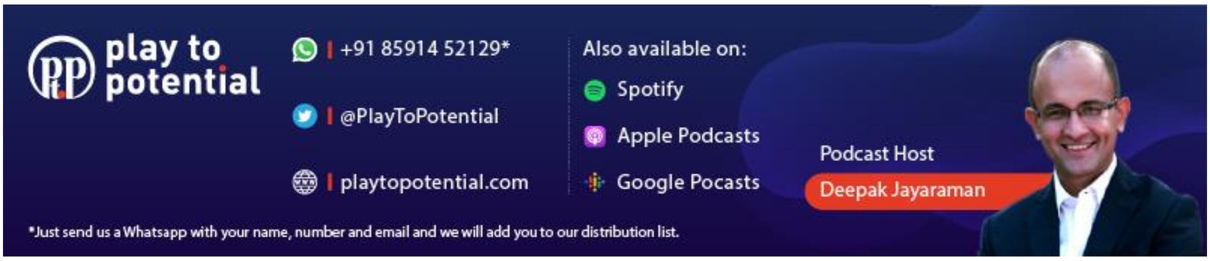

Guest

Sukhinder Singh Cassidy is one of Google's and Silicon Valley's most respected leaders. She has worked at various tech and media companies including Google, Amazon, NewsCorp, Yodle and Polyvore. At one stage she was heading Latin America and Asia Pacific in Google in 2008. She is credited with building Google's presence across 103 countries in LATAM and APAC.

She has recently authored the book – Choosing Possibility where she speaks about embracing micro-risks as a process to unlock growth and professional fulfilment. Some of the themes we spoke about included the notion of the myth of a single choice, Embracing risk as a discovering process, her experiences with her Coach David Lesser with whom she engaged for over a decade, her take on Bill Campbell. She also shares candidly what went wrong when she transitioned from Google to Accel to Polyvore as an external CEO. She speaks about some of the challenges in getting senior leadership transitions right in a Scale up. She also spoke about the notion of stepping into white spaces and how we should embrace who we are and marry it with market opportunity tail winds to build a successful career.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 82nd conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman. This podcast is a labour of love for the long term where I have conversations with leading practitioners, thinkers, authors, artists, sportsmen and other leading professionals to decode insights around leadership, transitions and careers.

In addition to curating this podcast, I work with leaders with a growth mindset as a Trusted Sounding Board helping them and organizations transform and play to their unique potential. To know more about what is in the podcast archives and the advisory work I do, you could just visit www.playtopotential.com. That is www.playtopotential.com

The guest at the podcast this time is Sukhinder Singh Cassidy. She is one of Google's and Silicon Valley's most respected leaders. She has worked at various tech and media companies including Google, Amazon, NewsCorp, Yodle and Polyvore. At one stage she was heading LATAM and APAC in Google in 2008. She is credited with building Google's presence across 103 countries in Latin America and Asia Pacific.

She has recently authored the book – Choosing Possibility where she speaks about embracing micro-risks as a process to unlock growth and professional fulfilment. Some of the themes we spoke about included the notion of the myth of a single choice, Embracing risk as a discovering process, her experiences with her Coach David Lessor with whom she engaged for over a decade, her take on Bill Campbell of The Trillion Dollar Coach. She also shares candidly what went wrong when she transitioned from Google to Accel to Polyvore as an external CEO. She speaks about some of the challenges in getting senior leadership transitions right in a Scale up. She also spoke about the notion of stepping into white spaces and how we should embrace who we are and marry it with market opportunity tail winds to build a successful career.

Without further ado, let’s dive into my conversation with Sukhinder Singh Cassidy.

Transcription

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

Sukhinder Singh Cassidy (SC): Thank you so much for having me.

DJ: Maybe just to kick things off, would love to know why did you write this book, Choose Possibility and more specifically, of the various titles you considered, how did you pick this one?

SC: Well, let me start with how and why I wrote the book. I wrote the book because I think that when you spend your career at a place like Silicon Valley, there is all sorts of myths that people put upon this place that this place exacerbates. One is how entrepreneurial and risk-taking people must be. And I believe this perception that we think the people are born risky, born as risk takers, they make one mighty choice that looks so well-executed and so well-orchestrated that we think that this lucky and really perfect choice must be a reason for their outside success. And when you are from within the place, you kind of see what a mess things can be and how things can look so perfectly orchestrated from outside and people can presume this sort of hero's journey that I talk about in the book and from the inside out, it is just not that way. And so I wanted to write the book because I think that risk taking is really accessible to most people and that making it accessible is a worthwhile endeavor. And so that is why I wrote the book.

DJ: Got it. And picking up from there Sukhinder, you talk about the myth of the single choice and you actually say that, good careers are actually a result of a number of micro choices and smart risks people take. Just talk to us a little bit maybe in the context of your journey, if you could give us a sense of what do you mean by these micro risks.

SC: Sure. Well, I think the point in the book is that from outside and again and from the media, we have this idea of the hero's journey. And even our own memory sometimes fails us that what we extract from other people’s journey and remember our own is often like the single big choice, which maybe in hindsight, may be it is easier to identify one choice that was disproportionately important or what have you. But the problem is that it is through abstraction or through hindsight that you may be able to deduce or imagine one choice. The problem is going forward through your life, it is about making choices and it is the practice of continually choosing, like being in a feedback loop with yourself essentially throughout your career, not with the product, not with the company but with as yourself. And that often unlocks each next possibility. It is the choosing and choosing and choosing again. And some of these choices are smaller, some of them are bigger. And so while everybody else may remember the one, the reality is it was not the one, it was several and the several was the 10 and the 10 was the 20. And so it is not about the size of one single risk, it is about the frequency of risk-taking and the commitment to a journey of continuously choosing, including choosing through failure. We think that the failure happens and we stop. Well, actually, it does not. What happens is people keep choosing and then they reach their next cycle of growth. And obviously, my career is probably part of where I took inspiration from. I am not an academic. I am a practitioner in business.

