Guest

Vedika Bhandarkar is the MD in India of Water.org, an organization that empowers families with access to safe water and sanitation through affordable financing. Water.org pioneers innovative, community-driven and market based initiatives to achieve the above objective. It is a global organization that operates on the belief that access to safe water can turn problems into potential: unlocking education, economic prosperity and improved health. It has impacted 6 Million lives till date over the last 25 years.

Vedika is an alumnus of IIM Ahmedabad and spent several years in the Financial Services sector across ICICI Ltd and ICICI Securities, JP Morgan (headed Investment Banking for them) and Credit Suisse (Vice Chairman and Managing Director based in India). In addition to her current role in Water. Org, she is a Non-Executive Director in 6 Boards today.

In this podcast conversation, she shares her perspectives on Investment Banking as a career, her thoughts on transitioning companies at a senior level, transitioning from the “For profit” world to the world of Social Impact, moving from an Executive Role to an NED role and her insights into how women should think about their navigating their careers.

Context to the conversation

Hello and Welcome to the 15th 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 Vedika Bhandarkar. Vedika is an alumnus of IIM Ahmedabad and spent about a quarter of a century working in the Financial Services space across ICICI, JP Morgan and Credit Suisse. She is now the MD at Water.org that is a global organization that is committed to developing and delivering solutions to ensure people have safe water and sanitation. In our conversation, we spoke about a range of topics including her thoughts around Women and careers, Transitioning at senior levels across companies, Moving from the for profit world to the Social world and much more. Without further ado, over to the conversation.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Maybe a good place to start is what you do today at water.org. What’s the organization about? Why you do what you do? What got you here?

Vedika Bhandarkar (VB): So, water.org, as the name suggests, is a not-for-profit and we are focused on making sure that every person in this world gets access to safe water and sanitation. So, our vision is that in our lifetimes, everybody in this world will have access to safe water and sanitation. Our focus is really households at the base of the economic pyramid. We are a 25-year-old organization and when we started, we started like any other philanthropic organization, which is giving money to people to build, either to dig wells or to get water connections. Very soon, we realized that there isn't enough money in the world to solve this problem. To give you a sense of the gap which exists, World Bank estimates that you need a trillion dollars over five years to ensure that everybody in this world gets access to safe water and sanitation. If you look at the amount of money which is spent in this sector per year in terms of aid, in terms of philanthropy, the money is about 10 billion dollars. So, there's a huge gap and it certainly is not possible in our lifetime. This started the thinking process of how we can make sure that every rupee or every dollar is leveraged to the maximum.

The second realization was that people at the base of the economic pyramid, which is who we serve, are already paying a lot to get access to the services. Everybody needs water, so even if there is no water connection, people are getting that water and they are paying the water vendors or they are paying through some other means, a huge cost, and they are borrowing at 50%, 100%. The third realization was that most of the people at the base of the pyramid want a choice in what services they have and are happy to pay as long as it's affordable. So, that's what started what we call water credit. It started in India many years ago. It's a very simple concept which was really working with financial institutions, which would make loans, small loans, and micro loans, for getting a water connection or for building a toilet.

So, we started water credit in India several years ago. We had to really work hard to convince institutions that this will work, but the good news is it works. It is still very much our main offering in India, and we've exported it to many other countries. So, to give you a sense of the numbers in India, through water credit, our partners have made more than one million loans reaching more than four million people, aggregating 1,200 crores. Remember, I told you we want to make sure the leverage are maximum? So, we offer our partner some help at the beginning to get them to start water and sanitation lending. The help can be just technical help and it can be some sort of soft subsidy to cover some of the initial cost. So, the initial cost of surveying the market, the initial cost of demand generation, of hiring people, whatever it might be. And after that, the scale sort of takes over and over time our partners will not need any subsidy. So, to get to these 1,200 crores of lending, our total grants to them have been 50 crores, so that's a 1:20 sort of leverage. Overall, across the world, we've reached more than 6 million people through water credit. So, that's been our main offering, but there are a bunch of other things that we do.

While we were working with lenders, we said, how else can we encourage you, how can we facilitate you doing more lending? So, a couple of things came up. One was, they said, if we had access to capital on a consistent basis, we could do more of this lending. So, we did two things. We worked a lot with the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation and with the RBI and last year, got water and sanitation included in the priority sector. This means, a bank for it to make loans in this sector, included in the priority, so our partners have more access to capital.

But we didn't stop there. We went and raised a small fund from social impact investors, 11 million dollars. We deployed it only in India as rupee-denominated debt last year and now we are in the process of raising a bigger fund, 50 million dollars. And the thesis really is, one, our partners will have more capital which they can use to make more water and sanitation loans, but also the social impact world has always thought that water and sanitation is not a sector which is bankable. They have thought that water and sanitation is only for philanthropy. So, we are hoping to prove through our evidence base that this is a bankable sector so that more money can come into this sector. I didn't talk about this. So, the million loans which have been made in India, the repayment rate has been 99%-plus, and the average loan size it took me many months to get over that fact, but the average loan size is just over 10,000 rupees. The reason it took me so many months to get over this fact is, one, it's so small, but two, it makes such a huge difference in the lives of the people who have access to either that water connection and/or the toilet.

DJ: What's the key insight there when you talk about 99%? What are the reasons underpinning that high number?

VB: That's a good question, and it's very surprising. So, the first most basic insight is that the base of the economic pyramid is a bankable consumer base, but MFIs recognize that, small finance banks recognize that, many banks now recognize that. That is, I think, the most fundamental insight which we have to keep in mind.

