consulting because people do pay the big bucks to have very smart people consult for them, we forget that a second necessary condition has to be that this is a person who really enjoys working with people, both internally and externally, and honestly, the ability to engage. I am not saying you have to be nice and inspirational and all those fancy things, but you should have an interest in engaging with other human beings. This is a contact sport and a lot of people don't realize that. They take the McKinsey offer or McKinsey makes the offer because it's very difficult to judge whether a person is cut out for a contact sport or not. So, it's a little bit like, do you want to play chess and tennis or squash or golf, maybe not golf, that has some interaction to it versus a team sport like a football or hockey or cricket, where they are all sports but there are very different personalities who succeed. And there's skill involved; obviously, you want to be good at whatever you do. But, I think, there's a certain kind of person who will fit into a team sport environment and a certain kind of person who would not play team sports and be more individual. I think that's the call most people don't realize.

DJ: It's also about not winning but enabling clients to win.

PS: Yeah. So, then, there is a whole set of other things that comes with making others successful, being comfortable in letting go, and being good at dealing with conflict, and so on. The working hard and so on bit, I think, goes with every job these days. But I really do think that your ability to connect with people, whether it's your teams internally over time and with clients from day one, [given] the kind of jobs consultants do, is very, very critical in being successful as a consultant. You have to really look at yourself and say, 'Am I that kind of a person? Do I really have it in me to start a conversation from nothing, break an awkward moment that inevitably happens in consulting-client relationship, and not get fazed by conflicts or resistance? How to have the confidence to deal with that? These are all becoming much more required in a consulting career. They always were, but I think, today, there is greater primacy to these things.

DJ: How should people think about transitioning from a consulting path forward versus branching off either at a manager level or a partner level or a director level? Given your journey and the journeys of others you have seen through, what are your thoughts on how people should think about that?

PS: I personally feel that everyone's journey is different. I think, somewhere, you take up a McKinsey or consulting role because it's prestigious, it connotes success. In your mid-twenties, when you really join McKinsey, your big metric is to find something that will lead you to being successful. Being successful in your career is usually from the point of view of the role and the job being viewed by your peer group, parents, families as prestigious and also that it will put you on a path to being well to do from a compensation and money perspective. I think, somewhere along the way, we all as human beings and this is not specific to consulting move from a model of saying it's about going for success to it being about going for fulfilment, purpose, and happiness. I should say success versus happiness, but happiness sometimes people think of as a corny thing, but I mean it literally. This is not the fun and pleasure kind of happiness; it's the satisfaction and purposeful and meaning kind of

happiness. So, I think, we all have that in us, but there are people who actually shun corporate jobs and go and work in a not-for-profit or will join a grassroots organization, saying I want to live my life that way. Some of us don't take that decision early on in life, but as you go through life, you start measuring your life, as it were, in terms not of success but of happiness, in terms of purpose, in terms of fulfilment. And that's when you start asking the question, is this the life for me and what am I really doing here?

Now, at which point you switch really depends on you. For some people, they are so ingrained in it, that for them maybe that is the purpose maybe that is what gives them happiness. At least for me, at some point, it started to mean less and less. I think when I went to ISB and came back; I realized the futility of being in a life where I had not experienced doing anything by myself. I felt McKinsey was too protected and that my real strengths came out when I did things. When I took thinking and applied it and took it to the next level, I forward integrated, as it were, from just being a consultant. So, coming back was never the same. Not many people have that luxury or privilege of actually having gone and tasted the real world. So, internally, you are always sitting there thinking, oh, I am only good enough for this. Especially with people like me. I was not even meant to be in business. So, you suffer from this whole imposter syndrome that I was never supposed to be in business and here I am, advising governments, prime ministers, building universities, and so on. Where else would or who else would give me this opportunity? So, you better stay here, this is the safe space. Then, you go out and you taste blood and you say, wow, that's actually what I enjoy more and that's actually what I am really good at. This stuff I have to, sometimes, struggle with. Then, you start asking yourself the question: what do you really want to do?

By then, in McKinsey I had started doing a lot of work around leadership and I used to say to myself, how can I be an authentic consultant or guide on leadership when I am not sure that I understand my own leadership or how am I developing as a leader. So, why not throw me outside, throw myself out there and challenge my own leadership and learn about my own leadership before I can start imparting *gyan* to others on how to become a better leader. A lot of people argued with me that hey, you can experiment with that internally in the firm, and honestly, I felt I couldn't, at least not the kind of challenges I wanted to throw myself. There was a massive firm hierarchy and structure within which I had to navigate and you always had to work with other people. You have to pick one of the practices. If you charted your own practices, you had to get a director to work with you and so on and so forth. At that point, I started finding the firm restricting both in terms of what being a consultant meant, which is to hold yourself back from actually doing anything and being just an advisor, to the other aspect of saying do you really have freedom to do what you want from a life-purpose perspective. Yes, some people chance upon it, but most people in the firm had to kind of go into the mould of how practices and so on, but its fine. So, at that point, this whole purpose and meaning thing started to overshadow my perceived happiness or success that I was getting from what I was doing. That's when I decided to leave.

DJ: One of the pieces I am curious about is when people reach senior levels and up, in firms like McKinsey. Number one, you are operating in a stratified layer where there aren't that many opportunities that sort of qualify to merit your consideration and also the stakes become higher having built such a precious career, you want to be careful about the next step. What are some of the thoughts on how people should answer the question about where to play next? And what are the mistakes you see people make just in getting the direction right?

