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Context to the nugget

We often have to reinvent ourselves along the way as we go through our career. There are various trigger points where our priorities change and market opportunities change. Atul shares his perspectives around how he has managed to go beyond Photography to venture into new domains. He shares a piece of feedback that one of his friends provides which paved the way to a new possibility.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You started as a photographer but clearly you've moved on to do other things. Kingfisher Calendar was sort of an entrepreneurial venture. You're now into celebrity management. You take care of people's personal brand using images. Talk to us a little bit about how you've thought of entrepreneurship along the way with the base as photography.

Atul Kasbekar (AK): The core of it was that if I looked at the market in India, it just seemed like a lot of people in this profession became or even abroad, for that matter at some point, it tended to become irrelevant, sometime in their 50s. After 60, forget it! So, it just seemed like this is a younger man or woman's job. And if an art director who is handing out the assignment happens to be late 20s, early 30s, at some point, if you are 55 you are going to be uncle. They'd rather work with somebody who, however cool you think you are, there is a cooler person who happens to be 20 years younger. So, I figured, at some point, you are going to get nudged out of the mix. I realized that you need to have a plan B in place at some point. The other thing to it was that when I did the three-year degree program in Brooks and then assisted for a year in Los Angeles with a bunch of different photographers, they all had agents. They just took the picture and someone else went and sourced the work for them, chased the work for them, wined and dined the art directors, and if necessary, chased the money, got them paid, realized what kind of work they wanted to do, pushed the photographer if they felt he wasn't working hard enough or could deliver more: 'I need more pieces like this, work at it' or whatever.

DJ: And that industry didn't exist in India at that time?

AK: No! I came back and I said, I think I'll get an agent and they're like, what's that. So, it was always in the back of my head that. So, I think it seemed like a logical sort of a thing to get into because there was a need and so one did.

As far as the Kingfisher calendar is concerned, I mean at a very simple level one wanted to be able to do an assignment where I didn't really need to answer to too many layers. Because you felt that the creative process, somewhere along the way, possibly became 'a camel is a horse designed by

committee' kind of situation. Then, you start looking for the lowest denominator of agreement. So, I said, here, I want to answer to one person; if that person likes it, we are good. Well, eventually, someone is paying the bill, so that person needs to like it, sure. I had always been fascinated by a process where a photographer like Bruce Weber would get an assignment where he would be told, OK, this is Calvin Klein's new perfume. It's called 'Eternity'. These are the catch words and now, go forth Bruce and bring us the images, and we'll put our logo below. It needs to say eternity. And then, Bruce will put on his thinking cap and do some tests and then shoot and come back and say this is it. And Calvin Klein says, wonderful, just what I have been looking for. There Bruce Weber was talking to Calvin Klein and the discussion was between those two heavyweights. They have figured out what the world wants and the hedonistic era of obsession is over, and it's much more family and its much more togetherness. So, let the light be much more backlit and white and beautiful and shadow-less. The 'Obsession' campaign was three-four naked people on a swing and it was much more sort of mad.

Again, what happens in celeb management is that you build up somebody, you work very hard and not make very much in the early part of their career. Then, they start blossoming and 10 people pop up with good work and say, come to us, we will be cheaper, come to us, we will do this. So, at a time when it would seem fair, when that person is doing really well, you are there as well to collect in the journey together, there is no such thing. So, once they've arrived, a lot of people tend to forget where they came from. And the only about decent thing they might do is say that you have been there for a while, some X, Y is at the table and is offering to do it in half, if you can match that you can please stay. If you started to think that star X made 20 per year, hence we bill two. We are estimating it could be 25 this year, so we will make two-and-a-half. Maybe I should make a down-payment on that house or whatever. You make some calculations accordingly. You could well have a situation where star X comes and says, listen, someone's at the table willing to do it at half, so if you can do it at half then great. And you say, yes. Then, all of a sudden, your two didn't become two-and-a-half; it became one and quarter. So, we wanted to own some IP. So, we said, let's try and do something that actually we are responsible for and you own that and that creative process is yours and for better or worse, it remains with you.

