



Guest

Ambi Parameswaran is the Founder of Brand-building.com, a Brand Advisory. In a career spanning 30+ years, Ambi has handled assignments in Marketing, Sales and Advertising with companies like Rediffusion DY&R, Boots Company and UDI Yellow Pages before dropping anchor at FCB Ulka where he spent about 25 years finishing as ED & CEO of FCB Ulka Group. Ambi has also been a prolific author and his latest book is SPONGE - Leadership Lessons I learnt from my clients.

The book (SPONGE) discusses some of the key lessons Ambi has learnt working with his clients over the years. It talks about his interactions with leaders ranging across Ratan Tata, Azim Premji, M. Damodaran, Karsanbhai Patel, Dr. Varghese Kurien, Vinita Bali and Rohinton Aga. We spoke about his insights from the book around how leaders take risks, how they leverage wisdom from experts, how they keep connect with their consumer and more.

We also spoke about lessons from his journey and his thoughts on building a credible personal brand and his perspectives on how leaders can get better at the art of storytelling given his rich experiences.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 35th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations with leaders across disciplines on topics around Leadership, Transitions and Careers. I am Deepak Jayaraman, your host and curator of the podcast. I am an Executive Coach and work with leaders during high stakes transition –whether it is a role transition, leadership transition in a company or a career transition in an individual’s life. To know more about the advisory work I do, you could visit www.transitioninsight.com

I believe that just like businesses need to be coherent about their answers to “where to play and how to win”, we all need to be thoughtful about our responses to the 2 questions “where to go and how to grow”. This is podcast is an attempt at exploring how some leaders across domains have grappled with these two questions as they have gone on their respective journeys.

At the outset, I would like to share a development. Play to Potential Podcast won the award for the BEST PODCAST for 2018 in the recently concluded Digipub Awards, a platform that recognizes digital publishers.

My guest this time is Ambi Parameswaran, who has recently launched his book SPONGE – Leadership lessons he has learnt from his clients over his career in the world of advertising. I read the book and it has some really insightful wisdom from his experiences with leaders such as Ratan Tata, Azim Premji. M. Damodaran, Dr Varghese Kurien, Rohinton Aga and more.

In this conversation we go deeper on some of the elements from the book and talk about how leaders make tough decisions, how they leverage the wisdom from experts while empowering them, how they keep the connect with the end consumer despite large organizations and more. We also talk to Ambi about his thoughts on building a personal brand and the art of storytelling given his rich experiences.

A quick thought on how you could consume the podcast. If you want to listen offline during a car-ride, plane travel, gym session or morning walk, you might want to use one of the popular podcast apps out there (Google and Apple have their podcast players, Spotify, Saavn, Stitcher and so on). If you are keen to get insights by them across speakers I would urge you to visit the Curated Playlists section of the website – playtopotential.com. If you want to be informed when I upload new content, you could sign up on the website. You have my word that you will receive less than 2 emails a month and your data will not be shared with any external organization.

Without further ado, over to my conversation with Ambi Parameswaran.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Having spent 25 plus years in the Ad agency context. What is your advice to people who want to join the Ad agency versus the industry? What question should they ask themselves to have a fulfilling career? How people should make directional choices or career choices?

Ambi Parameswaran (AB): There's no fixed answer for this whether you should work in an agency or in the client side of the business so let me just trace my own career journey, going back to 1997, even before that when I finished my IIT or when I was finishing my IIT I realised that B.Tech or working in engineering may not give me the jollies and I have got involved in few organizing stuff in campus and realized maybe there is some fun in that and went to IIM and actually enjoyed I mean people who have been in IIT could not believe that I was topping my class in IIM Calcutta and they didn't expect me to be anywhere near the top 10% of the class or top 25% of the class, because I was not a very academic guy in IIT but then IIM Calcutta I actually enjoyed. I enjoyed all the courses, I enjoyed finance, I enjoyed HR, I enjoyed marketing so it was actually serendipity, which kind of got into advertising in the first pass, I didn't know anything about advertising in my first year I wanted a summer assignment in Calcutta in those days, because I wanted to spend time in the city, move around the city, enjoy the city which I had not done, because as you know IIM Calcutta is really in the boonies, it's in Joka way out of the city. So, I wanted two three months to spend in the city to soak up the city, so I was looking for an assignment and I got summer assignment with the very young advertising agency called Rediffusion, when I got to know those people I discovered they were all IIM graduates who had come together to set up the company and I really enjoyed working with them three months I did my summer assignment, at the time a very esoteric project called Simulation model for media planning we didn't have computers at our disposal so it was largely written out as a with the flow chart and all that, so I enjoyed the thing and next year when the placement session was rolling by I got a call from them saying, and those were the days when this whole concept of pre placement offer was still not in vogue, so I got a call and I said you know what are you planning to do and I said look I am applying and I have got a HUL interview tomorrow, so they said look Subhash Chakraborty was the branch director of Calcutta, I said look lets meet for a drink, so I went and meet him for a drink on that particular historic so to speak Sunday evening and

