



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. Next to it are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129*', a Twitter icon with the handle '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with the website 'playtopotential.com'. To the right, it says 'Also available on:' followed by icons for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the far right is a photo of the host, Deepak Jayaraman, with the text 'Podcast Host Deepak Jayaraman' below it. A small note at the bottom left reads: '*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

Guest

Vinita Bali is a distinguished leader who has held leadership roles in 6 countries (UK, Nigeria, South Africa, Chile, USA and India) across 5 continents across organisations including Cadbury's, Coca Cola Company and Britannia. She is currently the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). In addition to this, she also sits on multiple Indian Boards (CRISIL Ltd, Titan Industries Ltd, Kasturi and Sons Ltd) and MNC Boards (Smith and Nephew Plc., Syngenta International AG). She is also a Member of the Board of Governors of Indian Institute of Management - Bangalore.

Vinita has had several significant transitions across cultures, functions and organisations in her career. We spoke about a range of topics including spending time on some of the transitions she has made, her early years and how they influenced her ability to see things as a continuum, her perspectives on adopting the mindset of a "tourist" and more.

Context to the conversation

Hello and Welcome to the 16th 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. You could visit transitioninsight.com for details. 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 Vinita Bali. Vinita has had a distinguished career spanning 5 different continents in organizations like Coca Cola Company, Cadbury's and Britannia. Today, she is the Chairman of the Board of Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition and is a Board member on several other Indian and international boards. We spoke about a range of topics ranging across her decision to enter consumer goods industry after initially enrolling for a PhD, her perspectives around navigating a career in a large MNC, transitioning back to India, Effectiveness in Boards and much more. Without further ado, over to the conversation.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Lovely. And maybe to start with the current Vinita you do a bunch of different things. I would love to get a sense of what all do you do today and more importantly why you do what you do. Talk to us a little bit about your portfolio.

Vinita Bali (VB): So, Deepak this is something that I had thought about having done almost 37-38 years of an operational role you know where you are kind of on high alert all the time and it's great; it gave me all the fodder and all the experience and the adrenaline, all of which I enjoyed and I

would do all over again. I think there also comes a time where you want to move on and do something different and as I thought about it, in my professional life, that something different came in the form of opportunities to go and work in different countries. So even though I have had long stints with largely three companies, I have moved around a lot not just cities but countries and continents and, you know, that was both a challenge as well as a very rewarding experience because what I learnt was not just about business, but a whole lot of other things which was really very interesting for me. So, I thought about this, I had got involved with activities or domains outside typically of the corporate world. So, my interest in nutrition actually came from some work that we had done in the area of nutrition when I was at Britannia. So, I was very clear that whilst I was still energetic and productive, I want to spend the next 20 years of my life doing things very different from what I have done let's say in the last 35 years of my life. And that created the shift. So, my portfolio is still, I still spend I would say 50 to 60 percent of my time on corporate and corporate related stuff through boards, advisories and such activities both in India as well as globally because I really love the global perspective. And I would say about 30 to 35 percent of my time is on nutrition and nutrition related domains, which also has interaction with industry. And the balance 5 to 10 percent is doing a bunch of different things actually partly academic as I am on the Board of Governors of IIM Bangalore. And I also interestingly, I am President of the Welham Girls' School and it's very interesting because I knew very little about primary school education and you realize that if things are to change then unless we start looking at primary school education, we are not going to be able to change it at the secondary or the tertiary or the advanced level. So, for me this is a beautiful time because I am learning, I am being challenged, boards I have taken have nothing to do with domains that I have worked in because for me boards is a great opportunity to learn and develop as much as you contribute. So, I am actually having a great time.

DJ: Lovely and it's interesting to see you used 20 years as a chunk of time. I have seen people say 5 years, 10 years, but is there a deeper insight behind that?

VB: No, I mean, I am hoping that my health will continue, my energy will continue.

DJ: Absolutely, that's not where I was going but...

VB: And you know yeah so as long as that happens, when I say 20 years, I am saying for a long time to come and you know I am one of those people where if I feel that being there, done that, staying more in this area, I am not going to learn anything or enjoy myself, I will go and find something different to do. There's just too much that you can learn and experience in one lifetime.

DJ: And would you have done this, since you are having so much fun, would you have timed this a little earlier with the wisdom hindsight?

VB: You know maybe in about a year or two years earlier than I did.

DJ: Okay.

VB: I also want to emphasize that I think what we or what I learnt through my various journeys through geographies, companies, hierarchies, I think all of that is very important. You need a strong foundation to be able to do a bunch of different things; at least that's been my experience.

DJ: What is GAIN? Talk to us a little bit about your role in and how that came about?

VB: So GAIN was created in 2001 through the special resolution of UN and that is the time that the GAVI (Global Alliance for Vaccination and Immunization) and GAIN which is the (Global alliance for

