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Context to the nugget

Distraction is all around us. Our screens are becoming smarter and our attention spans shorter. Engulfed with this tsunami of data in a world that worships multitasking, how does one develop mindfulness? Raghu shares some invaluable tips practiced by corporate leaders. You will be amazed to hear how simple tweaks (no need for any props! Just your time) can improve your mental well-being.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to move to a different theme, which is about staying present. Mindfulness in the digitally distracted world we live in is a competitive advantage. I go back to the 26/11 example, 72 hours without food or water and you need to open hundreds of rooms. In each room, you have three situations: a civilian, a terrorist, or a combination of the two, and what you do has to be different depending on what you find but you still need to keep your concentration. What are the lessons to be learnt, to cultivate mindfulness, to operate with thought, even under the most extreme of situations? What are the lessons the corporate world can learn?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): So, definitely, these 72 hours without food or water is something that happens because of training. In all Special Forces, in any commando training, you are deprived of sleep, you are deprived of food, and you are fatigued. As a matter of fact, in commando training, we are kept under huge stress and that starts from day one. One of the easiest ways of stress is that they never tell you what your next class is. So, you have no idea whether after you finish this, you should eat a hell of a lot or not at all, because the next could be unarmed combat which means you will vomit out everything that you have eaten, or it could be another 12-hour trek which means if you didn't eat you are screwed. That uncertainty is kept. Probably, one night you will end at 2 o'clock and your instructors would wake you up at 4 o'clock, so you would get 2 hours of sleep. Or they would wake you up at 2:05, in five minutes. So, you have no idea when you lay down to sleep whether you are going to get five minutes of sleep, two hours of sleep, or no sleep at all. So, it is a part of training. There is no doubt about it; there is an element of training there. But like many other trainings, including your marathon training — as you are probably aware, when you're training for a half marathon you actually never run 21 kilometres during your training. The maximum you will run is 18, because the last day, when you run for the main marathon is when you get into the zone and that zone takes you. So, if you are asking me, 26/11, how did those troops perform for 72 hours? It's part training, part being in the zone. Obviously, zone is an element of muscle memory, so the more you train... we have a saying in the army which is very, very popular that 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you will bleed in war'. So, the more amount of time you spend in trying to train for mindfulness...

For example, I know a lot of my friends who either run or cycle. They choose to run or cycle because it's a solitude sport for them; it's not a group sport. While they are running, they are thinking and when they are thinking, the body goes into that mechanical zone and then one leg after another and another and they don't realize that they have covered like 20 kilometres or 15 kilometres. So, you are able to disassociate from physical trauma and almost have your mind operating as if it's in another body. It's not getting these signals that your feet are hurting; your back is hurting and all. That's what our ancestors spoke about when they talked about meditation being able to disassociate from pain or pleasure or whatever, so this is nothing new. This is our ancient philosophy and all of that coming back together.

I think, in our corporate world, the corporates to my mind need some of the — I don't really know what to call it — softer side or a different side, but they do need a different side of training now. Our training has been so domain knowledge, so framework driven, you hear senior people talk about how they are Black Belt Six Sigma, they are quality black belts; it's technical, it's domain, it's acquiring three-letter acronyms behind your name, whether its certifications or whatever. But the softer side, negotiation skills, persuasion skills, storytelling skills, leading without authority, the ability to sort of become creative to say that 'OK, fine, I need an answer to this problem, I am going to take up my car, take up my bike, go off somewhere and in three days' time, I'll come back, and I'll come back with the answers to these major questions'. I don't think those aspects are being looked into. I think somewhere we got seduced with this absolute falsehood of multitasking and digital assistance and all of that, but I don't think that's true.