The second one, I think, even takes lenders by surprise. So, a loan for a water connection or a loan for a toilet is not an income-generating loan; it can be even called a consumption loan though I have a big problem with that, but it can be called a consumption loan. And the good news is, even though it's not an income-generating loan, people still are paying back their loans and, I think, that is the most fundamental insight. So, the borrower recognizes the value of either the water or tap at home, she saves so many hours every day where she doesn't have to go to fetch water or she recognizes that having a toilet at home gives her safety, gives her daughter safety and also reduces illnesses. Very often, sitting in cities, we make the mistake that people at the base of the pyramid don't know what's good for them. Actually, it's not true at all, they absolutely know what's good for them and look at the numbers; they speak for themselves. And the good news today is, we have built such a strong evidence base within India that to get a new financial institution as a partner is relatively easy now, because we can point to those numbers. One of the new partners who we got in, actually, we helped their risk committee get over their fear that it's not going to be viable lending and we said look at the data across states, across cycles, including the 2010 crisis; these loans have been repaid.

DJ: And even by a for-profit metric, it makes commercial sense to serve this sector is the point you're making.

VB: Absolutely! So, what gets my goat is when I go to a new lender and they will say, OK, we will introduce you to the CSR department. Yes, sure, I would love to get introduced to the CSR department, but the point which we are trying to make, and we are hoping it gets made every day, is, lending for water and sanitation is a commercially viable business and it's not something you do out of charity. In fact, at a recent partners' meeting, one of our partners said something which I thought was very unusual and I'd never thought of it. They said, they do water and sanitation lending in order to preserve and protect their lending portfolio and this is how they thought about it. They said, the biggest risk when you are lending at the base of the pyramid is that the borrower will go back into poverty and the reason they go back into poverty most of the times is because of a health shock. If you can do any lending to reduce the chances of getting those health shocks and sanitation and access to water does that you have actually improved the quality of their portfolio. And that was a very unusual way of thinking, but it's very powerful if you think about it.

DJ: And given water, as you said, is sort of core for a lot of things we do, two things, right? One is, sort of the insurance piece and second is the piece around hidden cost of what it takes to find an alternative supply, what it means in terms of lost time, etcetera? So, I think, that piece around hidden cost, sometimes, we in urban cities probably don't appreciate.

VB: Actually, even in cities, in slums, people have that. We call it the coping cost. So, you are absolutely right. The number of hours spent going to and fro, collecting water, the fact that many girls can't go to school because they have to be collecting water, the cost that you pay to the vendors, plus all sorts of health problems which impact everybody but certainly the women and the girl child, because to relieve themselves they have to wait till it's dark. They cannot relieve themselves as and when; it's not safe. So, the coping costs are just enormous.

DJ: Given us are on the topic, what's a good way for somebody who wants to contribute to this to engage? One is, of course, the financial institutions, you talk to them, but is there a way the retail consumer or individual can make a difference to this cause through this platform?

VB: Through the water.org platform? Absolutely! You can be involved. I think the first step which anybody can take and should take is just to contribute financially. EVery not-for-profit needs money to do their work. So, the easiest thing you can do is to write a cheque, and all cheques are welcome. After that, if you are interested in the sector, if you believe that water and sanitation is a very fundamental need, then there are other ways of contributing and by all means go and visit our website. See what other areas you would like to contribute in, because a lot of effort is also needed around behaviour change, around communication, around engagement with the communities. So, absolutely, write to us, and we will be very happy.

DJ: One of the pieces I am curious about is how we get formed as people through our growing-up years. If you think about your childhood leading up to IIM-A, three or four things which come up, which played a key role in shaping Vedika of today? And maybe, if I had to underscore the point, given the commentary that we have around women leadership, I am curious about any themes, specifically, that you reflect upon which made a significant difference.

VB: I was thinking about this, and I don't think I have a clear-cut answer. I grew up in a small town, called Udaipur. My parents were both academics, they used to work in the university and we were a very normal household. Since you asked me to think about it, I have been thinking about it, and I think there are two or three things which I could come up with. We were a very relaxed household. There wasn't any pressure put on you. At the same time, you were really expected to do whatever you were doing really well. So, you were expected to put all your effort into what you are doing. So, there was certainly no pressure to be first in your class or to win every medal or anything, but there was an expectation that you try your best and that was important. I think, that has stayed with me and it's important for me, and hopefully, we've been able to pass it to our kids, that everything that you do, you have to give it your all. You have to try your utmost.

The second thing was there was no pressure in terms of this is what you should do. As I said, my parents were both academics. They were both physicists, but there were certainly no expectation that I needed to do physics. Most of my classmates are doctors. So, they studied biology in school and they became doctors. I did not like biology at all and there was no pressure from my parents that you have to do biology, you have to become a doctor. I did math, appeared for IIT, and did not get in. Again, there was no pressure that you need to try it again next year or you need to go to any of the other engineering colleges. So, I did my science and then through research, through a couple of talks which I attended with my dad, I decided to do my MBA. This was the first time anybody in the family was doing an MBA. My parents had no idea what this was all about, but they were incredibly supportive. So, I think, this no pressure to go on the expected paths has also stayed with me.

I think the third thing which has stayed with me is just open conversations. So, as a family, we could talk about anything and you could have very strong disagreements with your parents and I had many of them. No subject was taboo and we believed in open conversations. It was a little messy, sometimes a little loud, but that's the way we grew up. That also stayed with me through my working career. Whenever things have been uncomfortable or I have disagreed with them, I've had open conversations and at that time, it feels like, oh my god, what're you doing, but on hindsight, I think that's really worked well for me. So, those were the three things, if I had to say, which have stood with me.

