Guest

Rama Bijapurkar is India's most respected thought leader on market strategy and India's consumer economy. She has an independent consulting practice and works across sectors and organization types, describing her mission as "bringing market and customer focus to business strategy". In addition to her consulting practice, she is on Boards of several blue-chip companies. She is a regular visiting faculty at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, her alma mater, and is a member of its Board of Governors.

Rama has published several books - "We are like that only", "Understanding the logic of Consumer India", "Winning in the Indian Market", "A Never Before world: Tracking the evolution of Consumer India" and "Customer in the Boardroom: Crafting Customer based Business Strategy."

In our conversation, Rama talks candidly about how she has navigated the world of opportunity as a solo-advisor with a specific emphasis on how she has chosen a playground that uniquely leverages her strengths and passion. She also talks about the Executive to NED transition, shares her views on women leadership and her take on how people should think about careers given an explosion in the number of divergent paths that are ahead of people.

Context to the conversation

"Hello and Welcome to the 18th 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 Rama Bijapurkar. Rama Bijapurkar is India's most respected thought leader on market strategy and India's consumer economy. She has an independent consulting practice and works across sectors and organization types, describing her mission as 'bringing market and customer focus to business strategy'.

In addition to her consulting practice, Rama has served as an independent director on the boards of several of India's blue chip companies. She has been a regular visiting faculty at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, and her alma mater and mine too, and is a member of its Board of Governors. Based on her nuanced understanding of the Indian consumer, she has written the books We are like that only, Winning in the Indian market, A never-before world and Customer in the Board room

In our conversation we spoke about how she ended up in a career at Market Research, how we could learn from brands in the FMCG world in the context of Personal Branding, how she has taken her work with the Indian consumers to different canvases and reinvented herself along the way."

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): If you could give us a sense of what you do and more importantly why you do what you do?

Rama Bijapurkar (RB): I have always operated with the portfolio so one part of what I do is my Boards, so if it is a Board season which is about a week in a quarter the it's a 100% of my life, there is consulting, there is teaching and there is for lack of better words I am calling it the buckets of just meeting everybody who has anything interesting to say, who wants to meet me for whatever reason, it could be someone like you I have already learnt enough from this conversation, it could be somebody whose VC has said why don't you go and check these plans through her, it's just not really paid or billed consulting, reading, writing so I put that into the sort of knowledge and refresher bucket, so at different points in time it will be different, so during my course at Ahmedabad, I spent a lot more time changing material, figuring out what to do? Maybe actually teaching even if I actually don't teach, I like to think of it not as a pie chart of time so my mental image is many channels and windows whatever is the right thing. So many channels are beaming simultaneously sometimes ,which is when you exhausted, so during teaching time, the teaching preparation work channel is in full flow, so I will read much more HBR at that time, I will start looking at my old notes but it will be on a war footing if it's a board season I think it is much more making notes of what I have heard and said little bit of preparing for them, most certainly it's also talking and networking a lot to board colleagues to if someone's come in previous night to sort of chat and figure it out, so it's hard to say, if you take away the pie chart might be hard to say how many channels are beaming but.

DJ: So how has that changed significantly over time? I remember you talking about this shifting significantly over a seven eight year horizon so talk to us a little bit about how that portfolio has evolved and have there been points in time where that's been big shifts?

RB: So I have changed my consulting portfolio now to much more of a monetizing knowledge rather than the retailing time, so I am really saying that, I used to have an old Nanny who used to say, it sounds better in Telegu, but it basically says, If don't die forward and backward you don't know the way to the Smashan, so, I think that that's the value I bring to the clients, that I have died a couple of times in many other contexts like this and so I know the way to the Smashan. So if I can get tell you to the way to the Smashan in three minutes I don't see why should I get paid less than somebody who will get you to the Smashan over three months also I think because I sit with much more data and so on and so forth I am able to vent that much more significantly this of what's of that? So the shifting of that basically means that you do shorter work but you do smarter work and you should be able to come on much more work for an hours talk on what is the mid-market of India like? Or what is customer value or how is the digital changing the customer value? So I am monetizing the fact that I think a lot more about it so that's really the kind of change. Yes I added one more baby to my portfolio some time ago I setup a Not for Profit think tank its hold people research on India's consumer economy, so the last time we saw any data on households in India was with NCAR which is in 2002-3 something like that, after which they stopped doing it for variety of reasons and so what I did was took the team and the person who would pioneered it form their and partnered with him and we have set it up in Delhi and we have already had two three rounds of data coming out, so we engaged with policy makers, so that's an interesting experience for me because I want to put more and more art in the public domain to become the industry standard and still try and make money in the private domain so there are times when that takes up a lot of time, so I actually now decided, so

