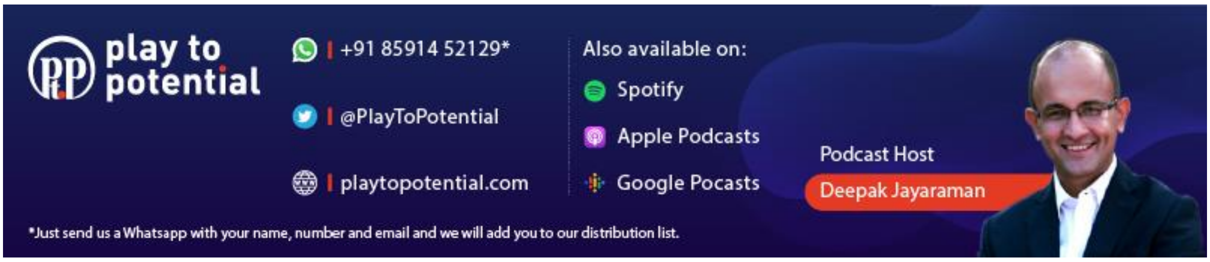

Guest

R Gopalakrishnan is a man of many identities. A Board Member, an author, an advisor, speaker and a teacher. Apart from having an illustrious career in Hindustan Lever and Tata Sons, he has been on several Boards over the last few decades. He has authored 12 books since 2007 (that is a run rate of about a book a year if you think about it). He spends his time on Boards, as a Mentor and as a Corporate Advisor, as a speaker and as a Teacher. He is an Executive in Residence at SP Jain and a Distinguished Professor at IIT Kharagpur.

While there is a lot of wisdom to mine from him, we tried to anchor the bulk of the conversation around his book Crash where he profiled about 15 high profile CEO appointments that didn't quite work out (that includes Vikram Pandit at Citigroup, Anshu Jain at Deutsche Bank, Carly Fiorina at HP, Vishal Sikka at Infosys and more. He looks at common patterns across some of these transitions and distils them in the book. We unpack some of that in this conversation. We first speak about Gopal's journey and some of his thoughts around having a marathon of a career. Then we dive into some of the elements in the book Crash and we wrap up with a rapid fire Q&A where Gopal speaks about the leaders and books that have influenced him.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 59th Conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman and I work with leaders as a Leadership Coach, Sounding Board or as a Transition Advisor as they navigate their journeys. In this series, we feature conversations from leaders from different walks of life on three themes - leadership, transitions and careers.

My guest this time is R Gopalakrishnan or RG as he popularly known. After an illustrious career in Hindustan Lever and Tata Sons, he has had an even more illustrious career as a Board Member, Author, Corporate Advisor and a Teacher. He has authored 12 books since 2007 (that is a run rate of about a book a year if you think about it). He is an Executive in Residence at SP Jain and a Distinguished Professor at IIT Kharagpur.

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If this is a topic of interest to you, you might also like my conversation with Prof Michael Watkins of IMD (Author of the First 90 days – considered as a Bible for Transition Acceleration). You might also find the Curated Playlist – Settling into a new context of value where learn how leaders from different backgrounds speak about how they adapted to a new context.

Let's head over to my conversation with R Gopalakrishnan.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Gopal, thank you so much for making the time on the Play to Potential podcast, excited to be talking to you.

R Gopalakrishnan (RG): Good morning. Thanks, nice to be here.

DJ: And Gopal in this conversation we talk about three themes: Leadership, Transitions and Careers and I would love to get into some detail about your wisdom on some of these specifically around the book Crash which talks about transitions, but I would love to talk about your journey first. Could you talk to us a little bit about your pie chart of time, what does it look like and more importantly why do you do what you do?

RG: Well, you know one way to define myself is that I am a retired old fogey, which I am. There are multiple truths with which we live and this is one such multiple truth. But about several years ago when my father was alive he said if there's something you want to do in life don't make the mistake that I made, which is to wait till you retire and then start to do it because that doesn't work, you start feeling sleepy. Start doing it while you are still active in service. That message stayed with me for a long time after he passed away and somewhere around 2000 early 2000s I was persuaded that I had a book in me, by an enthusiastic and misguided publisher and I started writing and my first book called The Case of the Bonsai Manager was published in 2007. So I have had a 13-year career writing, part of which I think for the first 7-8 years I was still in service, in executive service or corporate service, I wrote eight books on my own which is authored by myself and researched, authored, written everything and then it struck me that we have so much experience, all of us, not just me and if I apply the vedantic principles you learn from yourself. The insight is within yourself *"ahamasmi brahman"*, you know applies to management also, and I said there are so many other people who can write but many people feel hesitant and I started to co-author and wondered whether my… the footprint of wisdom and knowledge as might exist can be expanded which is what I have done in last three years, we brought out nine books compared to the eight books that came in eight years, we got nine books in two years and I like to… you said how do you spend your time, that was your question.

DJ: Yes.

RG: I am trying to, you know, whatever little physical assets you have will go to the children and all that stuff you do a certain amount of charity but the intellectual asset that you have, experiential asset that you have I am trying to empty myself of it because the more I empty the more I get.

DJ: Very interesting.

RG: It never seems to empty because I get new insights out of my own experiences and the questions people ask, like in the session I am doing with you. This will lead hopefully to somebody's advantage; I don't know how much but I hope I am doing it for a bit of a selfish person because it helps me to excavate. I am like a geologist; I excavate my own rocks and find new things that I didn't know existed there. So, I am seeing you as an excavator who is helping me as a geologist to excavate myself, that's how I spend my time.

DJ: That's a fascinating metaphor but maybe going back to the let's say the book writing career after an illustrious corporate career, how would you describe the arc of curiosity over time? If you look back in hindsight, how has it evolved?

RG: You know the more… I mean I must start by saying why I started writing. I had no intention and still have no ambition to get the Pulitzer for sure, but during my career I was the Chairman of Unilever Arabia about 30 years ago, and I was for the first time working in a completely different cultural environment with a completely different set of business problems the detail of which I am not going to go into now. And I was completely jolted out of my comfort zone because for 25 years before that I had been in Hindustan Lever, I had sat on every floor of the building, I knew every department, I knew everyone. And I ran into a business dilemma and I am not describing the business dilemma because that will again take us away from the focus of what you want to talk about. But the dilemma was here's a problem that I have come across, do I rely on my analytical ability or my intuitive ability? I finally decided because managers must get on and decide and set me thinking, I said, what is the balance if any, are they opposites or are they aligned and that's how I wrote my first book The Case of the Bonsai Manager in which I argued, a bit controversially I have to say, that analysis and intuition are on the same straight line. It is absolutely correct to be analytical and you must get data as far as you can, but you would come to the edge of a cliff where there's no more sense you can make with data. Artificial intelligence can't help you beyond that, natural intelligence can and natural intelligence will tell you whether you should jump or not. And that's when I said that top leaders lose their way in their jobs because they continue to rely on the analytical skills they learnt as young people and forget to switch on the intuition button. So that's how the journey began and not to go into each book because that would take a lot of time. Each book came out of some form of a question in my mind, "*jigyasa*" as we say in Sanskrit, you know, an inquiry, and I said why don't I research it and write about it. And that's how I first wrote my first eight books personally researching every word is written, no ghost-writers nothing and then I decided to expand the footprint as I described earlier. So that's been my journey. The whole process of self-discovery and each time I find that you thought you have discovered something like a geologist and I say there is something more to dig for.

DJ: Lovely, and maybe picking on a different theme Gopal, you know, I was talking on this podcast to a lady called Lynda Gratton.