DJ: Fair enough. And I think it's an interesting point you make about a) facilitating the child to figure out what makes sense for him or her, and b) in McKinsey, we used to use the term obligation to dissent, where, let's say, in a problem-solving discussion, somebody 20 years in the firm and somebody two months in the firm would be expected to treat each other as peers. That sort of sets a certain culture, whether it's a house or it's an organization.

VB: Correct! It's very hard in an organization. It's hard to do it when you are just two months in and it's very hard to take it when you have spent 20 years in the organization, but if you can do it, I think, it's incredibly powerful.

DJ: I think, maybe since I have two young kids, the parallel in the home context is, when you are time strapped, the tendency is often to kill the discussion. Take this and run with this. And the harder part, is often to say, OK, let's listen, let's talk, let's debate it out. So, I guess at some level, it gets hard on the home front as well.

VB: Absolutely!

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this topic is of interest, you might be interested in my recent conversation with Pramath Sinha (PS) who was the founding Dean of ISB and has been instrumental in setting up Ashoka University. He was a Director at McKinsey and does a lot of work in the Leadership space, when I asked him the question about how people should think about choosing a direction, he said something similar. He spoke about how letting the child make the choice is almost as important as or more important than just the specific choice the child makes. The link between education and careers is possibly getting more and more tenuous with the passage of time.

PS: *"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 and for a long time now I have believed that unless you are happy doing what you are doing or passionate what you are doing, you don't have breakthrough performance or breakthrough thinking"*

DJ: If this is of interest, you could go to nugget 14.07 in the Pramath Conversation. If you find this content purposeful, I would request you to take a minute or two to write a review on iTunes or share with people that you think could benefit from this. The podcast is available on iTunes and other podcast apps like Stitcher. To search for content by specific themes, you could visit the site playtopotential.com. Now back to the podcast chat with Vedika.

DJ: Two years at IIM-A and then picking up the plot at, let's say, the first big transition that a lot of us go through, the placements at IIM-A. You ended up going down the path of finance and you joined ICICI Bank. I am curious about a) how you thought about it and b) with the wisdom of hindsight, if you would think about it any differently given where you are today.

VB: In the first year itself, when you have to do all the subjects, as you remember, I had started figuring out that finance is what I liked. I like the numbers; I like the certainty which goes around with those numbers, the analytics. So, I had made up my mind that second year, I was going to specialize in finance. You remember the first job is the summer job. At that time, it's a pre-internet world, so you are not exposed to too many things and I wasn't. At that time, Citibank was supposed to be the hottest summer job and they had the toughest interview process. I think, they sort of excelled at making people cry, especially the girls cry. So, I said, I have to go through the Citibank interview process. Somehow I made it, though I did cry after my first interview, I think, after both interviews. This was for the summer and I came here to work in Mumbai and I was just miserable. They had taken lots of interns from all the schools they didn't have clearly defined jobs for them. I just hated pretty much every minute of my internship. So, after the internship, I was clear I was going to do finance, but I wasn't going to apply to Citibank and I was going to apply to something which was very different from Citibank.

At that time, the two hot jobs in finance were Citibank and ICICI, ICICI Limited by the way, this is before the bank and the third day-one job was Arthur Anderson. I wasn't so interested in consulting, so I applied for ICICI because these seniors I'd spoken to, it sounded like a very good place to be in. I applied and got selected and ended up spending close to eight years, three years with ICICI and five years with the joint venture ISEC. I enjoyed every one of them. So, if I were to look back today as you ask me to, would I have done anything different in terms of my first job? No, I would not have. ICICI was a small organization; I think, there were just a little over 1,000 people. It was a development financial institution. At that time, you will find it hard to believe, but the first time we overtook IDBI. IDBI was the big daddy, the first time we overtook IDBI, was a huge celebration in ICICI. Mr Vaghul was running the organization and it was just a fantastic place. A lot of us were young. It was a very professional organization and it gave you great grounding.

DJ: And just sticking to that theme of banking as a career path, I know banking is a pretty wide umbrella but I am curious about that campus transition, because what students hear is often pitches; they don't get the real story. So, maybe it would be good for you to reflect a little bit on what are the highs and lows of the banking path and are there two or three inflection points where suddenly people are having fun but the playground is shifted and they say, maybe I should do something else. Give us a realistic sense of what that path felt like when you walked on it.

VB: So, as you said, banking has so many facets to it. The first three years, I spent in ICICI which was a lending institution, so I was doing lending for a certain bunch of sectors. Actually, that helped me really learn about credit, how to assess credit, how to model, how to assess the viabilities of industries, and that's stayed very important and relevant throughout my career. Then, just after three years, this joint venture was being set up with JP Morgan, where the whole merchant banking division of ICICI was going to move. And I got asked this question, along with a couple of others who were working in lending, whether we would also like to move and it seemed like a great opportunity. Didn't really know anything about merchant banking or investment banking, didn't know much about JP Morgan also, but decided to make the shift and I am so glad that I did. So, I think the first lesson would be, be ready to take some risks. It's not always going to be very clear as to what will that opportunity entail. It is not going to be clear whether you have all what it takes to be successful at that, but if you don't try you will never know. I think that lesson had stayed with me, but sometimes, I haven't followed what I said too.