at the end he said OK, so he said will you join us? I said yes, are you making an offer? He said yes. I said done, am joining you. So he said OK. We shook hands and then I left, and then next day my placement secretary caught me and said I hope you are appearing for the 2 o'clock interview with HUL. And I said No. he said why? I said I am going to advertising. So are you crazy? I said no, I think it's interesting, I wanted to do something interesting and not just sell soap, I mean it's another story I ended up selling a lot of soaps, as an advertising career guy but I actually ended selling a lot of soaps as a part of my advertising career but I said I don't want to sell soap I want to do other things, so he said look, you just can't walk out an interview you have been short listed you have to pay for the interview, so I said what do I do? So he said these guys have to give you an offer, so what's an offer? So they have to give you a letter, so that I called those guys up look you have to send a letter, the letter has to reach the placement office by 12 o'clock, if it doesn't reach, I will appear for the interview so don't blame me. So they said no, we will make sure that will send someone with the letter I think the telephone lines in the Calcutta were not too good, I think they tried faxing it or whatever and then finally they sent the letter, so theoretically in my batch I was the first guy to be placed because I didn't appeared for any interview, got into advertising, really enjoyed three years in advertising, then someone said look may be this is not it there is another big world out there so I jump from advertising into marketing, I went on to the client side as a product manager at Boots, handling Coldarin and Strepsills, Burnol and some fairly large OTC plus I also handled some ethical brands, RX, Brufen and kind of all enjoyed it then as it happened the boss there moved to sales, you know kind of an oriented company called Yellow pages it was a pioneering thing so he made an offer, I went and worked there for two years, setting up the sales system for selling yellow pages in this country to really enjoyable, learnt a hell of a lot but the company had its own issues, and that was the time I said I should go back to advertising because I was missing it, I was missing the fun of working on different problem, every other day, interacting different sets of clients and then I got into ULKA and then ULKA made it you know FCB ULKA and continued there for what 20 or 27 years but of my 40

Year career almost 10 years were spent not in advertising it was spent in Sales and marketing. So, you have to pick the right things, you know when I joined ULKA, I remember the head of Lintas, Alec Pudumsee said you are making a big mistake this agency will shut down, I said OK if it shuts down I will come to you for the job, so he said Ya OK good answer but you know you should join us now, I said no!

DJ: and how did you pick ULKA out of the other options that you had?

AB: My former boss joined ULKA, and I wanted to go to Chennai to work in Chennai for five years or whatever so he said OK, place yourself wherever, look after wherever you come, so I went the company, actually I don't know how he hired me because the company was not making too much money, making a loss but was assembling a team of likeminded people and then the thing worked, so I think whichever job you are in, whether in advertising, marketing I think the first probably 10 years is when you need to figure out what gets you going and then by the time you are probably 35 you should hit the highway and stay on that for the next 15-20 years and then decide, do you want to work till 60 like I did or you want to get off at 55 or you want to work till 70 that's up to you.

DJ: And I think what's also interesting is you tested life both sides of the fence and then you took a call, on this side is better or just to make it binary but that's interesting as well.

AB: Both sides have its own positives and negatives and I enjoyed one side shall we say little more than the other side but I still have a lot of respect for brand teams and I think they do a great job.

DJ: This is your 9th book and what's the why behind the book?

AB: I started teaching on weekends at one of the business schools in Bombay in 1996 or 96 and when I started teaching I wanted to use, those were the days when Harvard cases were not available and you had to get those Xerox cases and which was not really legal to do all that so I said why don't I write some cases myself? So I started writing for the institute I was teaching in Bombay so I wrote a set of cases, I started using them in the class, it turned out to be quite ok and I put 15 of them together and send them to a publisher Tata Magrohill, they said we would love to publish it, so they published it as a book, it came out in the year 1999 or 2000 called FCB Ulka brand building advertising cases and concepts. That was almost like a promotion piece for the agency, they were all good cases, how the campaign worked and all that, which was fine, I had to use the cases for the thing which turned out, and the book sold and they came out with the colour version, the first version had CD with all the ads. In it. So it did well and then I came out with the second book which was on consumer research, very simple book on consumer research and then the third book was on again another set of case studies, so the first six books really were academic in nature, case studies, branding concepts, advertising concepts stuff like that and four and a half years ago I wrote a book called 'For god's sake' which was an advertising in marketing in brands and religion which was based on my PhD, which was on consumer behaviour and religiosity, so that did ok and then came the next one, which one on Nawabs nudes noodles which was looking at changing Indian society through the advertising lens and this one the latest which is Sponge leadership lessons I learnt from my clients just came out this month is really what you can learn from various people whom you meet in your job so it's really anecdotal stories.

DJ: But staying with that Ambi, why book? In the sense clearly, I understand it started with a little bit of teaching, you had the material and it also made business sense but can you pin point to some inner driver which leads you to taking time off.

AB: Each book takes roughly two years, I write only on the weekends, I don't write during the day now I get a little more time so I write some time. I suppose I end up writing because I do a lot of reading I do a lot of teaching and training and coaching and it becomes some kind of fuel for myself, so I suppose I write because I like to read, writing and reading are really two sides of the same coin and in a sense you are also writing because you want to share that little wisdom you have with people, hopefully they will find it useful. So every other day I get a mail from someone saying I read the book, found it very useful, that makes my day, so it's like you are trying to do something like help younger people. All my books are aimed at people who are probably in their 20s and their 30s; help them become better in what they do.

DJ: So let's dive into 'Sponge', I read it with a lot of interest, one of the pieces you talk about in the book is flying without a net and you refer to leaders willing to take risk and exposing themselves to different point of view, so give us a sense of what's your insight here what have you seen good leaders do in sort of keeping the conviction but also living the door open for new opinions to shape their beliefs?

