



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. Below it are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129*', a Twitter icon with the handle '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with the website 'playtopotential.com'. To the right, it says 'Also available on:' followed by icons for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the far right is a portrait of Deepak Jayaraman, labeled 'Podcast Host' and 'Deepak Jayaraman'. A small note at the bottom left reads: '*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

Context to the nugget

As an entrepreneur, staying relevant as the company goes through turbo-charged growth can be a challenge. Nandan talks about how he had to reinvent himself and his style at various points as Infosys grew from a start up to IPO, to listing on the NASDAQ and when it hit USD 1 Billion in revenues.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The Infosys journey in about 20 years, you built Infosys, you went public and then you became the CEO. What were the key inflection points from a leadership standpoint, if you reflect on your personal journey as the company grew?

Nandan Nilekani (NN): I think there's a very important message, especially for founders who want to remain at the helm of their company for a long time. We see that often today, even in India, in start-ups the founders often lose their role to professional CEOs; even in the US, it's quite common. Apart from having vision and all that stuff, [what you need] is the ability to understand that you need to reinvent yourself at every point. That's very important. So, for example, up to the time we went public in 1993, we were a private company and we all did everything. That model was fine when the company was still just a few million dollars. But as we looked at going public, initially in India, in 1993, we realized that this model was not going to work. Secondly, we realized that as global competition became more intensive, we couldn't be just a small unknown company. We had to be visible. It required a change in strategy and that also meant that we had to bring in talented people from the outside. That meant that we had to change our role. It was less about doing anything ourselves, it was more about creating a structure, the strategy, getting the right leadership team, empowering them properly, and so on. So, I think the first transition happened in 1993, when we went from being a private company to a public company. Also, when we took off on our growth curve. So, that was one transition, going from a bunch of founders doing all the things to creating a professional management and creating enough space to attract high-quality talent and give them the empowerment to perform. That's very important, because if founders bring in people and then don't empower them, then it doesn't work.

I think the second transition was in 1999, when we became the first Indian company to list on NASDAQ. That brought us to a whole new level of visibility but also accountability you know, the level of detail that US analysts look at your company it was a whole new experience for us. So, we realized that we had to raise the game even further, which means a very high sense of corporate governance, very good predictability of business, being able to explain business good and bad to analysts, all new skills had to be learnt. That was, to me, the second big transition.

Then, I think the third transition was after the crash, in 2001, when we realized that we had to really make our products and services even more value-added to attract customers. Then, I think, when we crossed the billion-dollar mark, because after billion, we said how we go to 10 billion, which Infosys reached recently. So, I think these are all the major transition points.

DJ: When you get key talent from the outside, what's been your experience in terms of what it takes to empowering them and helping them succeed?

NN: I think it's to realize that they are not going to do everything the way you do it. So, there's no point in saying why are you not doing it the way I did it. But making sure that as long as they have the right intentions, they have the right talent, and they have the right skills, then giving them the space to operate. Be very clear in your strategy, your articulation, your future direction, your rules, your budgets, everything. Reduce ambiguity, reduce unpredictability, because professional managers often get rattled by volatility of decision-making. Putting a structure in place that gives them continuity of purpose, and empowering them financially, empowering them in decision-making, and visibility, making sure that they also become recognized in their field. All these are important things.

DJ: In terms of your transition, when you took on the Infosys CEO role from Mr Narayana Murthy, two things there: one is taking on leadership when someone else has been a leader so that sort of style transition; second is that's probably a time when you were probably leading some of your other co-founders and may be some of them were technically reporting in to you?

NN: All of them were, yeah.

DJ: So, what are the lessons to be learnt on managing that transition?

NN: Fortunately, in Infosys, we had that discipline that whoever was elected the leader, the others would follow him. So, that was one good thing. The second is again, give enough space, and give them enough room to do their jobs, give them enough visibility and so on. I think I also very consciously said I will spend my time on building the global aspect of our business, which is how to become a global brand, how to become internationally recognized, how to do rainmaking with global customers. That was what I did. So, that was required to take it from 600 million to 3 billion. It had another benefit that a lot of the roles inside the company still had to be done.

DJ: So, it's also about carving out a piece which is different and distinct and fit for purpose given the company's evolution?

NN: Yeah.

DJ: A start-up is often going through turbo-charged growth. From the Infosys journey, how do leaders scale up the leadership muscle to stay relevant?

NN: So, I think that's a very good point. The leadership style at one million is different from the leadership style at 100 million, it's different from one billion, different from 10 billion. I think being able to recognize that each of them are different scale, require different leadership... It's not doing it but getting it done from others. It's about visioning better, it's about empowering better. These are all very important skills. I mean, if you look at Amazon's journey, it's 20 years now from going public. It's grown from nothing to this massive corporation, because Jeff Bezos was able to reinvent himself as the scale goes up.