I look at the environment and decide, which of these portfolios makes sense, if I saw for example that there was a down turn in the economy, I will actually offer to do more advisory boards because that's steady income, steady advise nobody wants to experiment with new stuff, right now I feel that with competition with regulatory shock and regulation and so on I feel that there is, everybody is now actually finally discovering the customer again, I think the demand question is no longer taken for granted so I now actually want to go back and reclaim the heart land of consumer insights, strategies, so I want to scale down boards and I want to scale up as I said the heart land of my consulting, so I remember hearing the word ages back that the heart land's surface is whiteness and why did you give it up and go looking for economy and all the other measures, so I think the heart land of mine is consumer insight and leveraging it to shape business directions, so I want to go back to the heart land so this whole data piece is also goes back to my heart land which is, consumer, consumer insight, evidence based insight and so on, so that's how each of them changes overtime.

DJ: If I may go back in time Rama, one of the pieces I am curious about is, how some of the formative experiences shape up? I do believe a lot of who we are gets baked very early on, so if you really had to rewind the clock back to your school days and college days and your growing up years are there three four things, either around parenting or around the climate in which you grew up which still influence you as a person?

RB: Well I am not as young as you so I can't think that far back, hazy memories but I can tell you what screwed up parenting, so for example I came from a family that pushed you and pushed you and pushed you in the sense of what my daughter and I call them, where is the other two percent syndrome, which meant if you got 98 in Math's they asked you why you didn't get 100, in fact when my daughter was little and she said, my father told her that I got 120 out of 100 in Math's because I did all the multiple choice questions and she just looked at him and said didn't your mummy tell you have to read the question paper properly first but as a result of that I think there's a relentless push so I was just telling someone yesterday that, I could give a talk and 98 people in the room could say it was fantastic and two people could say, well I don't know it wasn't unusual and that two percent could tank me so on the negative side it means you are an insecure overachiever, struggling all the time without balance, which I have over a period of time tried to work hard on reducing, on the positive side it means that you are always raising the bar for whatever it is and you just moving and moving and moving and also I think it's about chasing glory, more than chasing money, I think that also comes from the kind of routes that you and I share where you are worshiping at the altar of knowledge and you suppose to and the third thing is you have always told that you can't be proud about what you have achieved because it's all an accident of either birth or fate that you have, either the brains or the birth lottery or Sarasvati dances on your tongue but she is dancing on your tongue, nothing to do with you.

So, yeah, it's a set of that that's kind of relentless and pushing. But I think the big change also is, you know, I got married at 19 or 20. I actually graduated from IIM Ahmedabad at 20, I got engaged at 19 and I got married at 20. So, I think, the whole superwoman piece of you have to have perfect grihastha, you have to have a job, I think that in many ways, the needs of the family shaped the career, right? So, you couldn't actually survive in a 9 to 5 regular job with regular pressures because the two such pressures couldn't exist in one family, and in my generation, you have the extended family and the extended community to take care of. So, as a result, you start looking at saying how do I get the glory that I need to get from the places that I actually can work in given my capabilities and constraints. So, its strategy problem you optimize for. So, my boards, for example, to your previous question of how it has shifted, it has now shifted where I joke with some of my friends that I have the largest portfolio of unpaid boards. Okay, but I am on the board of let's say National Payments Corporation of India, which I am proud to be on because I think it's writing with digital architecture and I don't care if that is really no money or on the board of a bank like RBL, which is quite hot because they are only ones who have or one of the ones that have made money of financial inclusion and SME, you know, or so on and so forth. So, it's the bits and pieces and I try and do one board with every regulator so that you can figure it out. So, you change the portfolio to optimize…

DJ: So, there's a non-financial strategic reason for you to be…

RB: Yeah, whereas earlier… yes, and the earlier portfolio of boards I picked and even some of them currently is that every quarter you get educated at the board, right, because management will kill you with PowerPoint on the environment. So, we have a rural board and if you have let's say a credit rating company board, if you have a bank board, and if you have a health insurance board, and you have let's say an export business board then you pretty much whatever you have has synergy on the other side as well.

DJ: Did you start with the career in Market research? Or did that happen a few years later?

RB: No, I was the generation where everybody came and said women need not apply and that year the banks didn't come I remember the guys in the class saying, what are you women going to do? Citi bank is not coming how you ever going to get influent, but the advertisement agencies came so I actually joined an ad agency called Lintas and I spent a year, I was assign to the plum account called Hindustan Lever, we were the first generation of MBAs they ever took, so that was the long haul, the studio would tell you that how do you, if you don't know what the bromide is what is the point of a fancy education, even the studio guys in those days, put your art works together, this is predigital I am talking 1978 and so on, so after a year I remember going to my boss and saying that my job description and job description is a cross between a peon and an errand boy and I don't want to do it and he said but you have the lever account, and all the golden, I mean Harish Pumwani was the management trainee at the same time as me so all the golden grade guys later on were all sort of part of the system and I did love the lever system as systems go but it was just such a waste of time for advertising so then he said that they were setting up the research business for path finders and would I like to go there? So there were two of us who had between us one year of experience, and we had a boss who coming from Australia, who we gamed most of the time and we actually went off and did market research when the industry was nascent. And that was my entering to market research.