Improved Nutrition) were created and I think the and I think the insight in both of these creations really was that if the world had to tackle multi-faceted issues like nutrition it needed coalitions which were more than unidimensional so what I mean by that is nutrition is a function of not just the food we eat which again divided into your Micro nutrients and Macro nutrients which are your Vitamins and Minerals but it is also impacted by health and sanitation and hygiene, availability of portable water access to primary health care and things like that and therefore it is a multifaceted problem which required a multidimensionality of solving it and the initial funding really came from the foundations like Gates foundation so today gain has been an existence for 15 years, in fact in December of this year we are going to be celebrating 15 years of GAIN and over these years has worked in understanding and sharpening areas within nutrition so for example one easy to understand its simple intervention in nutrition is fortifying staples with nutrients, a great example of that is iodine with salt in India if you go overseas milk is invariably fortified with vitamins A and D countries like the US, Latin America etc. decided to fortify sometimes in the 30s and in the 40s and you therefore see a different dimensionality of deficiencies there compared with India, India we are in a fairly great situation where still 42% of children under the age of 5 are malnourished or undernourished, stunted or wasted and we typically tend to say oh he or she is short because in India we don't grow it eat all but actually its wasting and stunting. So that is sort of background to GAIN and GAIN works in over 30 countries right now and the word Alliance in GAIN is very important it perhaps one of the very few if not the only organizations that can talk to industry, development partners, NGOs, private sector to come together to find solutions to the problems of under nutrition and malnutrition to make it very palpable in India GAIN has been involved in work that has happened in Rajasthan on fortification of edible oil with vitamin A and D and the state government of Rajasthan has actually now stipulated that all oil sold in Rajasthan will have to be fortified with vitamin A and D so GAIN works there not just talking about the efficacy of vitamin A and D in edible oil because that has been proven over and over again in many studies that have been done around the world but also how it would actually be implemented, where do the micro nutrients come from? Where does this thing happen etc. so looking at the entire market place looking at the entire value chain, in Nigeria GAIN is working on how do we address post-harvest loss for something like tomatoes which are the great source of Vitamin A and you too have many kids in Nigeria with poor eyesight and night blindness, which is caused by shortage of vitamin A, GAIN has worked in Afghanistan for example on producing calorie dense and nutrition dense products to get to people or to children, in India actually my first interaction with GAIN was when I was with Britannia and we had worked with GAIN so where I joined Britannia, I realize that Britannia was making product for the world food program which are calorie dense and nutrition dense then I asked myself the question if we are doing this for the world why aren't we doing it for India where we have got such a poor nutritional status. GAIN was coming was opening an office in India I met them and that conversation lead to a wonderful collaboration where I think in 2007 or early 2008 we collaborated, it was a wonderful example of public private partnership with the NANDI foundation that was supplying midday meals to 175 thousand children in a school in Hyderabad we collaborated with them GAIN worked with Britannia on product development and we actually created what I think is a unique delivery platform for Iron built from the insight that 70% of school going children are Iron deficient anaemic and we created a biscuit which actually had iron in it, we worked with paediatricians to determine what should be the level of fortification and before we went into the school we do a baseline check of let's say the haemoglobin level of these kids and just to give you an idea typically these are the kids who come to school and we expect them to be attentive and to learn and so on within an average haemoglobin rate of 8 to 8 and a half and the government has a big program called the IFA PILL the compliance rate of which is less than 12% or 10% because it taste metallic and it makes you feel nauseous and you have digestion problems so all we did was we created biscuit as a wonderful carrier of Iron and there's a 100% compliance and so on and we did massive studies and each study proved that if you give this consistently over a period of 90 to a 100

days that level of Haemoglobin goes up to between 11 and a half to 12 and this is work that we collaborated with AIIMS which All India institute of science, so it's not as though we were doing this and win that insight we took another big decision we said that we will fortify even the products that we sell commercially but those levels of fortification obviously have to be different and there we went by the WHO code etc. for fortification so 50% of what Britannia even continuous to sell now which was the best insight is fortified with vitamins and minerals so I think the big idea that we stumbled upon there was, everybody keeps talking about corporate social responsibility and so on my view on that is very simple you can't do corporate social responsibility outside of your business the best way to be socially responsible is to embed a social cause into the business module itself and that is I think what we did, when we decided to fortify even with the products that we sell commercially.

DJ: One of the pieces I am curious about is how much of us who we are gets formed in our early years, so again if you were to go back in time are there three four things that got baked in your formative years let's say till end of schooling or end of college which still forms a core part of who you are?

VB: I agree with your proposition of we are a product of our experiences right from childhood to otherwise I think the most significant part of thinking about since in multiple dimensions or not in a single dimension or thinking about things systemically I think comes from my exposure and my interest, I think it was my exposure which lead to my experience to a lot of things when one was growing up. In school I used to do sports, I used to do dramatics, I used to for a long time I was a student of Indian classical dance which I pursued in the evening outside of school, so I was interested in doing everything you might say and not that I thought about it but I was also the school selector, junior school captain and head girl and so on and so forth, and those roles in a strange way come with their own responsibility which seems like a lot when you are a school kid, So I think it was the combination of all of that and my exposure to the world of theatre to the world of classical music and dance, I think refined in many ways, my aesthetics or my thinking about things across a continuum rather than fragmenting that this is cool and this is extra curriculum in my life everything moved off from one to another, the school finished we stayed back and then we did dramatics and then played hockey and then so I think in its own way that was quite formative that was quite formative in terms of looking at issues from multiple dimensions in terms of a sensitivity and sensibility which things like the arts and when I talk about arts, I talk about visual arts, I talk about performing arts, I talk about theatre I think those things enabled you to touch something which the rational objective world of valuations and NPVs and IRRs doesn't allow you to, and I think both are important I don't want to undermine one versus the other but I think if we can create a greater sensitivity and sensibility and a respect for the bigger environment in which businesses operate I think it would change things a lot and I think it would help a lot, I think we have become too unidimensional in our thinking.

DJ: The other piece I am curious about Vinita is also from a parenting perspective was there anything about the parenting context which helped you come on this journey that you have come?

VB: I think that's a very interesting question as I think about it ours was quite a happy household and there weren't any challenges, my parents were, for both of them I think the education exposure was very important, all the right brain stuff of theatre and dance and poetry etc. I got from my mother who was a reader very interested in these other dimensions of life but as I think about it, it was a very secure childhood and I think that security of childhood gives you confidence, it enables in you the creation of trusting relationships as compared with kids growing up in households which are insecure where dramatic things have happened, so nothing of that drama happened in my life, my dad worked for the government we were encouraged to have a lot of dinner time was always a time

of debate, discussion, argument and conversation so it was that security I think which gives you the confidence and sort of the trust, which stays with you later on in life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This reminds me of a similar theme that came up when I was speaking with Vedika Bhandarkar (VB) in one of my earlier interviews. Vedika is an alumnus of IIMA and had a successful career in Financial Services leading upto heading Credit Suisse in India before moving to Social Impact world and heading Water.org in the country. When she reflected on her childhood, she made a related point about how she got into the habit of having open conversations.

