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Context to the nugget

Numbers occupy a large part of our mind space when we think of organizations- sales figures, trend lines, market share – the list is endless and often clinical. But what about the stories behind the companies? These legends, usually ignored, are crucial for culture building. Hear Raghu talk about how the army utilizes this powerful tool to build its cultural identity and motivate its people.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): There is a lot of talk in the corporate world about building culture. I am fascinated by the armed forces because you don't have incentives. All you have is culture, to carry people with you. What are the two or three things that we could learn in terms of how to build a culture and how to build fellowship?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): So, firstly, I think I'll correct you there. It's not that the army doesn't have incentives. They are not material incentives, they are different incentives. It's very interesting that... There are certain units, for example, the special forces or let's take the NSG, National Security Guard, for example, which is a purely deputation force Rashtriya Rifle, another great example where soldiers will come only for two to three years. So, you will join that outfit for two to three years, which means, at any given point of time, even the commanding officer of that unit will not know more than 50 to 60% of his people, because he is himself getting rotated. Despite that, organizations have a very strong sense of cultural identity.

I think, how the forces do it is by storytelling, by creating a narrative of that organization which is so strong and so powerful, that any time a person puts on that uniform and he has got the shoulder badge and whatever it may be, Jat Regiment, Rajput, Bihar, Rashtriya Rifle, 22 Mech and the moment you adopt that, you sort of put on that clothing on yourself and you become part of that unit, you also are immersed into the legends of that unit. So, for example, one of the rituals that happen in a battalion is as soon as new soldiers are commissioned in and they may come in a batch of 15 to 20 or 30 or whatever they are actually taken around the officers' mess and the quarter guard and they are shown all the trophies. Every narrative is 'To retrieve this flag, we lost 30 people in that battle; to recover the dead body of one of our comrades, we launched seven attacks and we lost several more in the process, but we did not leave the body of one of our soldiers behind'. By the time you listen to the third or the fourth or the fifth story, your hair is standing on end, and you realize that you are in a temple, you are in the presence of your ancestors who have left this legacy behind, and that's the expectation from you.

I think that's a very important part of a corporate, where we have become, I think, very antiseptic. We've become very clinical, and these numbers and these sheets and these trend lines they cannot capture the story of an entrepreneur or of two brothers who decided that they are going to make a jeep in India and suddenly take on the British and create an empire which today is known as the Mahindra and Mahindra Group. Or a man who decides he wants to build a hotel because of whatever reasons. So, the legends of organizations are not, I think, spoken of.

The art of storytelling is culture building. How do you build a culture? How do you know that you are supposed to have reverence for your elders? It's because somebody has told those stories in your ears, if not necessarily directly, then indirectly, in terms of the shape of stories and the shape of what happened earlier, before you. I think that is a very essential part when you want to forge an organization together. Shared reality is nothing but storytelling. That is what makes us believe that we are right, our country is better, my company is better, my community is better. I can do this because my ancestors have done it, and I can achieve it because in the past I have done it. These are all elements of storytelling and that is the fundamental, I think, cementing block to get a group of people together. That is basically what the armed forces do. They build those legends, those stories and that's what takes people literally to the next level.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: One of the companies that comes to mind when I think of Culture is Johnson and Johnson. Their credo (which is like their Operating System) was written way back in 1943. 70 years hence, it has still stood the test of time. When I was talking to their India CEO (Vikas Srivastava) recently, he spoke at length about the importance of storytelling in the context of establishing and driving culture.

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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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