AB: Flying without a net I think is a name of a book written by Thomas DeLong and I have quoted that in one of the chapters. So, I think all leaders at some time or the other are really flying without the net, and so you may fall thud and you may actually break every bone in your body or you may actually end up a fly. So I think the big thing a leader has to do is to surround themselves around the team, who can help him take that call, you never have all the answers, for example in that story when we went and recommended to GSK that they should position Cobadex CZS which is a multivitamin with Chromium, Zink and Selenium purely for diabetic patients but no had done that before. There were hundreds of antioxidants, CZS is an antioxidant, hundreds of antioxidants and all the antioxidants were making all the claims, say it's good for diabetes, good for heart patients, it's good for skin, it's good for falling hair, it's good for peeling skin, so we said no you should take it one

single dimension and at that stage and I think it was bold of the marketing team, they said look, we are scared I don't know whether we can do this, but it was bold of them to not reject it, they said let's take this to the MD, you present your story to the MD and if the MD agrees, we will go with it, a lot of time what happens is the people in the middle layer put in so many filters that they are so scared of taking any decision and they are always second guessing the boss and by the time the boss gets to see it what is shown is completely mishmash of what was the original thought, so here I think two things happen, one the team felt that yes it was a risky strategy but they were willing to take it to their boss and stand by it saying yes agency is recommended it, we think it's risky but it's worth a shot and the CEO at that time said yes, I agree lets go with it. So, obviously there was gut and brain, so there was analysis which shows that that was a big market but of course it was a gut feel reaction. So, in marketing we see that all the time, most brand managers, brand teams want to hedge their bench, I want to appeal to young women, I want to appeal to middle age women, I want to appeal to young adults, I want to appeal to slightly middle age adults, life can't go that way, so you have to take a chance and punt and hope and pray it works. If it doesn't work well, you will learn something.

DJ: But staying with that is there something to be said about the leadership style of the CEO at that time, for the team to feel comfortable letting you present the risky idea up there?

AB: I think a lot can be said about the CEO and the team, when the team was confident enough to take something like this to CEO cause they knew CEO will not throw out of the room and the CEO was smart enough to say "Hey, this looks interesting" and he encouraged the team to take such ideas to him. So I think it's both ways, both ways the CEO encourages the team to come up so which is what we say if you are the CEO don't surround yourself with only people who are second guessing you, ensure that you have people that disagree with you, who bring your ideas which you don't like.

DJ: In your years of experience having done the work, what have some of the insights been in terms of what are the missed opportunities in pricing for value?

AB: Pricing for value in advertising is actually very tough, I create a campaign and the campaign works for the client and the client fires the agency and takes the same idea goes to another agency, what happens to you? So I think the magic is in ensuring that you have delivered something which really works for the client till advertising terms you make sure you don't lose the client, because you front end invested all that time and effort in developing a break through campaign and then make sure you stay with that client for 10 or 15 or 20-25 years so that's how we extract value, the client will not pay you one percent of his lifetime value on day one. Now, going to the chess thing that's interesting because that chess is the tool which was developed by FCB globally but FCB had abandoned that tool, so we kept it going under the Cogito consulting arm and in that particular example, Cadbury called us to do this chess on leading competitors and through chess we unearth the fact that there is a market developing at the particular end of the spectrum which they had not addressed at all and they woke up, and Cadbury is a very smart company and they were not clients of us at all, we didn't work with them as an agency we are not working with them, so my whole thing to Anand Kripalu was look you are a very smart company we may not be able to deliver anything, this chess works but we don't know, so he said no matter this will at least open up our eyes and it opened up their eyes and they launched tall range of Cadbury Silk I think as a brand and when I met him a year ago he said your that chess worked because that's a thousand crore business today, now did we get a share of thousand crore? No! But did they pay us a fair fee? Definitely, they paid us a fair fee, two – they gave us multiple projects after that and as luck could have it when Oreo was coming into the country, Oreo being a global account of FCB it came into the FCB the interface folder, the second agency folder and they are happy to work with them, so I think that the fact that we did some good work on Cadbury Karma, ended up...

DJ: It's less about the transaction but more about the journey I guess.

AB: It's about getting long term value, if you keep getting business from same client its fine, OK. So even in coaching or consulting that's the thing, right? I mean you do good work the client should come back to you next month, next year, year after and if that happens then you are doing a good job and you are pricing for value.

DJ: If you take a ten year view, what are your insights around what it takes to build and keep that relationship over a decade, if you reflect on journeys that have lasted decades or beyond, what is it about the nature of the relationship that you built with those organizations or individuals?

AB: Fortunately for us the FCB Ulka group was not very glitzy glamorous agency, we were not into winning big awards and stuff like that but one thing we were very good at was if we get an account, we will not lose the account, so whether it was Tata motors, or Zee or Wipro, ITC of course Amul for many years, Abbott, ICICI bank these all are accounts which lasted, you know they are still there 10 20 30 years the idea is once you get a client make sure you do what is right for the brand make sure to do your homework, make sure to speak your mind then make sure and I have written chapter there called Smoke signals which to understand whether any smoke signals in your relationship if there are smoke signals you need to make sure you fix them so one way of handling deep client relationship is that the relationship has to be at multiple level, you cannot leave relationship only to one person. It has to be at a CEO level, at a marketing level, at a brand manager level, and therefore you know if there any murmurs which are happening but the most important thing is if you are sincere, if you are doing good work, why will a client want to be apart with you? They will not!

DJ: The smoke signals also caught my attention, one is having relationship s across multiple levels, is there anything else that you have learnt in term of decoding the silence or decoding the diminishing trust or engagement as the case might be, what are the watch outs?

