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Context to the nugget

“If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.” Hear how Papa CJ took the plunge into the gruelling yet satisfying world of stand-up comedy. A mix of conviction, grit, pragmatism, sacrifice and passion helped him make this journey. This nugget gives us an insight into planning and being prepared for transitions.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Let’s talk about those three months. Again, 90 days is sort of the golden period for leaders to step into organizations or shift careers. Give us a sense of what those 90 days were like. How did you prepare for your first show?

Papa CJ (CJ): I think, I just started watching a lot more comedy. And they had a small stand-up comedy course in London. I don’t remember actually learning anything there. And I don’t think the people on that course actually thought I had any potential, but what happened was you found a bunch of guys, with whom you could struggle together with. So, there were 10 of us who really wanted to be comedians, and we would go to the same open mic nights, and we would talk to each other and try and get shows together. So, that camaraderie kind of helped build that platform from which to leap off.

DJ: 250 shows in ten months is like 25 shows a month, which is like a show a night roughly. That’s brutal!

CJ: I was the hardest working comedian in the UK. Normally, there’s 500 comedians competing for the same gig. I was the kind of guy who’d go anywhere, anytime, for no money. And a lot of shows were outside London. So, for example, I would leave London at about 4 o’clock in the afternoon, drive to some city in the UK with a bunch of other comedians, and do a show there. I was nervous. I wouldn’t eat, probably couldn’t afford food at that point of time. Drive back, get dropped off in the outskirts of London at 2 o’clock in the morning. I would pay the driver my share of petrol; keep in mind, I wasn’t getting paid for any of these shows. I would change three different buses to get back home and get home at about 4 o’clock in the morning. I did this every single day for an entire year. At the end of that year, you have no money, no friends, no relationships, and no life, but every single comedy promoter in the country knows your name. That’s where you start from.

Why it worked was, I actually had no idea how difficult it was or how low the probability of success was. So, as they say, ignorance is bliss. I just kept my head down and I kept going at it. But even after

a year of doing that, I went completely broke. So, I took up a job with a recruitment firm. I used to work in the day and perform at night. But, I think, the important thing to keep in mind is that, often people say, I'll do it as a hobby and I will get a job. I may have been spending eight hours at work and 10 minutes on stage, but in my head, I was doing stand-up comedy and the job was on the side to support me, until I could get to a point where I didn't need to do it anymore.

DJ: What gave you the conviction that stand-up comedy was your calling or sweet spot? The reason I ask is, often, when people are confronted with such a situation there's always a stop-loss point, where you say, 'enough, tried, let's go back to the regular life'. Did you have that point?

CJ: I think, the upside is that what you call the regular life, I knew I never wanted to go back to that. It's like having a fire under your backside and something else in front. Even if what's in front isn't motivating you as much, you know that what's behind is something you never want to go back to. There's that old saying which I've always believed, that if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. Too many of us sit in that boat and put our foot out and touch the water and then say, oh, I'll take a call. It doesn't work like that. Sometimes, you've got to just jump out. I believe that if you love what you do, you'll get good at it and if you get good at it, the money will come. The problem is, in most artistic fields, that gap between loving it and the money coming is indefinite, and we don't know if it will ever come. So that's the period you have to last out.

For me, I was just passionate about stand-up comedy. I love doing it. There was nothing I would rather be doing. And because I had managed to save up enough to get me through two years, I knew I could go that distance without having to fall back. Also, I had an extremely supportive environment. My parents completely supported me. Now, 10 years later, they tell me, listen, we thought you'd do it as a hobby and stop in six months, but you just kept going on. But at no point did they ever make me feel that maybe I should do something else. So, that was invaluable.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The key take-away for me in this nugget was that in creative fields, it takes a while for the commercial case to become evident. Till that point in time, one needs to be pragmatic and ensure that cash flows are taken care of. The related point is that if you expect the creative field to financially support you from Day 1, that pressure can come in the way of you having fun and impact the creativity and that could set you off on a negative loop. A similar point came up in my earlier conversation with Amish Tripathi where he spoke about how he quit his job only when his royalty cheque overtook the salary cheque!

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End of nugget transcription

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- 04.02 Papa CJ - Oxford MBA, consulting, stand-up
- 04.03 Papa CJ - Plunging into stand-up
- 04.04 Papa CJ - Stand-up: Unknown unknowns
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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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