DJ: With the wisdom of the path you have been on for somebody who's at that cusp thinking about a career in market research, any words of wisdom around what sort of temperaments in people succeed in that environment, what questions should a student ask himself or herself to see if that path makes sense for him or her?

RB: I am not the great believer in this examiner path before you would go down in it personally, at a very broad level for example whether you want to be a CEO league or rather down the CEO path or whether you want to be down the service business consulting thinking, investment banking kind of path, I think those are the big choices, but I have also lived long enough and seen enough people to know that a lot of it is like that movie sliding doors, if you enter and the door shut, you will not go home and see your boyfriend cheating on you and you will continue to live your humdrum life and if you actually got through those doors in 30 seconds and you found that the reality and then she quits, she goes to school, gets herself a better job and changes her life, so I think there are just so many sliding doors, I would have been an academic's wife my husband have a PhD and I would have been in academics why at IIMA except that and it would have been a completely different world and maybe I would have done my own FBM and been an academic, but that year IIMA said we don't want in breathing, so we don't want to hire you here so please get out and go and make the living somewhere else and comeback and it's so happened that his thesis guides happened to be one of the grand role men of advertising, so there was Labdi Bhandari, there was Dr. Mote and there was Shubratosen Gupta and Shubrato said that if they don't want to hire you come and work for me in advertising, no one in anybody's families had ever seen advertising and what's a PhD in a public distribution system doing an advertising but it changed my life completely.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of my conversation with Pramath Sinha (PS) a few weeks back where he spoke about the increasing tenuous link between education and careers.

PS: *"what you specialized in will not matter in fact this whole thing about specializing in a subject and then being in a career and align to that as you know is tenures it happens sometimes but increasingly happens less and less. So, when it's important to measure in something it's not really that important to measure in the right thing"*

DJ: People often come under tremendous pressure when they have to make a hard choice around a career. Recognizing that there are sliding doors that come along at various points in time and the fact that all of us are going to have multiple careers during our life time is a liberating thought that puts the choice in perspective.

If you find this content purposeful, do take a moment and leave a review on iTunes and share it with people that you think could benefit from this. Now back to my conversation with Rama Bijapurkar.

DJ: You worked in market research for a long time and then at some point you decide to go solo and become an advisor, what point of time was that?

RB: That was about 20 odd years later, I did it via McKinsey for 2 years, so yes, I worked in market research but I sort of went through, two start-ups in the research business, one was a complete start up with some friends from IIM Calcutta, senior guys. And one was I joined was Marg which is well established which is just had the split within a week of joining so we literally had to build it back because some of the business went away, I think the interesting thing that I did was that, so Hindustan Levers always been my spiritual moment they were very special and so I actually went back to be the insider-outsider and their system so I worked the deal where again I shattered how brash I was and may I still am but I did say to them that you can't stand my irreverence and I can't stand your stretch ache but we love each other, so we actually had a deal where I was the insider-outsider and that another, it meant basically that you've worked in the system, you got the equivalent grade because I said if you don't give me the equivalent grade your system will kill me, where even the towel in the toilet and how I get tea trade depends on the grade so I got all that I was a told to even per person employee but I was not the employee of the system so it was point of full time consultant, what there's enables me to do was to be able to and that's when I realized that there's lots of benefits of not knowing the rules and of you push any system on/off, so I joined their research business for a marriage of convenience or one year after which I would probably take over from the deputy of the business, within two months, a mail was circulating somewhere about the problem it was and on of their directors that come back from Harvard and then I never heard of Michel Portal and nobody told me you don't reply to the messages that come from directors because they are rarefied but I replied to them saying big deal I have worked with a lot of companies, small guys like this and they think differently and the next thing he knew if he someone me my boss was furious and I actually did the first ever competitor analysis on Nirma within the system, which I would not have been allowed to do if I would have been within the system so I realized that if you sacrifice your career path security you can actually get to do a lot more stuff that you otherwise could do and so I went back twice again immediately couple of years after that I went back to do this Annapurna which was later didn't work out but it was a popular food's business and then I went back …. Invitation to work on his project Millennium so my finest pieces of work have been done in levers, it was like a kid in a candy shop because in those days start-up agencies were not glamorous even the toilets were dirty, you couldn't call foreign clients or Indian clients to your office you have to afraid out of lobbies and restaurants and hotels, so going to levers where every software you have a wanted the ability to go and do the stuff the ability to make presentations to Dr. Ganguly and so on, on the system is just the huge learning and then I did two years of McKinsey because I felt that we were looking that, if you do the quadrants of, high business thinking low business thinking, high business understanding low business understanding and the other aspects is high customer understanding and low customer understanding, Market research companies were high on customer understanding low in business and so I wanted a High-High and I thought consulting might have it and so I went to McKinsey to try and figure it out, of course they didn't have that and it was the very good stint for me and I was bored but I learnt two things one was to put money where marketing mouth is, so how do you module things, shamelessly, fearlessly, put this off shelf make a spread sheet saying and the other was just the formal lexicon of strategy thinking, and as my other mentor told me, he said what you got was the confidence and he said that confidence would not even possible had not been the system I think that's fair. And then I went on my own.

