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Context to the nugget

Raghu talks about how we could think about leveraging the pool of leadership talent that the army produces. He compares India to markets such as US, where there have been generations of Corporate Leaders who spent their early years in the Armed Forces. This is not just about providing an education around some of the elements of business. It is a complete rewiring that needs to happen.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Clearly, there is a reservoir of leadership in the army and the civil world is very different. What could some of those leaders do to ensure they settle in well because the corporate world could benefit a lot from alumni of the army? So, any thoughts on how to bridge the two worlds to ensure that the corporate world could benefit from the leadership expertise of the armed forces?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): I have always been quite passionate about this area not because I am ex-army and therefore would like to sort of advocate the case of forces officers coming in. If you study countries like the US, or for that matter, even Europe, you realize that a large part of their spurt in growth happened immediately after the Vietnam War or after the Second World War. Of course, there was a lot of nation rebuilding happening, but what a lot of social commentators and contemporary historians have not paid enough attention to is the fact that immediately after the Vietnam War, for 15-20 years, every able-bodied man in the US had served in the forces, and there was a common vocabulary. They were course mates and comrades and one could just pick up the phone and reach out to someone else in another organization and get that extra leg up, because of another relationship which was there. The ex-forces people are doing exceedingly well in the US. As you are probably aware, Harvard ran a cover story on how servicemen who are coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq are being snapped up by the corporates, because they bring a completely different kind of leadership skill. So, the potential is clearly there.

Now, honestly, I think, in India, that potential has not been leveraged. Cases of people who have come from the armed forces and had a commensurately successful career in the private sector aren't that many. There are some fundamental reasons for that. One of the reasons is that in India, unlike in the US, we've had a very wide chasm between the forces and the civilian counterparts; at times, it's almost a disdain. There is a sense of disdain for the civilians or the army guys, and there is a huge lack of knowledge. Or for that matter, the bureaucracy; I mean we all have these stereotypes

about 'army mein ration free hain' and bureaucrats don't work. These are wrong stereotypes. They are not even true. Even if they were 30% right, one could say it's a broad brushstroke, but they are completely false. These are factually incorrect in many ways.

So, I think one of the challenges or one of the areas where forces officers would probably... three things. One, is for them to realize that they are going back to a second career and they are going to restart, at least in some areas, as a lieutenant all over again. So, it doesn't matter where they retired from. If they think, 'I am a brigadier or a general in my head' and come with that element into a completely new domain... It's a bit like saying, I am very fluent in French, so I should be treated with respect in Egypt. You are not going to be. You'll have to learn Arabic there. You'll have to learn the lingo, and then, you will have to start all over again. And if you have to learn, you have to bend; that's the only way to learn. You have to have the humility to say, 'I don't know this and I need to be taught this'. So, that transitioning into a civilian career is, I think, the first step where the forces need to be educated on the transition.

The second is, I think, the people need to choose the kind of portfolio that they would like to... To my mind, when people come from the forces into the private sector, there are five major categories in which they can come. The first and the most obvious choice is security, and to my mind, that is very underleveraging of the potential. The second is adjunct to that, which is more in terms of administration. The third is HR, because you have been leading troops and all of that. The fourth is operations, because that's a large part of the forces. The fifth, and the Holy Grail, is the P&L. You run a profit and loss, sort of, there is a score being kept, literally on a quarterly basis, on how well you are doing. I think that is the holy grail, but to get to that holy grail, I think, there needs to be grounding, re-education, understanding many elements. So, for example, cost and finance is something that most of the forces are completely, sort of, insulated from, because we really don't care how much a tank that we operate costs. I mean, it's not done on a, sort of, P&L basis. You don't hire people based on P&L. If you're authorized 800 people, you fight to get those 800 people. It's a very different context. At an operational level, there is no commercial context to it, and I think that's extremely important in the private sector. So, unless those elements are learnt, there would be dissonance. So, I don't think any army officer should think that they will be able to automatically morph the learnings that they have got from another world into this world.