PS: I think there is no answer to this. My view of this is that what you're looking for when you are looking for something is again some combination of predicting that taking on something will lead to success and happiness or happiness and success. To me it's a mug's game. It's very difficult to predict whether something will work or not. You almost have to go in there thinking, hey, this is not

my last job. I am making an informed judgement. It may not work out and if it doesn't work out, there's something that will come after that. It seems a bit fatalistic when I say it that way. I don't quite mean it that way. Of course, you do the due diligence, of course you go reflect and you think and you talk to your spouse and talk to your mentors and friends and make an informed judgement of what you should do. But, I think, often when people seem very sure of what they want to do I would still give them the same advice, that listen what you think you are very sure about you can get disillusioned very quickly, because you don't really know what the world wants from you.

So, I think if you are going to do something, think hard to me, I would err on the side of saying is there real purpose and meaning and happiness that will come from what I want to do, rather than chasing success. And then success will follow. Because if you are not finding that, then it may not be worth leaving McKinsey, because from a success standpoint, you are very successful. It's the best firm in the world to work with, I would still say. You earn well, people respect you. At some level, while you are running around a lot, working hard, it's a familiar environment. So, why would you leave it? To go to find some other success. This success is good enough. So, you should only leave, I think, when there is greater purpose or meaning and I keep coming back to that when you find something that really is fulfilling rather than say, oh let's become an entrepreneur. I mean, you should become an entrepreneur if that's what gives you meaning, but it's not true that that is where you will be more successful, unless you find meaning in that.

DJ: We are witnessing an entrepreneurial boom in terms of a lot of the alumni becoming entrepreneurs. Any watch-outs or any thoughts on just the questions people should ask themselves before they take the plunge?

PS: I like to say this to people, and I learned this in McKinsey when I was there. A lot of people take the entrepreneurial plunge because they are quite taken with the sexiness of their idea. So, it's like saying that I'm going to get married because I'm dating a beautiful woman, because obviously, somebody being beautiful is not the only reason you should get married to them. What most people don't realize is that actually like management consulting is a profession or being a lawyer or a doctor is a profession, entrepreneurship is a way of life, it's a profession. You have to care about the profession more than what you do today as a job or working in a large organization than care only about the *idea*. A lot of people get carried away: oh, I have this wonderful idea and if somebody else can start a digitally enabled laundry service and be so successful; my idea will also be successful.

I think, what people have to first ask themselves is, hey, do I want to be an entrepreneur? Do I have this real strong urge to start up something and do something on my own, regardless of the idea? Because you start your next laundry service and six months later, you realize it doesn't work. What are you going to do then? You are going to go back and take up another job? In which case, I would say then you are not cut out for entrepreneurship in the first place. That was the wrong way to think about it. A true entrepreneur will say, hey, this doesn't work let me go find something else to do and something else to do and something else to do. In fact, most entrepreneurs don't make good on the first big idea that they think they have. They have to pivot and sometimes go into a completely new business model and go two-three times before they can be successful or never at all, but they love entrepreneurship so much.

DJ: You used a very powerful word 'authentic leadership'. I am curious about what the word 'authentic' means to you?

PS: I have a very simple definition of that. You have to be authentic in that your so-called perception as leader or your stature, if I can use that word, or recognition as a leader comes from real achievement and not just talk and not just fluff. It isn't just because you are a smart guy or you talk

well and you dress well and you are presentable. There are too many such people floating around, and I think the question is, what you have got to really show for your so-called leadership? So, there is an authenticity that comes from having demonstrated that you can get something done.

To me, there's a certain other authenticity that comes from the other aspect of leadership, which, I think, is very important: have you really helped other people to be successful? And then, there's a third dimension to this which is really around how open are you to feedback and change and really pushing yourself to achieve your best potential and overcoming some of the more difficult challenges, having the courage to face your weaknesses and so on. That is such an important aspect of what people say anybody needs to do to become a leader that you can't expect that of others if you haven't put yourself through that challenge. You can't advise others to take feedback if you're not open to feedback. You can't advise others to change their behaviours or mind-sets or attitude unless you have gone through that and seen how tough it is and what personal price sometimes you have to pay.

So, authenticity, to me, comes from those three things: being able to really show that your leadership accounts for some achievement, being able to truly have a record of helping people and helping people succeed not just helping for the sake of helping and then becoming better leaders. Finally, having the personal life experience that you can relate to when you're teaching somebody or helping somebody or guiding or coaching them, without which it is bookish, and that person can read it somewhere or watch a Ted Talk.

DJ: You've spoken about the different things you do. I am curious about how you think about leadership in these different environments? Personally speaking, how do you flex your style if you will, for you to operate effectively in these environments?

PS: I haven't given that much thought. In fact, I feel that I have a fairly simple way of looking at leadership, which works in all these environments. So, call it my naïveté about this or single-mindedness about it, but, to me, there is, actually, a general theory that I am applying to these and it goes back to your question about authenticity.

I think leadership, at the end of the day, really amounts to these three things. Number one, how do you deliver breakthrough disruptive performance each time as many times as you can? You can't do it each time is what I have found but at least you can aim to do it in your style. So, say, there's a normal level of performance that everybody has to deliver or is expected to deliver but can I do something that is breakthrough or disruptive? To me, that's the necessary condition. You can have all the other conditions that I'm going to talk about, but without this, you can't be considered to be a leader or somebody who aspires to be a leader has to keep this in mind.

I think, the second thing is, what I said earlier about the ability to inspire other people to achieve their full potential, to become leaders, to be the best they can be. So, how you can help other people succeed is a great hallmark that you need to have as a leader. But you can't just do that, because if you just do that and not achieve some results, then it's a nice-to-have trait.

Finally, this trait of people's ability to take feedback, read their performance on those two dimensions and say how I need to constantly change, evolve. That's where, actually, the question of adapting your style or looking at leadership contextually comes into play, because, you may need to be a different kind of a leader in a different situation. Your strengths, your weaknesses, and your gaps may play up very differently. So, the ability to see that you are not meant for every situation and different situations require different styles of your own leadership becomes very important on that dimension.