DJ: The related point to this, if we look at solopreneurship as a journey one of the questions that people need to think about is align with the platform versus go completely solo, how have you thought about that and with the journey you have had there are trade-offs there but what's your take on that choice?

RB: I think fundamentally I believe that you have to not evaluate product options you have to look if it fits with the customer needs which is what I always tell people that this is good job or that is good job is look deep inside yourselves and see what your needs are? And then figure out whether something good or not? Because it's that fit that needs to happen, I have spent all my life doing start-up jobs, in big companies in small companies in McKinsey, it was a different kind of start-up job because of the assignments that I had in levers. So I was tired and I was exhausted and my main consumer need was that I never wanted to do something, where I have to get up at, get to work at 9 in the morning because the troupes needs to be set a good example. And also that I never ever wanted to have to take on work that I didn't want to take on and note if the cash flow is going, this was the generation of no venture money so it was brutal all my life you hustle and you hustle, so that's actually what drove it and I said that I don't care about cashing out but what that really want now is, I was tired and I think parenting also does that to you and I just said that I really want about is to do my thing and so that's the idea of solo. But it was a lot of pain because I also wanted to tell you that, I felt that I was misfit in the corporate world and that's why I was walking away and so I have friend who said to me that why don't you figure out three role models of people who you really respect once I had those three M, and its again serendipity how did that three come? Then I said there are guys who don't have any umbrellas, platforms, nothing but they have basically given the world what they have given the world.

DJ: How people should process the complexity of the career market?

RB: One of the young men actually I know who said to me, and he was a student of IIMA and I said to them that you were very lucky because you could do whatever you want but my generation was told that if you made your bed sleep in it, so my brother went to IIT for two years, hated it was told to finish it and then he went to the Indian Army after that into the public commission so he said mam but you don't understand my anxiety, he said my father has told me you can do anything you ever want to do and he said I am always looking around the corner to see is there something better and I absolutely what you are saying the fear of missing out but I think the more there are choices the more you have to be centred to the world is complex and volatile and I think more complex and volatile which is the more you have to understand your centre and your core, going back to the earlier discussion we were having, you have to really understand, so if you are anchored then you can with stand being buffeted it's a shame for companies too. I tell companies that if you are going to competitive busting and whatever the competitive came up with you are going to reengineer it reverse engineer it and do better, when you have 20 competitors who are putting our 20 products because they also don't know all ready far end then are you going to bust 400, how do you know which 20 of the 400 to bust? So you eventually have to have a deep understanding of who you are and what you are trying to do with your customers and take it from there so if you don't have that who you are understanding or at least the navigational principals, I mean I am willing to sacrifice money for glory or listen I want a certain amount of balance in my life and I think you then figure out that even if the answer is that I have to do this thing because I have to do then though I believe something else, I am saying as long as you know that's what it is you will be able to deal with it better but knowledge is an absolute master what is inside of you.

DJ: Tactically or behaviourally have you seen what people do? To sort of cut the noise out or sort of look in?

RB: Every other CEO I meet is into meditation which kind of worries me a bit. I think this meditation and the other thing is I am also noticing as a consumer insight how many people have spiritual gurus? I mean my own theory is that we as a society in churn because we missed this therapist's phase. I used to wonder when people in America said I go to my therapist or when you watch movies what the heck are going to your therapist for. But actually now it's a spiritual guru who is actually the therapist of the Indian society and if you look at underneath the Armani suits and whatever other the suits, everybody has got thread around their wrists have you noticed how many people? People that you normally not associate with Pooja and ritual because they are so westernized they don't get threads around their wrists, I think they realized that there is a larger anchor so it's got a religion they may not do it for themselves but all those threads around their wrist means some pooja has been done and the thread has been tied around your wrist and you are not going to cut it the way to in generations where life was easier, the minute you got out of the house you cut it off and let it be, but here you actually want that sucker and that support and that's why I think even the line of business you propose to do is absolutely the need of the hour because there is no other institution that can help you to do it.

