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Context to the nugget

Culture is often seen as something that large organizations need to worry about. However, if a start-up tackles the challenges of culture from the very beginning and clearly defines its competencies and values, it could be a significant competitive differentiator especially during the scaling up phase. Hear Abhijit elaborate on the start-up ecosystem in this nugget.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): To move to a different theme, I am curious about this whole start-up ecosystem. As companies grow, clearly there is a point where there is a need for people with experience to start coming and leading chunks of the business. What are some of the lessons to be learnt on managing this transition well? For this set of people who have brick and mortar skills, trying to settle into a company which is young, which is growing in the digital era, with a bunch of people who probably speak a different language and are from a different generation. What are some of the themes that emerge in terms of handling these transitions well so that they don't become points of fracture?

Abhijit Bhaduri (AB): Most of the times, if you look at the start-ups, and this is fairly universal, which is, you cannot think of having a start-up without a technology pass, somebody who is the CMO, somebody who is looking at security, somebody who is the CFO, one could sort of go on with that list. But it's pretty common to find companies who do not have a CHRO. Most of the times, if you talk to founders, the best-case scenario they say, 'It's so important I will do it myself', which is, of course, really like saying, 'I think surgery is very important, so I would like to do it by myself' or something to that effect. Start-ups when they fail, they do not fail because well, of course, they fail because they do not have a great product market fit, but the ones which make it past that stage they inevitably face challenges which are driven by the fact that they haven't focused on the softer issues of building an organization. This could be the way that you've designed the org structure, the way that you've designed the leadership team capabilities, the kind of org culture that you're building.

Some of the largest unicorns around the world today, if we are looking at it, they face challenges which are really around culture, they're the softer issues which are about what kind of values are we going to hold people to. The moment you actually make those choices, it changes the trajectory in multiple ways. Because if you say we are going to have these values, these are the ones which we are articulating, these two or three things that we think are core values for the organization, when you articulate something like that, parallels, you have to ask yourself, 'Would I be willing to let go of a candidate who's extremely competent we need just those skills but that person does not display these values that we have identified as critical?' If that were to be the case, how would we deal with

it? And most of the times, these are things that we haven't thought of, so we say, 'OK, you know, this time we'll make an exception, we'll coach this guy, but get this guy on board'. The moment you start doing it, you have to be aware that you've let go of a very vital piece and the implications of this are not visible in the short run. Therefore, most people do not understand how serious an error it is and they realize it only when there is a crisis.

There are enough examples of companies in the world which are very successful otherwise, which have had this kind of a challenge. They've had challenges of culture, which is how it explodes, because of either a harassment suit or it could be about the way some senior official has behaved in public, all of these things. And later on, many of these people have turned back and said, 'I need leadership help, I need someone to coach me, I think I need to grow up, I need to be mature'. These are all the words people have used. This is something that you need to do not after you've hit a certain benchmark in terms of turnover, which is how people look at it: these are luxuries we'll do once we hit a certain turnover or scale. These are things you start doing the moment you're hiring beyond the original lot of people who started to form the company. That is very hard, because now you are saying that OK, first of all, nobody wants to join me, now if I sort of sift out people based on values and all this fuzzy stuff, how am I going to ever run the business? And that's exactly where compromises start to take place.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The key takeaway here is that Culture is often seen as something that large organizations should think and worry about. But if handled well early enough, it could be key glue that holds the organization together and could become a competitive differentiator as the organization scales up over time. Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com

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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