So, these three dimensions of breakthrough performance, making others successful, an obsession with personal growth and personal leadership or leading yourself are the three dimensions that I see of leadership. So, when I am assessing somebody, whether it's an interview, whether it's a performance review or whether it is somebody I am looking up to as a mentor or judging whether they are worth emulating, these are the three things I am looking for. What has this person really delivered? What is their track record of helping, getting other people to succeed? Finally, what is the evidence that they have actually done something about themselves which is different and path breaking, relative to others? I think these three ingredients don't change very much between different situations. Where the context becomes more important is, OK, so how do you achieve breakthrough performance in building an educational institution versus delivering a consulting assignment or versus launching a new vertical at 9.9. Those contexts are very different, but ultimately being focused on the fact that listen, it's not worth doing if I am not able to hit the ball out of the park, is the mindset that you want to bring in all three situations.

DJ: In terms of the incremental leadership muscle that people need to focus on when they move, do you have views on how people should think about themselves in terms of their development? What have been some of your observations in terms of your transitions and the transitions that you see people make effectively?

PS: I would say two things. One is that given that you've lived the life of a consultant for such a long time, you kind of live in this belief that whatever you did had massive impact. It changed the way a client did things. You assume that whatever you thought up or whatever you came up with actually works in the real world. My belief is that most often, it doesn't. Firstly, when you go out into the real world, you don't have the time for that much thinking and consideration and reflection and analysis that goes into a typical consulting report. So, you're taking decisions with much shorter lead times with much less input and you have to decide and you've to move ahead. And a lot of times, things don't work. You have to do a lot more of try it, measure it, fix it, try it, measure it, fix it. You kind of do it that way rather than having a very deliberate strategy for anything. So, I think, recognizing that you instinctively have cognitive bias, you have decision-making paralysis, that your decisions that you're used to making and which may inform your quick judgment today are actually going to be, by definition, off the mark, because they don't factor in the implementation challenges. Just being aware that however smart you may be, don't assume that you know what it is to work in that environment or in the real world is very important.

I think, the second thing is then to really go with a mindset saying, listen, I have been living in an ivory tower for 10 years and this is like now taking on my first job. So, yes, I bring in great skills and that's a great starting point in a foundation, but, honestly, my gaps are really big gaps where I am actually at a zero. It's not like I have only got some partial information. I assume that I don't know this at all because of the protected environment I have been in and, therefore, being again very open to saying how do I learn. Giving yourself time to learn.

So, one of the mistakes I feel I made is that I was in too much of a hurry when I went and became the CEO of this company. I wasn't conscious of how important slowing down change is for an organization. I came from a consulting mindset of transformation, PMO *banao*, launch new initiatives, people will change, they will be inspired, and I will inspire them.

DJ: And there is a bias for pace...

PS: Yes. And then suddenly, you realize that this is not a three-month project, this is not a six-month assignment, this is not a one-year PMO, where you have to actually show that you delivered the cost savings. You are playing a long-term game and there are people involved. Somebody who has

worked in an organization for 30 years and you are saying this guy doesn't fit into my structure. You can't just get rid of that person, because tomorrow you will get rid of that person and your owners or your shareholders or promoters will feel, 'how did you just fire somebody who was such a loyalist? Do you know what I went through and how he stood by me? How can you just do that?' So, all kinds of other issues start to play up, which doesn't fit into the framework of an analytic approach.

That has been my biggest learning: to not be in hurry. Consulting, somehow, puts you into this treadmill of three-month, four-month projects. Everything has to be done yesterday; things have to be over delivered. To get off this clock and say, hey this is a long-term game I'm playing. If I'm going to be in this role for three years, let me take my time to listen, get to know people, build the credibility, and look at how I can build trust, all of those things. There's no hurry, it's OK. I can deliver the cost savings next year, but this year is really one year of induction, getting to know your people.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this is a topic of interest, you might like my conversation with Ravi Venkatesan (RV) who had multiple transitions. He moved from a senior role in Cummins in the US to India and then moved from leading Cummins to heading Microsoft in India and then moved on to take several Board roles. This piece can be found in Nugget 6.06.

RV: "so from this you begin to piece together first the situation and then out of that emerges a theory of change which is, what interventions are really going to Make a difference and who are going to be an important alliances if you don't listen and you start to imide you are coming with the point of view you starts jumping into action right away you going to make a lot of mistakes because you hadn't built this nuance and reasonably accurate picture of the landscape"

DJ: If you are enjoying the podcast, please take a moment to subscribe and spread the word by going to iTunes to rate and review the podcast. And thank you for listening. Now, let's get back to my conversation with Pramath Sinha.

DJ: If we looked at women growing all the way to become leaders, what's your take on where you see the bottlenecks? If we had to really say what are the three-four things that need to be de-bottlenecked in that pipeline for us to have more leaders flowing through?

PS: One thing is there is a lot of unconscious bias that still exists across all stages of a woman's career, which they have to fight. In general, the family still places a greater premium on the boy's education. In general, there is a suggestion that women need not be pushed to achieve their best and that ultimately, they are going to get married and then they'll fend for themselves with their husbands. And I have seen this happening in some of the more evolved and educated or elite; in fact, some would argue that socio-economically as you go higher up the strata, this becomes even more pronounced. I don't know what the sociological aspect of this is, but somewhere, there is a lot of bias that still exists right through your growing up years, through your education. If you look at the numbers graduating from high school and getting the best marks and so on, women outnumber men. Yet, when you go to boardrooms, if you look at MBA programs, engineering programs, if you look at corporate India, the numbers are abysmal.