VB: *"as a family we could talk about anything and you could have very strong disagreements with your parents and I had many of them and no subject was stable and we are know we believed in open conversations, it was a little messy sometimes little loud but that's the way we grew up and that also stayed with me through my working career that whenever things have been uncomfortable or I have disagreed with them I have had open conversations"*

DJ: Tune into Nugget 15.02 for more insights around this. If you find this content purposeful, do share your review on iTunes and share it with people that you think could benefit from it. Let's get back to the conversation with Vinita Bali.

DJ: Any insights on how people should think about direction, given the sea of options in front of them?

VB: I certainly think if I were to think about the time that I was making those decisions and now I think the choices have dramatically increased and therefor the confusion about what am I interested in, what am I going to do has also increased I also think that the environment in which we are operating is different today I think it's much easier to follow a certain career path and then move and do something different I think those choices also enable a degree of fluidity which was not available certainly when I was making these decisions which was late 70s early 80s so I do believe it's very important to be clear about, what are you interested in or what are the things that you are interested in? And not that I thought about it. That clearly at that stage but on reflection I have always asked myself three questions which are that is this something that I can learn from? The second is this something that I can add value to? And that obviously not in the context of academic pursuit but in a broader sense and the third is will I have fun doing this? and if the answer for all three is yes, it actually makes it very easy, you have talked about my journey in terms of what I wanted to do, I was very clear, I loved to travel, I wanted to travel abroad and in my mind when I was a student the Indian Foreign service was a way to do this so that is why I was saying I am going to join the IFS then I get to travel and see the world and the reason I went to JNU and D school was because I enrolled for and masters in economics my undergrad was in eco honours from LSR in Delhi so I got admission in JNU, I got admission in D school I really petty the children who are, who have done their CBSE exams and they have all got 98% and they are still not getting, they still not getting into the colleges of their choice I worth about the 78% in my senior Cambridge had a choice of any college I wanted to join in Delhi university and after that D school or JNU, IIM Cal and the reason only I decided to go to Bajaj was had nothing to do with anything, a cousin of mine who lived in Mumbai came down and said why don't you come to Mumbai? You have always studied in Delhi it will be great and if you want to sit for the exams in any case you have to do a masters do an MBA and the right the Foreign Services exam and I thought it was a good idea and it was as casual as that and that's actually been quite true of everything that I have done, it hasn't been that I am very clear

that this is what I want to do and I pursued it, things have actually fallen into my lap and once they fall into my lap then I very quickly decide what interests me and pursued that, so that's how I went to Bajaj and once you go there I remember in February the campus interview started and even though we were going to finish in June had jobs in February and also IFS went out of the window.

DJ: And any reflections on the enrolling for the PhD and moving on in two years?

VB: So I was always interested in academics, and somewhere how about this thing of maybe I need to become a professor so what happened was, and I was clear that if I wanted to do a PhD it was not going to be in India, it was going to be overseas and I needed some work experience so that's how, so this is after about two and a half years of working, actually again that is also very casual conversation but cut a long story short, I got this wonderful scholarship from the Rotary international which paid for everything including my air ticket from India to wherever I would have got admission for a year and so I got that scholarship first and then I said, ok I need to write my GMAT my TOEFL I was late for everything but anyway I did all that I was late but I got into Michigan state university at East Lansing so I went off and Cadbury were wonderful enough. So this was the PhD in management and I was very clear, I wanted to do competitive strategy, that was also the time early 80s where Michel Porter so there were all these books on the strategy of war so that was an area of interest for me but anyway I try and enrolled I actually finished all my 45 credits in a year I got myself transferred Columbia to Pursue my PhD and then after about a year and a half I just got bored, I got bored because for me business and management was about doing not about studying about business and management and I think Cadbury, my employer, when I went from India I think they understood me better than I understood myself and they gave me this wonderful offer they said ok we give you a year to a year and a half for a study leave if you do decide to pursue your PhD you resign and if you don't you come back and there's no down side in an offer like that so from that PhD there was an internship in the UN so I was kind of end this very experimental phase of my life so I went and worked in UN for about four months, I was a part time graduate intern there and so on but that also helped me clarify what I did not want and what I did want to come back to, and it was clear to me that, doing a PhD in economics, would be different from doing a PhD in business, so business is about being in the activity and in the sort of the everyday decision making of the business world and not studying about it so that's how I decided to drop a PhD, Cadbury then forged that I go and work with Cadbury in the UK which was actually my first time living and working abroad and it was quite unusual this was 1984 unlike now when multinationals have opened up not many people especially in marketing and sales went and worked overseas so it was quite a thing, I loved it, I was in the UK I launched the first every aerated chocolate and that exposure was just wonderful.

DJ: Sticking to that choice of direction, if you had to distil just a given the journeys you have been on and the journeys you have seen, how should a youngster, who is sort of at the cusp of 12th or at the cusp of undergrad degree think about the direction whether it's a PhD or business or Arts or any guiding framework worth reflecting on?

VB: I think one thing is that you must think about what you like to do? In my case my choices were for an undergrad degree, I could have done history, I could have done English and I did Economics part of it also was guided by conversations I had with my parents with my dad, could I have done history or English? Yes, but it would have been a different trajectory after that and I think what is more important than choice is if you realize that you are doing something which you truly don't enjoy don't live with it and I think and especially today there are so many choices, there are wonderful careers in Journalism, in Hotel management so many other things the worst thing anybody can do to themselves is to pursue something inherently you don't like and you don't enjoy, that is a very clear cut reason to go back and think about you want to do what you enjoy doing.

