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Context to the nugget

Anyone who wants to join the Indian Armed Forces as an officer has to go through the Service Selection Board (SSB). The ultimate goal is to select people with Officer Like Qualities (OLQs). Thus, the focus is on hiring based solely on potential rather than experience or academic qualifications. Our digital world is also moving towards potential-based hiring. Hear how the corporate world can learn some lessons from the SSB.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): As we look to identify potential, what are the three-four things the corporate world can learn from the SSB process which can help companies bet on these horses for the long term?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): In the forces, probably the army, in some sense, I won't say uniformed forces, because the police doesn't work that way, but in the army, even the chief of the army staff has to join as lieutenant. There is no question of doing a PhD and coming in and joining as a brigadier. It doesn't work like that. So, the police has IPS officers who come in laterally and they join at a fairly senior rank. But, in the army, for many of the officers of the Indian Army, it is their first job. So, in the game of SSB or in the game of army, there is no way to do anything about previous experience. It doesn't really matter. What matters is only the potential! So, the five days, the aspects that are being looked at there, I think, its better we understand that and then look at how the corporates can leverage it.

Of course, there is general physical fitness. I should tell the listeners and kids who are listening that anybody who thinks that he is not physically fit and therefore, should not apply to the army, that's a myth. Because so long as you are sort of OK, in the sense that you have your arms and legs and you are not dramatically invalidated physically as a matter of fact, physical fitness is the least of the scores in the SSB, because these are trainable skills. I used to be a college kid in Delhi who wouldn't run after the bus saying that a second bus will come. Within 18 months, I was running 16 kilometres in cross country, and that's something that the army will do. That's not a problem.

What they are looking for are untrainable skills, which are more in terms of officer-like qualities. Will you crack under pressure? Do you have the ability to work as a team? Can you get other people to work with you, without being threatened by you? You may be a great performer, but if you piss off everyone else in your team, or if everyone else in the team views you as competition or as a person who likes to hog all the limelight, you will not go beyond an individual contributor. You will never be

able to run a team, and in the army, it's all about the team. Nobody gives a jack shit whether you got your stuff or not. It's whether the team won or didn't win. It's as simple as that. It's all people together. It's never eight of us got in, but twelve didn't get through. That doesn't make sense; all 20 have to get in. It's all or nothing. Now, that format requires people to be able to look at the bigger picture. It requires them to think out of the box for problem solving. You must remember that in the army, I think, what they teach most people is fundamental problem solving. That is why you are able to take the same troops and send them for flood relief in Chennai, and for earthquake relief in Nepal, for building a Commonwealth bridge in Delhi, for taking children out of a bore well when they are stuck there. I mean, there is no training given for taking children out of a bore well. That doesn't happen in the academy. What happens is you are taught how to solve problems as a group, and I think, that's what they are looking at. They are looking at whether people have an open mind, whether they can do that kind of stuff or are they too fixated, are their cup too full, and are they too self-centered? Those are the traits which will probably be a sort of disadvantage.

They also have a very intensive psychological profiling. They have tests which I am sure you can Google and find out about. Word association or writing a narrative based on a picture that you've been shown and this is more to look at... but the interesting thing is that there are three different vectors that happen. So, there is a group task, there is an individual psychological assessment, and then, there is an interview. What they also look for is inconsistency between the three. That's why I recommend that you might want to take some basic guidelines, but don't try and get coached on it, because it's a waste of money. They can straightaway spot if you have been coached and often, people who have been coached will start showing inconsistencies between their three or four tests, and that will be actually worse off than being consistently... You can't game such a system and these people are doing it for living, I mean, they can look into your eyes and figure out what you are thinking. So, it's pointless trying to game them.

So, that, in a nutshell, is what one expects in the SSB, and of course, the elements that I spoke about can be derived into corporates as well. Many corporates are doing it now. So, you have a lot of these YSC and those kind of tests to look at a cultural and aptitude fit. Even construction of a team, by the way. So, in a team you don't need everybody who looks like each other in their thinking or whatever. Now, in the forces, they do that. So, when they populate the battalion, they will take a look at the OLQ, the Officer Like Quality, scores of the previous three officers who have gone there, and they will calibrate the fourth officer in such a way that he complements the previous three rather than becoming a clone of the previous three. Even in organizations, I think, in the corporate sector, my sense is, a lot of the times when recruitment is being done, you are basically carbon copying one or two individuals and saying, if I can get 10 more of these guys, I am OK. Often, JDs are designed that way. A manager who doesn't have time will often pass the CV of an existing employee and say find me three more of these. But I think, that's the wrong way to do it, because unless you really do need three more of the same people it might be better to get skills which are complementary or perhaps, at some level, diametrically opposite. Look at the portfolio of leadership qualities rather than saying that I want that 9-point leader, I want four of them. That is usually a very bad team. If you get four alphas in one team, that team will start competing within itself.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Two things struck me in this nugget. One is that as we are moving towards a digital world with several unknowns, it is imperative that the leadership assessment provides an insight into the individual's potential, which is often one lever deeper than skills or capabilities. The second piece is that Leadership assessment is an interesting mix of art and science. You are often collecting data from different vectors as Raghu mentions - Interview, Psychometrics (Hogan, FIROB, MBTI, Birkman as the case might be), References. People often ask me how much weightage is given to each. I guess it is less about assigning percentages but about connecting the dots, checking for inconsistencies and see the patterns that emerge to come up with a leadership decision that is robust and fit for context.

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End of nugget transcription

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About Deepak Jayaraman

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

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