Then, after that, was investment banking. So, from 1993 onwards, it was all investment banking. I think, in investment banking, there are certainly some inflection points which are important. The first one is the first time you become a supervisor, the first time where you don't know every number in your model, the first time you are not building your own model. It's a very scary time and that transition is very difficult. Some people make that transition and then move on to do bigger things. Some people just find it so hard to make that transition that they are always the people who are not leveraging themselves, so don't do as well. It's hard because you are worried, am I going to be relevant to my client? If I don't know every sell, what am I going to speak in front of the client? Its harder work, so that's the first big transition point.

I think the second transition point is when you are a director or sometimes even an MD. That's when you are a hunter. So, you are looking for business. The transition point is, it's a cyclical industry, banking, it follows the economy and there will be dry spells. How do you handle yourself through those dry spells, how do you pick yourself up when you lose a deal, how do you go for months without getting a transaction done? It's hard and if you can't handle that, if you can't be tough enough to handle that, then, I think, your lack of confidence starts showing up. You don't even realize it, but you are communicating that to your clients when you are speaking to them. You are certainly communicating it to your juniors or even your seniors internally. So, I think, that's the second big transition point and again you can either handle it well or you can't.

The third one is you become very senior, you are running businesses, and, I think, at this stage you realize it's a lot about managing people, it's a lot about relationships, it's a lot about networks, both internal and external. If you just say, I'm going to focus on what I do and I am really good at it and that's going to be enough, I think, that'll be a rude awakening. Because I have heard so many people, and, let's be honest, I have gone through these stages, where they say, oh, but I did such a good job why didn't I make it? Because that's necessary.

DJ: And very quickly reflecting on these inflection points and how you coped with them. First, running this spread sheet to monitoring it; second, dealing with the cross cycles; and third, relationships. If you could reflect on just lessons from your journey, any two or three themes which come up on these transitions?

VB: So, the first one was very hard for me. Remember what I told you about how I grew up? You had to excel or you were expected to excel at everything you do. The moment you do not own the model, you are relying on somebody else. So, that was very hard for me. I was very lucky to have a really good boss and this boss sat me down and walked me through this whole journey and said, look, if you micromanage, you are not going to give people who work with you enough space. At the same time, if you don't give them clear directions, you are not going to get what you are looking for. That conversation and that diagram which he drew me he was an ex-McKinsey guy by the way really helped me and I used it every time I had a new supervisor in my team. So, that was really good.

I think, the second one, circumstances made me. So, when the joint venture broke up, ISEC, and we moved into JP Morgan, a few of us. This was '98. Soon after we got our license was the nuclear test; India did a nuclear test, if you remember. US–India relationships were probably the worst and then the first dot-com crash happened. So, we went through a baptism by fire when we set up JP Morgan. There were many dry months and we were pounding the streets looking for business. While the JV break up was amicable, no divorce is finally amicable. ICICI was much better known, they were the big gorilla in the financial sector, and JP Morgan was not really known. So, it was tough, but that journey helped me. We went through that once more many years later in 2000-01 too, when JP Morgan was much bigger but again the economy had really tanked. So, I think, those journeys really help you. You have to learn how to take it in your stride but you keep learning.

In Credit Suisse, much, much later, so this was 2013–14 probably, there was one transaction which we had been chasing for a long time and everybody knew this transaction was going to come. We knew about it, we did everything we thought was right to win that transaction, got the whole bank behind us, worked on it, were systematic, but did not win it. And that was hard. Till then, I used to think that as a leader, you need to not fall to pieces after you lose a transaction because you have to rally the team around you. But maybe this time, I didn't do it well enough or maybe it showed much more on my face, I don't know. I didn't realize this till one day, a young colleague came into my office and said, I want to tell you something, and I said, yes, go ahead. He said, 'this is the first time I saw how much the loss of this deal has hurt you. Till now, I used to think that you really didn't care if we won or lost, but this time, on your face I could see, for a couple of weeks, that you were hurting and that has made me feel so good, because I realize now how much you care about this business.' And I sat there and I thought, wow, till now, I was doing exactly the opposite, but maybe, I need to be more authentic, because that's what motivates people. So, you keep learning.

DJ: That's a great insight, the point about vulnerability saying, I am not this I've-figured-out-everything kind of a leader but I am vulnerable too and be authentic. Just the last piece around this. I am also curious about the false choices people make. Again, in your experience, if you look at the kind of people that join banking for the wrong reasons but very quickly figure out actually it's not for them, what are the common themes that come up in terms with the misconceptions around banking, which catch people by surprise?

VB: So, I think the first thing which people think is investment banking is incredibly glamorous, and they think, you get to meet all the senior-most people in corporate India or corporate US or wherever you are working and you get to work on the most exciting and most glamorous transactions. It is true. You get to meet really interesting people; you do get to work on the most exciting transactions. But people don't realize the hard work which goes behind it. So, I used to joke, for every transaction which you see in the newspaper, M&A, there are probably three that never make it to the newspapers or maybe even more because transactions die. And transactions die at all stages. So, if you are working on a buy side, your buyer may not win; that's an easy one. Sometimes your transaction might die right at the end, because there was no regulatory approval or some other reason or because the egos couldn't handle it, whatever. And you've worked hard on it. You have worked for months, sometimes years, but you have nothing to show for it. But, I think, people don't realize the amount of hard work, the amount of grunt work, the amount of sleepless nights which go into it.

The second misconception is oh, you get to travel so much isn't it exciting? Yes and no. Initially, of course, you feel much kicked. But the number of times I have travelled, where you go from the airport straight to the hotel then to the office and way back. So, people would ask me, so, how's Paris? I don't know. The hotel was nice. And the travel gets to you after some time. So, I think, that's the second misconception.