Then, the talk was, should we do a TV show? Should we do a digital something? And I came across a seven pager, one of my partners, Shanti, came across a seven-pager that Saiwyn Quadras had written. And to give us due credit, to be honest, he had written 'Mary Kom' and we didn't know that and 'Mary Kom' had not released. So, it's not like we bought a seven-pager from the hit writer of 'Mary Kom'. We just bought it from somebody who looked like Jesus and who walked in through the door, pretty much. We said, OK, if we get the rights from the family we will try and make this film ['Neerja']. So, we actually believed it from a paper. But I am enjoying this. I have a friend who is a spiritual guide and he lives in Bangalore. He was saying that this is an excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true he says, you know, you're actually a very habitable platform for people, who otherwise would never meet each other, to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create.

DJ: What made him say that according to you? What do you think?

AK: I was actually talking in terms of, should I stop doing photography? Should I do this? Should I do film production or not? Seems like a dirty business. There are all kinds of people. For me, what you say is what you mean. If you didn't mean it, why did you say it? I hate to think that I have to spend my time thinking 'he said this, but what did they mean? Where is the catch? Just look properly at clause 14 point C point 8, whatever. This is it, this is the deal, which part did you miss?' There isn't any skulduggery. It is just so tiresome to lie and play these silly games. If it doesn't work for you, it's fine. Like the other day, someone said no to a script we had, which is really OK. But they did the

classic Bollywood thing of the idea of saying no, because you might hurt them, just avoid. So, finally, I sat the person down and said, listen, I will tell you what, I am made of sterner stuff. I am very fond of you and we can still be friends. We may make a movie together or we may never make a movie together. It's still OK, we will still be friends. That's OK. What will really piss the crap out of me is if you decide to play these silly games and ignore and then duck. It's not that complicated.

So, he said you are good at this. You have to be the alkali who sort of neutralizes acidic situations and you will just bring them and create an atmosphere where people can be harmonious. They work nicely as a machine unit and they do this. So, actually, in 'Tumhari Sulu' we have really got an excellent bunch of people working together. At some point, when the director's written it, it's very close. Then, we manage to convince him that it needs a little more additional writing and punching up. So, he agreed and then we got a writer he was comfortable with and so, he still feels like it's his, and that's really important. And Suresh [Triveni] is a great guy. And he then has involved other people and we suggested whoever we thought and where it's worked, he's taken it and where someone else has worked, we've let that happen, and it's beautiful. The art director owns the script, the DOP owns the script, and the guy who is told that when Atul Kasbekar's unit leaves this place, it will be left as good as when we found it. So, they will not say, look at all that plastic chucked in the bag and he owns that part of the script to know that of the production, you know, hey, I am going to make sure I do a great job. And there were so many different units working together. If you create that space, it's great.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: There were a couple of takeaways for me in this nugget. First is around how we think about ourselves and our competitive advantage. We often look at ourselves in a very narrow fashion and identify ourselves with the education we have had, the professions we have been in or other such superficial labels. But sometimes asking somebody else who is insightful to show the mirror to us can open up our blind spots. For instance, Atul talking about himself as a platform where people could come and do something together was a fascinating perspective. That sort of a reframing can open up all kinds of possibilities. A similar theme came up in my conversation with my last podcast guest Nandan Nilekani who spoke about how he thought about his competitive advantage after he lost the elections in Bengaluru. Do look up Nugget 11.08 if that is of interest. The second takeaway for me was in terms of how you create buy-in across various silos in an organization. Atul talks about creating a space where different creative elements (DOP, Art Director, the writer, the Director are all on the same page and own the various elements of the script). I really like the term "Creating the space" because in today's world of complexity I believe it is a key leadership requirement in any business. Google recently had a project titled Project Aristotle where they looked at various teams and said let us see what differentiates the great teams from the average teams. Long story short, it eventually boiled down to the notion of Psychological safety where people felt comfortable taking risks and had fun doing it. The leaders that created the space were able to drive a greater team performance than the rest. If this interests you, you should read up an article by Charles Duhigg in the New York Times where he talks about this in greater detail.

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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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