In my career, I counted 23 different choices to become the CEO of a large multibillion dollar company. And some of them were micro with outsized returns, some of them were macro that created large failures and some were macro choices that resulted in almost nothing at all, certainly not be impact I expected. So, for me, it was the practice of continuing to choose and some was often with unexpected results.

DJ: And maybe if I could pick up from there. You spoke about 23 choices if you maybe forced ranked them in the decreasing order of what people are likely to miss, you know, some choices are obvious, you go to B school, that is an obvious choice, you need to decide. But I am sure there is a realm of, in the book when I read it, there were a bunch of things that probably is not even in people's awareness that it is a choice, could you talk a little bit about those vital few which are worth bringing back to warrant our awareness?

SC: Sure and I am happy to talk about two or three or four from the book that kind of highlight, what illustrate this point. One unobvious choice was I left Google at the pinnacle of my career to become the CEO of a startup that was, you know, and at the time I was running Asia Pacific and Latin America for Google, it was a multibillion dollar business, I was certainly on track to be a Fortune 50 or 100 CEO if I wanted that path. And what I really wanted to do was to prove I could build and scale another company and be the CEO then, and I wanted to go to a new area of innovation in e-commerce. And so I walked away from a very large job to become the CEO of a startup. And that choice failed when measured by the next six months. And I say this to people and like six months later, I was in a battle with the founder and he wanted the company back and he won. I mean he said to Board I want to be CEO again and the Board was pretty quick to oust me in favor of him despite the fact that my resume, my accomplishments, all of that was quite large. So if you measure that choice 10 years later, I pivoted in e-commerce, I became a CEO, I thought that would be the company I would be running as a multibillion dollar company and ended up with the choice. The number of choices I had to make subsequently continued to double down on this idea of being in e-commerce. I decided to start another company in e-commerce and I became an investor, I became a Board member in e-commerce, I just doubled down on that thesis. I mean I loved the last 10 years of my life as being in charge. And I ultimately ended up running Stub Hub, which was another multibillion dollar e-commerce opportunity. But I just did not get there the way I thought. So that is one example. Another unobvious choice I moved to Silicon Valley in 1997. By the way, I did not think I was making the grandest of the choices. I thought I was making a choice to go in a place with really good weather that had good entrepreneurs. I did not know how to be an entrepreneur but I thought I wanted to be, I did not have an idea. And literally, I fell in love with the weather and the idea that there were people who were starting companies but I could not, by scale of imagination, have imagined how good the timing was of that choice relative to the growth of the internet, just where it was in its inflection point. So it gave me many many many opportunities to succeed and many to fail. But honestly, what do we call that term in the U.S., it is like shots on goal, like too many shots on goal, you can fail one and there would be another good shot on goal just right around the corner by virtue of putting yourself in the environment with tailwinds bigger than you imagined. So it was maybe an unobvious choice. I quit my job and I thought of making a micro choice, not a micro choice. I was like, there is not that big a risk, I was only responsible for myself. I had some money in the bank. I did not find a good job in California. I could always go home to my parents in Canada and live with them. This was a small risk but with outsized returns. That is an example in the opposite direction. Those are just a couple, I mean there are many more.

DJ: Another piece, if I may pick an example that stayed with me, I think very early on in your career, you talk about I think some bank, which says, maybe, we will consider you in the future and you take that as an opportunity rather than a rejection and you call them and then it turns into an internship or something like that.

SC: Oh yeah, that is the pretty, yes, it turned into my first job. I definitely was trying to become an investment banker on Wall Street and I failed it. I failed to get the job after many many interviews and almost a year of trying and I think what you are referencing is. They sent me a quasi-rejection letter. And Merrill Lynch, which did recruit in Canada but arguably one of the biggest investment banks in the world, I applied and they had said, if you are in New York, we will be happy to give you a 15-minute informational interview, which was a very polite rejection letter and my father was the one who said, hey, buy a train ticket and go, take them up on that offer. They might be rejecting me but I will still show up to say, I am actually going to be in New York, I will come and see you and I did. And that converted into a three-hour interview and that converted into an offer after a year of getting rejected through all the traditional processes. So yeah, yet another risk that may be that worked out in ways I did not imagine. But it was kind of continuing to choose possibility that led to that opportunity.

DJ: The other piece you talk about Sukhinder is you say that sometimes we think about taking risks only once we know for sure what we want to do, actually risk-taking is a way of seeing what makes sense, it is an opportunity to discover what we might like and where we are good at. Can you talk a little bit about risk as a discovery process?

SC: Sure, I think that the world has trained people to believe you need to have a perfect plan before you have 'the right to act,' which I think is somewhat ridiculous. It is sort of what people want to make a choice without having maximized their choices. It is almost like you think that risk-taking begins when you have to make a choice, I would say that is actually the riskiest move of all. You want to take risk to discover what your choices are and it is ironic because if you look at the, I think you did not go to a college in the United States and I did not either but when I watch the process of discovery, children taking United States to maximize their college choices, it is like the art of risk-taking. Yet no other time do they do that. They are like, they apply to Safety schools, they apply to the most prestigious schools, they apply for course X, they apply for course Y, they do it all in parallel, it is like beautiful but when it comes to any other major choice in our life, we are like, I do not have time to look, somebody just offered me this opportunity, should I say yes. And then we somehow reverse ourselves and we take these big risks like a one out of one risk. So I do not think risk-taking for discovery is one of the best sets of risk to take. You are just putting out feelers using little slots of your time and energy to even discover all the things that might be possible before you make one choice. So I think risk-taking is maximizing choices even before we choose which risk to take.

DJ: And you also talk about the notion of choice after a choice while making a decision, I found that phrase interesting. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by that and how that can help us make better decisions?