AB: There is no one watch out because each client's dynamic is different but I think the big thing is your biggest danger is if people change, at least in our agency a lot of us are constant and even one level below was constant, we don't change. But if there are changes in the client side it means there is danger, so very often you need to figure out who is coming, what is his background? Can you establish a relationship before he joins? One – you may have a relationship with him before, which is good, if it's not good can you find out? And figure out what relationship, if you can build the relationship even before he comes, if it is a stable team, the other important thing which the agency and I think every company should encourage is tell the people that front end running the account or running the client give the bad news first, good news can wait. So if you had a bad meeting come and report it immediately, if you had a good meeting you went and presented something the client loved it I am happy to know that but you can tell me that on Monday, but if you had a bad meeting please come and share it immediately and please remember the fault is mine the credit is yours, so if there is any problem if there is a client is very upset with you I will go and meet the client. So, the other important thing which inculcated was if a client is upset the senior will pick up the phone and talk to the client, you will not hide, and you will not blame the youngster for losing an account. So, as a CEO will be responsible for five six accounts then at the next level, who's the guy responsible for the account? He has to have the guts to tell the client look I have heard you are upset with something we are presented can I come and meet you? And in a lot of cases what we find is the head of the business doesn't have the gumption to meet the client, whichever B to B business we are talking about coaching, consulting any advisory profession, you got to go to meet the client, there is nothing better than just meeting a client having a face to face meeting.

DJ: What have you learnt about the art of influencing in all the years off the work you have done?

AB: I think there is an interesting book, right? Called influencing without authority, unfortunately I read it only last year, I should have read it 20 years ago because in advertising or any consulting space you are actually influencing without authority, you don't have the authority to sign the budget off, you don't have authority to sign off the copy but you know. So, I think you influence that client by first getting their trust, so I think trust is the basic, the client should trust you, once the client trusts you then don't take that trust for granted do your homework, do enough due diligence, so the challenge is do you know as much or more about the clients business than he does? Can you do that? I mean there is story in the book I have written about, the story about UTI mutual fund where Mr Damodaran took over and I had strong biases against PSUs because they end up doing this L1 and waste a lot of time, but the moment I met him, the first time I realize he was a different man and then I met him the second time we suddenly developed a great sense of mutual respect and trust and it turned out to be a great relationship, we still continuous to be friends it's about more than ten years old. So I think the basic background is how can you establish a sense of trust? Of honestly sharing things, so it's not that just because I have brought this campaign to me doesn't mean that if you reject the campaign I am going to shrivel up and die, please reject the campaign, no problem and we used to tell our creative guys lets hold up yaar, lets listen to the client, let's not be defensive, and very often what happens is you let the client talk and you figure out that actually there is a way of saving this campaign, which you think is the right campaign for the client, so trust and last month I was in Bangalore and one of that book talks I was doing, one of my former client was doing it for me and he said look this brand is so big I probably think they deserve more credit than we do because they stuck by what was right for the brand we often got confused and I think that was the real high praise to come from a very large client.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This segment reminds me of an insight from my last podcast conversation with Arun Maira (AM) – ex member of the Planning Commission and ex India Chairman of BCG. He talks about how listening could be an effective way of giving tough feedback to people.

AM: *"There is a very lovely saying that if a big tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear, was there a sound? So the listening is completed in the ear, in the mind of the listener so you have to prepare that ground to want to listen, to hear. So your speaking very accurately with the best of intentions that I mean in the best interest of this person but the window there has not been opened and there are many reasons that window may not be opened one of them just could be in the relationship that this person he comes in from a different world will discount whatever this person says though the person saying it with the best intention it's my feeling of difference from this person, the second comes is where this persons thinks there's something wrong with me and therefore his getting me advised that I am putting my differences anyways, there's nothing wrong with me how dare this person thinks so to get beyond this all barriers that we put up for our own, the protections so that we are not going to kicked around, I just have to allow myself to listen to this person, when I am listening to the person those barriers inside the person drops and the person dropping defences the person is enjoying listening to herself actually, because you are making the person talk and a person is listening to ourselves when you ask the questions about what the person thinks because the person himself or herself never have thought about why I think this way. Now you are listening to your own"*

DJ: I guess the key insight for me here is that if we listen without being defensive and ask the right questions to understand, we could get the other person to listen to themselves and there could be a solution space that could emerge that could take the relationship forward.

Just a quick request. If you find this content purposeful, I would really appreciate you taking 2 minutes and leaving a review on iTunes. It will help others discover this content. Now let's get back to the conversation with Ambi Parameswaran.

DJ: Trust is an interesting thing indeed Ambi in one of the other chapters you talk about Pradipta Mahapatra an individual who I had the fortune of learning from in the context of the coaching certification at CFI. You describe a meeting with him where you don't discuss either advertising or business or marketing but he decided to give you work at the end of the meeting? So, may be just double clicking on what takes to build trust and may be taking the cue from that particular meeting? What's been your experience if you really look at situations where you really have deep trusted relationship is there a pattern around? What it has taken to go there?

