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## Context to the nugget

Leadership Transitions can be a period of significant anxiety for several executives who are transitioning across contexts and domains. Nandan shares his insights around what he kept and what he changed when he transitioned across 3 dimensions when he moved from Infosys to UIDAI. He also talks about the power of commitment in such situations.

## Transcription

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**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ):** You moved on from Infosys and took on the UID challenge. How did this come about?

**Nandan Nilekani (NN):** I had spent 30 years at Infosys. I had done a lot of stuff, I had been the CEO, I was the co-chairman, and then some of our other colleagues became CEO. So, at that time there was this offer to come in and work in the government. This again goes back to what I said earlier, that I grew up in an environment of public service. So, it was something which was in my blood, in some sense, and I had seen the model in the United States. In the US, it's a very common tradition for successful business executives, at some point, to do public service. I mean Thomas Watson Jr was the US ambassador to Russia, after being chairman of IBM. And, of course, Goldman Sachs has a long tradition, from [Robert] Rubin to Hank Polson going from Goldman Sachs to becoming secretary of the treasury. Even today, the current secretary of treasury is a former Goldman Sachs guy. So, the US has that tradition. Robert McNamara went from Ford to the Johnson administration. So, there is this tradition. I thought that in that tradition I could also contribute and I got a very good offer from the government of the day.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invited me to join the government to a cabinet rank position and it was an important project. We had an informal rule in Infosys that you can't leave without everybody agreeing, because we were all in it together. All of them were very nice to me and said that 'Yeah, if there is an opportunity for you to serve in public life, you are contributing to the country, and then it's OK if you leave Infosys'. So, I got that permission also. It was also a new challenge for me, because I was moving from the private sector to government. Though I had worked on the fringe of government I'd never worked in government. I was going from Bangalore to Delhi. And, in some sense, I was going from a corner office overlooking a golf course and 100,000+ employees to a start-up, because I was employee number one in this new start-up. So, it was a triple transition for me, from government to private sector, from Bangalore's culture to Delhi's culture, and from running a large company to doing a start-up all over again. It was a triple challenge, but I thought it was sufficiently large enough to excite me, so whatever reservations I had, I overcame them and plunged into it.

DJ: And reflecting on that transition, once again in terms of what CEOs could learn when they are transitioned from very different cultures, if you reflected on the first 100 days or six months, in hindsight, what were the lessons to be learnt?

NN: I think there are some lessons that you have learnt that you can continue to use, but there are some lessons that you also need to unlearn. So, I think, its one thing to transition from running one company to another company. I can be CEO of company X and go to company Y and even though they may be in two different industries, the business thinking is similar. Because in both companies, it's all about increasing revenue, profit, market share, all that stuff. But when you go from business to government, where the parameters of success are very different, you have to readjust the scale. So, what I took from Infosys was the bias for action the focus on timelines, accountability, being transparent about decision-making, and so on. What I had to develop, though I had that thing in Infosys, was how to do consensus building, how to get a bunch of people who have different ideologies, different priorities, how to get them all to align on one goal. That skill, while I had it in Infosys, that skill had to be developed 10X when I went to government. So, I would say that somehow my learnings were valid but some new learning had to be done.

The other very important thing is that you have to be all in. So, I left Infosys and I got off the board and become an ordinary shareholder, because I wanted to be fully doing this job. Not only that, I gave up all my other private sector roles. I was on the board of the World Economic Forum and I was probably the first Indian on the board of the World Economic Forum in Geneva, which runs the Davos thing. It was a very, very prestigious thing for me to be there, but I said if I am going to be in the government and then if I am in an international body... I want to make sure that everything is fine. I was on some international boards, I quit them. So, I gave up a lot of things, because I wanted to be all in on this.

DJ: Was that about creating mind space in your head or was that about signaling commitment to the others?

NN: It was both. Mind space, so that I could focus on what I was doing with no distraction. Second, conveying that I am fully in, I am not a bird of passage. I am not hedging bets, I am not having one foot in America, my green card, none of that. I am fully in, I have given up everything and I am doing this for a living. Thirdly, also to make sure that there are no ethical conflicts, because I didn't want someone saying, oh, you work on that board and now you are a cabinet rank, I didn't want any of that.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The point Nandan makes about being ALL IN reminds of the story of Hernando Cortez and the notion of burn your ships. That story has had a profound influence on my life. It talks about the explorer Hernando Cortez who landed in the shores of Mexico in 1519 to conquer the land for Spain. He faced an uphill battle - an aggressive enemy, brutal disease and scarce resources. He is known to have burnt all the ships that brought them to Mexico leaving troops with only two options - Succeed or die. There is something to be said about the Power of commitment in situations where the easy option often is to hedge your bets. Thank you for listening. For more please visit [playtopotential.com](http://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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