SC: Sure. Well in the book, I have this very basic formula that I have certainly had in my mind that I think, there is a simple way to think about whether or not we are going to get into action on a new choice. I call it FOMO over fear. People say what does that mean. I am like, well, when we visualize the positive, we have the fear of missing out on a new opportunity. That is often what is galvanizing us to take action towards a new choice. But failing in our way is our fear of failure. And so it is very clear, the size of your fear of failure is greater than the size of your FOMO. No matter how big your FOMO, if the fear is even bigger, you just won't act and if the reverse is true, you are likely to get into action. So most people think, well, I will just visualize the positive, I will just visualize the positive. For me, visualizing the positive alone is not that comfortable. For me, I like to pre-mortem and say, okay, how do I size appropriately the fear I have right now, so I can shrink it or actually quite frankly just put it in context. So I always say with any choice you are contemplating, think about the choices after the choice that fails. Just think about the failure state, pre-mortem it, not postmortem, pre-mortem it and say, okay, if I make these choices fail, what happens then. And if you have many choices after the choice, chances are it is not a big risk, like, you should size down your fear failure because if you can imagine the many choices and even say what would I do in all these worst case scenario, if many are available to you, it is probably a smaller size risk than you think. And for me, that not only helped me shrink in my head besides the risk to its actual size but it also gives me the comfort to act. Because once I know that I have thought through the failure state and I have four-five-six choices of what I could or should do or would be available to me, I actually feel some control over my ability to respond to any situation and then I actively feel less fear of failure. So that is what we call the choice after the choice, which is like look through the choice that you fear so much, look through to the failure state and ask yourself how many choices are available. And if the answer is a lot, that should give you the comfort you need to act.

DJ: It is interesting that even in the way you look at the worst-case scenario, it is not so much about the payoffs but it is about the pathways that it generates, so even there, we frame it as a lookout for possibility as a way of making a decision rather than focusing on the payoff.

SC: Yeah, I think so because unfortunately or fortunately, living in Silicon Valley and here, I do see that you do not know which choice is going to pay off. You can never take a 100% of the uncertainty out of any, what we can do is make educated guess. And of course, I make very educated guesses about risk but what we cannot do is know exactly which one is going to pay off. This is why thinking through the possibilities, even at the downside case, is something that gives me comfort.

DJ: Got it. The other theme we focus on this podcast Sukhinder is about how people make work choices and life choices. In one of the sections of the book, you speak about you, you use the term negotiations with your husband about having a third child while wanting to be a tech company CEO, asking a broader question how have you thought about some of your choices around work and your family life, especially around maternity, which I find to be a point of leakage in the pipeline of women rising to the top, so how have you thought about that at various points in time?

SC: Well, I think that maybe the way I thought about it that in hindsight, I realize it is different than a lot of women or other leaders that I did not necessarily see but more so women who actually, research shows, are more risk-averse, like there is research to support that, you know, that point. I guess I have never thought of it, things as binary and there, it has been my ability to get through. Does that make sense? So I have never thought it is all work, it is all home. If I make a choice for this, it is a choice against this. By the way, there is sacrifices all around and I would say someone is unhappy with me, so that is absolutely true. It was absolutely true, there is no balance. Somebody is always getting disappointed. My family is like you put so much energy into work, people at work are like you are going to your daughter's water polo game, like, I need more of you and I am like, well, there is only so much. So it is true that you get fairly used to the fact that you are always disappointing someone and that there is some guilt there. But that aside, I think the key for me has always been, do not presume something is impossible unless you first fully negotiate it, at home or at work. Because when women say it is not possible, and by the way, that does not mean you have to want it, like there are severe trade-offs you make. So I am not the person who say to women, you have to want it, this lifestyle, I know that is not what I am saying. What I am saying, if you want it, do not presume it is not possible until you negotiate to the nth degree what is possible. So get into the best possible state through negotiation, as opposed to saying, I opt out. Because when you opt out without having a conversation, you do not know what is possible. So you may or may not be familiar when I was at Google, I was, I got married late, so it is 34, not late in today's era but for an Indian woman late, but certainly, by the time I got married, I was senior at Google, but by the time I had, I was pregnant with my first child, which is 35, I was already very senior and I was joining APAC and LATAM. And I thought how can I possibly do this. But I really want to stay in this job, I am just getting started. So I went to Google and I said, I would like you to pay for my nanny and my daughter to travel with me around the world. This is how I stay in this job and to their credit, they said yes. They looked at the opportunity cost of losing me. By the way, not an ideal choice. My husband was left at home alone for ages but better than giving up my job, better than my daughter being at home without me and being a mother, it was like absent all the time. So he got the shortest end of the stick. We were all gone four weeks at a time, you know, two weeks at a time, I have to be empty because my daughter and I, and the nanny were gone**.** But at least we were together as the unit when she was a newborn. But I did not know that was possible, that was something I brainstormed at home and took to work and then the converse is also true. We talked about, like, later in my career, I wanted to be a tech CEO and my husband thought like how do we have time for their child and we spent a year talking about how to have a third child because I also said, you know, not having a third child would be one of the biggest regrets of my lifetime, like, I cannot imagine it, so let us just keep talking it through until we get to a compromise where it is possible. And then we architected the support we would need to make it possible.

DJ: Hmm. And actually building on that Sukhinder, I guess a prerequisite for that is some level of self-awareness about what we really want, sometimes as you go through these roles, what has been your approach to get to the bottom of what you really want?

SC: That is a tough one because sometimes what we want evolves as we go. So we think we know what we want and then, we end up in a situation in our, like, much happier than we thought and much unhappier than we thought. So like anyone else, I would say, I probably learned self-awareness of who I am earlier than what I want and what I want has evolved. And I think we know in self-awareness of who we are by asking for feedback and if not, like, you know, a lot of people do not get regular feedback in their jobs, like, literally training the people we know and saying like, you are my best friend, what do you think I am good at, like, where do you see me shine, if you do not know the answer, so I think that I had pounded into as an executive all the things that I am not great at and great at because I have had lots of reviews. So that kind of self-awareness is easily more gettable. But figuring out what is at the root of our desire, but yeah, that has been an evolution for me honestly. And I think it is just about talking it through and there is a saying in the book I really like from this person who runs partnership with Facebook. And we talked about, like, I discovered who I was on the way and so I think I am one of those people. So I do not say, I think I have had always known my level of ambition. I do not think I have always known exactly what would make me happy. But it is like anything, every time I went through an experience, I learned more about myself. So I think I maybe have spent more time on self-awareness with maybe who I am than what I want because what I want has kept evolving as I have learned from every experience. So maybe that is not a pat answer but that is the truth.