I think there are some not misconceptions but mistakes which people make. I think one mistake which I have seen a lot of people make is talking too much and listening less. I think you make a great banker if you're really able to figure out what's on the client's mind? What is the problem he or she is trying to solve? More often than not, bankers are so keen, sometimes desperate, to show off what they know that they keep no time for listening. I think, when you do that, there's no way you are going to be a good banker.

DJ: The one thing that ICICI is known for is for having played a key role in making so many women leaders. As you reflect on your first nine years, any themes that come up in terms of what was it about the culture which enabled this to happen?

VB: That's a question which has been asked several times and it's been debated, as you know. I have been thinking about it. I don't think I can come up with the secret sauce, except these few things which we took as a matter of course. What were they? So first, there were just a lot of women around in ICICI. So, there were a lot of women at my level when I entered, but there were also very senior women and there were women with kids, with families, who were working at responsible positions, leadership positions. If you remember, Lalita Gupte. There were several of them. So, I think that is a very subliminal, it's not a direct, overt message, but it's a pretty powerful message.

Second was, it didn't matter what your gender was in terms of getting responsibilities. So, which division you worked in and what you did, it was pretty much gender neutral. Related to that was how you did with your work, it was recognized, again irrespective. So, if you did a great job, it was recognized, didn't matter whether you were a woman or a man. The promotion opportunity which you got, it didn't matter whether you were a woman or a man. The opportunity to move, as I told you, the whole merchant banking division moved to ISEC but there were three of us who used to work in lending who got asked whether we would like to move. Two were guys and I was the woman. So, it was an almost gender-agnostic sort of environment. And this was my first real working environment, so I grew up in that. I thought this was the norm.

DJ: And the fact that there were a lot of other women, your peers and seniors, was it a part of a conscious effort to hire women or is it to do with the fact that maybe compared to some other sectors, financial services makes it a little easier for companies to attract women into the workforce?

VB: I think, probably both. It's a relatively newer sector to that extent, so if you think about it, TFIs were not that old. These three institutions, ICICI, IDBI, IFCI, were created for helping the industry. Then, investment banking was certainly new. I think that's why finance has probably attracted so many. And in most industries, at entry levels, it's never a problem. At the entry levels, you are roughly hiring the same number of men and women in most industries, not all, but in most. I think, over time, how you create opportunities which are as gender agnostic or gender neutral as possible is much more important. And you are right, I think, ICICI, in terms of organizational policies, they were probably way ahead of several of their peers.

DJ: Now to take more of an individual view as you reflect on your career and clearly the growth on the professional side and in the personal context, any headline themes that you want to leave the listeners with in terms of the mindset with which women should think about their life which includes both career and home and everything else? What are the few themes that have held you in good stead in the journey?

VB: So, I think, the first thing which really bothers me many times is, very often, girls seem to make the call that you can either have a good career or you can have a good family life. I always feel that it's not an either-or situation if you want it that way. It's certainly possible to do both. It does mean a lot of hard work, it does mean a lot of networks that you need to build, it does mean a very great partner, spouse, but you can do it. So, the first thing I really get annoyed with is, girls saying, oh, but I can do only one. So I say be greedy, aim for both. And it's possible to do both, but then you can't shy away from the hard work. You should not be using that as an excuse.

The second mistake which often girls and women make is trying to do everything yourself, to be the superwoman who has the perfect career, who has the best household, who throws the most amazing parties. I think, if you try and do everything on your own, you are more likely than not to get one. So, you need to figure out what your priorities are and just focus on them and build networks. Ask for help. I think, many women find it hard to do, but I would say build your networks, be as systematic about building your networks in your personal life as you are in your professional life. So, build networks of friends, absolutely lean on your families, or build a good network of help at home, but build your networks, otherwise it's going to be much harder. It is going to be hard and you have to be ready for that. And probably 10 years are really, really hard, but after that, it gets easy.

DJ: That's an interesting point, because just like you spoke about leverage on the work front, I think, it's a similar thing that can be applied on the other front as well but people approach this is as a DIY, while they approach the work front as leverage.

VB: Correct! I think people are very scared of asking for help on the personal level, I have seen. It becomes an ego thing. I can do it by myself, I don't need help from my parents, and I don't need help from my in-laws. Or how can I leave my kid with a friend or whatever. I think you have to be as thorough and as systematic in building that network as you are in your organization.

DJ: And maybe just another piece about the banking career is intensity. Any reflections as you think back, now that you have moved on from that career; not to say what you do is less intense but clearly banking is known for its intensity than some of the other careers. Any reflections on how you have managed to overcome let's say those difficult moments that often hit you? Any two–three themes that come out?

VB: Banking is intense. It does mean a lot of hours and if I haven't said it so far, I hope you realize I am a big optimist, so glass is certainly half-full than half-empty. The good news is technology has made life much easier. When I started my banking career, there were no emails there was no internet, so you couldn't carry work home. But now, you can schedule your hours around it. If you have young kids at home, you can certainly try and get back before they go to bed, spend some time with them, and then catch up on your work afterward. So, the first thing I would say is you need to be thoroughly disciplined and you need to be almost ruthless in your discipline. So, 'there are only these five things which I can make time for in my life right now and these are the only five things I am going to focus on'. Say no to a lot of things.

Be in the moment. So, if you have decided that these are the hours I'm going to spend with my daughter or with my son, then you have to be in the moment. You cannot be on the phone or you cannot be checking your email at that time. It again goes back to the discipline thing.

Always tackle the one job that you really don't want to do, first. And that's hard, because I am a big one for to-do lists and the one which I really don't want to do will continue to be on my to-do list for many days until and unless I tackle it upfront. My only trick for handling the intensity is to compartmentalize and to be disciplined.