DJ: Interesting and just double clicking on this notion of a personal brand, Rama. Again, when people think about themselves as a personal brand both from the walk and the talk perspective, talk to us a little bit about the parallels you see in terms of what people should do and the mistakes you see people making both on the walk element and the talk element.

RB: I think there is substance and there is style. Very often I have seen people pick up style variables, you know, I see a lot of management at boards, for example, and I see how a lot of people will pick up the CEOs mannerisms, but not the substance. As a result, the guy down the line gets whacked, because I sometimes ask myself why am I whacking this guy, what if have taken it from the CEO, you know, am I being hierarchical around this and I realize that the CEO has substance that makes up for his style issues, whereas the guy down the line doesn't have it. So, it could be something as simple as when the guy down the line says haan, obviously, I mean, you know, you take it from the CEO because when he says haan, obviously he has usually got a very good point that he is signalling to you that… you should have seen it, right? So, I mean, that's on the more trivial side. But I think people are not, I think people have to actually ask themselves what is my positioning. And it's again back to consumer need versus the world outside. If you say what is required to succeed in that world and you build your brand based on that then it is not going to work as you know of all brands. I mean there has to be a brand intention. It's like strategic intent. So, you have to ask yourself how do I choose to play, that's what I mean by the walk and the talk, that where am I going to add value. So, even let's say you are a complete newcomer on a board, okay, you have to ask yourself in this karma bhumi where am I, why am I on this board, therefore where do I choose to add value, how will I add value and how would I signal that I am adding value; it's no different from companies. So, some of my boards I am there because I genuinely believe that we all have to do jury duty on companies because that's really what trusteeship of a citizen is in this country. So, if you are on a public sector board, if you are on an academic institution board, or quasi social entities like bank boards, I mean, you are there truly for governance. I don't think you are there to dazzle everybody with your marketing wisdom or your insight but you are really there to say I am sorry, I don't think the Chairman can chair the Nominations Committee or I am sorry there is asymmetry of information. So, in every place I think you have to decide how you are going to add value and then figure it out accordingly; that's one part of it. But it's about you and that place, the combination. And more generally I think you have to ask yourself, for example, I have grappled in the past and I am grateful that I am not young anymore because I don't have to grapple with these questions anymore, you know, the net present value of damage of anything I do to myself now is close to zero.

DJ: You are looking terminal value figures.

RB: Absolutely, that's why it is close to zero. If I am going to marriage fixed to me, I am going to kids fixed to me, I am going to get my career fixed, and it is never going to get fixed, right? But, sorry, I have lost my train of thought.

DJ: You were talking about positioning.

RB: Yeah, I was thinking about, yeah, you are right, about positioning that I always grapple with, I have always grappled with am I a technician or am I a manager. And by technician, I mean broadly is technical rocket science and I can see that I went through the phase of being the manager and I went through the phase of all that but now I am clear that I want to come back to being the technician in a different kind of way because I have a history and like to believe that maybe you are little bit of wisdom so I am not going to necessarily tell you five ways in which you can make Google search work better for you, I mean, I really don't care. But I think I can sit down and say hey, what is brand building as we knew it, or the basis on which old brands were built, the new basis for brand building and what are we losing out from the past and what are we gaining from the present. Now that's clearly technical but somewhere this business of I want to go up the ladder, you know, I want to be chairman of XYZ place, I want to be CEO, so, I am quite clear that I would rather be king maker than king, I mean, it sounds pompous but I think what I really mean bridesmaid than bride I guess is a better or a bridesmaid doesn't quite cut it…

DJ: And I hear you, I get where you are going with this.

RB: And this is the debate I actually have had with someone else. We were both speaking at a women's day event and he was saying that I don't want to be CEO is not an acceptable answer if you are serious about your career and that nobody can get power from a staff function. And I said that's much bias because in today's world the chief of analytics will actually determine pricing which a CEO cannot overrule and the amount of power you will have as a result of being who you are or if you have the voice of the customer, I mean, I think that has far greater power than if you have anything else. So, I think, you have to understand also where the sources of your success come from. Even this also is power is what you need the source of power, esteem is what you need, the source of your esteem. So, you do have to think about positioning in that context.

DJ: I remember a quote that you mentioned from Indira Parikh "if there is a game that only you can play then go and find a playground or create a playground" so talk to us a little bit about how you thought about it at different points in time and what that means for you?