RG: Yeah, she is a very accomplished author, yes.

DJ: Correct and she was a Professor at London Business School when I was there and she has written a book called 100-Year Life and she says given the advances in healthcare all of us are likely to be working well into our 70s and 80s. From your vantage point what's the advice you would give to people in their let's say 30s and 40s. I see a lot of people from let's say batch mates from IIT and IIM who have had a very good first 15-20 years but as you take stock of your journey in decades what have you learnt about having a let's say a marathon of a career?

RG: You know, I believe life is a wonderful marathon and when you are running a marathon, I am not a marathoner but from what I hear from my marathon friends when you are at the 10th kilometre you don't worry about retiring on the 15th unless you are my age, if you are young and fit you… and so a marathoner keeps on running as long as he can and I don't see a career as being any different. So partly due to my father's influence and partly due to my own self-excavation as it were I realized that I will not retire, I will refire and just the change of one alphabet, the third alphabet, from retire to refire made a dramatic difference to the way I saw. Now when you refire you must know in which direction to refire, what you are going to refire with. Some people very lovely, I have a friend of mine who went into painting at the age of 60, somebody who went into "*antim sanskaar*" which is you know creating... he has created 14,000 places for people of different denominations to die peacefully and so on and so forth. I decided that this is what I would do and I refired. Now, once you have refired, it looks like an inexhaustible source of energy until somebody else takes that energy out of you, you can go on. So, I don't see age as a constraint, at some stage some faculty may give up but that's not something for me to think about.

DJ: Of course, and maybe to use your geology metaphor if I may dig for a little longer there anything you have learnt about how to think about where to, you know, the biggest question that leaders grapple with is in which direction should I fire again? I have sort of been firing in direction X, now I have come to this point, in my life context…

RG: That's a very good question, I have just written on paper for my own edification not for publication and I have consulted a number of my cohorts who are about my age group as you can imagine and each person has spent his time looking for what to refire about at least 5-10 years before he retired and it was a struggle, the journey itself, you know, the joy of a victory lies in the peril of the fight. So, you have to go through that process, there is no prescriptive thing. But my definition of knowing when you have arrived is when you are able to undertake an activity in which time ceases to move. Like my daily routine I get up, I do my usual things and then by 10 o'clock I have had my bath, my puja, and I am sitting at my table and this was my office and I don't move out till 1 o'clock somebody gives me some tea or coffee and I have my lunch and… So, I am like working as I have done for the last 50 years but working on something where I don't know the passage of time. Each of us is like a little Lego piece. I love to give this quotation because we have got our own shape, size and volume and dimensions and we spend our lives looking for a hole in the sky where we will fit in and there are seven and a half billion holes in the sky, which is waiting for one Deepak Jayaraman, one Gopalakrishnan, one Srivastava and one Banerjee and so on and we have to go on trying to fix it until at some stage there is a snug fit, it just slips in. That's when you realize time doesn't matter anymore and that's the way I think I would encourage people not to get worried when they are 40 or 45 and I don't know what to do, I haven't got any enlightenment. You won't get any enlightenment but if by keeping on trying to fit into different shapes and sizes and finding that doesn't work, I am not encouraging being a rolling stone by the way but I am merely saying we automatically try various things and at one stage you will find that this fits for me very well and that's when you know that that's what you want to do.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love the phrase refire versus retire that Gopal uses to frame this problem. I do think once we get to our mid-life which is say post mid-30s, it does get harder to figure out the "where to refire" question. I like to think of this as a parallel to business strategy. Just like companies need to think about where to play and how to win in the context of their business strategy, we all need to think about where to go and how to grow as we go through our journeys. Where to go is quite parallel to "where to refire" as Gopal puts it. But I feel four things make it complex to solve.

- 1 – It is a multi-dimensional problem that involves our various domains of life. You need to think about your spouse, his or her career, you need to think about the time you want to spend at home given your life context, it needs to financially make sense and you need to find it energizing.

- 2 – We often operate with limited data here. The reason I say is that most of the data we get on ourselves as we go through our work life is around "how to grow". All the feedback you receive at work is about how you can get better at the job at hand, not what is the canvas where you could flourish.

- 3 – Where to re fire is not a sharp turn in the road but something that is organic and has to evolve over a period of time. We all grow up making career choices in a paradigm where there are a few options lined up in front of us, often concurrently like in the case of campus placement. Even subsequently, the moves are driven by a call from a Search Consultant or a Company. To put it in simple terms, it is the discomfort we feel when we write a Statement of Purpose for a college admission (for ourselves or our children). Having grown up in a paradigm of cracking the multiple choices closed ended problem set. Mid-life transition around "where to re fire" is a similar problem that can feel quite daunting Life problem and not just a career problem (multi-dimensional)

- 4 – Last but not the least, when you are in your 30s and 40s you are also firing all cylinders and if you are the Type A kinds, you are operating with limited residual mind space to thoughtfully solve "where to go" or "where to re fire"

If solving "where to re fire" is a topic of interest or curiosity, I could point you to a few resources at the podcast

1) The conversation with Herminia Ibarra, Professor at London Business School. She speaks about how we need to act our way into a new way of thinking than think our way into a new way of acting

2) You might find the playlists "reinventing yourself" or "navigational principles" relevant as several leaders speak about how they figured out the next mountain to climb

3) You might also like the conversation with Jennifer Petriglieri of INSEAD (Author of Couples that work) who speaks about how we need to think about these transitions as couples and not just individually

Now let's get back to the conversation with R Gopalakrishnan.

DJ: Lovely, Gopal, I think we could talk for much longer given your years of experience as a corporate leader and as a board member, but in interest of time maybe diving into the book Crash that you have written a few months back. I used to be… in the book you have spoken about 15… you have spoken about a few principles about getting the transition right and I have also chronicled a few that didn't go well and you have sort of posed a few questions around them. I used to be a recruiter at Egon Zehnder earlier for six years before I set up my coaching practice. So, I was actually curious about maybe actually chatting with you on how the recruitment process works even before we get into this diagnosis of why things go awry. If you could talk a little bit about how recruitment works, as a board member and as an observer of transitions apart from just the 15 that you have chronicled in your book, what have you seen about best practices in getting the decision right when you looked at situations which have resulted in a good outcome, what about a decision process or the selection process have been worth noticing?

RG: Well, I don't know, there is no mantra for this obviously, but my track record is probably when I think back at all the couple of hundred CEOs appointments, I have been involved with not that I made the decision.

