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Context to the nugget

In a start-up, how do you think about setting a goal post? It is a tricky question when there are several unknown unknowns. Nandan talks about how he thought about "What good would look like" in 5 years for the Aadhaar project.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): How do you even set a goalpost, when you have a start-up with such an ambition? How did you think about what good would look like?

Nandan Nilekani (NN): Actually, it was just a shot in the dark. I was very clear that we were going to make a public commitment though a lot of people said you are crazy to make a public commitment in the government system because you don't have control over so many variables. I felt, making a public commitment and sharpening everybody's mind towards that was more important than the potential loss of face if I didn't meet it. So, the trade-off, on balance, was to make a public commitment. I said I will make a public commitment of how many people will be on the Aadhaar platform by the time I step down. My initial thought was about 400 million and 400 million is a lot of people, but it didn't look good enough, so at the last minute, I changed that to some 600 million. So, when I went to the government, we made a public statement that we will enrol 600 million people in five years actually, we did it in four-and-a-half years; we did it faster. So, having a public commitment, that was a learning from Infosys. In Infosys, you always set ambitious goals. When we were a 100-million-dollar company, we said we will be a billion-dollar company in X years, which we reached. When we were a billion-dollar company, we said we will be a 10-billion-dollar company. So, what I learned from Infosys was that, if you want to stretch an organization, wherever you are, you need to set an ambitious goal from there. So, I was using that philosophy in the government, though it's much more high risk, because number of actors who can just stop you is many more. But that helped, because, everybody on the team knew what the goal was, and therefore, it sharpened everybody's sense of urgency and also helped to dissolve internal conflicts.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: One of my colleagues I worked with at McKinsey would often say that most of the times, framing the problem right can be the hardest part. Once you frame it right, the solutioning is often the easier bit. It was really interesting to see Nandan frame the point around commitment as a trade-off. Often while making a commitment, we are often thinking about 1 dimension which is reputation, You meet it great, if not there is a potential loss of reputation. We don't think hard enough about the upsides including benefits around alignment and urgency that it creates. Framing it as a trade-off was an

interesting learning for me on this nugget. 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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