RB: So I told you earlier about the quadrant of business understanding and customer understanding wanting the high-high on both because and that was the context in fact in which Indira said it because I was disappointed that McKinsey didn't have the high-high and I was complaining and not doing anything about it so that's when I went and I actually setup my practice to do that and then I had learnt in McKinsey the framework so there's a framework, so there was a front enders so then I conceptualize that it is a front fender strategy which is what game will you play in the market? So where and how to compete as a business as a whole. And I saw the backend was aligning all your functional strategies with it so the make or buy decision is aligned with how are you best going to fulfil the promise to your customer so it fits with choose the value, deliver that value, signal the value, so I said the front piece is mine and that's a piece I am going to hang on to and in order to make sure when the downstream happens that everybody is true to the game the market game so decided, you need to hire me in order to just be the not the police man but the protector of the strategy that you first had because otherwise it gets blurred as you go down the line. So once I pick that piece up then we actually did a course in Ahmedabad around it, it's called customer based business strategy which is still do along with Professor Jain and we started now looking and the challenges to find case material which is high because we get a lot of case material that's high low so we started inviting CEOs to talk about it, we started sensitizing, we started doing a little bit of, we do an EVP, so every year now we do a PGP, so four years ago CK Pralhad used to say write for your own clarity, don't write for others and I was also tired off teaching this course which I still teach by the way now so I wrote a book around the course it's called Customer in the board room crafting customer based business strategy and then I brought out all my board experience etc. so when you have a hammer everything as a nail or the other way or if you have a lens then everything you look at through the lens so I started looking at CEO evaluation and assessments of companies and how the balance co card is so week on the customer dimension, it's usually market share which is a derived arithmetic number and then I started looking at net promoters score and how it would reward the CEO for operational marketing performance but it does not reward the CEO for missing all the other games in town. So then you start seeing, so continuously kind of look at it through the lens and learn it and build that space so I am always clear that I want to show my body across the space and I will build later so how do you throw your body across the space? so even with this people researched my think tank we call it 'Ice 360' its India's consumer economy and citizen environment, I am saying to them that, how do we throw our body across the space, so we put out the 16 part series and meant and put out income data, we put a lot of stuff and you have to frame the debate and shape the debate if you want to through your body across the space, so it's pretty aggressive metaphor but, and I have often asked myself when people say to me that, you have not stayed in the job forever and ever and I think about it and I think I was married to the same man for close to thirty something years and so it's not like and I have lived in the same city for the long time so it's not like I don't have staying power so what is that professionally that I think about and then I realized that I have taken that stream which is my interest and competence which is customer insight and I have taken it into the cusp of governance, I have taken it into the teaching space, built along it so I have kind of stayed faithful to that particular area of what I am going to doing and now when I realized whether I am good at doing it I am trained to recognize patterns and you have to have some brand intension along the way.

DJ: In your head what's the delta? From being good at delivering value as a consultant in a certain domain to being a trusted advisor?

RB: McKinsey knows that the most important part of the clients anatomy is a year, so I thought about it a lot where I got upset, for example I used to get upset that I was getting hired by people because they had faith in me, they have trust in me but they didn't necessarily have faith in what I was telling them to do by way of project work and I sort of thought that I should be making money from my technical brilliance but why am I making money for being the person that they can talk to? And for me its felt a bit like prostituting myself its again goes back to all the baggage that you build over the years and I thought about this and battled with it long and hard and then I figured that somewhere along the way if you look at the attribute, its consequence and values at the end of the day every brand should have the value, I mean the attribute of Nirma maybe whatever cheaper and harsher the consequences have seen battles by budget but value is mis eye of the masses which is Patanjali and Baba Ramdev as well so the thing that used to upset me is that I know my premium commanding ability comes from saying it like it is. But I shouldn't be commanding price premium ability from that in my head because that is not right but I also find that when I am going to meetings and for a long time now and if I don't say anything them people actually tell me, I am very worried because you have not opened your mouth and did you hated that much are we so completely wrong? And these are very senior people, these are people I respect as a people the people I worked with, the people I listen to and then you find that integral part of your brand is, she calls it like it is, she says it like it is and that's what is leading to premium so I now realized that the technical brilliance that you want to make money on because I made this algorithm when everybody should buy it or I have this new framework I think you have to continue to build on those as well but it is eventually the balance filters we call it. So if competitive advantage only comes from saying it like it is doesn't makes sense, but competitive advantage usually comes from bundling things so you have to be technically superior you have to have be experienced superior, at the end of the day you also have to be liked along the way so my formulae for that is very simple, I don't work with anybody with whom I can't have a cup of coffee at 9 in the morning and say, you know I saw this terrible movie last night I don't know why I was watching it, it was like reading a bad book so I generally flat people and so its bundling that gives you competitive advantage but yes that is something that's not fully resolved for me, because I hate the fact that I am getting paid because I am, because of a personality trade rather than technical something. So I constantly seek validation where people say which is why I put my views out my technical views are on public domain so much because I think it continue to build the technical side of the brand and I suspect that and I am saying I am going back into the hot land I feel the brand has wondered too long around governance, police man general theorist and that you need to put teeth back into it so somewhere that work is into back of my head.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of my conversation with Atul Kasbekar (AK) the celebrated photographer who spoke about how he was trying to reinvent himself with the democratization of photography. Here is a clip from that conversation.