DJ: Sure

RG: And my track record is probably only 50%-60 % whoever's fault it may be is not material. And when I reflect back on it, I ask myself what could we have done better and I have certain principles which I presume might be of interest to answers to this particular question. The first is let a group of people take the call rather than a single person because there is a value to a collective judgment as compared to single judgement. I am not saying everybody must sit together, it might be sequential but sitting together helps because you discuss, sequentially you just get a little cryptic note on a piece of paper which the HR department assembles and it doesn't give you the picture, that's the first point. These are all, I am going to state some of them are absolute motherhoods. The second is we tend to look for visible success characteristics, track record, domain expertise, how many years of experience, answers to one or two clever questions with equally clever answers, I call those the visible. This is like trying to recruit somebody by looking at his face, his coiffure, his clothes, it's important, go ahead, do so but we don't step into the person's "*aatma*" may be too strong a word but the inner part of the person and it is that that is more important. I call it the soft part because if I get into hard parts and so on I would be stretching out of my territory, but there is a hidden part to every individual which he is trying to suppress, he or she, and you are trying to catch and you can do that only by simulating situations and discussing the reactions. I am not being judgmental that he is right or wrong, which we tend to do because we are in a position of superiority, we have to judge whether the candidate is recruited or not, but by saying will that work for my situation right and if I may use a cricket metaphor because what I have just said is a bit complicated. The cricket metaphor, a batsman can go to the crease and look for the field placement or he can look for the gaps in the field. Now, I am not a great cricketer, but if different batsmen say different things when you ask them how do you decide what to do and how to hit but this is the way a recruiter should do it. He should look for the gaps in the field rather than what is in front of him. And that way you get a slightly better situation. The third and the last point I would say is discuss discuss, discuss because a number of people are involved in the recruitment but usually, we leave it to some superior god in the hierarchy to decide. And you have to… we get seduced by the person's domain experience and by the person's… those are necessary conditions, but not sufficient conditions. The EQ part of it if to use the jargon are also necessary conditions but not sufficient but the IQ plus EQ is what makes for a very good recruitment and that's what I would say is one of the things that came out in the Crash book. In each of the 15 cases and I am not saying it is the CEOs fault, I was not in the fault business, is there was a mismatch of cultures and if you see how Chris Viehbacher was selected in Sanofi as an example I am taking out of the book and how he was fired. You can blame the board, the very French board of directors, you can blame Chris Viehbacher for being a very typical Anglo-Saxon North American, you can blame the acquisitions that he made, those were all the visible things but ultimately the board of Sanofi sought a non-French orientated international manager of competence. They found him and when he started doing that, they fired him.

DJ: And may be picking up on one of the things you said Gopal you know often companies end up hiring leaders based on their intrinsic potential or competencies or whatever the language right, sort of the inner qualities and not so much on the expertise or prior industry knowledge. There I find an interesting dynamic play out right often the board often has or the recruiting let's say the panel, the people who have visibility to that bet on something but the organization often measures a leader on the clothes and the way the person looks and there's often an asymmetry of insight into the leader and it takes a while for the leader to build credibility. So back to maybe we'll get to the post and I still want to be pre-decision, we will get to the post decision transition in a few minutes but any reflection on when is it a bridge too far? How do you think about experience versus let's say potential if I may sort of use those two words as black and white?

RG: You know, when I was in Unilever, I must now relate it to my experiences live rather than theoretically. It was very rare both in Hindustan Lever and in Unilever to have a non-Unilever person recruited at the top level. They are such a rich and solid tradition of management trainees, direct recruits, so they were all recruited by the time they were 25-30 and then they were moulded, hammered into shape as it were, right and at the age of 45-50 when you had to choose your new leadership they were known devils. In Tata, it is different my experience for whatever the reasons may be a lot of parallel lateral recruitments were done, I was an example of that and so were many others. And therefore, the whole issue of cultural fit. Now, in Unilever it was very difficult for a non-Unilever groomed person to survive. It was for the first time challenged 10 years ago when they recruited globally a CEO from outside, in fact from Procter & Gamble and Nestlé, but it all worked well, okay and since I am not privy to how it all worked, I will not talk about it. But my experience is that the people who are pushing for domain knowledge and expertise are not wrong and you must but it is thus far and no more and what you need is the cultural fitment and the visible fitment to match. So if you take a person who is totally innocent of power sector or automotive sector and try to put him as the head of that company, like a guy who doesn't know anything about consumer products and you just recruit him from, you know, the diesel engine industry and put him into charge of Hindustan Lever you are going to have a starting problem of considerable significance.

DJ: No pun intended.

RG: Sorry?

DJ: No pun intended, I said.

RG: *[Laughs]* But if you find a guy who has got reasonable domain experience, but not the richest but he has got terrific leadership and human values that's the value add and that's what we tend to miss, we tend to say this guy has got terrific experience in my sector and the human part of it the HR department to look after that doesn't work.

DJ: And may be flipping the question Gopal if we take it from the incoming leader's perspective, what have you observed about what leaders do to ensure that they are able to see through the difference between romance and marriage? You know, often when you are interviewing for a job as a search consultant it's just the nature of the conversations end up being around painting the rosy picture. So as an incoming leader, what would you advise someone? What is the kind of diligence you would advise them to do before they take the plunge?

RG: No, as I listen to your question, I recall an experience I had which had nothing to do with management and companies. I had been driving in India for about 30 years with a license and fortunately no black marks on it, driving my ambassador car in Bombay. I went to England, I was posted there for some time and I failed my driving test and when I asked him what did I do wrong and I said I feel almost offended, he said sir, I am not disputing that you have got a license in India, but what you have learned so far is to move a car, not to drive and then he told me 5 things that I did wrong and I passed the test on the second time, I think. Then I landed up in… now I am entitled to drive in the United States and I rented a car in Los Angeles airport, I had to get to somewhere near Hollywood or somewhere for some meeting and the guy says, well, there's the car, just go down, start it and go and the GPS will tell you the route. I was sweating, petrified, I was driving on the other side of the road, I did not know how to handle the GPS system, I didn't know where I could stop. So, the message I am giving is when you have learned to drive in a company you understand the traffic signals, the cultural moors, you don't even think about it. Like I did after 31 years in Unilever, I knew exactly which corner had the traffic jams. Then I went into Tata, I said they are not from Mars or Jupiter, but they had different traffic systems. They were driving on the other side of the road, they would not stop on the highway, there were some cultural moors which were different from mine and so on and so forth and what many… especially if you are recruited straight as a CEO because somehow you are presented in the media whether the company intends it or not and whether you intend it or not as some sort of a saviour, you know that after the prophets came there hasn't been one for the last 1400 years so we need another prophet and for this company we need a prophet and you take that too seriously you fall flat on your face. And I think it is very important therefore that even though you may be very accomplished, very experienced you must enter the new company with a capital H of humility rather than the capital P saying I am proven and that's the big difference. There are dimensions to this of course, which is the mind-set with which you demonstrate what you do. You should go in with that mind-set that I am proven, but I will put on the humility act then it reflects in your behaviour and behaviour is a way you interact. So if you speak a bit imperiously though you think you are being humble, I think that happens to all of us all the time and the people are judging you neither by your mind-set nor by your behaviour, but by your actions, which is the outcome of the mind-set with behaviour. So, you almost have a jigsaw where different people are different mirrors and different people are looking at different mirrors on the same person.

DJ: Got it. That's a great segue into the book Gopal and let's dive in, right? So just coming back to how leaders can settle in and the point you made around cultural fit Gopal, listening intently often comes up as a key theme right for leaders settling into a new context. If you had to double click on that could you expand a little bit on how a leader can listen more or intently as they settle into a new context especially for the first three, six, nine months?

RG: You know, I think the most important thing is introspection within yourself. This is my experience, okay?

DJ: Sure. Sure.

