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Context to the nugget

In any profession, it is very easy to be treated as suppliers in the value chain. How does one elevate himself to move beyond being perceived as a mere supplier? How does one engage and empower the team members so that they don't feel like suppliers and have greater ownership of the end product. Atul talks about his views in this context. He also talks about his experiences while making the film Neeraj and alludes to the role of authenticity in being able to enlist people in his journey.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I have heard you talk in a couple of other forums about this whole supplier mindset versus being a trusted advisor. That concept is relevant in several other professions. So, talk to us a little bit about what you mean by that and what it means in your profession and what the lessons are?

Atul Kasbekar (AK): I have realized that for me, it's most fulfilling and gratifying to be in a creative space. So, in the process of creation, whether it's movie or whether it's someone's career or whether it is a photograph or so on, I feel, it is extremely important, especially speaking for myself in the creative space, that you make everybody in the mix seem really important and valued and bring them to the table early enough.

So, for example, let's say, since we were discussing the Kingfisher calendar, the stylist is brought on two months before we've left for shoot, three months before; they know they are doing the job. Now, I want to know what you think. What are the trends? We are thinking of shooting in Mykonos; apart from the obvious blue and white of the Grecian stripes, what do you think? What do you think of hair? These are the models I am thinking of; what do you think? This 'what do you think' empowers a lot of people to feel like they belong and like they co-create. Then, they go beyond just the transactional value of what you are paying them to do that. When you do that, you've arrived in a good space.

So, it would really bother me when people said you are a supplier, supplier payment comes only in these many days. Screw you! I am not a supplier. If I am a supplier, you have lost me very early. Then, it's a very transactional kind of thinking. So, I have learnt this along the way that at least when I'm doing this, I'm going to ensure that everybody feels like 'yeh meri project hain'.

So, for example, when we did 'Neerja,' we couldn't have done it without literally so many people feeling like it's theirs. So, for example, I spoke to Naresh Goyal, and said, listen, there is this Punjabi girl whose story you may not have heard of. I am sending you a one-pager. We don't have the money. It's a female-oriented film. We don't have the money. I need your Jet Airways hangars for

two days and some work at the airport, etcetera. And I need Sonam and the crew to be trained by your stewardess training college, whatever that is, for one week and I have no money to pay you. He said, no, we will work out at a good deal. I said, the only deal is free. I am not the kind to otherwise negotiate. I will reach London and send him a text this flight was great, this flight was not great, this food was awesome or this was not, but '*woh haq se I am telling you because paise dekke aa chuka hoon main*'. I am not telling you before, hoping that you upgrade me or some sidey stuff like that, which other people do. So, he knows it's not the kind of stuff that I would inherently do. So, he said, done! The same thing with Sanjiv Goenka at Saregama.

DJ: And what was in it for him, out of curiosity? Was it just the relationship?

AK: I think, relationship, and they just felt that they were suddenly part of a movie-making process, that this story needed to be told. I would like your help to tell the story, it's that simple. And that was the truth. Same thing with Sanjiv Goenka. We need 'Bye, bye, Miss, good night,' I need the rights for free. That's about a 25 lakh of value for them to give that Rajesh Khanna song, but we needed the song. And Sanjiv is nice enough to say, yeah, this is a great story, *chalo bolte hain*, done. I mean, Fox was in shock that we got anything from Saregama for free. And why should we? It's a business for them to sell music rights. It's only fair they charge whatever it is. They thought this was worth it and they felt part of the process.

DJ: So, how do you enlist people into your vision and your dream?

AK: I think, at the base level, it's just about honesty. If you are just achingly honest, then, I think, at some point... I told someone who was collaborating with us, you can go through the whole rigmarole of finding out for yourself, but I can cut to the chase and tell you right now and then later you can tell me whenever you figure it out. I said, you know that we are really decent blokes to work with. One cut, two pieces, what you see is what you get, simple. So, he actually put a Facebook post some one year later saying, he told me this long back, and I have to say he was right. Quite sweet either on you can go through all these negotiations but I am telling you now this is it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Three takeaways for me here. One is the notion of Honesty and Authenticity that Atul alludes to in the conversation. In one of my earlier conversations with Abhijit Bhaduri who has written the book Digital Tsunami, he talks about the fact that in the Digital world, there is no opportunity for the leader to hide anywhere. The only option is to be your authentic self all the time. Else, people will be able to smell the inconsistency from a mile. If this is of interest to you, you might like the nuggets 7.06 and 7.07 from Abhijit Bhaduri. The second point that struck me was the notion of asking "what do you think" from various elements of your team. Once again, as we think about the evolution from an industrial era to a digital era, there are so many areas which are evolving and outside the realm of understanding of the CEO. This will require a very different, facilitative style of leadership of asking the right questions and facilitating a discussion and moving forward based on sound judgment and buy in that gets created in the process. The other situation I find this coming into play is when an individual transitions from a CXO to a CEO role or a CEO to a group CEO role. Till you are in your function, you are often the expert in the team on most of the matters. But when you move from leading a function to leading a business or from leading a business to a group of businesses, there is no way you can continue to lead with an "I know the answer" mindset. And that can be a non-trivial mindset shift for a lot of the leaders who have grown up in the "Let me tell you how it is done" way of life. The third takeaway for me is that in any profession, there is always an opportunity to take ownership and go beyond what is explicitly asked of you. When you do that you start moving from

being treated as a supplier to being a key contributor to the value chain. In my earlier organizations EgonZehnder and McKinsey, the senior leaders would often say that it is not about solving a stated client problem. It is about becoming a Trusted Advisor where the client leans on you for key decisions that he or she has to make. I guess every profession offers you that possibility of playing a bigger game.

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End of nugget transcription

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Atul Kasbekar - Nuggets

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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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