AK: *"I mean I have more of a friend who is a spiritual guy and he lives in Bangalore and he was saying that this is the excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true, he says you know you actually a very habitable platform for people* *otherwise who would never meet each other to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create."*

DJ: Back to the discussion with Rama, sometimes when we seek external feedback, people look at our brand along dimensions that we may not have thought of. So getting somebody to show you the mirror and unearthing some of these insights could be transformative in figuring out what next. One of the leaders I am working with in Transition is the Managing Director of a large auto ancillary company. He was keen to change to a similar set up. But when I looked at some of his signature strengths and his past, he had been great at moments of crisis and in handling tough situations. We felt he could be great for turnarounds and distressed assets and we are now working with that theme and looking for opportunities across similar sectors without being restricted to auto-ancillary.

If you find this content purposeful, do take a moment and leave a review on iTunes and share it with people that you think could benefit from this. Now back to my conversation with Rama Bijapurkar

DJ: How should women think about personal brand? Anything specific from a gender perspective that you want to highlight?

RB: I think again it's about internal problems, I think women have to fix a couple of things inside. One is, perform don't belong , if your entirely focus on belonging then you are never going to fully belong and you never going to fully perform, so I think if you focus on performance then it doesn't really matter, I am not saying be obnoxious or anything but you know what I mean? I mean, where do you focus your efforts do you focus your performance or do you focus on belonging? By belong I mean belonging to the group let's say if it's the management team or the board team or whatever it is, so belonging what means that I would come in earlier I have the coffees if I didn't feel like it, the network the network before the network after or do you want to write a note to everybody two days earlier that says because we may not have the time at the agenda I want to frame my thoughts on this matter and I think this is what you should do, and belongings means you need the opportunity when you open your mouth if they have decided not to do and if they have decided that they are not going to discuss the point at that point in time then you let it be or you are also vulnerable to people saying hey, you know do we really need to do this right now? But perform is really saying let me figure out, I am here because I will add value, let me, made me little harder to add the value but I would rather spend my time there then spend my time trying to part of the gang maybe because I will never be part of the gang if you like the gang that's great part of it but that's where the real effort is, should you kill yourself doing a lot of stuff? I think that's really important. And I also think about it also as the majority minority community I think women should understand that there is not that the deck is tact against them it's the majority community the rules for themselves, sometimes the stuff can get pretty bad and I think that you should be willing to call it out or sensitize or find ways around it to pretend that there is no gender issue doesn't makes sense. So for example I have had chairman who never let me speak, which is why I were use email as effectively as I like or I will set the process and can say each of us can please have one minute please and so we can roll out for the orders and which you chose to have a speed. The option and sort of careful to be able to do this, or if you are doing things which is country to what is expected and I think there is a real difference, so often there is a gap and I think to deny that doesn't make sense to join that in future doesn't make sense, and I think you then get respected much more, if you are predictable in that sense and then you will get included where you need to be included I mean I don't think I need to be included in everything else people tell me ohh unless you actually network, I am saying it's not that I am not networking what am I networking around, if I have an issue, I want to discuss I will call every single member of the board and I was saying you know what this thing is bothering me and I want to understand this better and two of them may say I don't really agree with the issue three of them may say he it's worth it lets talk about it, so that's networking for me, networking is not about not saying what I don't want to say because they may get upset with me.

DJ: How can we cultivate more women leaders to grow at the top? From an individual aspiring women leader's perspective are there two three themes around how they should think about their journey?

RB: Yes, I am also little concerned about this what qualifies to be a women leader? I think everybody should fundamentally think about what is the essence of winning for you in your career? So it's all the issues that we have talked about do you go this way? Do you go that way? I mean you have it as a man as well but women have it much more. And I think not be afraid to say that this is the way I want to win and go for the way you want to win its only when you adopt somebody else's idea what winning is you can't really go for it so figure out what exactly winning is and go for that.

DJ: What your thoughts on how they should think about, A- Board positions, when they start taking board positions but the more important point is what your thoughts on what skill do they start building? And what should they stop?