DJ: And even when I reflect on your choices while you suggested that there was sort of happens stands in a few situations clearly quick call on how you were feeling in that journey.

VB: I also think it is another thing which is in everything that I have seen, I think your own attitude makes a lot of difference aptitude is one thing, and aptitude determines how well you do anything that you do? But I think attitude is also very important if you come from a mindset of cribbing about everything then nothing will ever stack up to your expectations if on the other hand you say, I am curious about this this feeling is right for me I am enjoying studying this or doing this and you put yourself completely into it and you immerse yourself I think there is this great joy of discovery that there is that great joy and curiosity and if you don't like to learn then you should never be a student anywhere but I think if you discover joy in learning whether as a student or as a professional or as a chief executive or as in any role that you play then it all becomes very easy I think if you come from the orientation of oh my god my parents want me to do a degree and I have to get this check this box and move on and I see people in organizations come with the same attitude, it's a job that I have to do, it's not a job that you have to do, being a student being a professional working doesn't define your life but is a very important part of your life.

DJ: And I am sure these two types of people show up very differently at work. The types who are doing it because they want to learn and they are passionate about something versus people who are doing because it's a job. I am sure you see that difference.

VB: Yeah, and I think it all boils down to authenticity. It's about... you have to be very comfortable with who you are.

DJ: And if you could double click on the word, what does that word mean for you Vinita?

VB: Authenticity?

DJ: Yes.

VB: Authenticity to me means integrity of purpose and integrity of action. It is about recognizing who you are and in a sense that determines your behaviour. So, I think, that consistency of behaviour. If I am projecting myself to be different from who I am, then it's very hard whereas you know authenticity is you see me as it is in black and white, what's and all, you know that this is the person.

DJ: Got it.

VB: And I think authenticity also enables people to actually see your intent. You are then not playing games either with yourself or with anybody else. There is a certain genuineness, there is a certain honesty, there is a certain, you know, this is who I am and I have just found that to be so much simpler to deal with than sort of the complexity that gets created when there are hidden agendas, when what you are saying is different from actually what you are thinking and so on.

DJ: And it's interesting you say this; I was talking to another gentleman Abhijit Bhaduri who has written a book called Digital Tsunami and the point he made was especially in a world where different versions of you are out there, the digital world, the bar has got much higher for you to be authentic because it's so easy to be caught out if your projection is not in line with who you are and there's just so many more channels of you floating around in the world we live in. So, it was interesting that he made a point in that context of the digital world we live in.

VB: Yeah, I think Deepak what we are saying is that if your deep-down values and beliefs drive your behaviour, then the chances when you are operating from a point of authenticity is that even in different contexts there is a certain behaviour that can be expected from you. And I think that's what we are talking about. You talked earlier, we referred to leadership. To me leadership is a verb, it's not a noun and I think everybody is a leader in different contexts and in different situations, but leadership is not a position, it is behaviour.

DJ: What's your advice on how people should think about a career in consumer goods world, in your experience what sorts of people are flourished and what sort of people haven't? And what questions should students ask themselves before they sort of March forward in that direction?

VB: In a sense as I think about it it's almost like saying I didn't choose the consumer goods world, the FMCG world chose me, primarily because the first job I got was in an FMCG company and kind of moved from there I think again I go back to a point of you have to intrinsically like what you do, especially if you initially starting off in marketing and so on and so forth you have to be able to relate to the product because you have to be able to relate to the consumers and so on and so forth and I don't think it is so much about the consumer world as it is about the orientation that you bring to what you do. So whether I am selling a computer or a chocolate it is important for me to understand who my customers are? What my channels are? Who my consumers are? How do my products fit into their lives? Not how their life fits into my product typically we tend to see the world from the lens of the company that we are operating in and I think the biggest challenge is to see the world from the lens of the world and that's why I said it's not, how your life fits into my product but how my product fits into your life so I think the interesting part about marketing is this whole, it's not deterministic, there's nothing which says, if I do this every consumer will do that so what is interesting to me about marketing is the different psychology of consumers the sociology of the ecosystem in which business happens one of the characteristics as I keep saying of the FMCG businesses that we rely a lot on velocity, we are talking about low unit price products which a lot of people have to buy a lot of times for the business to be successful, so in a sense you are up for choice all the time and I think that's what is interesting, you're dealing with large numbers of consumers, you are dealing with things that they use every day, it's not a product that you use unlike Pharmaceuticals, I will think about a drug when I am not well, these are happy products, chocolates, soft drinks, biscuits and these are little joys, these are not serious things they don't change your life but these are simple joys and what is interesting is when you start looking at the value chains of each of these organizations and the number of job or the employment that they create is another very fascinating aspect and I realize this as I grew in experience and I guess grew in the roles that you really have an ability to impact the livelihoods, I am not arrogant enough to say the lies but you have the opportunity to impact the livelihood of so many people in that value chain the little kiosks that is sitting on the road, selling biscuits or soft drinks and these products are like having cash if you are sitting on the roads with the carat of Coke you know by the end of the day you are going to be able to convert your product into cash so it is the much larger ecosystem and then you realize how much more value you can add to that ecosystem by the way you deal with that ecosystem, how do you take in India how do you deal with your contract manufacturers, how do you deal with contract labour, or how authentic are you as a company in dealing with all of those are you cutting corners or not there are so many opportunities for creating employments, Jobs, and when you look at business in that context and when you look at how much influence business has on impacting livelihoods and when you really think deeply about that that's the entire ecosystem you are managing.

DJ: And form a lens of somebody trying to make a directional choice any words of advice on what question should I ask myself, so I am just wondering if there are one or two defining trades that stand out that people reflect upon for them to say, this might be interesting for me.