If you go back to your childhood, at least mine, I remember, on TV, there used to be three programs worth watching: one was a feature film in Hindi, one was one of those English programs, 'Secrets of The Sea,' or 'Here is Lucy,' and there used to be 'Chitrahhar'. That 'Chitrahhar' would have maybe about six songs and you would sort of look at the watch and look at the song and say maybe there is one more song, I could maybe just squeeze one more song that would come out of it. Now, you fast forward to an era where there are hundreds of channels but what do you do? Today, when you go to TV — just listen to what I am saying and map it with your behaviour you flip through channels until you stop at a movie that you have already seen, and you watch a little bit of that movie, and then you move on. So, you don't even invest in watching a new movie. You want to see glimpses of a movie that you have already seen. Now, this whole notion of multitasking and I see a lot of alpha leaders becoming almost macho about it, that I am able to do seven tasks I think a lot of our leaders in the corporate world don't take out the time to just think, just to introspect. They need their diary filled with activity to make themselves feel productive at the end of the day. So, if someone says, I worked for 14 hours a day and I had like 23 meetings, he or she believes that that day was a very productive day. It may have been, from a mechanical point of view. They may have gotten more widgets done, but were they able to think out of the box? Were they able to come up with a seminal idea? I think the answer is, you can't come up with seminal ideas in routine; it's not possible. Routine is not an environment conducive to out-of-the-box ideas.

The ability to disassociate yourself from the mechanical part of it. Having the courage to do that, to say that I don't need to appear constantly busy to remind myself that I am a leader or to hold my own in front of my subordinates or, more importantly, my boss. I think it requires a little bit courage for the leader to say, 'It's OK, I may not appear frightfully busy, but whenever I implement something it actually moves the needle'.

DJ: Just too maybe make it real, any rituals you've seen effective leaders use, to create that space for deep thought?

RR: I think a lot of leaders now, at least some of the people who I know, they invest time in sports. To my mind, it's a surrogate for having quality time with yourself. So, when you are running, when you are swimming, when you are cycling, or when you are trekking, or whatever, you are actually pretending to do an activity, but actually, it's a very mechanical activity. When you're swimming 50 laps, you're not looking at the scenery. You are beginning that ritual and you are disassociating your mind from your body. It's just de-linking and the moment you de-link, your mind then starts going into directions that you've not.

Some other leaders actually take up areas or reading that is completely unrelated to their core subjects or they indulge in experiences which are completely away from... sports is one, it could be arts, it could be music. I know a CEO of a firm who does metal work; he actually makes metal parts. So, he is a mechanic, so to speak. By the way, he's found an alternate living there, because he makes customized motorcycle parts for Harley Davidson. You write to the guy and he'll build you a seat or whatever. He is a CEO of a Fortune whatever company and he does that as a hobby. Or someone else does carpentry or whatever.

The intent is to disassociate from your routine and go into another place. By the way, that is the essence of all great stories. I don't know if you've ever thought of it that way, but if you look at any great story, its essential components are: there is a protagonist and there is an antagonist and they have a first clash. In the first clash, the antagonist always wins, and the protagonist goes away to another place. In that place, he finds his Yoda, or he finds his guru, and he learns something there, and then he comes back, and he confronts that problem, and he wins. So, I think, this necessity of going away to another world, whether that world is a physical world or a metaphysical world, it's a disassociation. It's extremely important for heroes and heroines and leaders. It is extremely important.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is something that came up in my previous conversation with Amish Tripathi as well. He spoke about how he went to Kashi for 3-4 weeks for writing one of his books. The key takeaway for me from this is that given that we are often surrounded by stimuli in a world where there is a tsunami of data hitting us, it is all the more critical that we bake in quiet time for us to reflect and move forward. Whether that is meditation, sport, painting or something else probably depends on the individual preference but there is a crying need for a "switch off" activity. Cal Newport - in his book - Deep Work - talks about this in detail and says that this might well be the biggest competitive differentiator for individuals in the job market of the future.

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- 03.00 Capt. Raghu Raman - The Full Conversation
- 03.01 Capt. Raghu Raman - Armed forces as a career option
- 03.02 Capt. Raghu Raman - How the army looks for potential
- 03.03 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning across cultures
- 03.04 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning from the army to the corporate world
- 03.05 Capt. Raghu Raman - Establishing a common language in the army
- 03.06 Capt. Raghu Raman - Z-KITBAG: Communication lessons from the army
- 03.07 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transmitting intent down the chain
- 03.08 Capt. Raghu Raman - Building culture — Lessons from the army
- 03.09 Capt. Raghu Raman - Building grit
- 03.10 Capt. Raghu Raman - Driving mindfulness and deep work
- 03.11 Capt. Raghu Raman - In summary — Playing to potential

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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