There is a lot of data on this out there, but it's very stark. It's almost like women are not there. I really think that the barriers to entry are several; they are there at all stages. Like I said, a boy would

be sent to an English-medium school, a girl would be sent to a vernacular school. The boy will be getting coaching for JEE, the girl would be asked to fend on her own. The boy, if he got into a NIIT Hamirpur and if he is from Kerala, he would be sent, but the woman wouldn't be sent and they'd say why you don't study in the local college. And the story repeats itself. So, if you want to do an MBA, the same story happens. The boy gets to do CAT coaching, the girl gets to fend for herself; boy gets into if not an IIM, a MICA, he goes to Ahmedabad; girl gets to study MBA at a local college. So, people are getting left behind, I feel.

At the other end, when it comes to employment, I don't think employers are really able to grasp the fact that you have to adjust yourself to accommodate the life trajectories of a woman. And I think McKinsey is particularly guilty of this. I mean, as a firm we started the profession of management consulting. The biggest challenge for the profession is, and McKinsey should take the lead on this, how do we have 50% women in consulting? What will it take? What is the management consulting model? Just as you hired non-MBAs and now 50% of the firm is now non-MBA, how do you make sure that you can have a career trajectory that accommodates children and manage, or vice versa? So, I think, that is where we are failing.

DJ: And to make that tactical, what do good organizations do? If we double click on that, around those two transition points, any headline takeaways?

PS: Yeah, I think, do away with tenure-based promotions; do away with 'you have to become so and so in such and such time'. Change the evaluation criteria. What is so sacrosanct about evaluation criteria? There is a very different evaluation criterion for admitting somebody to ISB, from admitting somebody to a Young India Fellowship Program, which is a one-year liberal arts course. But those two people are getting the same jobs. They are all going and working in the same organizations. They are earning similar salaries. So, you can see that using two very different criteria, you are producing the same output; you are getting the same product. At least, the market is valuing the product the same way. They are not saying these people are less or more. So, why are we doing that here? It's like when ISB first came out, nobody wanted to hire our guys, because they said what do we do with them? These are not campus, these are lateral hires. So, how do I hire them? I am used to hiring MBAs.

Somewhere, society and corporates and business have to change to accommodate a different stream of people coming in. So, your assessment has to change, of who you hire and what qualities are you looking for. You have to become much more flexible about saying that hey, people's trajectories do change when they have kids. I met a bunch of women who came out of the first batch of ISB 15 years ago and their biggest regret is that unlike their male colleagues, they have not been able to sustain their careers. Then, they say, we go back to the workforce and people ask us all kinds of funny questions and they have insinuations about where we should be placed in the hierarchy and what compensation we should make. I think, somewhere, women also need to be educated, just as when you came out of ISB we would tell people, hey, it's not your first job, that is important, but your trajectory. Here also, women need to understand that if you are not working for so long, you can't expect to go back to where you were and yes, your male colleagues are going to be a few steps ahead of you and that's all right.

I think this is what we are trying to do in a small way at Vedica. So, at Vedica we are intervening at the MBA point and we are saying, listen you don't need a CAT score, first of all. Don't stress about your test. Then, we say, listen, I am not hung up about your minimum cut-off or if you went to a nondescript college in Telangana before you came here. It's fine if I haven't heard of your college, but you need to show to me that you are really committed, that you want this kind of education, and if you're going to work hard to put yourself into a different orbit by virtue of this.

DJ: And how do you screen for this?

PS: Interview! Have a bunch of conversations. You can't do a perfect job, but equally, you can at least ask the right questions. What's your commitment? What are your life experience and the usual thing we used to do at McKinsey, using all of that? Are you interesting? Are you interested? And can I really help this person achieve what I want to do and what they want to do? So, we use very subjective criteria. We try to make it as objective as possible, but keeping it simple and saying, hey, if this person is enthusiastic in showing commitment, let's take her. And often people come in classes and say, 'Oh, OK, I am in a peer group, these women are not as good as me or they are not as smart as me and what am I doing here'. But people, over time, realize that that's not the only metric, the drive, the commitment, everybody has their own strengths and weaknesses. So, I think that's the one thing. We're getting them in.

Then, through the program, what we try to do is we do a combination of management, liberal arts, and critical thinking, communication, and leadership courses with equal measure. Now, that's a huge departure from lot of typical management courses. And in the leadership piece, we really give them a lot of exposure to women who are inspiring in terms of the careers they've had. So, these women can have conversations at an early stage about what they could be up against as they go forward, rather than assuming that you will be fine now that you have an MBA and then being hit by a roadblock very quickly. We said this is an important conversation to have. How do you sustain careers? How have people sustained careers? Listen, there's no one model. Look at all these women, their journeys are all different but remember you have to be focused on sustaining the career. Don't give up; it's not worth giving up, and so on and so forth. So, instil a confidence in them that listen, yes, it's going to be difficult; yes I'm going to get married; yes, I'm going to have kids. But other people have done it, so I can also do it. Here's some ways to think about it and plan for it, rather than let it happen to you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this topic is of interest, you might want to tune in my next podcast conversation where I explore this theme in greater detail. The guest is Vedica Bhandarkar - no pun intended. She is one of the several women leaders who have come from ICICI Bank. She headed Credit Suisse in India before moving to the Social impact world and she now heads Water.Org in India - Water.org empowers families with access to safe water and sanitation through affordable financing. Now, back to the podcast chat with Pramath.

DJ: You are a person who has a unique insight at two different levels: one is at the education level, when people are graduating and then at the leadership level, given the work you do. Given the changes that are happening in the education system and in the world of leadership, I'd be curious to know how people should think about educational choices. I am curious about two-three trends we are seeing. One is the timing of education. Earlier, it was study, work, and retire. It was very distinct, but now it seems education and learning is more of a journey. Second, when I look at the nature of education, it seems to be unbundled from clunky degrees to bespoke courses people can configure along the way. So, how should somebody in the tenth or eleventh or twelfth, think about direction? How should people think about it as they go through their journey?

