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Context to the nugget

There is an inherent assumption that successful executives can easily transition into non-executive roles on the boards of organizations. However, as Ravi points out, that is not necessarily true. Hear him talk about the special responsibilities and skills of a Board member. He also puts forward four questions you should ask yourself before taking on a non-executive responsibility.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Give us an insight into the transition that leaders need to go through, from being an effective leader to being an effective non-executive board member?

Ravi Venkatesan (RV): I think, the most important thing to realize is, it's no longer about you if you are a non-executive chair or whatever; it's now about the CEO. You're not the most important person in the room or the world. The spotlight is appropriately, and needs to be, on the executive leader, the CEO or whoever. Your role is actually to do everything within your power to help that person be more successful. So, you have to make that shift. It's not easy, because for so long it's been about you. Very authoritarian leaders, who may have been very successful, find it hard to make the shift. You need to have modest ego; at least, be willing to put your ego aside for those moments.

Having decided that it's about somebody else's success, you're going to have to think through how you develop that working relationship. It's different if you are the Chair and you're working with the CEO, and it's different if you're simply a board member, non-executive director working with the CEO. The ways in which you influence are completely different. As a Chair, I think, what you need to do is, have the capacity to demonstrate tough love. First, the CEO has to sense that you truly are committed to their success, but you are unafraid to hold the mirror up from time to time, if that's what needed. Hopefully, eventually, you get into a trust-based relationship, a true pilot-co-pilot, being aware that you're the co-pilot.

DJ: Specifically, a few things that need to be unlearned? Where do you see the failure modes?

RV: Ego. It's very, very hard actually, because CEOs are very focused on getting things done. That's their job and if they're good, they're very, very focused on getting things done. Sometimes, you wish that the CEO was more inclusive, truly saw this as a partnership. They're just too busy, getting things done. You can't feel bad about these things. You have to figure out the ways in which you're going to engage with him and the organization in a predictable way. If there's a very fine boundary, you've got to make sure you walk the edge of that boundary line without transgressing it and becoming executive and giving directions and becoming very random. The worst thing for an organization is if there are multiple cooks in the kitchen, multiple power centres. You've got to be careful to not

create that dynamic. So, you have to work through the CEO, yet you have to engage with the organization in a broader sense to make sure you understand, have a sense, finger on the pulse, a sense of what's going on. So, it's a very, very fine balance, I am learning.

DJ: Is there a difference to the way you process the opportunities that come your way? For example, one is sort of looking at opportunities to be an executive leader, as you're going through your career, but once you've transitioned from that phase to evaluating board opportunities, in your mind, what are the three-four questions people should ask before they take up a board position?

RV: I think the single biggest thing you've to look at is the value system of the organization and the people at the top, particularly, if it's a promoter-driven company. Then, are you comfortable with the value system? Because at the end of the day, you have a fiduciary responsibility, you're legally liable, so you want to make sure that you are happy with that.

The second thing you have to ask yourself is, 'Why do they want me?' Am I just ticking the box on some aspect of diversity? Or are they genuinely interested and open and welcoming of the experience and perspectives I'll be bringing? Because it's very frustrating if you are just a tick box, and they really don't want you, and you figure it out after the fact.

You have to ask yourself, do I really like the CEO and the Chair? Because they are the two most powerful figures in the boardroom and a lot of the dynamic is shaped by these two individuals. So, you've got to feel comfortable with the chemistry with these two people, because otherwise, you'll struggle mightily, both around your emotions as well as the ability to have impact and influence on things.

Finally, you've got to be thoughtful about how am I going to add value. It's not always obvious. Most of the time, you add value during moments of crisis. In peace time, things are just trucking along, there's not much to do. It's the difference between a peace-time general and a war-time general. So, you have to think through, sharply, the ways in which you are going to make a difference.

DJ: In your mind, what are the two-three must haves to be a great board member? What's that delta which differentiates the great board members from the average?

RV: I think, first is commitment. If you're taking this on, take it seriously. Read the material they send you, be intensely present during the meetings and discussions rather than checking your email or reading your iPad. I see a lot of board members not 100% engaged. Only if you are engaged can you really have insights. That's just so obvious, but I mention it.

The second thing is, I think the most important way in which you make a difference is by asking the right question at the right moment in the right way. Most effective board members I've seen over the years are those who are able to articulate that perfect question that was on everybody's mind but didn't get expressed. This person precipitates it and then the whole conversation just stops and everybody gravitates to that, and sometimes, it can result in very, very different decisions, and so forth. But again, if you're not fully engaged, it's hard to do.

A third important thing is to take on responsibilities. Attending the board meetings is just one part of it. Being active on board committees, chairing a board committee whether it's audit or investment committee or whatever it is, I think, is important, because committees is where the work happens, and that's what gives you influence in discussions.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Moving from Exec to a Non Exec role is like moving from the world of doing and getting things done to the world of Listening and asking the right question". That often again comes back to self-awareness and having a constructive feedback mechanism at the Board level to ensure that one could have effective Board meetings.

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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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