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Context to the nugget

Son of a tea planter, Papa CJ took the predictable path through school and college. Hear him walk us through his early struggles which led to him manoeuvring into the challenging and non-trivial transition from Oxford, to consulting, to doing 250 stand-up comedy shows in his first 10 months! Look out for tips on leveraging the asset of relationships that we all have.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to rewind the clock. You grew up in India, and then went to Oxford at a pretty young age and then you were working with a reputed consulting firm. Then, a year or two later, stand-up happened. That's a non-trivial transition. Walk us through how that passage of play happened.

Papa CJ (CJ): That's a long passage of play you're asking me to walk you through. So, I grew up in a very simple family. My father was a tea planter. He worked for one company for 35 years, eventually went to the head office in Kolkata. Now, as a child of middle-class parents, growing up, what do you do? I mean, we all have this mentality of '*beta, settle ho jao*'. Nobody knows what settle actually means. I think, the basic idea is you do school, you do college, you try and do a post-grad degree, you get married, and you have two children. Then, you're settled. Never in the Indian way of thinking is there ever a concept of a gap year, for example, or a why don't you go out and experiment and discover what it is that you love doing?

So, I followed the traditional path. I finished my schooling from Sana [Lawrence School, Sanawar]. I got into Delhi University. Post that, I took any job I could. I used to walk the streets of Kolkata, trying to convince shops to stock Coca Cola. Then, for six months, I worked with Unilever. Now, the fact is, India is such a massive country with such a large population, it is so difficult to compete. I think, today, if you want to be a waiter in a five-star hotel, you probably need a post-grad degree. So, a BCom isn't enough. I did the foundation exam for the Chartered Accountancy course. I got an all-India rank, but it was just so dull, I wanted to stab myself.

So, MBA was my way out. I remember studying for the GMAT. In fact, I almost failed second-year College, because in the middle of the second-year exams, there is a friend of mine, who was school captain, Sherwood [College], and we were in Delhi. And I said, 'Listen, let's go play golf,' and he said, 'Where should we go?' I said, 'Let's go to Shimla.' And he said, 'No, we can't go middle of the exams.' I said, 'OK, let's toss a coin.' So, we tossed a coin, I won, went to Shimla, came back, I failed two exams, got exact 40%, half a mark less and I would have to repeat second-year college, and my

friend, school captain Sherwood College, failed second year. Then, in my third year, I gave half my papers from second year again. I studied for the GMAT, I worked really hard and somehow got in the Oxford MBA program. Even with the Oxford MBA program, I was going to be the youngest MBA ever because I was 22, and they gave me deferred admission for two years later. I kind of negotiated my way in, because I had got into Manchester Business School and a few others at that point, and I called Oxford and said, listen, you want me, you got to take me now. So, they literally called back three hours later and said, the admission committee has met and we have decided to let you come in this year.

So, went to Oxford. Oxford was a tough year, because I had to take a loan for my MBA program. My dad was a tea planter who started work at 825 rupees a month. I used to look at Starbucks Coffee from outside and could not dream of going in, because I could not imagine paying 2 pounds for a cup of coffee. I did more job applications than my entire course put together. I interviewed with, you name it, whether it's a Goldman Sachs, or McKinsey or L'Oréal, I interviewed with everybody. But most people didn't want to hire a 22-year-old MBA, because I was an MBA, so I wasn't an undergrad, yet I didn't have that work experience. Somehow, I landed a job.

DJ: At the point of admission, what stood out for them to admit a 21-year-old or a 22-year-old?

CJ: My GMAT scores were really high and I was a generally sharp kid. They must have seen something in the application. I have no clue, man. When you get into some place, you think it's easy. If you don't get into it, you think, man, that's a tough place to get into. In fact, I remember, I was applying to Harvard and Stanford as well. And you know how all these essays they have similar questions, 'Where do you see yourself five years from now' and things like that? So, I did a cut and paste job and I sent my entire application to Harvard Business School telling them how I really wanted to go to Stanford. They didn't even bother to reply with a rejection letter. I remember thinking at that time, damn it, 125 dollars!

So, yeah, that happened. Got into a consulting firm in London, started working there. Even that consulting job, for the first three years, I went as a young kid who wanted to change the world. I wanted to learn, I wanted to work hard, I wanted to achieve. But for three years in that firm, I was completely wasted. I spent half my time on the bench. I had six different jobs it was the kind of firm where you could get into different departments, it wasn't pure consulting. And this was the year 2000, so a lot of people were losing jobs, but purely because I was good with people, I kept getting employed in different parts of the company. Then, eventually, I figured out a way to get a sabbatical on 35% pay. In fact, I went to my boss, listen I want to take a year off, and he said, no, you can't take a year off. So, I spoke to a HR partner who was a friend of mine. I figured out a deal where you could get one year off on 35% pay, went to my boss, sold him the idea, and both of us left the company on a sabbatical.

Now, that was the year when I tried lots of things. I set up some schools for underprivileged kids. I learnt how to fly paragliders. I trekked up to Mount Everest base camp. And I went to the Edinburgh Festival and I saw stand-up comedy for the first time and I just thought, this is amazing. I mean, here's a guy on stage talking rubbish. He's got a drink in one hand, a microphone in the other hand, and he is just having fun, and that's his job. I thought to myself, I'm going to try this. So, three months later, I got up on stage. Did 250 shows in my first 10 months and didn't look back.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Three things struck me in this piece. One is the notion of Going slow to go fast. I come across several leaders who try to change trajectories when they are driving in full speed and that is often structurally difficult to pull off. I am a big believer in the notion of you need to go slow sometimes to go fast later in life. Living a full-on life leaves very little time for taking stock of the inner world. Second is that you need to engage the key stakeholders and manage the transition carefully and smartly. A friend of mine was a Partner in McKinsey and was starting up a company. When his company went through a turbulent patch, he went back to McKinsey and consulted with them part-time till the business fortunes picked up. The specifics vary but there is often an opportunity to proactively architect the next steps carefully by engaging the key stakeholders. The third piece is that the answer for what next is not obvious and one need to try different experiences till one arrives at what makes sense. I am a big fan of the work of Herminia Ibarra, a professor in INSEAD, who has written the book working identity. In the book, she talks about crafting a portfolio of experiments and then slowly gravitating towards what makes sense than a sudden shift

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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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