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Context to the nugget

Pramath talks about how he ended up joining McKinsey in Canada instead of pursuing a career in academics which he had originally intended when he completed his PhD. He also talks about how students should think about evaluating consulting as a potential career option.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Going back to the point in time when you joined McKinsey. You are an IIT alumnus and then you had a PhD from UPenn. At that time, why McKinsey?

Dr Pramath Sinha (PS): Sometimes, there are points in life where you don't know why you take something up, and it's often in reaction to not liking something else rather than knowing what you are getting into. So, it wasn't like I knew what I was getting into with McKinsey, but I was quite unhappy being an academic at that point in time. It was doubly disappointing because I had worked very hard up till that point to become an academic or to get the PhD. Then, to find that in the profession itself, there was a lot of politics, there was a lot of confusion about people like me who came from a very interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary background. I just think I was in the wrong context, in the wrong milieu. I had moved from the US to Canada thinking that that's where better opportunities were and that I could be a bigger frog in a small pond. They offered me a good position and so on and so forth. And it often happens in life. It's not just then. I now realize that every second move I make is a wrong move. Then, you correct yourself and find that that corrected move becomes the best move you took. This has almost been a pattern, at least, in my life. So, I think it was one of those moves that was probably a wrong move. If I had gone into another university, where the context was right, I may still be an academic today for all you know, doing research in robotics.

So, I had this very tough challenge where I was not enjoying the atmosphere I was in and what I was doing. It was then that a bunch of friends who used to work at McKinsey approached me and said, hey, McKinsey is looking for diversified hires who, interestingly, when you look at it now, were non-MBAs. It's like, we don't know what other ways to classify these guys who don't have MBAs, so it's like we are hiring non-MBAs and literally, the person who referred this to me said, if you are successful, I get to donate 500 dollars to my favourite charity. They have a referral program going. So, I was first very perplexed. I knew about McKinsey because I was at Penn and Wharton was there, and I knew all the Indians who went to Wharton all went to McKinsey. They lusted after McKinsey, so I knew it was a big deal for the MBAs but I never thought I would actually be looking at working there, but then I realized that they had been hiring PhDs. What really worked for me was that the Toronto office, where they sent me to interview once I applied, was, in fact, full of people who did not have MBAs. So, I suddenly saw people like me working there, interviewing me, and being very

much like me and seemingly enjoying the place. I've always been a bit of a risk taker and I like doing different things, so that's how I said why not. And very quickly realized that was a good decision. That it actually felt more like my PhD days than my academic days, because it was people from all different backgrounds, it was very multidisciplinary. I was given a lot of respect for my PhD. From day one, people started calling me rocket scientist, literally, because of my robotics background and so on. So, it was a great ride.

DJ: How should people think about consulting as the first job? I am quite curious about type 1 and type 2 errors in these situations. Who were the people that joined consulting but very quickly realized they are not cut out for it and who were the people that could have been great consultants but never ended up joining for the wrong reasons. Do you have a view on that?

PS: My view is that while there is a lot of emphasis on hiring people who have very high IQ and that's what the McKinsey's and others of the world do when they go out and recruit. I think, while that is almost a necessary condition in consulting because people do pay the big bucks to have very smart people consult for them, we forget that a second necessary condition has to be that this is a person who really enjoys working with people, both internally and externally, and honestly, the ability to engage. I am not saying you have to be nice and inspirational and all those fancy things, but you should have an interest in engaging with other human beings. This is a contact sport and a lot of people don't realize that. They take the McKinsey offer or McKinsey makes the offer because it's very difficult to judge whether a person is cut out for a contact sport or not. So, it's a little bit like, do you want to play chess and tennis or squash or golf maybe not golf, that has some interaction to it — versus a team sport like a football or hockey or cricket, where they are all sports but there are very different personalities who succeed. And there's skill involved; obviously, you want to be good at whatever you do. But, I think, there's a certain kind of person who will fit into a team sport environment and a certain kind of person who would not play team sports and be more individual. I think, that's the call most people don't realize.

DJ: It's also about not winning but enabling clients to win.

PS: Yeah. So, then, there is a whole set of other things that comes with making others successful, being comfortable in letting go, and being good at dealing with conflict, and so on. The working hard and so on bit, I think, goes with every job these days. But I really do think that your ability to connect with people, whether it's your teams internally over time and with clients from day one, [given] the kind of jobs consultants do, is very, very critical in being successful as a consultant. You have to really look at yourself and say, 'Am I that kind of a person? Do I really have it in me to start a conversation from nothing, break an awkward moment that inevitably happens in consulting-client relationship, and not get fazed by conflicts or resistance? How to have the confidence to deal with that? These are all becoming much more required in a consulting career. They always were, but I think, today, there is greater primacy to these things.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It was fascinating to hear about Pramath discussing how every other career move of his has been a success in the context of how he landed up at McKinsey instead of a career in Academics. Nandan Nilekani, one of my earlier guests, spoke about how he reflected on what gave him energy when he lost the Bengaluru elections. As we go through our respective journeys, I guess we make certain assumptions about a path and then as we walk that path, the reality often is very different from what we had in mind when we embarked on the journey. Being honest with ourselves and taking

quick corrective action is often key in these situations. If this is of interest, do look up my conversation with Nandan Nilekani.

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End of nugget transcription

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Dr. Pramath Sinha - Nuggets

- 14.00 Dr. Pramath Sinha - The Full Conversation
- 14.01 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Current portfolio of initiatives
- 14.02 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Consulting (McKinsey) as a career option
- 14.03 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Transitioning out of consulting (including views on entrepreneurship)
- 14.04 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Authentic leadership
- 14.05 Dr. Pramath Sinha - What consulting doesn't prepare you for
- 14.06 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Vedica Scholars Programme — Nurturing women leaders
- 14.07 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Educating ourselves (and link with leadership of the future)

- 14.08 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Building leadership capability in entrepreneurs
- 14.09 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Personal board of advisors
- 14.10 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Reflecting on the past and the future
- 14.11 Dr. Pramath Sinha - In Summary - 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](#).

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