Context to the nugget

What is common to radio, sonar and the internet? All these technological innovations, like many others, have their origin in war or conflict. Most have been researched and developed at military labs and then scaled up. Start-ups therefore, can benefit immensely from this experience. Hear Raghu talk about the need for a common vocabulary in order to achieve this. Hint: there is also a valuable tip about the 'How' question.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I am curious to discuss some of the elements of leadership that we can learn from the armed forces. I have heard you talk about the skill-up technology that the corporate world, specifically the start-up world, can learn from. I'd love for you to elaborate on that.

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): Like I've mentioned in a couple of my other talks, if you look at the technological development that has happened during the times of conflict. Try and visualize that before the Second World War began, the world was in propeller planes and by the time it ended, more than six countries had their own fighter jets developed, production lines, and industrialized to a number that they could actually be fielded in the Second World War. That doesn't just mean producing the aircraft. It means the whole ecosystem of the MRO, and pilots, and strategy, and logistics, and all of that. Every piece of technology you use today, 90% of it comes from conflict, so whether it's radio, sonar, radar… Internet was developed largely to prevent a nuclear…, so that in case of a nuclear fallout, you didn't want to rely on a system which was point-to-point failure system. That's why a gridded system, the DARPA basically, created that. Now, there is some logic in that. When human kind is fighting for existential reasons, they are likely to put their best minds on whether it's the harnessing of nuclear energy itself or for many of the sort of technological marvels that we today take for granted; their origin is in conflicts.

Similarly, if you look at nations like Israel which is known as the start-up nation. One of the contributing factors is the fact that young kids are given exposure to technology which in the civilian street they will never get. So, that two years' conscription, or three years' conscription in the case of men, gives them an exposure to leading-edge technology — very, very expensive technology — which they would not otherwise get an exposure to in normal other careers. So, there is a whole element of technology that is used in the forces, and it's a great platform from where you can begin thinking about some of the elements of innovation. Whether it's innovation of technology, innovation of processes, innovation of thinking out of the box, it provides a very strong foundation there.

Now, the example that you are referring to is more an example of how you may create a framework. See, one of the challenges in an organization which is trying to scale up is that… When you look at a small team, when it starts up, it's typically three-four people, founders who get some administrative help, logistics help, sales help. A typical start-up is 10 people and that's a section in the armed forces. Usually, the second stage will be anywhere between 35 and 40 people. That second stage is roughly the size of a platoon. Then, when you move from there to your next tranche, it will usually be 150 to 200 people, which is the size of a company in the army; it's also called a company or a squadron in case of the armed corps. The fundamental spans of control and expansion limits and boundaries are already sort of defined. They go back a few 100-1,000 years; it's not something that is happening anew. Span of control is not something that's new. That's been happening since many, many 100 years ago. So, rather than reinventing the wheel, one could look at these models and modify it wherever required and be able to implement it in today's world as well. That's what I meant by saying that there are certain frameworks and certain vocabularies that if you just transition or morph from another world and bring into this world, you straightaway can hit the ground running rather than trying to re-create it from scratch.

One of the models that I strongly advocate is for any organization and a team of people to have what is called a common vocabulary. By common vocabulary I don't mean that organizations have to become clones of each other, but just like there are certain protocols ,in say, the IT system and that's why an MS Word document is able to talk to an Excel sheet which is able to talk to a PowerPoint presentation, because those protocols allow these different programs to talk to each other seamlessly — similarly, I think, organizations need to have their individual characteristics, their idiosyncrasies, their own cultures, but at an operating level they need to have a common lingo. Suppose I say, give that document to me ASAP. Now, as soon as possible, for me, may be 45 minutes, for you it could be three days. If I tell you, take a look at this document, for you, it could be the font is OK, there is a lot of white space, the grammar is right; for me, it could be run it past the regulator, run it past the compliance guy, run it past the legal guys. That's what I mean when I say take a look at that document, because that's what I would do. Now, if we don't have a common vocabulary within an operating system, then a lot of things will fall through the cracks, a lot of people will get frustrated. You hear these sentences very often incorporate: 'He just doesn't get it!' This is two different vocabularies clashing with each other. Now, one of the things that I think the forces focus a lot on is that they will allow the regiments to have their own cultures and their own characters and their own idiosyncrasies, the way they will greet each other, the festivities that they will celebrate and all of that stuff. But when it comes to operations, when someone says half right turn, there is no debate in anyone's mind that it is 45 degrees; it's not 43, it's not 47, it is 45 degrees. Now, if organizations start absorbing that framework at their initial stage, when they are in the start-up mode, then scaling becomes much easier. It's like having an alphabet set. So, you say, I am going to use A to Z as my alphabet set. But typically, what happens in an organization is that they use A to Z during their initial stage, then they decide to change the vocabulary when they are going to the next stage. When they subsume another company inorganically, then again the vocabulary changes. This dissonance which it causes within the organization, it's a bit like five horses pulling a chariot. Each horse's just off by 5 degrees, so there's a lot of pulling and dragging happening, and each horse believes that the other four are not pulling their weight, and the chariot isn't moving forward. I think that's what I mean by having a common vocabulary and frameworks which can which act as the skeleton of the organization on which muscle can be added and flesh can be added, but the skeleton sort of holds the entire shape together.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my work, I often request the leaders to pause and reflect (whether in an offsite context or not) on the How question. In start-ups, given the pace of action there are several What questions which need clarity and suck bandwidth (What should our strategy be, what technology should we adopt, what should be the pricing model etc). Making space to reflect collectively on some of the How questions - How do we communicate, How do we make decisions, How do we say no to projects and so on can be tremendously clarifying as an organization scales up.

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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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