DJ: Let's talk about some of the transitions you've been through. The first one was ICICI Securities to JP Morgan and then JP Morgan to Credit Suisse and both were transitions at leadership levels. The first three to six months are often make-or-break phases. Any reflections on those two transitions, wearing the hat of what you went through at that time but also wearing the hat of having the benefit of hindsight? What are the things that people often miss out while doing a transition at a senior level?

VB: When I moved from ISEC to JP Morgan, I wasn't senior. It was back in 1998. I had just finished my nine years; I hadn't even finished nine years of working. So, that was a relatively easier one. I was moving from a joint venture to JP Morgan and what took me by surprise was, while I knew JP Morgan through the joint venture for five years, moving away from a joint venture to a 100%-owned, it's such a huge difference. Suddenly, you're treated differently. There's much more access in terms of knowledge, networks, information. So, that was very pleasant and it wasn't a tough transition. The transition was much more in terms of, as I said, going and getting that first piece of business, making sure we had a viable business.

Having said that, in the 12 years which I spent in JP Morgan, from 1998 to 2010, there were a couple of big transitions and those were around acquisitions or mergers which JP Morgan did. I think the biggest one was in 2001, when JP Morgan got bought by Chase. Chase had just bought Jardine Fleming before that, and all these three organizations had presence in India. So, Chase Manhattan did, Jardine Fleming did, and JP Morgan did. We were all getting together after the merger, the economy was tanking, so there were way too many people, and I was expecting my second kid. Shamika was born in January of 2001. So, that was probably one of the biggest transitions I went through within JP Morgan, because it was clear that we were too big in terms of team. We had to shrink, and honestly when I was going away on my maternity leave, I didn't know whether I was coming back to a job. It's a totally different thing what happened afterwards, but that was a pretty tough transition.

I think the transition from JP Morgan to Credit Suisse, which happened much later when I was much more senior, was also an interesting one. There are things which I think I did well and there are things which I could have done better. So, what did I do well? I didn't have to prove anything when I moved, so I didn't inflict a lot of pressure on myself. We did set ourselves a goal as a team in Credit Suisse, but there wasn't that constant pressure that I need to prove something. So, that made life much easier. Obviously, you have to go and build your [internal] network all over again, which can be exhausting, especially if you've spent so many years in the previous organization where everybody knows you. So, you have to start all over again and it can be exhausting. And every organization works differently. It takes you time to figure that out and it can be sometimes painful, the whole journey and process of discovery.

I think, and here's where I made my mistakes. Because Credit Suisse was itself the result of a couple of mergers, the investment bank was more American, because that was First Boston, and I had worked in JP Morgan, another American institution. The private bank was very Swiss. So, the two cultures were very different. I think, on hindsight, I did not invest enough time and effort in figuring out the differences and in building networks in both the parts. It is necessary to do that because every organization has a different rhythm and to anybody who makes a transition at a senior level, I would say, you really need to try and figure out what the differences are and invest the time. The first year is your honeymoon period. Every new organization will give you time. Use that time wisely, much more internally than externally.

DJ: Are there one or two things that stand out in terms of what one could do in decoding a culture?

VB: Again, I would say, ask for help. In most places if you've just joined, and certainly the people who have hired you, it's in their interest also to make sure or to help you succeed. So, take their help. Don't try to do everything yourself. I think it comes back to the same thing. When you transition at a senior level, you think you have a point to prove, so the path you will follow is, OK, let me do it myself. I need to make a point. But you don't need to do it yourself. The people who have hired you, they are as invested in your success as you are. So, I would say take the help. We're scared of taking help because we think it makes you look weak. Actually, it doesn't; it just makes you smarter.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It's interesting that Vedika talks about seeing the world as a problem to be solved and having a misplaced sense of what is solvable in the social impact world. Ravi Venkatesan, who himself has had multiple transitions, Cummins in the U.S. to India, heading Cummins in India to heading Microsoft in India, taking on NED roles such as chairmanship of Bank of Baroda or co-chairmanship at Infosys and heading Social Venture Partners in India and so on spoke about the criticality of listening in a new environment.

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 the important allies in this. If you don't listen and you start a meet, you come in with a point of view, you start jumping into action right away, and you are going to make a lot of mistakes because you haven't built this nuance and reasonably accurate picture of the landscape.

DJ: If you find this of interest you might like the nugget 6.01 with Ravi Venkatesan. If you find this content purposeful, I would request you to take a minute or two to write a review on iTunes or share it with the people that you think could benefit from this. The podcast is available on iTunes and podcast apps like Stitcher. To search for content by specific themes, you could visit the website PlaytoPotential.com and use the search functionality. Now back to the podcast chat with Vedika.

DJ: The other transition I wanted to talk about is executive to NED transition. Now, I think you sit on 6 boards? In your experience, where do people struggle in making that transition? What does it take to transition well from being a successful executive to being an effective board member? Where do you think sometimes people who have been successful as an executive struggle to be as effective as a board member?

VB: I think, the biggest difference is when you are an executive, you have responsibility and authority. And if it's a P&L, you own the P&L. So, you can make most of the differences. When you are a board member, an independent board member as I am, you certainly don't have that authority. So, to stay away from that micromanagement, I think, it's the hardest thing. Very often, actually, I think, the boards struggle with it. So, many boards sort of forget that their role is not to run the company on a day-to-day basis and then, they start doing what the CEO is doing or start micromanaging the CEO, which I think is hard. So, that is hard when you move from executive to non-exec positions.