RB: So board role is nose in and fingers out and executive role is fingers in and nose in and everything in and that's why I think consultants make the transition more easily because they are quite happy to have a fingers out of things so that's the one thing I think executives, so you have to really understand that this is jury duty more than actually being the protagners that's hard but the other thing is also that I noticed that the executive leaders who transition to non-executive. So when you are going to NED board position we find that there is a lot of sympathy for the executive management so we usually find that the board divides up when there are issues and the executives guys who have been executives have that old empathy and sympathy and so they think their job is to sort of make up for the fact that they won't protected in their tenure and to be the protector and that what, our job is not to disappoint the management here, what is I am saying, if you want an acquisition desperately I still don't have to give it to you and if you are going to get demoralized, I mean grew up let's talk about why this is important? But my loyalty is somewhere else it is notch to you I am not here to be cheer leader, nurse, maid, nappy, coach. I think that's the stuff that executive managers tend to get into and then therefore you are the coach and you are the this person and so on as compared to saying that all of us in boards are call to make judgement calls so whatever is your background, you are doing your background to make the judgement call and that's all you should do. And you just make judgment calls for everything that put in front of you and these are since of commissions, since of omissions, Plans whatever it is that's what you have to do and then they tend to sort of turn their noses up other people who are, for example let's say if you are a large institutional shareholder, you don't have any of this executive experience you tend to wield it around if there is a superior animal or on the other side you get adversarial with the CEO of Precisive, CEO doesn't want your coaching doesn't want your expertise. You have to be karmic you have to say based on the facts in front of me, this is my evidence based on so.

DJ: Three things they don't teach in IIMA but should.

RB: A lot of things they don't teach at IIMA, One of the concerns with I think on management education now is that and even particularly in IIMA, we are going much more than the technical path and I think much less on the problem solving path so it's a reaffirmation of here we teach you how to learn so you can learn rest of life and think about it there was a whole generation washed out and wiped in 1991 and nothing we ever did to equip best with this but if you look at everyone including let's say KV Kamathur who sent me one batch person and onward and onwards, I think everybody regrouped and relearnt and so to say that it's not technical that is got your ability to learn and your ability to problem solving to build back I think the respect for that the second is just to say, he listen sliding door should happens in life, sliding door happened in life god gave me the equanimity to accept what I can and to change what I can and the wisdom to know the difference I also think that speaking also with my consumer hat on, all these people are products of putting their life and hold from standard 9 because you have to get the right, you have to get the 99% in ten otherwise you get screwed in 12th to the same one mark point clause and IIT you will lose your seat and saying with IIM so at a time we should actually be having more risk takers because the world outside is Vuka, we are actually getting people who are hot hour flowers so the top 200 actually, if we decatter them and threw them away and took the next 200 and the next 400 we can actually get better than just the human beings it was these plus minus six sigma guys that we are getting, verified hot hour flowers win have been there had they not listened to mummy and daddy every single day of their lives from standard 9.

DJ: Given your journey any headline takeaways for people to reflect on in terms of navigating.

RB: It's the same thing, you have to have the navigational principals, and that is the new strategy theory as well, if you read that all the stuff on strategy in complex world they are saying that "The destination may have changed, you may not wanted when you get there, it may have self-destructed, grew up, that's the new world but you have to have navigational principals to the journey, you have to be very clear because those acts both is guardries and as motivated us and so you approximately knows what direction you are going in, That's how Google builds new products as well, whether it gets used for insurgency, activism more romance in the world is up to how environment uses it and fail fast and succeed at leisure but more important understand what your navigational principals are? Don't keep saying this destination because that that that. So it's more like a guided missile you have to just keep adjusting it and you won't know the set target, then set a target in this world more than in the world that I grew up in if you are not open to changing destinations you are really going to get screwed and today there is much more joy to be had the confluence of the things and so when people say ohh my daughter is doing Psychology, I am like great you can either going to consumer or neuroscience or to the consumer behaviour you can go into HR you can go into designing interfaces and a tech company you can do so many things so you have to have core, which is why I find this BBA kind of educations a little bit dangerous because like my academics friends tell me as well if you have studied economics your mind is wired in one particular way to learn so how does your mind fundamentally get wired and you can take the wiring somewhere else, so if you have studied sociology your mind is wired in particular way and that is also part of your core skill, your ability to see it through the lens of your training and that is the whole purpose of education, so just understanding this will make it just a little more will make it more better.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The big takeaway for me from this conversation was that all of us need to have clear navigational principles to process the world around us. That could change from time to time but being able to articulate that in your head could play a significant role in your fulfilment in the journey ahead.

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End of transcription

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

Nugget from Atul Kasbekar that is referenced: Entrepreneurial pursuits beyond photography.

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Rama Bijapurkar - Nuggets

- 18.00 Rama Bijapurkar - The Full Conversation
- 18.01 Rama Bijapurkar - Pie chart of time today
- 18.02 Rama Bijapurkar - Early formative years
- 18.03 Rama Bijapurkar - Career in Market Research
- 18.04 Rama Bijapurkar - Becoming a solo-advisor
- 18.05 Rama Bijapurkar - Careers - Paradox of choice
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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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