AB: This chapter which I have written about our late guru Pradipta Mahapatra and I have called it a pitch which wasn't a pitch I think. So, a common introduced me to Pradipta Mahapatra and we were sitting in the hotel Taj Connemara bar and the friend left after 10 minutes and I was left to talk to Pradipta Mahapatra and we spent 2 hours you know I think discussed about business, about economy, about various things he never asked me what I will do for him as an agency. I don't think he even ask me for my specific credential anything that's what. But at the end of 2 hours he said "are you interested in working in our business" and I said "of course I'd love to" so he said "ok come tomorrow morning and take the brief". So, I asked him "look don't you need to meet the team" he said "no I have meet you, I have had talk to you for 2 hours, I know what kind of guy you are". You will work on the business, right? So, I said "yah". That what I wanted to know. So, I think Pradipta Mahapatra was I think that a lesson learnt from him that in 2 hours he could gauge me and figure out that I can trust this guy with my advertising business. now that a great skill you know I don't know have I ever had that kind of a skill but I realized that all relationship which you have with you know in advertising you end up working with various kind of people Photographers, Film Makers. You have to develop a sense of trust with the guy. So before you give him the business it could be because of the show-reel or whatever but sit and have a 1 hour chat with him. At 1-hour chat will be more useful than any credential he can give you. Though you will understand a lot you just let them talk, you listen and you can figure out. So, I think this whole thing is we have to develop an ability to gauge a person whom we can you know then trust right. I mean there are 2 ways looking someone says look at trust someone and then I reevaluate some other say no first establish whether I can trust him and then I start trusting him both are you know which ever works for you can work yaa

DJ: But back to that meeting I am sure its several years back but anything to be said about how Pradipta spend those 2 hours with you? If he wasn't talking advertising or business or marketing?

AB: i really don't know what we talked about we talked for 2 hours right but you just chatting about where are you from? What do you do? You know what do you like to do? What do you read? You know all kind of stuff. He never for once asks me how big your office is. Actually, I had no one in my office it's only me and my peon right. He never asked me, he didn't ask me where my office is. How big is my office? Do I have anyone in my office? No, we talked about everything where are you from? Oh, you studied here? Ok great? This that you know. What would you like to do? How do you know so and so? How do you know so and so? We talked about a lot of friends you know. And he somehow he realizes that I can trust this guy and that's great you know.

DJ: And he was a very fascinating story teller as well. I fondly remember him from the CFI days. The other piece that caught my attention in the book Ambi is the story you mention in your attraction with Dr. Varghese Kurian I think that chapter is titled Architect and Pillars and I really like the crux of the statement that you are saying you know an architect design a home. You ask the guy to knock off

a few pillars because you think aesthetically doesn't look well, later the house down whose responsibility is it? So, I guess it just got me thinking on as an advisor where do you draw the line in terms of accountability in the sense this my domain you stay off because I am the expert and where do you let the client in. so I was just wondering you know what's been your experience around this theme of what is sacrosanct where you don't let somebody change stuff because it's an expert opinion and where do you let yourself to other people to shape stuff?

AB: The Dr. Varghese Kurian story is part of our F C B Ulka folklore you know I personally I never worked on the business its part of the Folklore and that company embodies this. They select you very carefully once they select you they trust you. The contrast to this is what I have written about Mr Rohinton Aga for Thermax. Now he wrote the body copy of the 6-ad campaign in 800 word but I think now on the one hand source someone asked me the question on the one hand you would saying Dr. Varghese Kurian said don't suggest, don't tell the client, don't tell the agency that they changed the colour from blue to green. Tell the agency what is your point of view let them decide whether they want to change it from blue to green or red or orange or yellow you think that's a great managerial or a leadership way of, and the other side you also praise Mr Aga because he took you know he wrote body copy for an ad. Now who was right you know should Aga have just told you I don't like the body copy because it doesn't read well should him to write you know.

DJ: it's so great I have never sort I didn't somehow see them as different of the same spectrum but they are.

AB: Yaa but they are. So, I said look what Mr Aga did was very interesting because he read the copy, he knew the stories were great. Btu he didn't said look let me give it a shot. He wrote what he thought was good copy gave it to us and said you want to use it use it, don't want to use it don't use it.

DJ: More interesting he still left you the choice.

AB: Yaa exactly this is my suggestion for copy it's up to you to then use it. So it was one he was a client he could have said use my copy he said no you people are the experts. See if this is ok. If it is not ok whatever you write is fine. So, I think that's also the sign of humility of a leader that you know for example going back to the old story that architect comes to you and presents a house with 5 pillars and you are the house owner and you said I don't like 5 pillars let's make it only 2 and then tomorrow when the house collapse so whom will you blame. Will you blame the architect? Will you blame yourself? But if I were let's say MR. Aga does it look I don't know we should have 5 maybe it hurting the look of the place. I have drawn something with 3 take a look but do you want to go back to 5 we will go back to 5 and the agency would have said yes sir let me look at what you have done with 3 pillars and let me take a view and I may come back to you with a different one or may be or may be this is fine. So, think its same problem handled very differently by two different people.

DJ: It's very interesting and in both cases I guess what's unsaid is that they still trust your judgment varies in the level of how hands on they are. One is hands off and one is hand on but they end point is they still trust your judgment saying you are the expert you take the call.

AB: Exactly they are saying look you are the expert you will take the final call but this is our thought. Our input into your process you can reject it.

DJ: It reminds me of my days at EgonZehnder sometimes clients would say you are doing a search you have these 5 candidates I think this might be, this person might a good fit why don't you through him into your mix and evaluate independently rather than enforcing their view on the candidate on

the search firm they will say you take a call you evaluate this person but I think he could be a candidate.

AB: Exactly that's the better way to go that way you are not where as if they had said let's look at him then why should you waste your time with the other 5 candidates if you want to look at him, look at him and take him know yaa lets finish the process.

DJ: The other pieces I was curious about Ambi is notion of judgment? I guess I find advertising as an interesting canvas where you need to marry art and science, heart and head what have you learnt about leaders that have a very strong sense of judgement if you really look at some of the leaders that stand out in this particular domain what about them gives them that sound sense of judgement?