DJ: And how did you grow as a person? If you had to decode how you grew?

NN: I didn't have a coach like you. So, we had to learn it by ourselves, everything was on our own. None of us had an MBA degree, none of us had worked in a large company before, and none of us had classical management experience kind of thing. I think, once you have a goal and if you do it very logically, you can actually say, OK, with this goal, this is what I need to do.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of something I picked from an interview of Phil Libin, the person who founded the company Evernote. He talks about the advice he received from Hiroshi Mikitani - the CEO of the Japanese retail giant - Rakuten. It's a USD 15 Billion dollar company. To talk about their relevance on the global stage, their logo will start appearing on the T-shirt of the Barcelona football club soon. They have a sponsorship contract till 2020. Phil Libin refers to this as the rule of 3 and 10. 3x being a span breaker for 10x. He says that when you go from x to 3x and to 10x and so on, almost everything breaks and needs to be thought through again - Communication systems, org structure, leadership, processes and so on. The other interesting point he makes is that once you get to 10,000 people, it will take a while for you to get to 30,000. So you can have some stability of systems, processes and leadership. But when you are cycling through 1, 3, 10, and 30,100 and so on, the velocity of change is so high that it is very easy to miss a few steps and end up with all kinds of broken stuff. So, just watching out for these transitions and addressing them proactively can ensure that hairline cracks during transitions don't turn into fractures. Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com.

End of nugget transcription

RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

Leadership Development: "How do I grow" is a question that all of us grapple with. The recipe for success is also changing as we move from an Industrial paradigm to a Digital paradigm. This is all the more pronounced in a start-up context where the job outgrows you very quickly. Successful leaders talk about the role of mentors, coaching, listening and more in scaling up one's capability. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Inflection points: Inflection points are when the notion of "what got you here won't get you there" hold. Whether it is a company moving from a start-up to a scale-up or a leader moving from a CXO to a CEO role, these passages of play have to be navigated carefully as there is a high risk of derailment. You can access the playlist [here](#).

SIGN UP TO OUR COMMUNICATION

Podcast Newsletter: Join 1000s of leaders who benefit from the Podcast newsletter. Not more than 1-2 emails a month including keeping you posted on the new content that comes up at the podcast. High on signal, low on noise. Sign up for the podcast newsletter [here](#).

Nuggets on Whatsapp: We also have a **Podcast Whatsapp distribution group (+91 85914 52129)** where we share 2-3 nuggets a week from the Podcast archives to provoke reflection. If that is of interest, please click [here](#) and send a message stating “INTERESTED”. Do also add this number to your Phone Contacts so that we can broadcast our messages to you when we share a nugget.

Nandan Nilekani - Nuggets

- 11.00 Nandan Nilekani - The Full Conversation
- 11.01 Nandan Nilekani - Current portfolio of time spent
- 11.02 Nandan Nilekani - Early childhood wiring
- 11.03 Nandan Nilekani - Selecting the right co-founder(s)
- 11.04 Nandan Nilekani - Scale-up and transitions at Infosys
- 11.05 Nandan Nilekani - Infosys to UIDAI — A 3D transition
- 11.06 Nandan Nilekani - Setting a goalpost at UIDAI
- 11.07 Nandan Nilekani - Running a startup inside the government
- 11.08 Nandan Nilekani - Reflections on politics as a career
- 11.09 Nandan Nilekani - Re-inventing self and playing to potential

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](#).

Disclaimer and clarification of intent behind the transcripts

This written transcript of the conversation is being made available to make it easier for some people to digest the content in the podcast. Several listeners felt that the written format would be helpful. This may not make sense as an independent document. Very often spoken word does not necessarily read well. Several of the guests have published books and the language in their books might be quite different from the way they speak. We request the readers to appreciate that this transcript is being offered as a service to derive greater value from the podcast content. We request you not to apply journalistic standards to this document.

This document is a transcription obtained through a third party/voice recognition software. There is no claim to accuracy on the content provided in this document, and occasional divergence from the audio file are to be expected. As a transcription, this is not a legal document in itself, and should not be considered binding to advice intelligence, but merely a convenience for reference.

The tags that are used to organize the nuggets in the podcast are evolving and work in progress. You might find that there could be a discrepancy between the nuggets as referenced here and in the actual podcast given this is a static document.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature without prior written permission.

Podcast Transcript [11.04 Nandan Nilekani - Scale-up and transitions at Infosys](#)

Also available on Apple Podcasts | Google Podcasts | Spotify

www.playtopotential.com