PS: You could come at this from either end, but the two are connected. The leadership that's required for people to be successful in the future and the preparation through education that is

needed for them to be successful in the future or be good leaders in the future. Maybe we start at the end of what's required going forward.

Different people have said different things but the essence of it is that one, we really don't know, but two, it's very clear that at least for the very best of people, the challenges that they are going to face are going to be fairly ambiguous and it's not going to be solvable, as it were, with just taking one approach. So, to be successful you have to recognize that. You aren't going to be able to solve the problem that you are going to be faced with, or challenged with, by yourself, by one approach that you learnt. You are going to have to look at things from a multi-dimensional perspective, a multi-disciplinary perspective. You may be wrong in what you come up with and you have to have the ability to adapt and be flexible and to adopt other strategies. You have to pull in other people to help you solve the problem, because, by definition, the problem will not be solvable by you alone. And, in very short order, you will have to very quickly re-educate or educate yourself about the domain that you are getting into and almost do multiple PhDs throughout your career. Other people say this in another way, which is that, you are not going to have one career but half a dozen careers in your life and over time, maybe even more, as the world changes faster and faster.

So, the question becomes that with these kinds of problems, with these expectations of a leader tomorrow, with these kinds of career progressions, what you do by way of education. Coming back to that end, I think, you've already alluded to some of that. One is that you have to break away from this obsession about specialization. This is not to say that specialization is not good, but that specialization and generalization or breadth and depth are more relevant. You need depth, of course, because you need to understand what it takes to go deep into a problem quickly and rapidly, which has now become the ask. So, it's not like we are saying, oh everybody should be a generalist. Absolutely not! You must know how to specialize, but you must know how to specialize rapidly and have many specializations in your life. At the same time, you need to have the ability to have a broader perspective, which comes from breadth. I think that's where this whole debate between liberal arts and STEM has come from. I think, it's a false debate and it's a false trade-off. You need both and that has always been what education was about. But particularly here, in India, with the post-independence focus on developing the technical capability of the country, we went too far in that direction and we haven't corrected that at all. The liberal arts colleges and universities have declined at the expense of or because of the growth of the technical fields. So, I think bringing in breadth and liberal arts, which is somewhat what we are trying to do at Ashoka or what I have done at Vedica, combining it with business, doing something else with architecture and liberal arts, and so on. So, both specialization and generalized education is extremely important.

I think the second bit of this is very important. I think, this goes to the heart of when people say how come people in India, the same people, don't do as much innovation or don't create products or don't do breakthrough scientific discoveries as they would in the United States or in other parts of the world, when they have the same basic education, and genes, and DNA. I think, the fundamental issue with that is that at the lowest level of our education and going all the way up to the highest level, we are not providing people choice, the fundamental choice of being able to choose what you study. People often counter that and say how do people ever know. And that's true. People never know, but the process of going through having to make a choice is a very big part of education and mindset, in terms of risk-taking and pushing thinking and really identifying what are you passionate about. For a long time now, I have believed that unless you are happy doing what you are doing or passionate doing what you are doing, you don't have breakthrough performance or breakthrough thinking.

So, here, what has ended up happening is that we are constantly, at every stage, forcing people to choose based on their performance in an exam, the marks they got, the rank they got, and so on.

Moreover, once you choose something, you are stuck. So, even if you come to the conclusion, 'Oh, I chose something that I was perhaps not right about or didn't really know but now realize is not right,' you can't switch. So, if you get into a program at an IIT and you are studying metallurgical engineering which is what I did and you are hating it, you can't really do anything about it. The switching costs are infinite. You cannot change. So, the point is not only do you get stuck, you don't have any flexibility. This combination of choice and flexibilities, along with this point about having breadth along with depth is really what we need to bring into our education system to allow our young people to prepare for that world we talked about.

DJ: And if I were to make this question tactical, if I am an individual who sort of finished my tenth and have the universe of options staring at me law, commerce, finance, engineering, liberal arts and so on. Are there one or two questions you would ask to reflect on which will help the broad choice?

PS: First thing I do is I ask them to listen to what their children are saying rather than deciding for them. That I see as a huge problem. I think our parents were much less concerned about what we were doing, even though, at that time, I think, it was very important. But today, what has happened is, ironically, even with the large number of choices in careers, the choices in education are very limited still, so that forces people to become very, very focused on saying, oh, I have to decide. So the first thing I really ask them is, are you deciding for your kid or do they really want to study law, for example. And often, you will find kids who are very clear that they are very excited about being a lawyer and that's really what they want to do. Honestly, between you and me, objectively, they may not know, but the important part is they are excited about it and they want to pursue it. So, first and foremost, just clarifying that.

Then, if you end up on the other side, where the person doesn't know, I then start by saying, listen, it's OK that you don't know. There's nothing wrong with that. Because otherwise, people are under pressure that they are confused or that they don't know and they ought to know and how come they don't know and so on. So, taking that pressure off and then helping them understand, honestly, what you specialize in will not matter. In fact, this whole thing about specializing in a subject and then being in a career and aligned to that, as you know, is tenuous. It happens sometimes, but, increasingly, happens less and less. So, while it's important to major in something, it's not really that important to major in the right thing. That kind of releases the tension of a lot of parents and children, when they realize. Sometimes they don't, but most of the times, you can actually show the parents themselves that what they majored in and what they are doing now has no connection.

DJ: It puts the choice in perspective.

PS: Correct. So, that then opens up a whole host of possibilities about what this kid could do. And, I think, that's when you move to the point of saying, OK, so what are your choices really. And there are a host of choices. I mean, you could choose to go just study science or psychology or history or go abroad or stay in India. And it takes off the pressure of having to get the decision right. I didn't give you the three-four questions, but I think that is the thought process, very tactically, of what you go through.