AB: I think some of the smarter marketing companies have a process of approval right but the smarter leaders don't let the process come in the way of accepting a good idea. They know that there is process we need to go through the process but you people say that this will work I think this will work let's go ahead and let's use the process as only as a process right. So, they are not slave to the process whereas certain companies what I find end up becoming a slave to the process you know we like the idea about let's put it into test if test doesn't clear if we will not do it. You know if pre-test is 100% guaranteed this thing then why do you need us. You know you need a copy-writer, you read a research agency no of them I need it and it can go straight into search and then and one had to do plain speaking to some clients you know because a process became a hurdle but a lot of clients were smarter and able to balance the head and the heart. Yes, you need a process but you need to balance the heart you think it will work, it will work. So, in one of the examples I have talked about how this particular client I think Ravi Swaminathan of COMPAQ, the whole process from the brief to the final ad coming on TV was 10 days its unimaginable. You know any think less than 6 weeks is unimaginable. Normally it takes 3 months and some large FMCG companies should take 6 months 10 days turned out to be a good campaign probably the client was clear this was the brief and he was sharp focused on as long as the brief delivered, script delivered on the brief he said go and I was doing the Delhi talk with him and he said look in the IT space, in the technology space we don't have time you know we had a small innovation if we had got it and we need to put it out there within a month because someone else will copy it yaa that's the window I have so you guys give me the good idea and I said lets go and I had only the problem with the budget and my colleague said no we should spend the money because it's a good idea we should not compromise on the production values. So, we did it, the whole film happened in 10 days and turned out to be a damn good film. So, he was a good balance of head and heart.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Just a quick observation here. The point Ambi makes here reminds me of an earlier chat I had with the Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik (DP). I remember asking him about how we should build good habits and he spoke about the distinction between building habits and cultivating awareness.

DP: *"This concepts of habits is a western idea, habit is a bad word in Indian philosophy, another word for habit is conditioned I am conditioned to do it, conditioning there's a pavlovian response, a dog has a habit of salivating whenever the bell rings and the west has made it a virtue action without thought is habit repetitive action without thought is habit and if you look at the many of the cultures in the west they are like domesticated animals at a particular time they will get up and run, so they are on a treadmill all the time and this is seen as virtue, driving in a car with a coffee in your hand,*

nobody sees in America that this is tragedy, it's a tragedy, you can't enjoy your coffee, you can't enjoy your drive you have glamourized slavery"

DJ: While this point was made in a different context, I think the crux of the insight is that being having habits are helpful but being aware, understanding the nuanced context and applying one's judgment is imperative. A bit like how Ambi says, processes exist for a reason but if you become a slave to the process, then you often end up with sub-optimal outcomes.

Just a quick request. If you find this content purposeful, I would really appreciate you taking 2 minutes and leaving a review on iTunes. It will help others discover this content. Now let's get back to the conversation with Ambi Parameswaran.

DJ: But even that may be sticking to that right cost and value especially in ad world you also talk about superstars will come back to that in a minute. But you know the cost could be significantly so how have you thought about cost and value when it comes to big spends so the same ad campaign I am sure can be done at X, 10x, 0.1x I guess the cost curve could vary significantly so that something that something that you have built a strong judgement on over time?

AB: There are two different costs. One is cost of production. Your production is very fuzzy, I mean, globally it is very fuzzy. The same ad film, give it to one producer he will quote 20 lakhs, another producer will quote 2 crores. Now, are you getting 1.8 crores more from producer B compared to producer A, that's a judgmental call. Lot of clients get carried away by the star name of the director etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. But one has to take a judgment because they say look, this is okay, but this is not okay, right? INCOHERENT (0:00:37) I think the Naukri story which I write about there and Sanjeev Bikhchandani told a detailed story in Delhi when we were doing the book launch and he said look, the film you presented was costing us 20 lakhs, we had only 2 crores to spend, that's 10% and a lot of money. I said no, it's too much, let's spend the money on media, let's do the other option, which was a somewhat different script at a lower cost. But he said one of the colleagues said no, we should do this. And that's when I talk about this whole concept of failing versus failing to try. The demonstration that it is better to try and fail than not to try at all. So, the media spends is pretty much at least, you know, those days was pretty scientific, right? How much, what kind of exposure will you get, what will work, what is the threshold level and then you keep titrating it. Nowadays with digital it has become a lot more complex, you know, and lot of clients are just throwing money at digital and hoping something sticks and everyone says, I want a viral video. You can't do a viral video; you can do a digital video and hope and pray it becomes viral, you know?

DJ: Factors beyond control.

AB: Yeah, totally beyond control so... but your client would turn on and say I want a viral video. Hello, you can't do a viral video.

DJ: I tell people right it's like I am going to give you a dropped catch, a missed call, you know, you can only give me a catch whether I drop it or not is my... it's not in your control.

AB: Yeah, exactly. It's something like a missed call that you can't cut off.

DJ: But no, I think the related point about superstar I was just curious is in every company as a leader you sometimes have a superstar who are rough around the edges that are often high maintenance. I guess I am sure you have seen this as a leader at F C B Ulka and with the clients you have worked with and in the stars that feature in you campaign what you have learnt about harnessing the

potential of these superstars you know sometimes you need to embrace them with their rough edges what's your insight?

