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Context to the nugget

The fact that we need to have more leaders at the top is well-known and there has been enough commentary around it. Pramath talks about the unconscious bias that still exists in the society and his attempts at making a difference through the Vedica Scholars Program for Women

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): If we looked at women growing all the way to become leaders, what's your take on where you see the bottlenecks? If we had to really say what are the three–four things that need to be de-bottlenecked in that pipeline for us to have more leaders flowing through?

Dr Pramath Sinha (PS): One thing is, there is a lot of unconscious bias that still exists across all stages of a woman's career, which they have to fight. In general, the family still places a greater premium on the boy's education. In general, there is a suggestion that women need not be pushed to achieve their best and that ultimately, they are going to get married and then they'll fend for themselves with their husbands. And I have seen this happening in some of the more evolved and educated or elite; in fact, some would argue that socio-economically as you go higher up the strata, this becomes even more pronounced. I don't know what the sociological aspect of this is, but somewhere, there is a lot of bias that still exists right through your growing up years, through your education. If you look at the numbers graduating from high school and getting the best marks and so on, women outnumber men. Yet, when you go to boardrooms, if you look at MBA programs, engineering programs, if you look at corporate India, the numbers are abysmal.

There is a lot of data on this out there, but it's very stark. It's almost like women are not there. I really think that the barriers to entry are several; they are there at all stages. Like I said, a boy would be sent to an English-medium school, a girl would be sent to a vernacular school. The boy will be getting coaching for JEE, the girl would be asked to fend on her own. The boy, if he got into a NIIT Hamirpur and if he is from Kerala, he would be sent, but the woman wouldn't be sent and they'd say why you don't study in the local college. And the story repeats itself. So, if you want to do an MBA, the same story happens. The boy gets to do CAT coaching, the girl gets to fend for herself; boy gets into if not an IIM, a MICA, he goes to Ahmedabad; girl gets to study MBA at a local college. So, people are getting left behind, I feel.

At the other end, when it comes to employment, I don't think employers are really able to grasp the fact that you have to adjust yourself to accommodate the life trajectories of a woman. And I think McKinsey is particularly guilty of this. I mean, as a firm we started the profession of management consulting. The biggest challenge for the profession is, and McKinsey should take the lead on this,

how do we have 50% women in consulting? What will it take? What is the management consulting model? Just as you hired non-MBAs and now 50% of the firm is now non-MBA, how do you make sure that you can have a career trajectory that accommodates children and manage, or vice versa? So, I think, that is where we are failing.

DJ: And to make that tactical, what do good organizations do? If we double click on that, around those two transition points, any headline takeaways?

PS: Yeah, I think, do away with tenure-based promotions, do away with 'you have to become so and so in such and such time'. Change the evaluation criteria. What is so sacrosanct about evaluation criteria? There is a very different evaluation criteria for admitting somebody to ISB, from admitting somebody to a Young India Fellowship Program, which is a one-year liberal arts course. But those two people are getting the same jobs. They are all going and working in the same organizations. They are earning similar salaries. So, you can see that using two very different criteria, you are producing the same output, you are getting the same product. At least, the market is valuing the product the same way. They are not saying these people are less or more. So, why are we doing that here? It's like when ISB first came out, nobody wanted to hire our guys, because they said what do we do with them? These are not campus, these are lateral hires. So, how do I hire them? I am used to hiring MBAs.

Somewhere, society and corporates and business have to change to accommodate a different stream of people coming in. So, your assessment has to change, of who you hire and what qualities are you looking for. You have to become much more flexible about saying that hey, people's trajectories do change when they have kids. I met a bunch of women who came out of the first batch of ISB 15 years ago and their biggest regret is that unlike their male colleagues, they have not been able to sustain their careers. Then, they say, we go back to the workforce and people ask us all kinds of funny questions and they have insinuations about where we should be placed in the hierarchy and what compensation we should make. I think, somewhere, women also need to be educated, just as when you came out of ISB we would tell people, hey, it's not your first job, that is important, but your trajectory... Here also, women need to understand that if you are not working for so long, you can't expect to go back to where you were and yes, your male colleagues are going to be a few steps ahead of you and that's all right.

I think, this is what we are trying to do in a small way at Vedica. So, at Vedica we are intervening at the MBA point and we are saying, listen you don't need a CAT score, first of all. Don't stress about your test. Then, we say, listen, I am not hung up about your minimum cut-off or if you went to a nondescript college in Telangana before you came here. It's fine if I haven't heard of your college, but you need to show to me that you are really committed, that you want this kind of education, and if you're going to work hard to put yourself into a different orbit by virtue of this.

DJ: And how do you screen for this?

PS: Interview! Have a bunch of conversations. You can't do a perfect job, but equally, you can at least ask the right questions. What's your commitment? What are your life experience and the usual thing we used to do at McKinsey, using all of that? Are you interesting? Are you interested? And can I really help this person achieve what I want to do and what they want to do? So, we use very subjective criteria. We try to make it as objective as possible, but keeping it simple and saying, hey, if this person is enthusiastic in showing commitment, let's take her. And often people come in classes and say, 'Oh, OK, I am in a peer group, these women are not as good as me or they are not as smart as me and what am I doing here'. But people, over time, realize that that's not the only metric, the

drive, the commitment, everybody has their own strengths and weaknesses. So, I think that's the one thing. We're getting them in.

Then, through the program, what we try to do is we do a combination of management, liberal arts, and critical thinking, communication, and leadership courses with equal measure. Now, that's a huge departure from lot of typical management courses. And in the leadership piece, we really give them a lot of exposure to women who are inspiring in terms of the careers they've had. So, these women can have conversations at an early stage about what they could be up against as they go forward, rather than assuming that you will be fine now that you have an MBA and then being hit by a roadblock very quickly. We said this is an important conversation to have. How do you sustain careers? How have people sustained careers? Listen, there's no one model. Look at all these women, their journeys are all different but remember you have to be focused on sustaining the career. Don't give up, it's not worth giving up, and so on and so forth. So, instil a confidence in them that listen, yes, it's going to be difficult; yes I'm going to get married; yes, I'm going to have kids. But other people have done it, so I can also do it. Here's some ways to think about it and plan for it, rather than let it happen to you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this topic is of interest, you might be want to tune into my next podcast conversation where I explore this theme in greater detail. The guest is Vedica Bhandarkar - no pun intended. She is one of the several women leaders who have come from ICICI Bank. She headed Credit Suisse in India before moving to the Social impact world and she now heads Water.Org in India - Water.org empowers families with access to safe water and sanitation through affordable financing.

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End of nugget transcription

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Dr. Pramath Sinha - Nuggets

- 14.00 Dr. Pramath Sinha - The Full Conversation
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- 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
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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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