DJ: Also interesting is, it's about setting the right climate in which the choice is made. And as a parent, I guess, it's also important to set the right climate where the pressure is taken off, as you said.

PS: And a lot of times, to be fair, the pressure is also on the parents. Because they are looking at their peers and some of their peers are sending now we have people sending their kids to high school in the UK for some reason. And it's like, OK, now what's happening here? So, they are all

wondering whether they are doing something not right by their kids by not sending them. So, I think, there's a lot of pressure on parents also. So, by just first easing that peer pressure, you are helping them think.

DJ: Moving forward, if we were to reflect on some of the entrepreneurial activity that we are seeing. Nandan Nilekani pointed out that India has a lot of start-ups but very few scale-ups. Give us an insight into how some of these young founders need to suddenly start building the leadership capability which requires them to exercise many more muscles. What's your take on what does it take for them to individually scale up their leadership capability?

PS: I think, Nandan is right and I also feel that a lot of these start-ups not scaling up are really leadership failures rather than idea failures. I think, what people see are all the successes. So, they see a [Mark] Zuckerberg or they see a [Steve] Jobs or a [Bill] Gates. And some of these are examples of people who didn't complete college, they did not do enough, they didn't have any entrepreneurial history either, and they hit it big. But that's almost like a lottery, to my mind. I mean, these are extremely talented people and you have to give them credit for their persistence and so on. Equally, there are many, many more such talented people who didn't make it. We can't look at the example of these few people and say, all of us will be successful.

It's great that they are inspiring people to go on to start and so on. But there are two-three elements that people are missing out on. Number one, I have always believed in, and I think it's true even if you study the lives of these people that entrepreneurship is actually not about the idea; it's about being an entrepreneur. It's a way of life. You have to love entrepreneurship and not your idea. If you are an entrepreneur, then you will just persist. You may start with one idea and you will give it up and you will pivot and you will adapt and you go into adjacent spaces and so on. That's how all these guys have been successful if you study their history. I think, a lot of the people who are starting ventures today are really one-trick ponies, and I don't mean it in a deprecating manner. They are so wedded to a particular idea they got that they are jumping in because they think this is the best thing since sliced bread. The truth is that it may not be and most often is not. Success lies in recognizing that and quickly pivoting. So, that's the real essence of entrepreneurship which they are not aware of. So, they think it's about the bright idea they have.

I think the second thing is that being able to scale up your leadership skills is a hugely non-trivial task. Nobody has really talked about that to people. How do you manage just your peers, your top team, people who are more senior than you, more experienced than you, who you inevitably will need to bring in? Your founding team will go away. These are not the issues that you worry about on day one, so you don't know. And you don't know what you don't know about yourself. So, that's the other hidden factor that becomes very quickly limiting where people are not able to retain other people, they don't know how to scale up even if they have a successful idea.

How do you solve for that? I don't know. I think, on both, you solve by mentoring. I feel that and this is what people like Nandan and others, I think, are doing or trying to do some of these folks have to mentor other folks into being successful as entrepreneurs. I think, it's great that we have such a wave of entrepreneurship in this country but it would be important for some of these learnings to be passed on from generation to generation. I am not suggesting that you should not become an entrepreneur even without experience; you should, of course, give it a shot, but you should be thinking about the right reasons for success or the right drivers of the success, which I don't think will come through self-realization. It will only come through somebody being able to sit you down. I think, it's true not just for entrepreneurs but for everyone. I think, it's important to have good mentors, it's important to have the humility to say, listen, I really don't know this stuff and I need to sit down with somebody to walk me through this.

I think, the other small, or big, problem I see these days is that a lot of the investors haven't really been entrepreneurs. At least, I remember I don't know how it's like in the US today but in the early days in Silicon Valley and so on, the bigger VC and VE guys had all been entrepreneurs. They had actually either been entrepreneurs or they had been involved in entrepreneurial organizations. They had worked and they had built. They hadn't just been consultants like you and me. They hadn't just been people who had been investing all their lives. I think, somewhere you are not then able to provide that mentorship. You can bring in the money and the resources and how to scale up and examples of how to monetize, and so on. I think that's very valuable too. But finding people who can scale up leadership skills in proportion to how your business is growing is difficult and you have had to live that life. I have seen that between two investors that I had in 9.9, my own venture, one of the investors had actually built something from scratch. So, some of his insights about how to scale up your own leadership, how to look at the scaling up of the business, how to think about leading a sales force, was very granular and very, very pithy, which I would have never learnt if somebody hadn't actually gone through that process.

DJ: I recently spoke to Avnish Bajaj and the downside he spoke about was if you have done it, then there's a tendency to step in. So, it's about bringing that empathy from the past, but without sort of micromanaging.

PS: Which is why I used the word 'mentor'? Mentors do this very well. As a mentee, you go to a mentor with a problem. They will tell you, listen, if I were in your place, here's how I would do it. Then, you as a mentee think about that and you sometimes reject. You would say this is maybe the wrong context; he was in a different era. That could be your arrogance or you take a call. At least, you have input from somebody who has been there, done that, rather than having to figure it out yourself.

DJ: As we think about the evolving business landscape and the complexity, if I switch back to people in their 40s and 50s who in a way built their leadership, for a lack of better term, in the industrial paradigm or the traditional way of businesses and now are seeing a new way of dealing with new information. The velocity of decision making is increasing in some of the industries. As you look at some of your peers who are CEOs, what have you seen good leaders do in terms of adapting well to the changing business context?