AB: Well we used to run with the philosophy that we cannot have cannot afford to have superstars, you are member of the team the team is bigger than you. So, if you are a superstar there is no place in the agency for you because it's a team work. You don't start saying that it's my idea, my this. Having said that obviously there were some people who are really much more talented and one realized over time is that these highly talented guys need to be fed challenging brief all the time. So, we used to put them on specific accounts to work on but they used to be the pinch-hitting team you know so your problem is any client you give it to that guy and he will work on it. So, keep them aligned to business but keep feeding them a lot of work. Yaa so feed them a lot of work and they will normally they take on and they say that in the agency system that "work goes to the guy who can do it" it flows to him and so-called superstars have infinite appetite to do work they never turn down work. So understand that and make sure that he doesn't through superstar tantrum but he is doing the superstar work and give him the recognition give him the accolades you don't need to give him double increment or all that just a pat on his back and if that is establish as a custom that's a custom. So for example the big thing in an agency is a big pitch that gets to be called to work on a big pitch that's a sign of

DJ: Big pitch as a prestigious client you mean?

AB: Yes, pitch for the new client so it's a big pitch that gets called to work on that pitch that's a sign of where you are in the pecking order.

DJ: What have you learnt as somebody who has been at the thick of storytelling, what have you learnt about what is a take for an individual to be a good story teller?

AB: To be a good story teller you have to be a good listener. To start with, you have to understand what works as a story in that context and then figure out how you can weave a story into your narrative and if you look at it in the book sponge, what I have actually done is taken 25 stories of various clients whom I met, written them as stories and then kind of segued that story into a managerial principle, or leadership concept etc. so if I just started by saying leaders have to be humble and then talked about RD Aga it wouldn't have worked whereas I flip it around see as a client from Pune who was going through a change, he called us we went and met him and then this happened that happened that's an example of a leader who had humility. So, today a lot of clients have this story telling, they invite a story telling specialist to do story telling workshops, now I think storytelling is not something you can parachute into a team I don't think that will work I think you have to build a culture of sitting and telling stories, we are fortunate we worked with a boss called Anil Kapoor, Anil Kapoor can sit and talk for 10 hours, one story after another after another,

DJ: Pradipto is also a great example.

AB: These are great examples of guys who can keep on telling you stories. So are you building that culture? Of people sitting and generally shooting the air and telling stories about various things and if you build that culture then people pick it up and storytelling is a great way of engaging the client in what you are going to do. Instead of going and saying how about this campaign? You start with the story and then get on to sell what you are selling, client knows you are telling a story and he is enjoying it and he also knows that you are going to sell something which is fine.

DJ: Which is why you are there in the most of the situations because the client knows that?

AB: And I have met clients who are great story tellers, I mean it's a pleasure for example meet Pradipta is always telling stories about something or the other or Mr Damodaran you sit with him for an hour or two he will tell you various stories about his days as an IAS officer in the north east to something else to something else so its great fun sitting and listening and in my own way when my colleagues come and sit, we will tell some stories about something and I will tell I am sorry I might have not told this before, and they say "yes, we have heard this three time OK, *thik hai*"

DJ: At least I am consistent over time.

AB: "Did the story end the same way?" "*Haa* it ended the same way, you told the client that you can't sack me, your father cant sack me your grandfather cant sack me," "have you heard that, no? Moral of the story you understand, OK! Now go."

DJ: What are some of the lessons from the world of Brand building/ brandbuilding.com that can sort have benefit practitioners or solo advisors can benefit from, what are some of the principals that are helpful to bear in mind?

AB: I think the basic principles of all brand building will work, which is who's your target customer? Who are you dealing with? What does your brand stand for? And are you true to your brand DNA and everything you do? And are you interested to invest your time and effort to build your brand? I mean here you for example doing it through podcast, I am doing this by writing books, by writing columns etc. so people will come and tell me how do I become visible to the world? I said the first thing is start writing and start posting it on LinkedIn and start connecting and tagging your lot of friends and you won't believe it, people who are, they take months to write one article, I said why do it take you so long to write a 500 word article? You know so much, you are so knowledgeable, so if you don't take that effort to first define who is my target customer I wanted to deal with what does my brand going to stand for? And what can I do to perpetuate my brand? You will be in the same place the world will keep moving and that's important if you are a product brand, service brand or a personality brand, like I am sitting and doing this with you it will somewhere help you to somewhere help my brand, it will help your brand, so look for opportunities to collaborate look for opportunities to share.

DJ: CEOs of large organizations, what have you seen them do in not losing touch with the consumer, sometimes when you are leading a large company you can sort of get buried in the hierarchy, what have you seen good leaders do to ensure that they have the pulse of the consumer that they are serving?

AB: If you ask me do they do the standard stuff to do like market visits and meet customers and all, I think they do a lot of that stuff but a more intrinsically I think they feel for the customer inherently they are conscious about who their customers are? They don't get carried away by all the hoopla around them , so you taking Nirma and then the toothpaste which was the nice toothpaste they had made, so we done the research and we went to them and said look people are accepting this product and even the Nirma brand name they are accepting but then his call was, he said look given the current cost material CUT going back to that Karsanbhai Patel and the Nirma story, Nirma was then ruling the roost it was a number one detergent powder the Nirma beauty soap was doing very well and when they had developed this product Nirma toothpaste they gave it to us we did some research in rural India, rural Maharashtra, rural UP and consumers quite liked the product, so we went back and told Karsanbhai that look this Nirma brand as a toothpaste people are willing to accept it because Nirma stands for good quality product but he said look but looking at the cost of raw material today I cannot launch it, so we asked, why? So he said no, for a comparable pack size if Colgate is 10 Rs. I cannot price Nirma more than Rs. 5. If I price it Rs. 5 I need to give my trade at

least 2 Rs. Margin total between retail and wholesale so I got to ship it at Rs. 3 I can't do that so we will not go ahead with the project, so I said, why? He said no my consumer for Nirma brand they will want something of that value, they will not be able to pay more and we respected that thing, did he go and do any research? No! But intrinsically instinctively he knew that this is what my consumer wants this is what I stand for in my consumers heart and mind and he took that call and I respected him for that.