VB: The lens I would use that does this opportunity gives me the chance to work with really smart people? I think the cultures of organizations is very important, one piece of advice I would give is that, if you increased your own self-awareness of who you are and what you like doing, there are some people who flourished in a competitive adrenal flowing environment there are others who are more measured and you have to actually do a little bit of homework to say, first of all do I like the products that this company sales, whether these are consumed products, white goods, services, anything, can I relate to this, if I cannot relate to alcohol why would I go and work in... if I cannot relate to some Tractor, why would I go and work in a company that are selling Tractors, so there is something which says can you relate to the product, what is the culture of this company? Do I have the opportunity to work with really smart people? I think those are considerations, we don't spend enough time looking at some of the softer aspects of culture and so on and so forth and I do believe and I am going to be very explicit about, it is not about money, if you are good at what you do opportunities will chase you and money will definitely come so don't start with where am I getting the most salary, start with where will I become the most wonderful manager, the most wonderful person, where will I get the maximum opportunities, because if you are good, there are opportunities, there will be more opportunities that you can imagine and the money comes.

DJ: I am curious about the multiple transitions you have been through in multiple continents across several countries, I would like to spend some time on some of you big transitions and the one piece I am curious about is the first 90 to 180 days where often the hairline cracks becomes fractures very quickly if not addressed properly so give us a sense of what are the omissions and commissions in these first 90 days both from an incoming perspective but also from a hiring leaders perspective, what can the two do to ensure that the transitions go well?

VB: So there are many questions in this one question so let me try and segregate them the first is the transitions you make, I think in my case every transition was about in my evaluation at that time looking to a different and better. Better not in terms of money I think the word really would be looking for a more different and diversified opportunity except the last one which is when I moved back after eighteen years to India to work for Britannia that was purely a personal choice and a decision, my mother had, had a stroke and I just decided that this was a time to be close to my parents, so that was very largely driven by personal choice and by a career that or by a company that would not require too much of overseas travel etc. because I was moving back primarily to be with my parents so that was a very different and it came at a very different life stage both professionally as well as personally everything before that was about the opportunity for a diversified role, the opportunity for a bigger impact the opportunity for a larger foot print, including the transitions I made to move from country to country, so with Cadburys for example I had an opportunity to work in UK, which for the first time in my life was going and working overseas in a very developed, so it was the number one market for confectionery for Cadbury in a very developed market, so huge learning opportunity then to go and work in Nigeria, which was really part of a leadership trajectory that I was on in Cadburys where a bunch of us had been selected to do different roles and I was actually supposed to come back to India as CEO of Cadburys in 1993 when I finished my Nigeria assignment which went off very successfully at that point in time Cadbury gave me a choice of course you can come back to India which was part of this whole leadership program we were on, we were connected with INSEAD and so on I think there were just 10 to 12 of us globally and so they came back to me and said well there's an opportunity to go to South Africa and the first question I asked them was how do I fit I am neither black nor white and they said that's exactly why you fit and they gave me this offer, I must say Cadbury approach things in a very nonlinear fashion they said go and spend ten days in SA on our expense, travel around the country meet with the Cadbury people and then you decide and I came back very clear that SA is what I wanted to do and so it was going as Marketing and Sales director on the board of Cadbury South Africa, not as CEO but one of the other

things I wanted to say is titles have never been important to me, it wasn't I wasn't craving a CEO title for me it was the adventure for me opportunity to really create a line in the sand at a time of one of the country's most profound transitions in South Africa, Mr. Mandela was released in 1990, the country was having its dialogue between the national party and ANC, elections were going to happen in 1994 and number of countries that had continue to operate in South Africa we are operating in a very limited market there was this huge opportunity of how do we connect with the new SA and this was a marketing persons dream for me, I would never chase the title, so I do think I have also operated from a sense of adventure form a sense of possibilities, from a sense of horizons, from a sense of a something which is definitive and deterministic.

DJ: The reason this is interesting because in large MNCs again when I look back, when I was a search consultant at EgonZehnder, I would find there are a lot of people who have had good careers in MNCs often find a repatriation quite challenging, because you sort of, you fly and you go to different places at some point when you want a comeback and land in the home territory gets much harder so did you think about that? There's sort of coming back to base at some point or you would set off and...?

VB: No, as I said I had no plans to come back to India I was flying, I was doing what I wanted to do I was having a great time and therefor my decision to comeback to India was not a professional decision it was a personal decision and at that point in time that personal decisions were very important for me.

DJ: And just persisting with this theme of navigating a large MNC, any themes on, see one is the sense of adventure and clearly one is the sense of delivering mandates you have given but are there other themes around how you manage your career in large corporate without getting lost?

VB: Yes, in fact when I joined the Coca cola company from Cadburys was the first time I got into a global role and it was a very large global role because it was the global marketing director for brand Coke which operated in 200 countries at that time, this is Atlanta and Atlanta was also really creating this whole global structure for managing global brands it's had some sort of a lose structure before that but they had got back search Zeman as the chief marketing officer, Coke was flying high in 1994 when I joined Coke, I mean Coke was flying those were the days when people like Roberto was the chairman of Coke who was on the cover of fortune talking about economic value added and how do you serve the customers and the market and for me again I was doing very well in Cadburys so why did I moved to Coke, it wasn't that I left Cadburys it was that I moved to for a market year, what could be better than the opportunity to be responsible for the world's most valuable brand and I could not say no and one of the things I really credit Cadbury with and I had this conversation with Dominic Cadbury, who said is there anything we can do to hold you back? I said I am not running away, I am just running to something else, so culturally the two were very different, Cadburys were very British, very quicker and there was the Coca Cola company I got into a very move offs role, we were creating a global sort of architectures and so on and for the first four to six months I was just trying to get a handle on, so what exactly is my role? And there were several of us who had joined at the same time there was a new global brand director for Fanta for Sprite so we used to go off at lunch and talk and say so what are we doing? But I think what happens is if you are ok with ambiguity and there is some degree of complexity and if you are aware of what is happening around you because at the end of the day, success in any role is a function of empathetically understanding what the role is? Where the role can truly add value? And how do you create processes and structures so that things which are multi-dimensional remain multidimensional then I think you get big doors of success.