RG: When I was Vice Chairman of Hindustan Lever the shoes would click and I would get all the salutes as I entered the building, everybody knew me, they sir'd me and, you know, I was amongst the older members of the management committee therefore you sort of automatically feel that you are a proven guy. When I was entering Bombay House 22 years ago, no heels clicked, nobody knew who the hell you were and at the most my imagination allowed me to have a few people say in a hush tone oh, he is the new guy they have brought in, you know, because some media coverage had been. I was an unproven person and every person was sizing me as indeed I was sizing them. This is a very good situation to be in because it jolts you from your complacence of thinking you are a proven fellow, saying that I might have won Wimbledon, but I am now in Roland Garros, and I think it brings a certain amount of humility that I may get knocked out in the second round. So, this was the most important self-introspective thinking that must come. It doesn't come automatically because for 30 years you got used to being seen as a… you know get to the General in the Army, if you now go and take charge of the Navy one shouldn't assume that you are going to be successful. The second aspect that would come to me is to informally adopt not appoint adopt some mentors. Some guys who are senior people or people in your interaction zone whom you can go and chat with and who will give you if not a direct hint at least a lateral hint that you know this is not the way we do things here or while your reaction was very logical the way you expressed your reaction could be better. I found these two to be very helpful. The third has of course lasted that don't be afraid to make a mistake. Don't make a fatal mistake like punching your boss on the face, but you will make mistakes and you must be willing to admit that you made a mistake. When I was Vice Chairman Hindustan Lever in a sense, I knew what to do; I could do it, if I was a bit ham-handed people understood. Here, I wasn't sure what to do, but I still did a few things and when I was ham-handed I got the signal back because I was looking for the signal, nobody was coming and telling. And I think therefore it's like climbing… being in the company you have been in for the last 10 years, 20 years is like driving on the highway, you can race the engine 60 kilometres, you know where the restrooms are and where the restaurants are, going into a new company is like rock climbing, you are not sure where your next foot is going to sit at least for the first two, three, four years.

DJ: Of course.

RG: And if you go with that mindset that you are not the racing car… if Narain Karthikeyan has to go rock climbing he had to better change his methods.

DJ: It's a great metaphor. You need to feel the new surface before you start putting your weight on it. And just back to the second point Gopal in terms of having that informal set of people who tell you a little bit about how things work here. Any insights around where you could find them? Are they around your peer group, is it superiors, is there any wisdom around how we look for them?

RG: Around your peer group is what I did but it could be subordinates as well, it could be a boss, it could be a combination but the important thing is not that you adopted them because it is not a conscious process, you are not sort of saying from tomorrow so and so is adopted as my mentor, but some people who seem to be more forthcoming even if in tangential term so they want to hurt you and it's the signals that you look for, in other words the transmitters are all around you but you have to tune your receiver. If you have the wrong frequency and your receiver is not receiving what is the use of the transmitters.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my work with leaders who transition into a new context, I realize that suddenly it feels that the organization has become introverted. People stop speaking with you. And just like one says that if you are leading a team of introverts, you need to find a way of listening to the silent voices. Ravi Venkatesan (RV), speaks about how he adopted a few internal and external mentors as he took on a Chairman role in a Public Sector Bank.

RV: *"So, as you know about 18 months ago I took on a completely new role as the chairman of a public sector bank, now I know nothing about banking and I know even less about public sector, but yet Raghuram Rajan and Jayant Sinha felt that it was important that I take it on so I did, now what you do in this situation? And you know that the place is filled with landmines and you can step on anything without realizing it and get blown up, so what you have to do in is listen intently and I did I made it very conscious effort to listen to a bunch of people retired chairman of a bank of Baroda so it helped me understand from your perspective, what I should do what the issues are? How would you handle them? And you get a certain perspective, I went and spoke to Waghul of ICICI and P.J. Nayak of axis Bank because they had, they have been around and seen revolution of banking sector, I met a lot of our own employees and so forth, so from this you begin to piece together first the situation and then out of that emerges a theory of change which is, what interventions are really going to Make a difference and who are going to be an important alliances if you don't listen and you start to imide you are coming with the point of view you starts jumping into action right away you going to make a lot of mistakes because you hadn't built this nuance"*

DJ: The point around developing a High Resolution picture of the Theory of Change is an important one. Most of the transitioning leaders have a clear sense of the "what" they need to do, but often the failures are because they didn't appreciate the how well enough.

And I like the point Gopal makes about adopting these mentors and not necessarily appointing them. In my work with leaders, I find that leaders are a bit like an engine that is raring to go. But unless the engine builds a strong connect with the compartments; it is going to snap at some point. So, if I may double click on the point around adopting mentors, I think it is key that you invest in informal relationships internally so that over time you develop a cohort that you connect with that warms up to you and can act as an informal feedback loop. I have noticed that this is something organic that evolves and not a list of 5 names that is given to you. The key however, is that the leader often comes into a fire and there are 50 things clamouring for his or her attention. It is key that he or she creates the mind space and the discipline to slowly build these relationships and develop a circle of mentors who can act as guard rails as they move forward.

Thank you for listening. If you find this of value, do take a moment to visit the podcast archives at playtopotential.com. You might specifically be interested in my conversation with Michael Watkins on how leaders can settle in effectively in a new organization. You might also like the theme "settling into a new context" where we learn from leaders across different walks of life on how they navigated the first few months in a new environment including someone like Gandhiji when he moved back to India from South Africa. Now let's get back to the conversation with R Gopalakrishnan.

DJ: And moving to a different topic Gopal in the book you talk about the CEOs being measured on two things, right? One is objective metrics and second is fulfilling the expectations of the pecking order of stakeholders. I found that nuance quite interesting. Objective metrics I guess we all understand but talk to us a little bit about what you mean by the pecking order of stakeholders and maybe if there are examples around how we should think about what's the pecking order in the context we are in.

RG: So, one of the things I learnt, I am not sure where I learnt it, how I learnt it but I am sure I learnt it from somewhere or the other some experience is if you want to change things in the organization which you are going to lead or be a leader of first you have to change yourself. The so-called objective metrics are actually subjective in the sense they focus on increase profits by 20%, diversify into X or Y, which are all fine, but those depend on the context. So, we set targets for various companies in February for the year 2021, who the hell knew Covid was coming? So, the context has changed and therefore the performance metrics automatically change, Coming to the other part, the invisible part, boards are not interested only in your achieving objectives, they are interested in how you achieve the objective also. It is stylish to say just deliver me the results, I don't care how you do it but in reality, we are interested how they did it also. If a CEO is slitting a few necks every night to achieve his results, then you have to accept that there's a criminal case building up. So that's what I mean by the soft part, There are multiple stakeholders, you know, you have so far grown in your career thinking I have one boss, if I satisfy him everything is all right. Your board itself has a chairman and directors who have been around 20 years, directors who have been around 2 years but then you have your leadership team, your subordinates if I may use that word, then you have your stakeholders your shareholders, you have your allies, you know, suppliers, vendors, bankers and depending on the way you act and behave the pecking order emerges. If you are a very strong domain person, so you have been in the auto industry for 30 years and you joined an auto company then you pick up the phone and start energizing your old network, you know of some fellow who supplies very good components. That might be misinterpreted in your new environment you are doing that because you were a head of purchase in some other auto company you don't sort of bring in all your old buddies, but then very strong in recruiting talent and then you go and fill up the place with people from your own company or perceive to have done so even whether you have actually done so or not and people don't like that. So, I use the word pecking order of stakeholders to mean what was in your strength until the other day can play out to be a weakness. So, while you must have a 360-degree approach to all your stakeholders without doubt the angles of the pie keep changing depending on who is the person who's there. I have known situations where people say that, you know, he came from so and so place, he has filled it up with people from that place. It's not at all uncommon in CEO transitions.

DJ: Sure

RG: That person will say but he is a damn good guy and he was interviewed by five different people but it's the perception that you left that you filled it up with people from there from a particular bank or a particular company in that field. Some CEOs have the attitude that now that I am the CEO, I can tell everybody what to do; I am the boss. Well, nobody in the world, nobody in the world is without a boss. Sometimes even a Prime Minister finds he has a boss in the form of a Party Chief, every husband knows he's got a boss, you know, I mean, we are all accountable to somebody and I think if you go in with that degree of humility, you have got a very good chance of making the transition.