DJ: Got it. And you talk about your journey with David Lesser, your coach in the book and you talk about, I think, at some point, you say that you worked with him for a decade or more in your journey with him. As a practicing coach, I am curious about what a journey looked like for you without getting into the confidential…

SC: Yeah, the nitty-gritty, yeah.

DJ: What has been of disproportionate value to you? Sometimes you do a lot of things but one or two things stand out, so I would love your reflections on that.

SC: Sure. So first of all, I found David through YPO because as I ascended at Google and became a leader, I also found that I wanted to try the people I could talk to, that was the promise of YPO, you find similarly minded peers and you are in a discreet and confidential forum. First of all, I did my first learning that led me here is trying to make your spouse your work priest, like I am not a fan, maybe it is because I put so much on my own husband. And by the way, he is, you know, as you can tell, I would not have this career without having a very supportive spouse but supportive does not mean that they are meant to, like, we are meant to use our marriages to drain all the energy out of them by putting them through all our work anxieties. Like you just take energy from one sphere and you drain it. And so whenever I am obsessed with work, I have learned it, if I want to put that into my marriage you know, not a great two-way giving relationship. So what led me into YPO was like, look, how I not put this all upon myself and find a peer group to talk to. And inside of that, I learned that, while I loved YPO, it was taking a lot of time but I really liked the coach who was coaching our forum, David Lesser and I was like, can I just work with you directly, this seems a lot more efficient. And luckily, he said yes. So that is how I found him. And then to your point about what has been a disproportionate value, keep in mind, I went through multiple big transitions, the decision to leave Google, I told you I had a failed choice that did not work out with Polyvore, my first startup. The startup I went to after Google where I took a big risk and then obviously I evolved again when I became the CEO of StubHub. So the disproportionate value is the continuity. If you give up on having a coach, let us say in Year 2, they have not seen your cycles to reflect back to you. Number two, he has been with me through multiple management teams, is somebody I can bring in, you both have my history but can help new people get to know me and navigate me, help me navigate them, so I have actually used him even as somebody to get my 360 feedback from because my management teams know that I trust him. They know that they, you know, so they know that maybe if they want to give me feedback and they are too afraid to give it to me face-to-face, they know that I am providing them a conduit for somebody I trust who can hold their feedback and give it to me. So that history has a lot of value. It helps with pattern recognition. So I would say one of the biggest values is then, like, it is one of my longer standing relationships beside my marriage, and is somebody who can reflect back to me what I said five years ago what can stitch together my own feelings of myself with when I used him to get peer feedback or 360 feedback, other people's view of me and helped give me a holistic perspective. And I know and I think at the end of the day, this is the value of coaches. We know that, yes, we may be paying them but their job is to help us be our best selves with no skin in the game other than our success. No politics, it is just like a very peer relationship. And so I appreciate that, like I appreciate having somebody in my corner with whom I can be completely authentic, who has no other vested interest other than my success, and who I also trust to give me feedback, like I trust they have my best intention. So I think it is a conduit for us as leaders. I think that a great coach is a conduit for us to learn about ourselves, probe ourselves, challenge ourselves and that is why I like the history and tenure in that relationship that has had given me disproportionate value.

DJ: Got it and if I may stay with this Sukhinder, any rituals or any practices that you do with your coach, which has really stood out for you, which has been of significant value?

SC: Well, it is not like we, you know, sometimes you just listen to let me rant. I do not think we have particularly, like I do not think we always go to this ritual but there are few. David is actually very good at making you, I know it sounds hokey, but it is very true, making you talk to your inner self. Because as I said, David will like take all the parts of you and I think some of our rituals are always about like separating out the different identities I have and I really like that with David. So David knows when I am bringing out my inner risk manager when I was making choices literally, let us have a conversation with your inner risk manager. I was like, what are you talking about. He is like, no no, you are going to sit in this seat and talk to the part of yourself that is scared, that is the part of yourself that is ambitious and literally have a conversation with these two different identities, that is one example. Another is he knows that I was raised in a fairly religious family. So I was raised by two Sikh parents and I consider myself pretty religious and so I literally, like, there is a part of me that believes that work is soulful and purposeful and I believe that the way I am going to show up in the world and have an impact maybe through business and I fundamentally think those things are intertwined. They may not be for others but for me, that is what I saw my parents do, their purpose and their vocation were the same thing. So I can literally have a conversation with David is like, well, what would your father say, what would your, you know, like if you think about the spiritual side of you, what would it say, so I appreciate that he is somebody who can disaggregate my separate identities and let them talk to each other as I tried to make more choices. So that has been something pretty unique in our relationship and I appreciate it about him. There are other coaches who may not be the same way. But for me, trying to bring all of myself to everything I do and somebody who recognizes those different competing parts of myself has been a gift.

DJ: Lovely. And actually staying with the theme of coaching, you also talk about your conversation with Bill Campbell at some point and you speak to one of the authors of the trillion-dollar coach on **his** methods. But staying in the theme of coaching, if you shine the light on your conversations with Bill, any reflections on what difference it made to you and what about and what about him that that stands out for you in your experience?

