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Context to the nugget

Grit can be defined as ‘courage and resolve; strength of character’- something we all need to live our lives and face successes and failures. Raghu says, “We all have the DNA to create that reservoir of strength.” Hear him talk about the elements of grit and how an organization can create an environment to foster it.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): There’s a lot that’s been written about grit and the role of grit in leaders. If I were to take a specific example, I was reading up on the 26/11 operation, and I was told that the people that fought it went without food or water for 72 hours but still had to do the job. You also alluded to it earlier, where you spoke of tapping into your inner reservoir. Are there any lessons to be learnt on how people can build that muscle, for them to be able to access that inner reservoir that a lot of us are blessed with?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): Of course, some of us are blessed with the reservoir, but all of us are blessed with the DNA to create that reservoir. Actually, there is a book called ‘Grit’. The author there specifically mentions how people who are encouraged to fail often make much better leaders, whereas people who’ve never ever failed in life — because life will hand you failure. There is no planning you can do to... even for your child, for whom you want the absolute everything and you want to cocoon from every bad thing in life, there is no way you can do that, because failure will happen — now, anybody who has not dealt with failure in the past will usually collapse catastrophically whenever there is a failure and will not know how to deal with that.

Grit, to my mind, consists of three or four things. One, it consists of constantly pushing your envelope. If you ask a civilian or a person who is not sports-oriented or someone who is not involved in physical activities, ‘Why don’t you run the Mumbai half marathon?’ he will say ‘Are you kidding me? Its 21 kilometres’. But I can give you umpteen examples, and I am sure you know of several people, who just decided that this year I am going to run the half marathon and ended up running the half marathon in a pretty decent time. So, the physical capability to do that was always there. It was just the mental lid that the person had: ‘No, 21? How can I run 21? I’ve never even walked five kilometres, so I can’t run’. These are self-imposed limitations that all individuals have. I remember one of our instructors used to say: If you stop, your body has won; if you fall down exhausted, your mind has won. Because if your body is asking you to stop and your mind says, OK, let’s stop, then essentially the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Whereas if you are able to keep... so, when you

say grit it is that this is the pain that I can take, I can't take any more pain, and then you step one more and then one more element of pain, one more notch up I can take. That's one element of grit.

The other element of grit is actually failing. What I mean by failing is, it is not about an exam, or it's not about a promotion, or it's not about trying an idea and that not working. Failing is us setting, as an individual or as organizations, a set of conditions, boundary conditions, which if we safely cross, we have won. I like the metaphor of high jump competitions. So, when you do the high jump, the way it works is, say five people are competing. You raise the bar and then there are three left, and then you raise the bar again, and now there are two left and one of them is not able to clear it. It doesn't make the remaining person automatically a gold medallist. You raise the bar once again, despite the fact that there is only one person and he has cleared the previous bar. The bar is raised again and let's say he clears it again. Once again, the bar is raised, though for all practical purposes he is the gold medal winner already, so he can easily take that gold medal and go home and say that I won, but he is now competing with himself like you compete with yourself in a marathon. You can't compete with 5,000 people who are running; 3,000 of them will beat you. The point is, you are competing against yourself, against your previous timing. If it's not the timing, it is against your age or against whatever else, it's a relative target that you have set. I think it is very important for people — I know this is almost a cliché to say — it is important for people to fail. Organizations also tom tom about it, that we want to encourage failure. It's how you deal with the first failure that tells the rank and file whether you really mean it or it's a nice sentence to speak in board meetings and stuff like that. Because if the first failure happens and you come down like a ton of bricks, which is what in most cases happens, then you really are not looking to develop grit in the organization. Then, you are looking for a zero-error syndrome, and zero-error syndrome, by definition, means there will be no risk. There will be no pushing of the envelope and there will be no treading away from the beaten path because only that guarantees you a higher propensity of zero error. Going off the beaten path, thinking out of the box, pushing the envelope, taking a punt on hiring somebody with a gut feel even though the paper says that it doesn't seem to make a fit, but your heart tells you will fail, if you don't fail, then it's not a punt.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: As Raghu mentions, Grit does consist of a few different elements - 1) There is an element around mental barriers we have to pain and physical limits 2) It is not a static variable and one could keep pushing it out almost like how a High jumper would 3) As an organization, it is possible to create a climate that fosters grit and drives healthy risk taking like Google discovered in Project Aristotle (something that is documented in the NY times article by Charles Duhigg). For more, please refer to the work of Angela Lee Duckworth who has written a book titled Grit.

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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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