DJ: Moving on Gopal in the book there's a line where you say that directors seek effective solutions while CEOs look for efficient outcomes. Say more here, I was wondering if it's linked to the principal agency problem that we talk about in terms of, you know, who owns the business and who runs the business. I liked the distinction you made between effectiveness and efficiency. How does that play out in the context of a CEO coming in?

RG: What you mentioned about the principal agent is probably one vector. You know, this is like music, it has multiple layers and if you are a discriminating person, you can feel the layers, So, yours is one such layer, I am not disputing it, it is an obvious one which you have picked up, but I have something different in mind. I have tried this very often in Tata management training centres and other places where I might have given a talk in the past. I will ask the question do you think a top leader must be more focused on effective or efficiency and many of the people think they are the same thing, many of the people think what's the difference. Then a shootout happens, conversational shootout where they say that at the very least you must be efficient, if you are not efficient where the question of being effective is? And then this sort of deteriorates into semantics between efficiency and effectiveness. So, in order to get a more clear decision on this you started using a metaphor which I have alluded to in one of my books. If I put a pot of honey and ask a bee, if I could speak to the bee, to get to the pot of honey, he goes round and round in circles before he alights on the honey. If I ask a human being he will just get up, turn his head and walk straight. The human being is efficient. The bee is effective. Now it's to do with the anatomy of the bee and I don't want to get into that discussion in the interest of time, but the anatomy of the bee doesn't allow him to be efficient and therefore he has to go round and round in circles before he alights on the honey which he desperately wants as much as the human being. Take a second example since most of us don't spend our time watching bees getting into pots of honey. How does water flow down a mountain's slope, never in a straight line unless you are sitting at Niagara Falls which is not a mountain slope anyway? It goes… it takes the contours of the mountain under gravity to find its way down. It is seeking to be effective. Efficiency demands that the water droplet fall straight down vertically right but it will hit obstacles and hurdles. Think of how blood flows in your veins? It's not in a straight line, it's in waves, and that's why when our ECG is taken if you switch on the monitor it will go [*making a sound*] if you heard your own ECG. So the law of nature is that things move in spirals and circles and not in straight lines and to me that became a very effective way of communicating to people there's a huge difference between effectiveness and efficiency and then I found very interesting ramifications because people the group would say, you know, that's why our company goes around in circles before taking the decision and it doesn't matter which company or what we are talking about, it never takes a decision in a straight line, it goes to that committee that committee that committee it goes around in circles, and then finally the capital proposal is approved and the acquisition is approved and that metaphor I am using to explain your… I mean, I… since I have written some book on this I can go on and on forever, I should not do that. But there's a huge difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Now coming back to the question of the board, the board is looking for effectiveness not at the expense of efficiency but if they have to, they would rather err on the side of effectiveness than efficiency. Like Covid is going on now, of course, I want efficiency, I want cost to be controlled but I want effectiveness, I don't want dead bodies lying all over the factory or the head office building.

DJ: And what sorts of things would you put in effectiveness when you say effectiveness just for us to grasp the nuance here?

RG: Effectiveness means adjusting your actions to the topography of the land in which you are operating and efficiency means bore a tunnel through and get and do it. So that's why mountain slopes roads go round but you can't bore a hole through, I mean, it would cost you probably a lot more money and it's probably more unstable. But let me give you one… you know metaphors always help because it opens our mind. When I was young Hindi was made compulsory and it was a nightmare for me because I had to learn multiple languages apart from speaking one at home multiple languages and you know the South erupted, that's a well-known story. Now, there was a guy called Purushottam Das Tandon who was the MP, who was a huge Hindi chauvinist and he was the guy who was pushing Pandit Nehru. Pandit Nehru gave us 15 years' time. That is an effective measure, it sort of… the conflagration was put down and during those 15 years metaphorically he called Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar and said, *"yaar, hindi picture chalao"* and Hindi has spread over the country. Today if you go to Tamil Nadu no auto rickshaw driver will object if you speak in Tamil but when I was young and if you spoke in Hindi, he would reply to you in English or not reply at all. I was very, very interested, I went to a small place called Thruthuraipoondi, most people can't even pronounce it and they were watching Kaun Banega Crorepati and I said to him in Tamil, I said, you know, do you understand what's going on, this is Amitabh Bachchan? They said to me back in Tamil very rolling, rolling Tamil, "sahab, when 1 crore is involved, how does it matter whether it is in Tamil or in Hindi? Now you see the difference between effectiveness and efficiency.

DJ: Got it. Just moving to a different theme Gopal, you talk about the notion of a CEO having the right mental model with the board and you say that the CEO needs to treat the directors as your senior friends. Say more here. I found that quite nuanced. What do you mean by the mental model here?

RG: You know a board has different kinds of people on it. Some will irritate you… and I have been a CEO and I have also been a board member so I have seen both sides as it were and for many years not for just one or two years. When I was a CEO, I said my mindset unexpressed of course what do these founders know about my business which I don't know. I would be respectful to somebody who was 10 years older than me or more senior to me hierarchically. I might have been dismissive about somebody who was closer to me, I didn't see them as people who would add value until later in my CEO-ship I said, hey, you know, there are so many dimensions here, I should listen to these guys. And I started to change my method, when I first became a CEO, I took that attitude. It happens to every CEO. He sees the board as an unnecessary bunch of old uncles who are paid to do nothing in particular and get in his way. Now if he changes that toggle switch in his head and thinks of them as friends, I use the word senior friends, I don't mean in terms of age, some of them may be age, some of them may be experienced, some of them may be in wisdom, they may be are lawyers or accountants, it doesn't matter and that he could go and chat with them then he would get a different outcome. It becomes a bit like who is the CEOs mentor? He doesn't have one, nobody in his organization is going to tell him and his wife can tell him, that's where the Clementine Mirror comes which I have also referred to in one of my books, but assuming he doesn't discuss his board meetings with his wife every evening and assuming she's not greatly interested he needs a mentor, a person who can pull him down a few pegs or push him up a few pegs and a board member may be able to do that, it's not guaranteed. But if you don't even keep the window open and keep them as your circle of friends and not say no to them there's a chance that one friend or the other will tell you think about it. And therefore, I think CEOs hopelessly fail, hopelessly fail and I have done so myself by the way in my time not all the time, but for the first few years of becoming a CEO in regarding their board as potential founts of another opinion. They are like the walls of a cliff; you are shouting in the cliff in the mountain side, you need some cliffs to reflect back signals to you. If you don't use those cliffs you've got to be lost in the mountain.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I like the metaphor of cliffs reflecting signals back to you. However, the point to mention here is that sometimes Board members are a little far removed from the situation on the ground and in my work with transitioning leaders; I observe that if the leader is not settling in well, the organization often goes silent. And when you don't have a critical mass of relationships, it can be extremely difficult to decode silence on your own. That's why I think it is critical for leaders to think about architecting fit for purpose feedback loops that can keep reflecting the signals. And sometimes, it is hard to extract real data through org processes given the biases and conflicting agendas. As a Coach working with the leader in transition, my first step is to build trust with some of the key stakeholders early in the journey so that I am able to get closer to the real signal so that I can help the leader with that input. Earlier in the podcast, I had spoken to Michael Watkins (MW) (Prof at IMD and Author of First 90 days – a great resource for transition acceleration). He speaks about the criticality of fit for purpose feedback loops)

MW: *"Just to start with a basic premise that you know in general organization do a poor job of providing feedback to leaders in transitions. Especially when they are broader from the inside and why is that because there is some sort of sense they have to get their feet you know that give us a chance you know or a reluctance on part of direct report to kind of give upward feedback or on the case of the board the board that just may not see you know what's going on and so I'm a huge believer in providing structured feedback after pick a number 90 to 120 days certainly no longer then that because that provides some discipline in the sense of giving some serious structured guidance to the new leader upon which they can act before things have gone to a… There is very serious things that are going on and so you know you can the leader do that themselves absolutely should be for sure better thing it's often better done by having a couch who can out and conduct those stake holders interviews and by process basically … I do an industrial stake holder interviews and then after 60 and 90 days I go back meet the same people right so I have got a little bit if the relationship with them you know I can just makes it easier to kind of collect the sort of real feedback about how this person is doing."*

DJ: Getting this piece right can be critical and can be the difference between a hairline crack being corrected and turning into a full blown fracture.