SC: Yeah, of course. So for this, if you do not know Bill Campbell, I mean, you know him because you interviewed Jonathan or Alan or Eric, I do not know which, a trillion-dollar coach, Alan Eagle and Bill Campbell is reputed obviously for having coached executives and leaders from Steve Jobs to Eric Schmidt on building companies literally with trillions of dollars. So Bill at the time was coaching a lot of executives at Google. He spent several weeks at Google and I was one of the lucky executives who was also introduced to him for coaching. And Bill is different than David because Bill is an ex-NFL coach and so, you know, first of all, I think it is about the art of management to the Valley, very few people in the Valley. Valley has the cult of the founder culture but it is not very, for a long time, it did not give importance to being a good manager, being good at management. And Bill was the first person to make that desirable. So first of all, I give him credit at a macro level far beyond me. But for me, he was more of like a warrior coach. There were times at Google where I would be frustrated. I was in a region between Brazil and China, so it was a massive region. It was very disproportioned, disaggregated countries, countries in which we were losing badly, like, China, Japan, Korea. And in countries that even if we were winning, we were fraught with complexity, India had its complexity, so was Brazil, what have you. So many times, I would look at my counterparts at Google and I thought they had it so easy and my team was working so hard and we had always a mess of some kind to deal with. But Bill's influence on me was that, at times calling forth my warrior self and stop looking at everybody else and thinking about what they have and thinking about what you have and what you are building and, you know, one of phrases he taught my team that stayed with me sort of like, Sukhinder, you should be proud of your team, there is the team with all the dirt underneath their fingernails. So instead of bemoaning that you do not have it as easy as someone else, think about what you guys are building, think about what you put into, like value the grit. And that is the kind of coach Bill was. He was different things to different people. But from different people in our lives, we get different types of energy and coaching. So Bill brought a very unique coaching style to me, which I appreciated.

DJ: Got it. I think building on that, one of the terms Alan uses is Bill was a cheerleader. Sometimes when you are in the thick of things, you sometimes lose track of the number of things going right and one of the things he would say was, Bill would just sometimes even stand in the boardroom and applaud and spur people on.

SC: Yeah, absolutely. Well, Bill also had a twinkle in his eye all the time and I think to your point while he was saying to me be proud of your grit, for sure he was a cheerleader for my organization inside of the bigger Google and I remember that too, you know, and being holding us up as like, look at what that team is doing and so you are absolutely right, he was tough love but also the best cheerleader, that is absolutely true.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. I had the opportunity to speak with Alan Eagle (AE), one of the Co-Authors of the Trillion Dollar Coach that describes the methods of Bill Campbell. One of the themes he speaks about is how Bill was an evangelist of courage for his coachees.

AE: *"So one of my favourite anecdotes from our book is we were talking to Clay Bavor. Clay is a VP here at Google, he oversees our VR and AR products, Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality products and at the time that this story took place Clay was a Products Manager and he was just starting to work on AR products and he was showing an early product to the Google Board so he was kind of nervous. He is up in front of the Google Board and he is demonstrating this thing and they are all wearing the goggles and trying them out and he is trying to walk people through this down and something went well and he hears this clap from the back of the room like boom, boom, boom, boom and like loud cheering and it is Bill Campbell cheering him on and Clay said that moment gave him such confidence and such a boost and think about how often when you are in a meeting if something goes well someone on your team does something well, you say, good job or something like that of course but how often you are like, yeah man, stand up and clap, you don't, cause it doesn't feel right but that's what Bill would do. So that's part of being an evangelist for courage is really cheering people and celebrating their successes and there is an interesting tactical component as well. When we were talking to one of the Apple Board Members I don't recall he talked about how Bill would do this in an Apple meeting as well about how Bill did this when he was showing the Apple Board the Apple Play Store for the first time and how Bill was like cheering and saying this is so awesome and it also gets the momentum going in the room if you want to make a decision that way. It is pretty hard to decide against or argue against something when someone has literally stood up and cheered for you. So, you know, there is a tactical aspect as well and mostly this concept of being an evangelist for courage it's just this idea of growing confidence in the people, just trying to boost them up, make them think they can do more than they think they can do."*

DJ: For more, you can tune into the conversation with Alan Eagle about the Trillion Dollar coach at the Guests Section at Playtopotential.com. You might also like the Playlist on Coaching that you can find the Curated Playlists section at the Podcast.

If you are deriving value from the podcast, do take a moment and leave a review on Apple Podcasts. It will really make a difference given the boom in the podcast supply. It will help listeners discover this podcast from the ocean of content that is out there. It will also help Guests build trust with the podcast as they think about whether it is worth their time.

Lets now get back to the conversation with Sukhinder Cassidy.

DJ: And you speak about transitioning from leading a 2,000 odd member team at Google to Polyvore after a short stint in Accel, can you talk about that transition? And the reason I ask is in India, we are going through a tech boom, like rest of the world I guess, and we have several companies that are scaling up, that are recruiting senior executives from established corporations, not that Google is an established cooperation, but I am curious about your learnings from transitioning from an established organization to a founder-led startup, what is the benefit of hindsight, what are some of the themes that emerge?