PS: I think there's no one example, but I think that the people I have seen be successful are those who are somewhat reflective and introspective about failures and mistakes they made. They focus a lot on what could be the learnings that they could take forward and what does that mean for them personally in terms of their own behaviours and attitudes that they have to change. So, I have seen some of the most successful people be much more reflective about these things. I think several of them have also then gone on to expose themselves to more and more different situations, either within or in newer opportunities outside of whatever they were doing. Because they recognize that multiple experiences make you richer and prepare you better for the future from a learning standpoint. I think several of them are using coaches, executive education programs, doing things with peers that are very focused on professional and personal development. They seem to understand that self-actualization and finding purpose is not something airy-fairy or spiritual only. It directly impacts your success and then satisfaction from what you do. So, I think, there are a host of these things that people are realizing.

I think, it's tough though, because earlier you didn't need, perhaps, to do all of this in your work life. You could do a set of things and be very successful and be quite mechanical and industrial about it. I think, in some contexts, you can still do that and be successful, but in most contexts, that has completely changed: one, the kind of problems that you are dealing with and two, the expectations

that your own employees have of you. People want a different kind of workplace; they want a different kind of boss. They feel almost entitled that they should all be very respected and that whatever they do should inspire them and that they should be excited by the purposefulness of their work and so on. So, creating that kind of environment for wherever you work and sometimes in very boring, seemingly less exciting environments is tough as a leader and how to do that is a big challenge.

DJ: How have you thought about your board of advisors? People talk about the personal board of directors that sort of guide them. How have you thought about that? Who would you put on the list? If you can provide an insight on how that's evolved over time?

PS: It's a good question. This is a very good example of the answer to your earlier question on how you build resilience towards a new model for leadership. I am somewhat more of a heart guy than a mind guy. So, if you look at my board of advisors, my PhD advisor, who I did my PhD with nearly 30 years ago, is somebody I still stay in touch with. She is now at University of California, Berkeley. So, every time I go to California, I actually spend time with her and hang out with her. Now, again, she is not directly related to what I do but where I was headed to was that ultimately people who inspire you, regardless of whether they are related to what you do, are on my board of advisors. Because just a meeting with them, just time spent with them, pushes you on to think whatever you are dealing with better or do something that you were struggling with better and so on. So, I think, she is one example of somebody I have on my board of advisors.

Rajat Gupta who was the managing director of McKinsey and I spent a lot of time with him building ISB. Of course, Rajat got into quite a bit of trouble, but as a person, he's been amazingly inspiring, particularly with all the troubles he went through with his case and then being in jail and out of it. So, I really admire Rajat. I've always admired him for his ability to think big and yet retain certain humility and a certain commitment to making other people successful. So, I stay very close to him, and he is one of, clearly, my heroes in spite of everything that has happened to him and for him.

One of my investors, Sanjeev Agarwal of Helion, is somebody that I really look up to. Sanjeev is a good example of somebody who was an entrepreneur, scaled up a business, became an investor. I have to say that despite being an investor, his selflessness and his almost detachment — which then, I think, helps him give you very sound advice, even though he could be seen as in conflict — has been quite remarkable for me and I find that very inspiring.

So, three very different people, but I could immediately think of these three people who really have been great guide posts over time. One thing I know is I don't let go of these people when I find them. It doesn't matter if what they are or are not relevant to what I am doing. Like I said in the beginning, it's really much more about are they inspiring you or not, and it doesn't matter whether they have the subject matter expertise.

DJ: And do you have some sort of a discipline around how you sort of stay in touch with them or is it more gut driven?

PS: I am not a guy who is very good about staying in touch with people. Especially the way I think about it, my relationships are lifelong and it doesn't matter if I am physically or virtually in frequent touch. But yes, I do make an effort to reach out. I do make an effort to be intimate with them when I am with them and I think that always keeps it going, because then people don't feel like you are being artificial or you are just showing up to schmooze or network. Equally, there are times when I just called up these people because I needed help and you hesitate thinking, oh, I didn't stay in touch but I'm now calling them because I need help. But, I think, if you do it the right way and you

do it not in a sense of entitlement but with a genuine need, then if these people were inspirational in the first place, they will rise up to inspire you even more.

Another of these folks is a McKinsey director Tsun-Yan Hsieh who is now in Singapore, retired, but used to be in the Toronto office of McKinsey. We've had a long relationship and I remember many times even in my career, calling him, 'Listen, just give me something to do with you'. And every time I did that, he would, and that would change my life. So, I think, people like that just are there for you and you kind of know that. So, even if you don't see them frequently enough, there's a bond that is very special that you want to preserve and not give up on.

DJ: How do you think about the life ahead? How do you think about success? How do you think about terms like legacy? What's your plan for the future?

PS: That question can have a very, very long answer. So, let me be specific in how I am thinking about this. I feel like I have been very lucky to have had the opportunity to build some really lasting institutions: whether it was ISB; now Ashoka; it's early days for Vedica but I'm sure that it will survive and persist and do well; now involved in a couple of new universities and I think they will get there too. So, I have sense of fulfilment about having made a difference and created some of these things. But as I look out ahead, I feel like if I am worth what I am, if I can take some credit in building these, then I feel like I need to do something that would impact a much larger section of society.

At the end of the day, these are all elite institutions and they cater to very few; of course, there is, sort of, a broader impact and knock-on effect and spin-on and so on. One is not trying to do ROI calculation, but I am just saying that, if you really wanted to solve for education per se in this country, then the truth is, these institutions will help, but the larger scale problem is humongous. So, I'm challenging myself these days to ask how can the learnings from what I have done be used to leverage, to impact, a much larger section of society and eventually does any of this help me think about effective ways to reach out to people who don't have access to high-quality education? I think there is where my heart ultimately is these days, in pushing myself to think through what I can do that I know from these experiences that can actually impact a much larger section of society.