DJ: And I am curious about the phrase you used empathetically understanding, say more what do you mean by empathetically understanding the role?

VB: So in this case it was, take a brand like Coke its very local in its distribution and sales it's not unlike few brands where you got three global factories that are supplying the world in a case like Coke, where you have got tens if not hundreds of bottlers and distributors in every country, so the delivery is as local as local can be but here we are talking about the brand, what it stands for, how it should be communicated? As global as global can be. So it is the red can, it is the dynamic ribbon, it is the properties that Coke associates with how do you activate the Olympic, so the decision to sponsor the Olympics is a global decision the architecture of how that is going to be created is what we developed globally but the challenge was that it had to be executed locally, now you are coming into an situation where people have been used to operating in a certain way, so if you understand what are the pain points or where countries are looking for augmentation then it becomes so much easier to create that pull rather than a push, part of that push comes from saying OK, in Coke we created a very simple framework and that's what I liked initially we said it's not about global or local, it is global and local we simply need to define what is global and what is local? We simplified things and that's what I like, part of my initial role was, it was almost like you bringing in a little bit of academic recur into the thinking, we created the whole architecture for Coca Cola, what are the properties we are going to associate with and what we are not? We were associating with everything, the joke used to be if it moves sponsor it, if doesn't paint it red, and we say how do we change this to becoming most strategic about what we wanted to do? We created frameworks and architecture for how do we connect with the Olympics? So India wants to activate cricket, how does Coke associated with Cricket? So it was a very simple framework which said there are ideally four levels of decision making. Level one is it's a global decision with no input from the countries level two is global decisions with country input, level four is country decision with no input from global and we set country decision with global and level three which is where we didn't want to be is our decision so we said it should be one two, four and five so we created a lot of these wonderful frameworks etc.

DJ: Sticking to the theme of transitions, if you had to write the playbook and talk about the missed opportunities, when leaders transition at senior role in large corporations like Cadburys or Coke are there one or two things that you would really highlight both from a leader that's transitioning from and from a hiring leaders perspective just the stuff that they should focus on for the first 90 to 180 days?

VB: I think in many ways the success of a new higher is more dependent on what the hiring leader does to create the context and the environment for the new person coming into the organization and I believe that when we spend so much of time interviewing talent and getting people in it again surprises me, why company don't spend the same amount of rigger and robustness in terms of saying what would be the best way to absorb or to embed or enmeshed these people into the organization, so I think there's almost a greater responsibility on the hiring leader to ensure that the ground is fertile for the new person that you have hired to deliver his or her best and I think some of the things that are very helpful are just very simple things like the detail in which the induction is done making it easier for the new person to actually socialized within the new organization and these are all not just formal things but also informal ways in which you do that usually it is also acceptance by the peer group and what the hiring leader can do in terms of making the receptivity greater within the peer group so I think the hiring leaders have the greater responsibility as the person who has joined the organization, I think if you spend the first few days curious, listening, not jumping to conclusions we tend to get very judgmental very quickly I think if you spent the first few days as tourist in a place which is really about as a tourist you are exploring, you are curious, you want to read about this that and the other so if you spent those few days more like a tourist more

from the point of view of understanding and not judging more from a curiosity orientation rather than I have the answers and more from the point of you of really knowing that you are the new kid on the block your hiring manager may have hired you but none of the others owe you anything I think if you find that level of acceptance and I learnt it when I went to new countries, what did I know about consumers in Nigeria? What did I know about consumers in South Africa? And you have to very quickly go and figure out what that module of collaboration or cooperation is going to be and I think if there is that attention paid including to some of the softer things this is not a task oriented framework.

DJ: Talking about the hiring leaders one of the points you mentioned was ensuring that there's a greater acceptance with the peers tactically speaking any one or two things hiring leaders could do to ensure that because that's often the point where the resistance comes in sometimes visible or invisible manner, so any tactical things you have seen people do to increase their acceptance?

VB: One of the easiest things to do is, to do things informally just do a lunch or dinner outside the office where people first get to know each other as people before they get to know each other at positions within hierarchy and somehow in India we also very hierarchical so I would do an informal dinner with the spouse or girlfriend or whoever or nobody as the case might be because I think if you first understand the person and you first accept the person then accepting the role also becomes easier I think other things which are more like the whole process of sort of socialization, not necessarily presentations to be made but a walk through, giving enough one on one time with the new person and the existing people not just in the office but go and have a cup of tea together or whatever doing some informal fireside chats if the new person had to get to know you and you get to know the new person also informally that helps I would call a bunch of 10 or 20 people and say, here's our new head of supply chain, ask him or her any questions and so on. So I think the softer things and again it is very cultural.

DJ: And it's interesting it's almost like, work aside and let the web of relationship get formed and once sort of that's firmly in place it grows over time and that sometimes gets build more effectively outside the work context.

VB: And one thing I have also found is if you create relationships which are based on respect then even when I don't agree with you I still respect your point of view and one of my key learnings is that we don't spend enough time on relationships on professional relationships that created out of mutual respect and therefore people feel that they are in those positions and they have to defend those positions and that is where you end up not having a dialogue but a discussion or even an argument where the end point is, who is going to win, nor are we going to come up with the better decision for the company, so this is not about the finance guys winning over the marketing guys it is about how the marketing in finance people are collaborating and engaged in a dialogue to come up with the best possible solution on pricing or revenue, management or whatever the topic might be.

