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Context to the nugget

How does being a business leader in India differ from leading in other international markets? Hear Ravi elaborate on what you need to succeed in India by sharing some personal experiences. Don't miss the bit about Jack Welch of GE and the concept of a younger mentor.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Give us an insight into transitioning to India? In your mind, what are the common failure modes of people coming into India from a different market?

Ravi Venkatesan (RV): I came back to India in 1996, partly because India had gone through economic liberalization in 1991. I said, 'Wow, it's something different going on and I've never worked there, so it will be fun to spend at least some time there'. The other reason is my parents were aging and I wanted to be a little bit closer to them as they were going through some medical issues. I never intended to come back for good. In fact, for the first three years, I left all my things in storage in the US, and one quarter at a time, I would pay to extend the storage. I had a hedge, because I wasn't sure just how long things were going to work.

I had come in as the CEO, at the age of 32, of a failing joint venture with Tata Motors. The environment I stepped into was extremely hostile, because the two partners, Cummins and Tata Motors, were at loggerheads. There was a very powerful feudal leader at Tata Motors a man who just died called Vinod Rawal. He looked at me and said, 'You've never worked, you're 32 years old, you're more American than you're Indian'. He was quite hostile and I realized that somehow winning his trust was central to my success and that of the JV, just an instinct. So, I just focused on being humble and cultivating sort of an elder brother-younger brother relationship with him. I thought that was important. So, understanding instinctively only now can I retrospect and go back and rationalize these things understanding stakeholders and who matters and managing that was just survival instinct.

The second piece was, you better be a fast learner. If you're going to do transitions and I think today you're forced, whether you like it or not, to make these transitions every so often we have to be very agile in learning about new environments and new situations. So, I was a fairly quick study.

The third thing is tenacity. Everything in India is going to take much longer than you ever think it will. So, what should happen in one year will likely take three or four years? So, you've just got to hang in there and one day, it all pops and you're rewarded. So, those are some of the things I did, but I think a general sense of humility goes a long way in all these transitions.

DJ: Give us an insight into, from a leadership perspective, how do you nuance your leadership style in India?

RV: There are some things you've got to realize are different. First, India is a much more volatile and turbulent environment. I mean, just take demonetization. And this sort of stuff is fairly routinely happening. So, as a leader of an organization, you just have to be far more agile and resilient at the same time, than you would in a developed market, where things are much more stable and predictable, although they are becoming more like us.

The second thing that is different is, people capabilities are still quite modest. Remember India opened up only in 1991, so it's hardly been 25 years since we really had open business environment, and talent started learning how to operate in this environment. So, in contrast to, let's say, to a Germany or the US or Sweden, the depth of talent is quite modest yet, although it's improving. So, as a leader, you have to teach a lot, and you can't get impatient, and you can't just assume people will do things the way you wish. So, you have to be leading from the front, you have to be teaching a lot, and it's action learning, and you've got to be endlessly tough and patient. So, that style is quite different, I think.

The third thing is, you have to engage emotionally with your people. I think that's far more important in several cultures, including our culture. People expect that. They respond well to an emotional engagement. You can't be this distant, aloof, transactional leader. I don't think that works anywhere, but certainly it doesn't work too well out here. So, these are some of the challenges of our environment.

DJ: Picking up on one of the themes you alluded to, leading people who are much older than you. If specifically reflect on the developments in the start-up ecosystem, as the companies grow, there comes a point where you need to get experienced people to run functions or run BUs. What are some of the lessons in making them work with you and driving towards what you're trying to achieve?

RV: Again, I was very conscious of the fact that when I started out my career, I was very often the youngest person in the room, at least till I turned about 40.

DJ: You were 35 when you were Chairman of Cummins in India?

RV: Yeah and it was big. In 1998-99, there weren't that many big listed companies and to be a Chair of one of those was considered a big deal, but today, that's incredibly common. I think, the most important thing is treat people with respect, and that's particularly important if you've got somebody older reporting to you. I think, there is an expectation; India's still conscious of age and so forth. So, respect goes a long way. Most of all, whatever issues they may have following a younger person, if you're passionate about what you do, if you're competent at what you do, you listen to their ideas and treat them with respect, all these things about gender, age, all these things tend to vaporize very quickly. Today, I am at the opposite end, usually leading people much younger.

DJ: Any lessons on getting them to listen to you?

RV: Well, one of the things I do is, I expect them, I formally tell them, and I need you to teach me 'X'. So, there's a young entrepreneur I'm advising, helping or whatever. I said, 'Listen, I need you to teach me about bitcoin'. He sort of assumed that oh, a guy from Microsoft, board of Infosys, chairman of some bank, surely you're joking, aren't you? And I said, 'No, I really need you to explain this to me in detail'. They really love it. Jack Welch was particularly very good at this. He used to say,

every business leader in GE in the '90s needs to have a formal mentor who's much younger, teaching them about technology and digital and all those sorts of things.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The notion of having a younger mentor is so simple yet so profound. Given the pace of change especially on technology and some of the related areas, it just makes so much sense to have a formalized learning relationship with somebody who is much younger and more knowledgeable about some of these new developments.

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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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