In fact, I do want to I am saying this for the first time on tape or in public and I do want to sound not pretentious I have some very lofty... I don't know the answer, honestly. And this is a very personal thing that I'm holding myself to more than anything else, to say, if I'm really worth my salt, then should I not be able to move the needle on the larger problem than having created a few examples or islands of excellence?

DJ: Given how far you've come, if you had to be immodest for a couple of minutes and really say these are the reasons why I was able to do what I have been able to do, are there two-three themes about yourself that you reflect upon which have enabled you to deliver the outcomes and build these institutions?

PS: Tough to say, but a few things. I think my time at McKinsey and my time with Rajat really raised my sights in a way that I don't think was possible. I was this good, middle-class kid from Patna who was ambitious but didn't quite know what was possible, didn't know what potentially can be done. So, I think, that stint at McKinsey and seeing Rajat build these institutions and then him giving me the chance to work alongside on ISB made a huge difference to my raising the sights.

I think, the second thing is that my upbringing in Patna and the school that I went to. When I look at my colleagues from that school and also IIT Kanpur, I have to say that my school friends and my college friends are all very modest, humble human beings and they've done amazing stuff. So, there

was something about the milieu that I was lucky to be part of, where you could come out with a very strong sense of entitlement or edges or arrogance, but I never saw that and I still don't see that in my friends from that time. I think that has always been at the back of my mind as I have gone off to do stuff. I will tell you where it makes a difference, because you might say, well, that's a very nice thing to say but that's what everybody says, it's not so unique. What that does is, and somebody recently said this to me, if you don't forget where you came from, if you don't forget that leadership is actually about never forgetting where you came from, that places you in a position where you can really move mountains. Because you see how far you've come and then you say, my god, if that's what I could do in the last 30 years of my life and if today I have another 20, imagine what you could do from here and wouldn't that be exciting. Not because you want to win an award or prove anything to anybody, but just because it's so exciting to see how far you can come. So, I think that has always driven me more than anything else.

My wife often keeps asking me, why're you running around doing all of this stuff and do you really need to do it? And sometimes, she asks, couldn't you have just been a partner and director at McKinsey like your friends? And there's nothing wrong with either of those options. But to your question, I think, what's driving me is just this excitement of seeing how far you can actually come and what, therefore, could be possible which you don't know.

DJ: Also, going back to one of the earlier things you mentioned, authenticity. Somewhere I do think, knowing where you came from and ensuring that you are grounded also feels a little more authentic and real when people show up that way.

PS: I think you picked up on a very important point, which is actually the closing point I wanted to make. That authenticity allows you to build collaborations in a way that you otherwise wouldn't be able to build because it naturally allows people to trust you. It enables a huge amount of trust from young to old, from senior to junior to people who you're meeting for the first time. I think I am good about using that to my advantage, honestly. Of course, part of that authenticity is to not just use it for your own personal advantage. So, I think, that authenticity engenders trust and then if you use that trust to do bigger and greater things that is what allows you to take things forward. So, I think, that was the essence of my point about going back to where you came from, because that ultimately connects back to a seemingly contradictory [point]: you start very modest, but then remaining modest allows you to do very immodest things, which I think has been the biggest learning I've had in this journey.

DJ: In conclusion, any summary themes you want to leave the listeners with for people to play to their potential?

PS: I have a bias to this and it may not be the be all and end all, but because you are talking about playing to potential. I think there's something to be said about being very authentic about helping other people achieve their true potential. These are things that have been said a lot. The US Army has this thing about 'come be the best you can be' and so on. But, I think, if there is one thing you as a leader could focus on or you as an individual could focus on is making other people successful. Then in the process of doing that, a lot of benefits that flow out of that actually make you successful. It makes you understand yourself better. You figure out your purpose better. It doesn't seem connected, because it's like I am making somebody else successful. But that notion in itself is so powerful that it teaches a lot about yourself, what you are, what you want to do, or what you should do, and so on and so forth.

There was one thing that I've always felt people didn't value as much — they are so focused on themselves. That, again, is one of those seeming contradictions, that if you actually focus on other

people, you actually end up focusing on yourself. I don't mean this to be a very deep point. I actually mean it as simply as that. If you can just turn your focus on making others successful, then there's huge clarity that comes. Otherwise, you have to worry about 50 things and which of these 50 will really lead me. So, one liberating thought is, hey, don't worry about yourself, and just focus on making other people successful. And through that, a lot of those things that you were supposed to do, or those 49 other things that you were supposed to do, will get done. So, that's the one thing that I think, in summary, would be the big thing that I usually like to impress upon people in different ways.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you enjoyed the podcast conversation. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to review it on iTunes and share it with people who you think might find this purposeful. You can find other conversations at playtopotential.com. But if you want to download the content and listen in an offline mode (let us say during a flight), you could access the content on iTunes, Stitcher or any of the other popular podcast apps. Just search for Play to Potential. Thank you for listening and look forward to having you listen into one of the subsequent conversations of the podcast.

End of transcription

Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: [Listening intently during Transitions](#).

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Dr. Pramath Sinha - Nuggets

- 14.00 Dr. Pramath Sinha - The Full Conversation
- 14.01 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Current portfolio of initiatives
- 14.02 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Consulting (McKinsey) as a career option
- 14.03 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Transitioning out of consulting (including views on entrepreneurship)
- 14.04 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Authentic leadership
- 14.05 Dr. Pramath Sinha - What consulting doesn't prepare you for
- 14.06 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Vedica Scholars Programme — Nurturing women leaders
- 14.07 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Educating ourselves (and link with leadership of the future)
- 14.08 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Building leadership capability in entrepreneurs
- 14.09 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Personal board of advisors
- 14.10 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Reflecting on the past and the future
- 14.11 Dr. Pramath Sinha - In Summary - Playing to Potential

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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