DJ: Picking on another transition point which is when you move from a functional role to a general management role or a P&L role was is direct happened for the first time when you joined Britannia?

VB: No, I was in a P&L role in Coke I was division president for Latin America, so I had been in a P&L role before and actually interestingly in Cadbury in many ways while it wasn't the full P&L but as head of sales and marketing the brand P&L was your P&L.

DJ: Where I was going with this was I have noticed that often when you in function you are often the master of your domain and there's a certain style of leadership that works but often when you are leading people who often know much more than you in their respected domains this style needs to

shift so any reflections on how people can transition from a functional leadership role to general management role and what are the issues that sometimes people don't reflect on enough that could derail at that transition point any thoughts there?

VB: I think that is the most significant transition, there are other transitions which happen in a functional role let's say transition from a brand manager to a head of marketing where you feel oh my god my brand manager hasn't written a good enough brief for the agency and I could write it in five minutes and you have to resist that temptation of I could write it in five minutes so there is even in a functional transition there's an interesting thing, but functional to general management I think is a big transition where really what you have to set yourself is my role is one of there you really move in a significant ways to what I call moving away from functional leadership to adaptive leadership where your functional domain and expertise is less important than your leadership ability and that leadership ability really has to do with ability to get people to collaborate, your ability for future thinking your ability to envision your ability to sell ideas to your team your ability to inspire people it is nothing to do with anything because am I from the marketing going to become the best head of manufacturing? I can't, am I going to become a best CFO? I can't but if I can create a context for team work and inspired leadership getting the best out of people that is where your domain shifts from functionality to really inspiring people and the best out of them it also shifts from I think again something which we don't spend enough time on is what I called building capability, which to my mind is four or five things it's about firstly ensuring you have got the right people in the right roles the second thing is, it's about ensuring that you have got the right processes to get the job done its about management candles which is called what are the structures that you have? It's not the structure about who reports to whom? But what are the structures in the organization, where are the informal meetings are happening? Where are the formal meetings happening? It is a question of what are the metrics you prioritize which determined behaviour and it is about I think the biggest role you play in a general management role, what is the environmental culture you are creating? And I think that to my mind that environment and culture piece, the values, the authenticity, how you relate with people, how you relate with customers, how you deal with vendors I think those are the roles of a General Manager.

DJ: Even the Coke to India transition was sort of one is clearly a geographic transition but the other is also the organizational context? In the context of leaders who transitioning back any reflections on what are the few things, what are the watch outs for leaders coming in at senior levels and what are the typical missed opportunities in these transitions?

VB: Oh it was huge I was coming back to India after 18 years, I think first of all people who are successful in moving geographies and countries and so on are necessarily people who are more flexible and adaptable, you have to be very flexible and adaptable, it's not the world doesn't fit into you, you have to figure out how you fit into the world that is and then determined how you are going to change that world, so you have to accept the current reality of what you are moving into and that requires a degree of sensitivity, empathy because it's very easy for the recipient organization or culture to completely reject you so the first thing is to very quickly get a sense of how this place works, very quickly get a sense of people and say ok who are the ones who will be on my team and play the transformation game, who are the ones who will feel very challenged and therefor get very defensive, you have to make some quick calls on people who are going to stay and people who are not going to stay and sometimes you can make the wrong calls but you don't have the time.

DJ: And back to your earlier point about sort of being the tourist and being in the listening mode versus quick early decisions any thoughts on how that trade of works? Decisiveness versus being in the tourist mode?

VB: You have to balance that because you almost can't do things on the fly and you almost can't take too much time to do it but what I found in all my transitions was when you focus on the organization not on them internally but externally on the market, on the consumer, on the competitiveness and those are all hard fact driven things everybody wants to be a part of the winning team and you are not there to critic and criticize what they have done you are there to say do you like the way we are winning now? Or do you want to win more? Do you like all the things that we have done now or do we need to do things differently? And frankly what I had found was I did many town halls, many meetings and I have always approached this from the point of saying I don't have the answer neither does anyone of you? But all of us together have the answers, first of all just to get people engaged in an open dialogue I found was very difficult in India because people who are taking positions, people who are watching what their boss is saying and so on so you have to, that is where the authenticity plays a big role couple of things if I could summarize, one is that you have to focus the organization externally not internally, secondly my insight very clear is everybody wants to be on the side of winning team and people will choose to play in a winning team, some people are simply staying there waiting for direction so you need to determine who are the people who need to be very directed and then they can go and do it there are others I found that if, my style is you can't be directive it has to be a combination of where you need to be directive there are some things which are non-negotiable and there are others which have to come from the team members themselves, they have to own decisions, I found certainly in the, that there are a lot of people who are waiting to be told. People like to believe that they are decision makers but actually they are waiting to be told and they are much simpler ok so I was told to do this and therefore I did it and my thing is at a certain level you have got to take responsibility and that responsibility comes from your ability to make decisions as well as implement so you have got to size up a lot of things but if you focus them externally then the internal quibbling to a large extent comes down I don't want to simplify it by saying it just goes away there are still people who are waiting and watching you have to then be able to determine, who are the people who are standing sort of on the edge, they can tilt this way or that way you have to very quickly identify, who are the people, who are definitely not going to be able to do this and you have to have the right conversations with them and then you have got every organization has people who are drivers of change so you have got to identify those 10 or 12 with the missionary zeal to change.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this is a topic of interest, you might want to tune into the conversation with Ravi Venkatesan (RV) where he talks about some of his transitions; Cummins overseas to Cummins in India, heading Cummins in India to heading Microsoft and so on. He talks about decoding the right of passage in a new company.