The second is on similar themes: how do you get people to accept or to listen to what you're suggesting when you are not really their direct boss? So, how do you get yourself heard? I mean, it's not a direction you give. How do you influence without having the authority? I think that's the second one.

And the third one is, every board has its own dynamic between the boards and if you are the latest member on to the board, there are already groups within boards or some typical characteristics of boards. How do you figure that out? And in several of the boards, I was the first woman on the board. So, that brings its own dynamic, but I found it fascinating. I tell my husband that this is like the OB classes in IIM, and it's just fascinating to me.

DJ: It's like the 12 angry men and a woman.

VB: Absolutely!

DJ: Any takeaway on two things: for a woman who has had a successful executive career, who is considering getting onto a few boards, what are the few practical thoughts in terms of what they could do? And second is, just about back to the point of settling in, any reflections on what are the two–three things they could think about as they settle into a new board role?

VB: So, I think, in terms of getting on to boards, the good news is there is a law, which means every company does require and it's not that you get called for a board position only because you're a woman, but that certainly helps. So, I would say put your hand up, get in touch with a couple of search firms who do this. And many of them do. Your previous firm does that, Spencer Stuart does that, a couple of other firms do that. So, put your hand up, is the first thing I would say.

Second is, there are a couple of courses also which are being run. Research that and go in for those courses. Because often, I think, the people at the board, men usually, might not even realize that a woman is looking for a board position or this woman has this background, because she might not be in a very high-profile role. So, you need to make sure, similar to how you would apply for another job, you need to be a little organized about it and you need to be systematic about it. Some people, I found, get squeamish about this and they say, oh, if I am good, I should be noticed. Well, in a perfect world you should be, but we don't live in a perfect world. So, be organized, be systematic.

And once you get on to the board, then you have to prepare. So, I usually go and spend quite a bit of time with management on my own, just listening, figuring out, hearing about the business, what makes the business work, what doesn't make the business work. Before every board meeting, you should prepare. And for the first few months at the board meetings, just listen. You get much smarter about the business, but you also get much smarter about the board dynamics, and then, you can start contributing.

DJ: You moved from Credit Suisse, the world of capitalism, to water.org. As I heard you talk about what you do, clearly it feels like leveraging a lot of those experiences and the financial services wisdom maybe applied in a different context. Talk to us a little bit about how you thought about that transition from Credit Suisse to doing what you do now.

VB: So, I spent 25 years in banking, most of it in investment banking, and I enjoyed myself. I really enjoyed myself. We were lucky. I did a lot of my banking during the years when India opened up, had a big economic revival. There were lots of first-time transactions, cross-border, all of that. But even while in my banking days, I was very sure I didn't want to, at the age of 65 or 70, look back on my life and say what have I done in terms of work and if the answer was only investment banking, I was very sure that's not going to be enough. That's not where I want to be. So, I knew at some stage I was going to leave investment banking. I had no idea what I'd do afterwards, but I knew at some stage I was going to leave. I started getting bored in banking. I started getting bored because after the 2008-09 crisis, it became harder. There's a lot of commoditization happening of banking. It started becoming a race to the bottom in terms of fees. The economy was slower, so it wasn't as if newer types of transactions were happening. So, I started having these conversations within Credit Suisse saying, hey guys, I am bored. I wanted to leave on good terms. My boss, who I'm great friends with, my ex-boss, he convinced me one more year, one more year, but finally I left in early 2015,.

The only thing I was very sure of was I was not going to go back into investment banking. There was nothing else I was sure of. This new law came up, so I took up a few board positions, but that wasn't enough in terms of keeping me engaged on a day-to-day basis. So, I started volunteering. I wanted to work with an organization which worked in the area of intellectual disability and I found out about this great organization called Jay Vakeel. I started volunteering there and as I was volunteering there, that was quite an awakening for me. So, my first fear was I know nothing about the social sector, what am I going to contribute? The easiest one was I could help them raise funds, which I did. But to my surprise, I found that there were so many things you learn in a corporate world which you don't even realize. It's about processes, it's about analytics, it's about scaling up, all of that helped me in Jay Vakeel, and I volunteered there for almost a year. (Now, I sit on their board.) And that gave me the confidence.

I started enjoying it so much that I said; maybe my next move is going to be in the social sector. I think, sometimes it's just providence. Suddenly, two things came up, water.org came up and the opportunity to set up a foundation came up. I thought the first time I move into this sector, I want to be close to a cause, so I did not want to join the foundation. I did not know about water.org before, but personally, Sandeep and I, my husband and I, in our personal giving, have always been very focused on women and the girl child. And what I realized while speaking with water.org and then while reading about them was, the absence of water and sanitation impacts a woman and a girl child much more than it does a man or a boy. And you know we can talk about safety, all of that, what happens when a girl grows up and when she starts menstruating, what happens and all of those things. The positive is also true. So, when there is access to water and sanitation, the quality of life improvement is much more for a woman and a girl child.

Once I understood how fundamental this is and how it can impact the woman and the girl child, which is anyway a cause very dear to Sandeep and I, that got me attracted to water.org. The opportunity to use my finance background, the people I mean there are such amazing people in this organization that got me attracted. And then, finally, there's this weird symmetry. So, I worked for 25 years in investment banking which is as wholesale as you can get. You're talking always in billions and millions of dollars, and now, I am working at the other end of the spectrum, where the average loan size is less than 10,000 rupees. So, there is a very weird symmetry in my mind that I am doing both ends of the spectrum, and that's what made me move.

DJ: How have you thought about impact, success, and money in this journey? Any reflections on how those three curves have moved or anything that you would have done differently as you look back in life?