DJ: And that instinct may be just to persist with that Ambi, does it come because he is a consumer of the product of he belongs the demographic, he is selling to I am sure he is grown beyond the demographic he is selling to but do you have a sense of where that instinct come from?

AB: It is possibly because he came from that demographic, he came from that demographic so he knows that mindset while he may be sitting in a palatial big office his mind is still there. He still knows the consumer instinctively, a lot of us lose touch, I mean we do both, there was another nice story in the book called 'Chaaywala test where we flip it the other way, we think that our target customer is very crude he will not understand this, he will not like this and the 'Chaaywala test' story when I said look Pradip Guha just called the 'Chaaywala' and asked him to choose among the four options which the agency presented and the Chaaywala picked the one which the marketing head of the company thought was too sophisticated for the lower income groups, so he said look if you think this is too sophisticated for lower income group this boy is from lower income group look at what he has selected. So a lot of times we make that mistake also, saying this is too sophisticated, we think we understand, let's dumb it down. A lot of advertising in India today because of this problem that a lot of it is aimed at the SEC, the middle of the pyramid the bottom of the pyramid you dumb down stuff really badly and then you realize that you know consumer thinks our brand is cheap or brand is bad because you dumbed it down, consumer didn't asked you to dumb it down given a choice every consumer would like to use fancy soaps and fancy clothes and drive in fancy cars, they can't afford it, which is fine.

DJ: What are the two three choices that you have made that have played a profound impact in your life that you would like to call out?

AB: Talking about work, the choice I have made to go and do an MBA was a right call ok because I would not have been in a very happy doing chemical engineering, thermo dynamics and designing reactors, so I think that was a good call and I think the second call that I came back into advertising joining an agency Ulka which was shutting down was a very good call and I think I stayed the full hundred yards turned out to be very good and of course I am very fortunate that I have a family which is very supportive, I couldn't have achieved any of this without my wife who is like huge peeler of support so I listen to, I mean she reads all the books I write, she reads all the articles I write and she is a bad so to speak critic and I think she keeps me on level and you need to surround yourself with the people who pull you down a few notches every other day and she does her fair share of that which I think is good, I am grateful for that.

DJ: How you have scaled up over time?

AB: So, you said be immodest so I will be immodest. I started teaching many years ago and one of the directors of one of the Bombay business school said I should do PhD and I ended up doing PhD, it turned out to be a good experience in itself, I did my PhD in 2008 or 9 I finished my PhD and I was 50+ but I did the part time PhD but I was lucky I got a decent guide, I got a decent topic, Bombay university PhD has its own complications so I managed to navigate all that but turned out to be a good experience then just when I had turned an advisor to the company I decided to go into AMP at Harvard 8 weeks, that was again a great experience, spending 8 weeks on campus with a really

multi-cultural, multi country group of 180 people and that's kept me going and then when I was about to get my full time job I did my CFX certification which was again very useful so I think the fact that you tend to go back to class once in a while refreshes you every time. So, I have been lucky.

DJ: In Summary what's your take way as to how to play to your potential.

AB: To play to your potential become a sponge is plug for my book as well, you will meet a lot of smart people on your journey learn to learn from every one of them. Every interaction, not as a selling interaction or buying interaction as a learning interaction and as you keep learning, as you keep go along you will become better and you will definitely play to your potential.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you found the conversation purposeful.

There were three big take-away for me in this conversation.

1) First was the point Ambi makes about trying a few things but by 35 making a commitment to a direction and then motoring ahead with conviction. While we live in turbulent times with evolving career paths, I do think the fundamental principle still holds. You go broad, try a few things and keep reflecting on what is giving you energy while also seeing where you are distinctive. At some point, make a commitment for may be 5-7 years in a certain direction and see where that takes you and then repeat that heuristic again. The only thing that might have changed is that you might have to run this algorithm a few times in one life time but the notion of going broad and then going narrow is valid advice I feel. One of my earlier guests Chandramouli Venkatesan (the author of the book Catalyst) talks about the notion of learning loop when it comes to career moves. You might find that concept interesting if you want to know more.

2) The second insight that stayed with me was the point Ambi makes about how good clients lean on the judgment of the expert and ensure they derive that value. Being hands-on or delegating the work is one thing but not leveraging the wisdom of the expert that is working with you is a lost opportunity.

3) The third insight that stayed with me was the point Ambi makes about story-telling not being a skill but being a core element of the culture that needs to be carefully cultivated over a period of time. You can't inject story-telling into an individual with a 4 hour workshop. You need to really role-model it for your team to really start exhibiting those behaviours. I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations of the Play to Potential Podcast. Signing off – this is Deepak Jayaraman here. To know more about the advisory work I do, please visit transitioninsight.com. Bye now.

End of transcription

Nugget from Arun Maira that is referenced: [Giving feedback by listening](#).

Nugget from Devdutt Pattanaik that is referenced: [Building Habits Vs Enhancing Awareness](#).

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Habits: Habits are routine behaviours done on a regular basis. They are recurrent and often unconscious patterns of behaviour and are acquired through frequent repetition. Guests on the podcast share their experiences in baking habits in their lives. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Context Based Leadership: You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Ambi Parameswaran - Nuggets

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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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