SC: Sure. So a couple of thoughts. So first of all before I went to Polyvore, I had been a founder who had a CEO at my company who I helped recruit at Yodlee and worked with him for five or six years. So I feel like I had lived a life of the founder who had an external CEO I had a lot of empathy for it. By the way, after I left Polyvore just on the side, I literally emailed Anil Arora who was the CEO of Yodlee and I said, I just want to say to you thank you for dealing and putting up with me when I was a founder, like let me tell you, on the other side to be the CEO to a founder holy smokes. So after Polyvore, I emailed him and this was like, thank you, and then I think about what I just went through, you have dealt with me for like five years and like very gratefully now I take my hat off to you because I was in the same place, not nearly so gracefully. Obviously, just to be clear, I went from Google to Accel because I wanted to learn e-commerce and study all the available choices before I picked one. So Accel was I was CEO-in-Residence, I sat in on investments and I specifically said, I think I want to go to e-commerce next. So that was what I did at Accel. That was one of my preparations for Polyvore honestly, it was like let me learn the industry. I would say in some ways I tried to be as savvy as I could. Again, risk is risk. You can never take it to zero. I knew the founder. This was the first time he was going to have a CEO. So David Lesser and I literally talked about what could I do to ease his fears. We agreed that in the first three months, I would just listen and try and say nothing, like, not nothing but just listen and hold it. So I said to David, I am going to need you in this transition. David also coached me on how to approach the Board because they had a relationship with Pasha. I remember when I met with the Board, I was like, look, I do not want to pick Pasha out of a relationship with you, that never works but let us just agree that we will have a dialogue. I am like, I know he is going to call you, like you guys have been working together for many years. So I am a new factor in this equation, so let us just agree that, you know, he will keep meeting with you and that is great, I do not want to cut off that access. I mostly just want to be able to have a dialogue with you about what is going on. So I tried to establish my own kind of channels with the Board without saying like everything goes through me because I knew this he is the founder. And then I established like, you know, the third thing I did was like, Pasha, let us just go to coffee once a week. So these are some of the tactics I used. By the way, you may say what is the value these tactics if you did not end up, you know, having it worked out. But I think in all ways what I tried to do was create room for the founder did not feel like I was trying to assert my control over him. I mostly just thought like you are good at all things, I am not good at, you are a world-class engineer and have great product sensibilities I am go to market and I worked with, you know, and I had been a business founder to five engineers at Yodlee and I know what I know, I know what I do not know and I am really good at harnessing teams. So I would say my learning is, I do not actually and, you know, I do not mean this to be arrogant, I do not think I did anything wrong. I think I created a plan to try and hold his energy next to my own and not being competition. I said multiple times just like a marriage, so what makes a marriage work, it is like you both want your kids to grow up and go to IIT or to Harvard or to whatever, the point is like you have a common long-term goal and that keeps you in when the times are really tough. That is the way you have to approach something like this. It is like, but I would say my learning is and this is maybe useful learning for everybody out there, you can have all the best tactics, if your values overlap with the person which you are, you know, and your self-awareness and their self-awareness is not high, it is a hard marriage to make work. So a CEO-founder marriage is a very unique kind of marriage or quite frankly, COO founder is much harder because you both have a kind of moral authority over the company and you do not want to be in battle with each other where the company has literally been torn apart by the founder saying one thing and the CEO saying another. But I say it is like a marriage, you both have to have a pretty high amount of self-awareness, some decent amount of humility on the things you do not know, a commitment to some communication vehicle when things are really tough and most of all, most of all, common values. And ultimately, the founder and I did not share common values. And I talk about that in the book. He can be world-class, I can be world-class, our values overlap was not there. And maybe that is the thing I regretted, like as there was no way for me to discern, like what our value systems are and they were not the same.

DJ: Hmm. And reflecting on that Sukhinder, for leaders that are at the cusp of making a transition who are deciding between choices, what has been your experience in understanding the value systems of your destination, whether it is the organization or the leader, any reflections on that to minimize the post-purchase dissonance if you will?

SC: Yes, exactly. No, it is true. By the way, I think it is so much the values of the who not of the company because at the leadership level and I know a lot of your audience is leaders, so you are totally competent, like, no leaders fail because they do not have the competency to do the job. It is often culture fit and also culture fit with the rest of the leadership, even more than the company. The people you are going to battle with every day are the CEO, the other leadership team members on whom you are intrinsically dependent. So often say, when I think about where I succeeded, it has been the values overlap with the leader who I look for, here is what I look for, I look for skills that are diverse for my own. I fundamentally believe that you win when one plus one plus one equals three but when you look for values that are congruent, there is a bunch of ways to discern them. Number one, ask them what their values are, just ask what are your top three values. It is amazing when people reveal about themselves when you just ask them. Number two, ask for people who work with them, I always say when I am asking people who work with them, you know, and you know, when you think about what are your best interactions with this person and then like, I am going to work with the CEO, I might say like, hey, what are the things you are going to do that are going to drive me crazy and I am like exactly ask me the same question. So sometimes I want to tease out from all of the people who work with someone like, where do you get energy from, what drains your energy in those interactions, back channels, I definitely do. I just want to understand like what is this person's strengths and development areas. And of course, today we live in a world where honestly so much information on how people participate is public, reputations are small. If a leader has burnt bridges, it is easily discoverable. I mean, we live in a world that is so small if you are a leader. You can get on LinkedIn and find five people who know the person you are talking to and quite frankly, at least two or three who have worked with them. If it is not one degree, it is two degrees. And you really want to understand. And obviously the tell-tale signs of better leaders, yes, a healthy organization, which whose values you admire, company values are often a reflection of a leader, that is true. The talent they have been able to attract and retain, that is another good indication. But like I said, sometimes there is no substitute for asking directly and then the observed behaviors and their reputation. But I think you have to go into any equation knowing what your values are. Does that make sense, and I think I have learned some very painful lessons in what my values are in hindsight.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Nandan Nilekani (NN), one of the co-founders of Infosys had an interesting take on this in the context of Co-Founder selection. He speaks about aligning on the timelines for which the leaders are able to postpone gratification.

NN: *"First is that you must share common vision, you must share a common value system, you must share a common desire to postpone your gratification for another day. Because building companies, especially building companies to last, is not a sprint; it's a marathon. So, if your partners are short-term oriented, your partners want quick rewards, if your partners have ethical issues, it doesn't work. Everybody should say, OK, we're willing to defer reward for a decade. That's a big ask. So, I think the big lesson in Infosys was and [N R Narayana] Murthy had done a great job in assembling the people the fact that all of us were united in a common vision to create a global company. All of us were* *united that we want a very ethically run company with clear standards of ethics and corporate governance, and that we were willing to defer gratification for decades, if required. That was the binding glue and the fact that we put the vision above any of us. So, I think, getting the right co-founders is very important from a vision, values, timeframe of gratification point of view."*

DJ: This is a very nuanced point that Nandan makes. How we think about postponement of gratification often depends on spousal preferences, stage of life, kids education, parents and other elements that might drive our financial trade-offs in life. Aligning on this explicitly in addition to the things that Sukhinder speaks about might be a good idea as leaders come together in the context of a start up.

Lets now get back to Sukhinder Cassidy.

DJ: In the book, moving on Sukhinder, you talk about this notion of stepping into the white space and delivering, can you talk a little bit about that, I like the phrase, stepping into the white space, can you expand on that for us?

