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Context to the nugget

Having moved from the army setup to the corporate world then onto a government organization and back to the corporate world, Raghu has worn many hats in his professional life. All of these shifts have involved transitioning across cultures- some well-established, others being established and yet others, desperately needing a change in culture! Hear Raghu talk about how he navigated these transitions to integrate into the organization he joined.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You've transitioned from very different worlds. What have you learnt in terms of lessons in how you managed the transitions?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): In hindsight, I can put a structure around that learning. I must confess though that when the transition was happening, I consider myself extremely fortunate that I had a few people, who serendipity brought into my life, who were able to guide me and help me not make mistakes which I could have made. In hindsight, if I were to look back and say this process could be done much better, then this is the way I would probably do it today. To my mind, any organization, regardless of where it exists — whether it's in the private sector, government, or the army — it falls into one of these four categories: it will either be a start-up, or it will be a turnaround, or it will be an organization that requires a realignment from where it is, or it is a steady-state organization. Now, all these four require very different styles of leadership. In a start-up, you require some sense of energy and a shared reality and a chutzpah and say, we need to head in this general direction, but you really don't know what the real goal is going to be. Any start up, if it starts trying to figure out plans for more than 12 to 18 months is basically going to go wrong, because it's more about choosing to do something different, having a general line of direction and going with that. If you are doing a turnaround, for example, then the leader, when he takes over the turnaround, he will give some arbitrary decisions just to indicate that there is a new sheriff in town. That's more a strategy of ready, fire, and aim. You make your presence felt by doing some brisance in the organization. You shatter something's to indicate that there is a new leader; it's going to be new. You can't try that in a steady-state organization, because in a steady state organization, you need to spend the first 90 days just learning what makes them tick and not tweaking anything which is working fine, because you don't know what string you will pull and which part will unravel completely.

Now, none of these situations are more difficult or less difficult. A start up is as difficult as a steady state. Imagine stepping into the shoes of Steve Jobs. A steady-state organization and the expectation from you is that you are going to deliver something dramatically different, right? So, I think, the first

element that any leader needs to do, is to decipher or diagnose what state the organization is in. Which one of these four states the organization is in? Also, what the leader needs to do is to decipher what state he or she most comfortable is in. So, if I am a start-up, my affinity is towards start up. Turnaround leaders are people who will give their commitment and then seek clarity. Steady-state leaders are people who would give their commitment only after getting clarity, so they would seek a lot of clarity before they give their commitment. Now, if you try to apply a start-up model on a steady-state organization, you will obviously go wrong, dramatically wrong, no matter how great a leader you are, because you will try to buck things. So, if I went into, let's say the government and try a start-up mentality there, it's unlikely that it will do well. I need to recognize that this is steady-state, this is a super tanker. If you want to turn it, you will have to first get consensus and then begin the turn. You can't stand at the bridge one day and say we are going to do a hard turn right. That's not going to happen. Whereas in a start-up or in a turnaround, you will have to take decisions of that kind.

So, I think rather than the transition from the army to the civil — of course, there are certain nuances there, there is no doubt about it. All said and done, the Indian Army doesn't run the risk of 20 of our soldiers quitting and joining the Pakistan Army. That doesn't happen and that happens all the time in the private sector, so you will have to, sort of, factor those kinds of nuances, but other than that — I think, the base framework is the framework that I just spoke about. You first diagnose the state of the company or the organization or the sub unit. And by the way, these cultures can co-exist in the same company. So, you can have a massive company which is a steady-state, but two of its units or two sub-companies might be going through a turnaround. Subcultures will exist, by definition, they will exist in large countries and large companies and larger sort of establishments.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my earlier avatar as an executive search consultant at EgonZehnder, whenever I placed a leader in a company, I would urge them to take the time and read the book - 1st 90 days by Michael Watkins. In that book Michael Watkins talks about a similar framework where he divides companies into 5 categories. Start up, Turnaround, Accelerated Growth, Re-alignment and Sustaining Success. Based on this, one needs to be thoughtful and have discussions about 1) how expectations are set 2) Resources that are made available 3) Leadership style that needs to be adopted and so on. This is not just about an induction plan but a more comprehensive integration plan that holistically thinks about the leader ramping up quickly to be able to add commercial value at the earliest.

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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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