RV: *"And so, it's important that the promoters like you and the right of passage in Microsoft was you needed to take on Bill and Steve and it didn't matter whether you won or lost the argument but the courage to stand up and hold your ground was a rite of passage."*

DJ: In our chat, he also spoke about some of the other transitions including coming back to India from the U.S., moving from executive to non-executive and moving to the social sector and so on. This is conversation 6 at the Play to Potential podcast. If you find this content purposeful, do take a moment and leave a review on iTunes or share it with people that you think would benefit. Now, back to my conversation with Vinita Bali.

DJ: And back to the role of the hiring leader in this case they are promoter any reflections on their role in setting an incoming leader for success, who is coming from a very different context?

VB: When I joined the Britannia, it was still a JV between Danon and the Wadia group so I was really coming into a JV and there were several Danon people on the board and so on, I had been interviewed by the Danon people and actually in many ways Britannia was a quite professional company. And one of the first things I said that I work best and that's another thing that you must know, you must know how you work and my thing was I worked best when am given responsibility and accountability I will not surprise you but I cannot work with somebody is standing on my head all the time, so we agree on deliverables and if I deliver great and if I don't, and it worked exceedingly well and I think most often people are not honest enough to say what they feel and I really feel that we do ourselves a disservice when we are not honest enough in positions of responsibility and accountability because everybody is receptive.

DJ: I am curious about the transitions for successful executives into boards, and I am curious about two things, one is you are on the few Indian Boards, in your experience what you see between great board members and good board members both in terms of what they bring to the table but also how they prepare and how they engage and so on and secondly a related question is successful executives what are the watch outs in terms of stuff they need to learn and unlearn as they transition to being a board member, any reflections on that?

VB: In my case I was fortunate enough to be on several board even in my full time executive role in Britannia what I have done since then is, I took up two global boards primarily because what I was missing when I got back here was that huge global perspective that I had in my roles at the Coca Cola company and the two global boards that I joined were in very different domains, one was an agree products company and the other is a medical device company based out of the UK so for me board serves the purpose of a continuous learning and development plan for a non-exec. You learning about different domains how they look at opportunities and businesses and so on so certainly for me global board are critical and important because I do like a global perspective in fact I got of a lot of India boards and I wanted to restrict them really A only because there are so many boards you can do if you want to be a productive board member, so again I joined the board of Crisill which is very much an analytical company it does a bunch of other different things ratings is only part of their business it has again ability to interact with executives from SNP and McGraw-Hill who are on the board so in my case I have chosen boards that will expand my horizon both from a domain perspective as well as a geographic perspective, I do see a very big difference between a quality of conversation in my experience on the boards in India and the global boards that I have been on in general and I am generalizing a lot the contribution on board members is in a way more significant on global boards than on Indian boards I think people comes better prepared to board meetings, the board meeting run more effectively and more efficiently the quality of material that is distributed in advance is often times better. The discussions themselves are discussions there is less presentation and more discussion I find that on the Indian board there's a lot more presentation and as Indians we also tend to be more verbose and so on theirs is a lot more engagement in between board meetings on the global boards than there is on Indian boards. On Indian boards you typically get together for the quarterly meetings and one strategy meeting that's it.

DJ: And that's engagement as a group or is it by lateral or is it?

VB: No, there are formal calls that we do so every four to six weeks you are in a board call so you are in a way more regularly connected with the board and the business of the company and these are not cheat chat meetings, I mean these are significant meetings and these are done very well, using technology, so there are some differences and the other thing is every global board that I have been

on has been a professional search process I think a lot of Indian boards are moving to that but a lot of board members on Indian boards if you look at the old boards it's the chairman picking up the phone and speaking to somebody or a few people in the group deciding who should come on to the board, every global board I have been on, I have been one among several candidates who have been interviewed by the board so you know that you are there because of your competency and it's very interesting if you look at the Indian boards and if you look at the number of people who are almost like the team that goes from one board to the next and I think that also partly comes in the way of productive conversations.

DJ: In summary any headline thoughts on you want to leave the listeners with to play to their potential?

VB: Playing to your potential comes from a few things the first things is you have got to have conviction, conviction in what you are doing and you have to be a consummate learner so its conviction about what you want to do and the consummate learning with who you are? So I do believe that if you have conviction then the drivers really are the certain, passion because you believe in something and you are convinced, you will find the best way of doing it you have to believe that you don't have all the answers but there is somebody out there who has the answers you have to believe that realizing your potential is as much about what you do and in an organizational sense how you play with others so it is not just an individual journey, it is also a collective journey and I think the last thing really is to say that the only way to grow a company is to grow yourself and the only way to grow yourself is to be curious about learning.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The theme that struck me the most in this entire conversation was the notion of curiosity and the notion of being a tourist and how that guided several of the decisions Vinita made during her career, whether it was taking the South Africa opportunity with Cadburys instead of the India country head role or the way she describes Board roles. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. Do take a moment and leave a review on iTunes and share it with people that you think could benefit from this. I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations of the Play to Potential Podcast.

End of transcription

Nugget from Vedika Bhandarkar that is referenced: [Early childhood wiring](#).

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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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Vinita Bali - Nuggets

- 16.00 Vinita Bali - The Full Conversation
- 16.01 Vinita Bali - About Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)
- 16.02 Vinita Bali - Early childhood wiring
- 16.03 Vinita Bali - Navigating the sea of career options
- 16.04 Vinita Bali - Consumer Goods (FMCG) as a career option
- 16.05 Vinita Bali - Transitioning roles in a large MNC
- 16.06 Vinita Bali - Navigating the first 3-6 months
- 16.07 Vinita Bali - Functional Leadership to General Management
- 16.08 Vinita Bali - Transitioning back to India in a leadership role
- 16.09 Vinita Bali - Being an effective Board member
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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