SC: Sure. And I will try and hit again on how it applies to leaders. I have seen many people who think that their biggest point of impact is doing their own job really well, let me say that again, doing your own job really well. We live in a world of specialists. I grew up in BusDev and Sales, you grew up in a different field but we all grow up a specialist of some kind. Until the CEO suite, one could argue you are specialist in a functional life. So often you get really smart people who think excellence and impact is about doing their thing extraordinarily well. Yet, we all as leaders, all of us, are frustrated when you can take a group of A players and put them in a room and, say, okay, we are on our way to, we are trying to make this project succeed, and it is a red right now. And then you kind of check in with every individual person and their thing is a green, and you are like how can you each individually be a green, yet, the status of the project is orange or red. Well, it is very simple. It is not because of the things that are owned, it is because of the things that are unowned. It is because as an old colleague of mine said, if you would stand and draw a circle around yourself, you would call that circle your job responsibility. And then if you lined up all the circles in a grid of all the people who are employees in the company, you would find that there are gaps between the circles. Who owns the gap? When projects fail, it is because of the thing that is failing us between the gap because everybody thinks their job is only the thing they own. And I am like, no no, great leaders of any dimension - Individual contributors, managers, all the way up to the CEO, step into the white space where the gap is and deliver what needs to get delivered and stop thinking about what your job responsibility is and think about what is needed to get to success. So that is what I mean when I say step into the white space.

DJ: Give us an example here. Let us say for a CEO or for a CXO?

SC: Yeah, here is a good example of a CXO, let us just say product and tech. Let us say, you have a Chief Product Officer and he has delivered the specs. You have a Chief Technology Officer, he said, like, well, I delivered the specs. And then you look at the OKRs, like, okay, well, you delivered, you know, I mean this is a simplistic example, but you are like, you say you wrote the rights spec, you say you delivered the spec and yet, the product they just released to enterprise customer was buggy. Alright, so if we can all just sit here and say you guys both are perfect but together, you are failing. That might be a time I am making it up, where I am the Chief Product Officer and even though it is not my responsibility, theoretically, I might say like, hey, what I would love to do, can we just get both teams into a room and literally, let us just get everybody in the room altogether, park our egos at the door and let us just go through step-by-step. What were our strongest points and what were our failures is delivery or should we think about what is failing in our two ways. But like that key about stepping in the white space although is not to point fingers at someone else. That is very easy. That is very easy to say, the thing is to say, hey, guess what, I am not talking about your blame or my blame, can I just, like, I am happy to take the action item of, like, can I just call us altogether, like, all of us together in one room. I am happy to create an agenda, I am happy like, I have to go like, you know, have, you know, and go hear from everybody what they think their ideas are and create the doc that we can discuss. Those are all examples of like it is not my job as the head of product. But if we fail to deliver this project that, is a high-quality product that was not buggy enough in our first release, then it kind of does not matter whose job it is, can we just get that job done. So sometimes, it is uncomfortable to say, like, well, somebody needs to own that thing and we think we are stepping on somebody else and so you can just see be a facilitator, not because you are saying, you did it, I did it, you need the answer but when people do not take the opportunity to go step in, the most things just aren't done. And everybody is worried about looking perfect in their own role. And as a CEO, I love the people who step into the white space. Unlike those, we are extraordinary leaders. They kind of, like, yeah, it needs to get down, so I got it done. I am like, okay, awesome.

DJ: Got it. It is about owning the interface, sort of the stuff that slips through the cracks and sort of taking ownership.

SC: Absolutely. It is about taking ownership of the whole, not just your piece and whatever that requires you to do. Be a facilitator, be a facilitator, be a note taker, be a note taker, be the person who asks the question, ask the question. But not from a place looking to blame the other person, most of like, what does it need to get from here to the finish line. Like literally, what needs to happen for it to get over the finish line.

DJ: The other thing that struck me in the book Sukhinder was you use the metaphor of finding the wave from the movie Finding Nemo. Our younger son as a matter of random trivia is nicknamed Nemo, his name is Nirmal we call him Nemo at home. But what I found interesting was at every point in time, there is always this inside-out versus outside-in piece. One is about saying, who you are, what really drives you and that leads you to a set of choices. It is a bit like strategy, is it capabilities driven or is it opportunities driven. What has been your reflection on this whole, do you see a tension there following the current versus following your heart, how have you managed the two?

SC: Well, I think you just made the perfect analogy. In strategy consulting, any five forces model would tell you to measure both. It is only to your point. Maybe, something sometimes is in conflict but often, you are just basically rating them all and saying, like, if I had to add up the probabilities. Obviously, probabilities are maximized when we enter environments that have momentum and they maximize our skills and our ambitions, yes, everybody would wish for that all the time. Sometimes, we face more of the choices where we really want to do this but the indications of the macroenvironment are, it is not the right thing to do. So the point is, any smart risk-taking involved, an outside-in and inside-out perspective, and if anything, I would say, our failure mode in risk-taking is, most people tend to believe far more that risk-taking is in the micro moves they make entirely. And so, remember, I am a fan of micro moves and micro choices but we want to be in anticipation and response, not feeling like we are, like, 100% of the universe is in our control, it is not. What is in our control is our anticipation and our response, anticipation, response. So I believe in those kind of micro moves. When people are like hey, I am just going to outexecute my way out of this problem and I am like, oh, really, might be you think it is all about you, you think you can just, I will tell you what, like, you know, sometimes when good teams meet bad markets, bad markets win. You can keep trying to outexecute your way out of a hurricane, it is still a hurricane. So then a micro move is not going to do any good. You want to bolt your doors, I will go ahead and try. You need to, like, get in your car and like literally, drive a 100 miles an hour around the hurricane, like no micro move is going to save you. The best thing you can do is like try and figure out when the hurricane is coming and with what force. So I think that that is the analogy I would give. I think that it is not an OR but an AND but I think that more often, I see executives believe they can outexecute their way out of anything and I often see this in the strategy room where people will be like, well, if we just execute better, if we, like, just execute better. Yeah, sometimes it is about execution and sometimes literally it is about like are you in the wrong market, do you have momentum, what are the headwinds that are coming your way that you may not be able to outlast. So, I think we need to have a lot of confidence in our own agency to make moves. But we need to be absolutely looking for things that increase our probability of success from the outside.