If you find the podcast purposeful, do take a moment to rate and review on Apple Podcasts or any other platform where you consume this content. This simple act from you could make a big difference as this helps other listeners discover this podcast given the tsunami of content that is out there. Do also consider paying it forward to Antarang Foundation, a not for profit I work with and support. To know more, please visit the Pay it Forward section at playtopotential.com. Let's now return to the conversation with R Gopalakrishnan.

DJ: Let's talk about the Clementine Mirror since you mentioned it, I found that interesting as well. You talk about how leaders can take advantage of their spouses who sometimes can sort of give them the harsh truth. So, if I could dig a little bit more there what's the insight there Gopal?

RG: You know we say the CEOs job is very lonely and all that stuff, it acts only as you choose to make it, if you want to be a hermit of arrogance then you can be so. But actually there are lots of resources around you and you need those resources because your brain is damaged as I have said in my book in Crash, power damages your brain and to repair the damage it's like if I hurt my shoulder playing tennis then physiotherapy helps to restore it if not surgery. In the same way if I have got power there is nothing wrong with it, if I exercise power there is nothing wrong with it, but I must understand that it will produce some distortion in my brain and my thinking process and I need physiotherapy for it, this is called brainotherapy. A spouse is one such source; it is not the only source. So, I have used Clementine because she happens to be the wife of Winston Churchill. It could be your wife, it could be a very trusted colleague, it could be a person whom you superseded but who is old friend for 30 years, it could be a board member, it could be anybody else. You have to be receptive to it. The Clementine story itself I don't know if you want me to narrate very briefly.

DJ: It's a good time to maybe briefly talk about it.

RG: Well, you know, I was very struck, when I go to London… when I used to go to London I would often visit museums and so on, I went to the Imperial War Museum in the bunker room near St. James Park, Regent's Park and I found a letter there, framed and put up on the wall and when I peered at it closely, it was handwritten by his wife, Winston Churchill's wife Clementine to him and it read something like "My dear darling Winnie, you are a wonderful man, the nation needs you now, it's dated 1941 or 42. But the other day I heard people saying that you are now becoming irascible and impossible and they are not able to talk to you. My darling Winnie, you know, I love you so much; I would not want anything better for you or for this nation than success in the war. Why don't you mend your ways a bit, your… and it had all… it was a bit torn up and then put together again and the story behind it I learned later was that she wrote this letter, he came so tired that evening that she said no, no, I can't hurt him further, she tore it up. Next morning she said if I don't tell him who the hell is going to tell him and she put the letter together and that's what is saved and kept there and then of course I have got the actual words which I have mentioned and reproduced in the book. But this is what happens, I don't know how many times my wife has told me what a prick I was in a particular interaction. She says I don't understand what subject you were discussing, I am not interested in because that's not my field but the way you spoke to this guy was wrong and when I reflect on it very often even in a marriage the spouse tells the other person, I keep saying wife but it could be the other way around so I rather use the word spouse, it's not what you told me that I object to but how you told me. Show me a married person who hasn't been through that discussion. So how you do things matters a lot and this is where the Clementine Mirror came in. It is not that Winston Churchill was wrong, it is not that he took the wrong decision, it is not that… but the way he came to his right decision was wrong. Clementine Mirror is what optical mirror does to your face; it shows you how many pimples you have got on your face, especially if it is concave. A Clementine Mirror is nothing but a concave psychological mirror, which provides the mirror doesn't matter.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Earlier in the podcast, I was speaking with Tasha Eurich (TE), an Organizational Psychologist who has been studying the phenomenon of self-awareness for several years now. She calls Self-awareness the Meta skill of the 21st century and as part of her research, has profiled a few people whom she calls self-awareness unicorns. People that started from a not-so-great place when it came to their self-awareness but ended up doing a lot of work on themselves over the years to really understand themselves.

TE: *"Our unicorns were able to get feedback and say this is really different then the way I see myself and that's ok that doesn't mean I am wrong and they are right and vice versa it just means that there are different ways of seeing and those different ways are valid and that's what it comes to the prism metaphor so most people thing about self-awareness is something you know the simple would be I look in the mirror I see my reflection and that is who I am but it's a lot more complicated and everyone probably remembers from science class when they were young that when you shine a white light through the prison on one end on the other end it comes out as a beautiful rainbow and the way I like to think about self-awareness is you know it's every single reflection or every single light that goes through you get a richer, fuller picture of who you are so every day to point that you get whether it's your own whether it's your spouse, whether it's your co-worker, your employees, your boss each of those are valid and helpful"*

DJ: Building on what RG says, whether you see it as a concave psychological mirror or as a prism, there is a lot of data to be gathered from the loving critics around you. People that care about you and can be candid with you. In the Coaching work I do, I find it really helpful to speak to the spouse and a couple of close friends of the leader who know them from childhood. At senior levels, whether I am helping solve how to grow or where to go, it is really helpful to understand what energizes the person, when is he or she in flow, and what demotivates the person. I tell people that if they need to get to know me, a 30 min chat with my wife is likely to be more insightful than 10 reference conversations on me from my past colleagues. Not tapping into the Clementine mirror is a huge missed opportunity. Let's go back to R Gopalakrishnan now.

DJ: Understood. And the other point you talk about in the book Gopal is leaders having a certain level of porosity to co-create a good outcome. I found that phrase quite interesting as well. Talk to us a little bit about what you mean by porosity and maybe if there are a couple of examples just to embellish the point?

RG: You know, when you get into leadership position I talked of brain damage, one of the things that it does to you is to give the feeling that you have the answers to all the questions and answers to some things where people don't even have questions. You get into that sort of mindset and so you have decided on a particular course of action, this acquisition should happen or this capital expenditure should occur and you are merely selling it to people. You are like a salesman who has taken a soap made in the factory and you are just determined that he should buy that soap. That's a wrong attitude. In some cases it is fine but in many cases that's wrong because co-creation means I take and show him that I can make this type of soap, I can make that type of soap, you know we do market research in consumer business to find out do you want a freshness soap or do you want a beauty soap or do you want a skin softening soap. He said, oh! All these things are possible, I would rather have a bit of that and a bit of that and you come back and co-create the soap and decisions in the CEO or in the board room have to be often co-created. If there's a crisis obviously I am not asking for you to do, you still try to build the elements of co-creation and when I use the word porosity if he has made up his mind and he is merely selling it, very often CEO say, I have to sell this idea to other people, please understand if you have reached a stage where you have to sell, if it is the odd idea yes, I understand, but if your permanent mode of operation is that you made that decision and you are just selling it to people then you are going to have a bad market. That's what I meant by porosity.