Similarly, I don't think any civilian leader should believe or have a false expectation that just because he's brought somebody from another domain they will hit the ground running. That's not going to happen. There'll be some mistakes that they'll make in the beginning. There'll be some sort of acclimatization and part of acclimatization is actually making some mistakes. So, if both sides expect a zero-error syndrome to work from day one, then it's a wrong expectation. I think that part is something that, at the jawan's level, we do it pretty well, not as much as we should, but we definitely have reskilling programs and all. Among officers, now, they have started a kind of a mini MBA in some of these B-schools. To my mind, that's really not enough, because the mini MBA only teaches you theoretical knowledge; it doesn't teach you the mechanics of how things work, the unarticulated power structures, for example, in organizations, or navigating the politics of the organizations. And politics, to my mind, is not a bad word, because politics is the art of polity. It's not necessarily a dirty word, just because it has been dirtied by some people. The science of politics is not bad, so I think learning that, learning how to lead without authority, leading only by your influence these are some of the things which military leaders also need to make a transition in. They

have to realize that in this new career they are literally drinking through a hose, so that's the kind of learning that they have to do.

DJ: And any lessons from the other market. You mentioned US and some of the other countries, so any lessons on how they bridge this cultural gap?

RR: One of the areas where I believe India is at a disadvantage is that formally, in many of the Western countries, there is education about the defence forces. So, if you were graduating from, say, the US, you would know far more about military in general. You would know about the D-Day landings, you would know about the Vietnam War, you would have been brought up on a diet not just of war movies but historical movies. There would be hundreds of books written on the Vietnam War and what happened in World War I, World War II. It's part of the civil society's consciousness. I have a theory for that, and I believe that's because all those countries have faced an existential threat. So, whether in hindsight you say that Japan could have never threatened the US, after the Pearl Harbour raid, even as deep as Chicago, people were diving into air-raid shelters. Because that was the fear, the existential fear that the Soviet Union would take you out. And that is why the entire country as a whole needed to be made aware about defence. Now, India, fortunately or unfortunately, has never had an existential crisis, so even when you are waging a full-blown war with Pakistan in 1971, large parts of South India are completely unaffected. When you have something happen in Sri Lanka, with the IPKF, large parts of North India don't even know what's going on there. So, I don't think as a nation, we ever have got together to realize that we can have an existential crisis. That, to my mind, has created this whole sort of insulation of the forces from the rest of the country. Not even us versus them... but 'cantonment', the word comes from containing troops in another location and they are in their own la la land and the contained troops also think that they are in their own bubble. I think this osmosis advantage we have not had, which is what happened in the US.

The second is, I think, again a derivative of the first point, where many of the leaders in the US or in the UK or in Europe, until about 10 to 15 years ago, were from a generation who actually fought wars themselves. They've been involved in the Second World War, they have been involved in the Vietnam War, or they've seen the Korean War and all of that stuff. They have a very high representation of forces in their political establishment and business establishment, in industry. Unfortunately, that's not the case in India. Most of our ex-servicemen who do come out, they are, sort of, relegated to security duties. They will only handle security or there will be that one odd token general in some board, but that general will still be leveraged only for his security expertise, or man-management expertise at some level, or little bit of operations, but never in terms of strategy and stuff like that. So, I think that osmosis has not taken place and it's not something that we can start tomorrow. It will take a generation of officers to come out, to earn their spurs, to earn the respect, to speak the same lingo, and to demonstrate to their civilian counterparts that they are equally good leaders in a P&L environment, that they understand profit, they understand loss, they understand money. As you probably realize, there is almost an unspoken culture in the army not to be concerned about money. It's almost a disdained aspect, talking about money is considered to be, that's important in the army, because obviously you are not being driven by material incentives there. But that's what keeps the score in the civilian street. So, you can't say that I'll play by the same rules here. So, it's a complete re-wiring, and more importantly, it's an understanding that there needs to be a re-wiring. It's not just the rewiring itself but the consciousness on the part of

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that leader who is transitioning from one place to another that I need to be re-wired. That's true for any transitions, not just from one sphere to another; it's any transition, even life transitions.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I do genuinely believe that there is a significant reservoir of leaders in the army that the corporate world could leverage effectively if only they could manage the cultural transition effectively; it is not just about equipping them with a different set of skills but about enabling them to navigate a new culture that they would have to make an effort to understand and acclimatize; Both sides (hiring company and the leader in question) I guess, need to take ownership of managing this shift carefully; In my limited observation, even in inter-company leadership moves, it is often not the industry or the technical stuff but the cultural mis-match which leads to executive derailment if not managed carefully. It is often the soft stuff that is hard to get right.

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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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