DJ: And just a couple of questions before we wrap up Sukhinder, I am mindful of the time as well, as you think about your journey, you speak about specialization generalization, you suggest go broad and then…

SC: Deep broad deep, yeah, deep broad deep, I think I was like, yes, broad deep broad, yes.

DJ: Yeah, so give us a sense of how that has played out for you and how you see the macro choice of going deep vs. broad.

SC: Well, I would say to people, like, look, if you have ever read Malcolm Gladwell, one rises and becomes an expert on 10,000 hours or something and for me, that was Sales and BusDev. So you find an area, by the way, when I say broad, when you come out of school, you do not know most things about building skills and discovering what you love. And for me, I discovered I was so good at sales and I loved it. I learned financial literacy and financial and now analytics. And I learnt to love it, like, I wanted to master it and once I became confident, I really loved the numbers too. I did not know I love the numbers but I do. So I learnt those two things about myself and I ended up as a career, mostly sales and business development, business development being quite a nice hybrid between needing to be able to assess opportunities financially, but also pursue them like sales. So that is great. Okay, so you master something and you can ride quite high on a functional dimension. But if you say, hey, I want to be a CEO, just think about that for a moment. Or I want to be an entrepreneur, I am like, okay, that is about learning the skills you do not know. So by its very nature, you will have to step off the deep track at some point and take a risk to learn something you do not know. Like literally, it turns out that is not like just literal, research also shows that in today's day and age, the best path to a CEOship is a winding one. Literally, CEO and executives who take time to broaden their skills are more likely to attend than those who just stick to what they know. So, if you want to grow does not mean that at some point, you encounter a set of problems that you have no experience in, that is the very definition of growth. It is hard to grow if you know everything. So I am a big fan of building mastery certainly, that is how we build our superpowers and how we build our reputations, it is where we build our network, that is all true. It is where we can show increasing accomplishment and efficiency and then at some point, what we have achieved mastery, your growth curve stops. And if you want to really become a broader, more capable leader, a CEO, an entrepreneur, a GM, you will have to ultimately go learn the things you do not know and take the risk to take on a new role, take on a new task, take on a new responsibility and I think the difference often between men and women is, men will reach for that opportunity they are not qualified for and actually that works in their favor, and women often would not reach for the opportunity they are qualified for because they are worried about failing or whether they are ready. And I am like, if you waited for when you are ready, growth never happens. So my belief is, yes, build specialization by all means. But then, your growth happens where you stretch yourself to things you do not know and learn how to master new skills.

DJ: Hmm. The other thing that struck me when I read the book in the way you make choices, you say it is not so much about the outcomes and payoffs but really who you become as a result of that choice and sometimes we forget to take cognizance of that, how have you thought about that and once again, with the wisdom of hindsight, what is the nuance here?

SC: Well, I will say to people maybe a sentence that does not make sense. I will say the reward for risk is not reward and people are like, why, I am like, no no, the reward for taking risk is not reward. And I am like, it is not the reward you originally imagined, it is something else. So when we take a risk, and bigger risk, where we make a bigger choice, you are not done. Let us say you say, I want to go build a $100 million business, okay, and you say, I am going to go choose this new role where I can have the opportunity to build $100 million business, not $100 million today but I want it to be, that is the opportunity ahead of me. Okay you make that choice but guess what, now you have to make a bunch of more choices to make that dream come true. It is not like you are done once you have made the choice to join. Now you are in like the pursuit of that macro reward and you are making lots of micro choices, micro, small or bigger over years like, you know, you do not know if you are going to get that reward. But as you keep pursuing this reward, what are you doing, you are building agility. This is why I will say to people, you are in a sphere, where you are committed to that choice. You are committed to the pursuit of that reward. So you wake up, you try something, it does not work, you try something else. And now you are in a feedback loop all the time of making choices. And every time when in a feedback loop, if we can create learning or an outcome, we are developing some kind of impact, you are creating impact. Maybe get to $10 million, $20 million, maybe you build a stellar team, maybe you build a respected reputation in the industry. By the way, you are not hitting your big goal but you are still building impact. So whether or not you get to the big goal, I do not know, I do not know if you are going to get it to $100 million, I do not know if you are going to get $120 million or $180 million, I do not know if your division will open or close, I do not know if you will get there and the company will decide to shut it down because it is not meaningful, I do not know, but what I know is in the pursuit of that goal, you are building impacts and outcomes. And you yourself are building an agility and a confidence in your capacity to anticipate and respond. And that is what we become when we embrace risk. So I cannot guarantee if you get the reward you originally thought. What I can guarantee you is if you pursue choice-making and risk-taking as a muscle, you will gain agility and confidence and grit. If you look at the correlations of agility, confidence and grit to long-term success, there is a high correlation. So now you are acquiring these skills and they are the most confident skills for any new job you are going to go get, whether you ever reach your original goal or not. That is what I mean when I say, the reward for risk is not reward, it is who we become. But ironically, it is correlated to longer term reward.

DJ: Got it. So this podcast is titled Play to Potential Sukhinder. As we wrap up, what does the phrase mean to you?

SC: Well, interestingly, I think it is a very complimentary phrase to choosing possibility because what it really says is we are reaching every day for something that is not yet ours and that pursuit of that as a muscle, the pursuit of that as a process has its own rewards. So if you say Play to Potential, I am sure you do not say to people play to potential once. You would say, no, keep playing to be your potential, that is where the magic is. I would say keep choosing possibility, that is where all the fun is.

DJ: Lovely. Sukhinder, pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for your time.

SC: Thank you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. A couple of messages before we wrap up.

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Thank you and hope to have you tune into one of the subsequent conversations at the podcast. Bye now.

End of transcription

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Nugget from Alan Eagle that is referenced: Being an evangelist for courage.

Nugget from Nandan Nilekani that is referenced: Selecting the right co-founder(s).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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