DJ: Very interesting. Sort of make interactions a two way exchange and not just a sales process, right?

RG: Yes, you know, it is like an automaker would make a prototype or a model and then the model will be shaped, he will put it into a auto show and people would make comments, he will increase the flares a bit, he will bring down the hood a bit, increase the headlights. If you can't do that as a CEO then I think you have got a problem.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my coaching work, I find that this piece is often a derailer for a lot of Type A leaders who are often outstanding in problem solving. It is like transitioning from unlocking the power of your CPU to leveraging the potential of cloud computing. They require very different approaches. While the education system we go through helps build our CPU, it doesn't tell us how we unlock the power of cloud computing of all the wisdom around us. The only piece I would add to what RG says is that when you come across with the right level of porosity, not only do you get to a better answer or a solution, you also end up building better relationships with the people around you, which sets up a virtuous cycle for the future.

One of my earlier guests Jennifer Garvey Berger (JGR) speaks about the notion of listening to fix or listening to win rather than listening to learn as being a potential trap, especially when we lead in a complex world.

JGR: *"I have us look for what certainty feels like and begin to notice that as separate from a cognitive process like what does it feel like when you feel certain. You can often notice some things your body does like I move forward in my seat, I start thinking ahead to how I am going to defeat the disagreement or the perspectives of others, like I have a sense of righteousness in me. Now when I notice those things I am able to say oh wait, wait, wait, this is an emotion, this is closing me down to new possibilities, new data, and I could totally be wrong here. So asking myself what is it that I am really believing right now, not what's true but what I believe is true and then how could I be wrong about this allows me to listen in a new way not to defeat the other person, not to listen to win or listen to fix their ideas, but to listen to learn from them to hold my mind open as a practice, as an intention or practice as opposed to just going with this emotion that bowls over my capacity to learn."*

DJ: Are we listening with adequate porosity in our minds is something worth thinking about as we go about our lives, more so when we are transitioning into a new context. Now, back to the conversation with R Gopalakrishnan.

DJ: Moving to a different theme Gopal. I was curious when we briefly spoke about getting a leader from a different industry based on intrinsic potential and characteristics. I want to sort of dig there a little bit more because there the organization often is not privy to some of the hidden qualities that the hiring panel is betting on right and the leader sometimes get measured on traditional characteristics like how much does he know my industry, how much does he know my customers and so on and so forth. In those situations when leaders transition from context A to context B to a very different industry or space, what have you seen in getting those principles in getting those transitions right?

RG: As I said earlier you have to go in with a capital H. Like for example, when I joined Tata's, there was not a single industry which I was familiar with, power generation, making trucks and motor cars, creating telephony networks, I mean these were the boards that I served on, I was not familiar with these, I was a little more comfortable with things like making chemicals and pesticides, because they had a similarity to a consumer goods business like Hindustan Lever. And I remember I used to go and spend my Saturdays or whichever is a holiday there like a student and I still have my diaries of the notes I took. I would go down and sit with front facing people trying to learn and always walking away saying I will never, never in this lifetime know as much as these guys because they have spent the last 20 years doing this. And of course, one of the things that every leader should do is to go and talk to people less powerful than himself, it helps you to be humble. It helped me a great deal to be humble when I went to Trombay Power Station or to Pune factory of Tata Motors to find so many people who were much junior to me in the hierarchy, or who knew infinitely more than I about that particular subject. And if you can go in with that attitude the guy also recognizes that of course I don't seem to know everything, he shares more willingly, just like you would share your knowledge with somebody who is interested. And I think in a leadership transition where you do not have that domain knowledge this is the most important lesson that I learnt. It promotes capital H, which you have to adopt after shedding capital E for ego from your last job. So, it is like you play Ravana in this scene, in the next scene you have to play Rama. So, you don't change your mindset, you are not going to be able to pull off both, you know.

DJ: Understood. I am smiling because given the lockdown our family with kids are catching up on the old Ramanand Sagar's re-run of Ramayana that we grew up watching on Doordarshan but I hear you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It is worth understanding the key reason the organization has brought you on board. Ravi Venkatesan (RV) speaks about his transition to heading Microsoft in India after several years in Cummins.

RV: *"you have got to figure out what really matters, so in Microsoft, that was a clear why the company had hired me because we were becoming irrelevant in country if billion people, and so they wanted not a technology guy or at least Bill and Steve wanted somebody who understood India, so within six months I said in order to become relevant this is what it takes and here is a set of things we ought to be doing, and it was plausible I don't think it was rocket science or brilliant and they said great now go do it, where is your team? And by the way here is the billion dollars of investment go make it happen and the team in India said Wow, holy cow, this guy has done a really amazing job, getting us all this investment, they used to beg for every head count and suddenly we had an abundance of riches"*

DJ: Having the clarity around the axis of value add can be immensely clarifying when you are being brought into a new space. It gives you focus in terms of what you need to do to move the needle in terms of outcomes and winning trust in the system.

Let's get back to the last piece of the conversation with RG where he speaks about the leaders that inspire him, the books that have left a mark on him and more.

DJ: Lovely Gopal, I think it has been a very insightful conversation. If you will, I would like to wrap up with a few rapid-fire questions just to get top-of-mind responses to some of these questions?

RG: Right.

DJ: Three books that have left a profound influence on you?

RG: Now you are getting me into… I think if I have to think of three books I was very, very influenced by Discovery of India by Nehru because it showed me that India is a colloidal society, a wonderfully different society from any in the world. I was very influenced by a more recent book called Sapiens by Yuval Noah Harari to show that we are all small microcosms in a long series of evolutions, don't take yourself too seriously. And in a more practical down-to-earth level I read Peter Drucker, Practice of Management, an old book, must be 60-70 years old but it had a deep impact on me on the importance of management. Probably it is a combination of these three that I would say has had… that's what I can remember.

DJ: And leaders you look up to for inspiration? Three leaders who in your mind...

RG: You know I think each person requires two types of leaders, inspiring leaders and instructional leaders. So, I am going to break my answer into two. Inspiring leaders are people you don't know but who we read about, books are written, tomes are written. So, you will find a usual list of suspects if I may use that uncomplimentary word. For me they are Lincoln, Gandhi and Mandela but I have been far more influenced by instructional leaders, people from whom I learnt practical for little things and I did not learn any small practical things from Lincoln, Gandhi and Mandela. If you had asked me to give a speech, I will quote them. If you ask me to say what you did when you faced this problem, I would think of three different people. One was my father and for many of us that's a common feature that these are simple practical things unquotable but highly doable. I had two bosses, one was called Vipin Shah, he is now 88, and Ashok Ganguly who is now 85, who also had a very instructional influence on me at an appropriate time. So those are the three I would quote.

DJ: And if you had to distil the two three core principles with which you have led your life that have sort of endured I am sure there are several but if you had to sort of really codify two or three that are dearest to you, which have helped you in your journey…

RG: You know, my career has been as an executive, an operating executive and so the ones that come to my mind when I hear you are remember your life is 75% doing and 25% thinking. This is not disrespect to intellect but with great respect for kinetic energy rather than potential energy, okay. So, 75-25 is a very good thing. If you are spending your time the other way around you might as well be in the planning commission or a Secretary to Government of India. I am not knocking them on the head; I am just merely saying that that's taking. The second is always being conscious of your vulnerability as a leader, not your power. If you could show that you are vulnerable, people will reach out to you. If you demonstrate that you are not vulnerable and you are a blue-eye, square-jawed, clear-headed reincarnation of Jack Welch then you have got a problem. And the third and the last lesson I would say is you are bound to cause unintentional hurt to other people, admit it, don't hesitate to say sorry. I have not practiced all these three by the way, I should not give you the impression that I am some paragon of… but by not practicing them that have I learnt the lessons that I am responding to you.

