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Context to the nugget

Having worked in Cummins and moved up the ladder, Ravi took up the challenge of being the CEO of Microsoft India at just 40 years of age and against the advice of family and friends. This was an industry he knew nothing about and a culture his friends thought he wouldn't adapt to. How did he make this transition successful? What did he pay attention to? Hint: The anecdote of his interview with Bill Gates is very interesting.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): After a long stint in Cummins, you moved on to take the leadership role in Microsoft in India. Give us an insight into how one could transition across industries effectively, with the wisdom of hindsight.

Ravi Venkatesan (RV): I was very nervous about that shift, because the only place I'd ever worked in was Cummins and I'd worked my way up, so it was very much my home. I was leaving home, and I was also moving to a profoundly different industry, against all the advice of my friends and family and mentors, whether it was my mom or whether it was Nandan Nilekani. They said, don't do this, it's going to end badly, because you don't understand technology, Microsoft is a super tough transactional culture, you're a relationship guy. So, it was a tough decision. I remember thinking that OK, I'm 40 now, if I don't do this now, when? When I turn 50, which will I regret more, having joined Microsoft and got fired or having been too timid to even take it on? And I said, I'll feel worse with the latter, so let me go, but again let me frame it not as a job but as a project and so we don't know how long it will last. It ended up lasting eight years.

Now, what did I do that helped, in retrospect? I think, the first thing is, I was very conscious. I didn't know anything about the industry, so I listened a lot. In fact, I remember my interview process. I got interviewed by Bill Gates who used to then interview every person Microsoft hired. So, I said, 'Bill, I must be frank. I think you can find a better qualified person. I don't understand technology.' He said, 'That's great. Maybe you'll listen.' And he was exactly right. I listened a lot before making up my mind, and I think, that was really helpful, because it was a very arrogant culture at that point in time.

The second thing I realized is that the team we had was high on enthusiasm and low on maturity. So, I had to build a very new team, a much better team, incredibly quickly. I think that was really helpful. So, as you make these transitions, quickly figure out who's on the bus, who's off the bus and then get a core team of committed people around you, because on your own, it's pretty tough.

Third thing was again stakeholder management. What I realized is, at the end of the day, Bill and Steve [Ballmer] were still pretty hands on and this is, therefore, in many senses, a 'lala' company. It

might have been a 30-billion-dollar company, but it was still very promoter-driven in an Indian sense. So, it's important that the promoters like you. The rite of passage in Microsoft was that you needed to take on Bill and Steve, and it didn't matter whether you won or lost the argument, but the courage to stand up and hold your ground was the rite of passage. So, within nine months of my joining the company, I made sure that we found an issue where I took a stance. And once that moment is over, you are in the good books, and if you're perceived to be in the good books of Bill, whether you are or you're not, the organization tends to be very much more supportive. So, I think, you have to decode the culture of an organization, who really matters, and learn how to navigate all that.

Performance matters. At the end of the day, whichever organization you are in, fairly quickly if you start performing and your unit starts performing, lot of things fall in place. I remember, the year I joined, Microsoft was handing out bonuses for growing 14%, and I was shocked, because I came from Cummins, which is a diesel-engine business which was growing faster. So, I said, this is the Hindu rate of growth. And the very first year, we took it to some 28%, and year three was 35%, year four was 45%. So, there is a certain thing about performance which really does earn you a lot of credibility and space to operate. So, I'd say, yeah, these were some of the things.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: While there is a bunch of things the transitioning leader should do to move from one context to another, I would also underscore the role of the hiring leader in these situations. There is significant opportunity that is often missed in setting the incoming leader up for success. Managing the organization's expectations in terms of what to expect from the new leader and when can go a long way to give the new leader some breathing space to come up to speed.

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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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