VB: When anybody's ever asked me why I did investment banking for so long, usually you would expect money to be one of the big reasons. Surprisingly, if I try to put down the three reasons or the five reasons, money is not going to be one of them. The people who used to work in my team, they used to joke, 'I hope you don't talk like this to your boss when you are negotiating for us'. The reason is, look, we were all lucky we grew up in our careers in a time when there was so much happening in India, when it was opening up, the wages, the salaries, the compensations totally changed for all of us. This is not how I was brought up, so I always felt money was important in terms of fairness. So, am I getting what's fair, in terms of what I do and when compared to other people who do similar work. But the money in absolute terms was actually not a big driver.

What was a big driver was, yes, I am a very competitive person, and so can we be among the top few banks in the country. So, when I left JP Morgan, we were the leader in the country and when I moved to Credit Suisse we were like 20-something in the list of banks. As a team, we'd set a goal that in five years we should come in top five. When I left, we were lucky, and luck absolutely has a role to play in success, and we were number three. I felt that we had achieved what we had set ourselves to achieve. So, what was important to me was, yes, how well do we do as a team? How well do we do as an organization? How many times do we get repeat business? That was very important to me personally. So, does the client trust me enough? Do they feel we added enough value that they will call us back? That was a very, very important milestone for me. But as I told you, I also felt even in the heydays of banking that this is not all I want to do. I also feel that we were lucky and because of that luck, we need to have a phase of life, each one of us, when we give back in whatever way, in whatever shape. It could be writing cheques. That's also fine, and I never discount that. But if there is a way, personally, I felt if I could give back and have an impact at a different scale, of a different kind, I would like to do that. And that's where I am.

DJ: What are the watch-outs when someone transitions from the for-profit to the non-profit world?

VB: The first thing I would say is, I am sort of amazed at the distrust both sectors have for each other. I think, as I am certainly not the first, there are many more people before me who have made this transition and hopefully there are many more people after me, so as this movement continues, I'm hoping that the distrust goes down. In the corporate world, there is this belief that not-for-profits have no financial discipline, no targets, it's an easy life. In the not-for-profit world, people believe that corporates are all soul-sucking, soulless machines. Neither of them is true.

DJ: It's a lack of respect and a lack of trust, right?

VB: Exactly! So, I think, those bridges certainly need to be built. This migration helps in those bridges being built. I think, when you move from the profit world to the not-for-profit world, yes, processes are important, structures are important in the not-for-profit world, but you have to realize and you have to have the humility of realizing that every problem cannot be solved immediately. Sometimes, some problems cannot be solved. It's very hard. Personally, from an investment banking environment, every problem had to be solved. You just have to find the solution, you have to creative, and you have to find the solution. You come here; you realize, no, there are problems which cannot be solved instantaneously. There are problems which are so much more complex and they require so many parts coming together. And that happens at its own pace. So, you have to have the humility, you have to have the patience, and that's what I learn every day.

DJ: In summary, as we wrap up this conversation, any themes for people to play to their potential?

VB: The big one for me is its all dependent on us, each one of us, and how we can or cannot play to our potential. A lot of the demons are in our mind. So, you asked me a little while ago about women and while I hate making these generalizations, I am going to go ahead and make one. I find that very often, women are more risk averse. So, if a new opportunity comes up, if it's something which looks different, which is outside your comfort zone, a woman will usually say yes, only if she is 80–90% sure; a man will usually say yes if he is 25–50% sure, and there's been a lot of research. So, I would say, the first thing, whether you are a man or a woman, don't hesitate to take risks. Everything should not be what you've done before and everything shouldn't look the same, whether it's taking risks in terms of a new organization, whether it's taking risks in terms of a new sector or even a new responsibility within an organization, a new branch, I don't know, whatever it is, don't be hesitant to take risks.

The second would be, just be authentic, just be true to yourself. All of us spend more time at work, more of our waking hours at work, than we spend anywhere else. If you try to be somebody who you are not, it's very hard to keep up. So, you might as well be who you are. And you don't have to look exactly the same as the next person, and I don't mean diversity only in the gender sense. I mean it in all types of sense, the way you speak, the way you work, the working style, the way you dress. It's OK. Once you get over that, the fear of taking risks and the pressure of trying to be exactly like somebody else, I think, then, you can play to your potential.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you found the conversation purposeful. If the transition to the Social Impact world is of interest, you might find nugget 6.01 with Ravi Venkatesan relevant. If the topic of women leadership is of interest, you might find the nuggets with Pramath Sinha of interest where he talks about how he is trying to make a difference with the Vedica scholar's program. If you found the podcast of value, could I request you to take a moment and go to iTunes and share and offer your comments on the podcast. I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations at the Play to Potential Podcast. Bye now.

End of transcription

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Nugget from Pramath Sinha that is referenced: Educating ourselves (and link with leadership of the future).

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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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Vedika Bhandarkar - Nuggets

- 15.00 Vedika Bhandarkar - The Full Conversation
- 15.01 Vedika Bhandarkar - Water.org - Introduction and how you can contribute
- 15.02 Vedika Bhandarkar - Early childhood wiring
- 15.03 Vedika Bhandarkar - Investment Banking as a career and key transitions
- 15.04 Vedika Bhandarkar - Women and careers
- 15.05 Vedika Bhandarkar - Effective Leadership transitions across companies
- 15.06 Vedika Bhandarkar - Executive to NED transition
- 15.07 Vedika Bhandarkar - Women and Board roles
- 15.08 Vedika Bhandarkar - Transitioning to the Social Impact world
- 15.09 Vedika Bhandarkar - 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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