DJ: On that note Gopal a real delight talking to you on the Play to Potential podcast. Thank you so much for making the time on a Sunday morning.

RG: Thank you very much. I wish you good luck and now back to families both yourself and myself.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope that you found this conversation purposeful.

Three things struck me in this conversation.

1) First - The notion of refire versus retire and how we can use Flow as a basis for making directional choices when we get senior. If this topic is of interest, you might like the theme "Reinventing Self" relevant as we discuss leaders from different walks of life on how they thoughtfully changed direction mid-stream

2) Second is the distinction Gopal makes between speed car racing and rock climbing. It is a simple but a powerful metaphor to make the point. The muscles you need to build, the nature of feedback you seek, the signals you watch out for and so on are so different in one versus the other; If this is of interest, you might like to tune into my conversation with Michael Watkins of IMD who is the author of First 90 days. You might also like the theme "Settling into a new context" where different leaders across backgrounds speak about how they settled into a new context. This includes insights from leaders like Vinita Bali who has worked across 6 countries in 5 continents, Mahatma Gandhi who transitioned from South Africa to India to lead the freedom movement and Suresh Narayanan – who was parachuted in to deal with Nestle's Maggi crisis. Just go to the Curated Playlists section and look for the theme "Settling into a new context"

3) Thirdly and Finally, I really liked the point Gopal makes about the Clementine mirror. I believe that we all lead one life and gathering data only on the work front is highly suboptimal when we are trying to build a picture for a leader. I ask the people I work with "how 360 is your 360". Not tapping into the insights that your spouse has, some of your friends and mentors have on you is a lost opportunity. I make it a point to speak to some family members and friends during the Coaching and Transition Advisory work I do. If you like to know more about building greater self-awareness, you might like my conversation with Tasha Eurich, a researcher on the topic of Self-awareness. She speaks about how internal and external awareness can sometimes be orthogonal.

Thank you for listening. As you know, quite a bit of work goes into researching, producing and publishing a conversation. We also try and connect the dots across the various conversations as much as we can. Hope you find that of value. If you find the podcast of value, I would request two things for you to consider.

- First - Do Rate and Review the Show on Apple Podcast. Given the tsunami of content out there, it will help other listeners discover this podcast and seek value from it. A small action by you could make a big difference to someone else

- Second – Do consider paying it forward to Antarang Foundation, a not for profit that I work with closely. They work with children from less privileged backgrounds play to potential by imparting life skills, giving them career guidance and connecting them to the world of formal employment. We all are seeing what is happening around the world due to economic inequity. No easy answers but one piece we need to solve as a society is to ensure that the young adults are productively engaged in a vocation that they are passionate about. Antarang Foundation is all about making that happen

Thank you and look forward to having you at a subsequent conversation at the podcast. For more, do check out the Podcast archives which include Curated Playlists painstakingly curated by theme for easy reference and consumption, 500+ nuggets and close to 60+ guests at playtopotential.com. To know more about my Coaching and Transition Advisory work, please visit the "About the host" section at Playtopotential.com. Bye now.

End of transcription

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Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: Listening intently during Transitions.

Nugget from Michael Watkins that is referenced: Fit for purpose feedback loop.

Nugget from Tasha Eurich that is referenced: Feedback as a prism vs. a mirror.

Nugget from Jennifer Garvey Berger that is referenced: Trap 2 - Feeling right doesn't mean it is right.

Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: Listening intently during Transitions.

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Reinventing self: "How do I stay relevant" is a question that all of us have to grapple with as we go through our respective journeys. Careers aren't linear any more. Some of the leaders talk about how they managed to pivot during their journeys and significantly change trajectories. You can access the playlist here.

Pursuing your passion: "Follow your heart" is an advice that is commonly doled out to individuals that are trying to make career choices. However, the reality is little more nuanced. People who have followed their heart talk about how they have weaved it into their lives or in some cases, how they have been pragmatic about taking the plunge. You can access the playlist here.

Navigational principles: Leaders discuss their personal frameworks around how they made choices around pivotal moments in their lives. They articulate the set of criteria we should consider having when we are at a fork on the road and have to pick between disparate options. Arguably one of the most critical skills of the future as we navigate a world of abundance. You can access the playlist here.

Spotting potential: As we move towards a world where intrinsic capabilities count for more and more, how we spot diamonds in the rough is a capability that will begin to matter more and more. This is as relevant for hiring as for investing. Leaders across disciplines share their insights on how they look for raw potential that can then be honed. You can access the playlist here.

Judgment: Judgment is a key trait that differentiates the great leaders from the average ones. How do you make decisions and exercise choices in a world full of options and grey areas with multiple stakeholders around you. In addition, the playlist has nuggets that discuss how one creates a climate for the people around you to exercise good judgment. You can access the playlist here.

Mentorship: As we go through our journeys, it is critical to learn from mentors who can guide us, inspire us and push us towards our potential. Leaders share how they have thought about the notion of a Personal Board of Advisors and have benefited from it through their journey. You can access the playlist here.

Listening: When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new". This is a quote by Dalai Lama. Several leaders talk about their experiences with listening and how they have grown with it. More specifically, leaders also reflect on the criticality of listening when transitioning into a new context. You can access the playlist here.

Settling into a new context: Figuring out "where to go" is only a part of the challenge for leaders in transition. How you land effectively in a new context is as critical. Hair line cracks often become full blown fractures if not attended to carefully. Leaders talk about some key lessons Individuals could bear in mind as they transition across contexts (Army to Business world, US to India, MNC to Family Business, Consulting to Industry/Investing etc.) You can access the playlist here.

Context based leadership: You can access the playlist here.

Self-awareness: Insights around what it takes to build a better understanding of self. This includes perspectives around how we can deepen our picture of ourselves through a combination of inner work, mindfulness practices and by gathering meaningful feedback from the world around us. You can access the playlist here.

Building trust: Becoming a Trusted Advisor is often the Holy Grail for a lot of Business Advisors. This issue is as relevant for businesses as they think about how their consumers interact with their brand. Leaders talk about what it takes to build trust with an individual. You can access the playlist here.

Leadership Transitions: Perspectives around moving from one role from another especially while moving from Functional Leadership to General Management; Leaders also talk about how they thought about inter-generational transition as business owners. You can access the playlist here.

Inflection points: Inflection points are when the notion of "what got you here won't get you there" hold. Whether it is a company moving from a start-up to a scale-up or a leader moving from a CXO to a CEO role, these passages of play have to be navigated carefully as there is a high risk of derailment. You can access the playlist here.

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R Gopalakrishnan - Nuggets

- 59.00 R Gopalakrishnan - The Full Conversation
- 59.01 R Gopalakrishnan - Running your career like a marathon
- 59.02 R Gopalakrishnan - Making robust hiring decisions
- 59.03 R Gopalakrishnan - Settling in - Rock climbing versus Running
- 59.04 R Gopalakrishnan - Discerning the pecking order of stakeholders
- 59.05 R Gopalakrishnan - Solving for efficiency versus effectiveness
- 59.06 R Gopalakrishnan - Having the right relationship with the Board

- 59.07 R Gopalakrishnan - "Clementine Mirror" - the role of spouses
- 59.08 R Gopalakrishnan - Bringing in adequate porosity
- 59.09 R Gopalakrishnan - Getting cross-industry transitions right

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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