

Podcast Transcript [14.07 Dr. Pramath Sinha - Educating ourselves \(and link with leadership of the future\)](#)

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Context to the nugget

We are growing into a future where there are several unknown unknowns. Pramath talks about what sort of leaders would flourish in the new paradigm and how one should think about education in the context of this broad trend.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You are a person who has a unique insight at two different levels: one is at the education level, when people are graduating and then at the leadership level, given the work you do. Given the changes that are happening in the education system and in the world of leadership, I'd be curious to know how people should think about educational choices. I am curious about two-three trends we are seeing. One is, the timing of education. Earlier, it was study, work, retire. It was very distinct, but now it seems education and learning is more of a journey. Second, when I look at the nature of education, it seems to be unbundled from clunky degrees to bespoke courses people can configure along the way. So, how should somebody in the tenth or eleventh or twelfth, think about direction? How should people think about it as they go through their journey?

Dr Pramath Sinha (PS): You could come at this from either end, but the two are connected. The leadership that's required for people to be successful in the future and the preparation through education that is needed for them to be successful in the future or be good leaders in the future. Maybe we start at the end of what's required going forward.

Different people have said different things but the essence of it is that one, we really don't know, but two, it's very clear that at least for the very best of people, the challenges that they are going to face are going to be fairly ambiguous and it's not going to be solvable, as it were, with just taking one approach. So, to be successful you have to recognize that. You aren't going to be able to solve the problem that you are going to be faced with, or challenged with, by yourself, by one approach that you learnt. You are going to have to look at things from a multi-dimensional perspective, a multi-disciplinary perspective. You may be wrong in what you come up with and you have to have the ability to adapt and be flexible and to adopt other strategies. You have to pull in other people to help you solve the problem, because, by definition, the problem will not be solvable by you alone. And, in very short order, you will have to very quickly re-educate or educate yourself about the domain that you are getting into and almost do multiple PhDs throughout your career. Other people say this in another way, which is that, you are not going to have one career but half a dozen careers in your life and over time, maybe even more, as the world changes faster and faster.

So, the question becomes that with these kinds of problems, with these expectations of a leader tomorrow, with these kinds of career progressions, what you do by way of education. Coming back to that end, I think, you've already alluded to some of that. One, is that you have to break away from this obsession about specialization. This is not to say that specialization is not good, but that specialization and generalization or breadth and depth are more relevant. You need depth, of course, because you need to understand what it takes to go deep into a problem quickly and rapidly, which has now become the ask. So, it's not like we are saying, oh everybody should be a generalist. Absolutely not! You must know how to specialize, but you must know how to specialize rapidly and have many specializations in your life. At the same time, you need to have the ability to have a broader perspective, which comes from breadth. I think, that's where this whole debate between liberal arts and STEM has come from. I think, it's a false debate and it's a false trade-off. You need both and that has always been what education was about. But particularly here, in India, with the post-independence focus on developing the technical capability of the country, we went too far in that direction and we haven't corrected that at all. The liberal arts colleges and universities have declined at the expense of or because of the growth of the technical fields. So, I think bringing in breadth and liberal arts, which is somewhat what we are trying to do at Ashoka or what I have done at Vedica, combining it with business, doing something else with architecture and liberal arts, and so on. So, both specialization and generalized education is extremely important.

I think, the second bit of this is very important. I think, this goes to the heart of when people say how come people in India, the same people, don't do as much innovation or don't create products or don't do breakthrough scientific discoveries as they would in the United States or in other parts of the world, when they have the same basic education, and genes, and DNA. I think, the fundamental issue with that is that at the lowest level of our education and going all the way up to the highest level, we are not providing people choice, the fundamental choice of being able to choose what you study. People often counter that and say how do people ever know. And that's true. People never know, but the process of going through having to make a choice is a very big part of education and mindset, in terms of risk-taking and pushing thinking and really identifying what are you passionate about. For a long time now, I have believed that unless you are happy doing what you are doing or passionate doing what you are doing, you don't have breakthrough performance or breakthrough thinking.

So, here, what has ended up happening is that we are constantly, at every stage, forcing people to choose based on their performance in an exam, the marks they got, the rank they got, and so on. Moreover, once you choose something, you are stuck. So, even if you come to the conclusion, 'Oh, I chose something that I was perhaps not right about or didn't really know but now realize is not right,' you can't switch. So, if you get into a program at an IIT and you are studying metallurgical engineering — which is what I did — and you are hating it, you can't really do anything about it. The switching costs are infinite. You cannot change. So, the point is not only do you get stuck, you don't have any flexibilities. This combination of choice and flexibilities, along with this point about having breadth along with depth is really what we need to bring into our education system to allow our young people to prepare for that world we talked about.

DJ: And if I were to make this question tactical, if I am an individual who sort of finished my tenth and have the universe of options staring at me — law, commerce, finance, engineering, liberal arts and so on. Are there one or two questions you would ask to reflect on which will help the broad choice?

PS: First thing I do is, I ask them to listen to what their children are saying rather than deciding for them. That I see as a huge problem. I think, our parents were much less concerned about what we

were doing, even though, at that time, I think, it was very important. But today, what has happened is, ironically, even with the large number of choices in careers, the choices in education are very limited still, so that forces people to become very, very focused on saying, oh, I have to decide. So, the first thing I really ask them is are you deciding for your kid or do they really want to study law, for example. And often, you will find kids who are very clear that they are very excited about being a lawyer and that's really what they want to do. Honestly, between you and me, objectively, they may not know, but the important part is they are excited about it and they want to pursue it. So, first and foremost, just clarifying that.

Then, if you end up on the other side, where the person doesn't know, I then start by saying, listen, it's OK that you don't know. There's nothing wrong with that. Because otherwise, people are under pressure that they are confused or that they don't know and they ought to know and how come they don't know and so on. So, taking that pressure off and then helping them understand, honestly, what you specialize in will not matter. In fact, this whole thing about specializing in a subject and then being in a career and aligned to that, as you know, is tenuous. It happens sometimes, but, increasingly, happens less and less. So, while it's important to major in something, it's not really that important to major in the right thing. That kind of releases the tension of a lot of parents and children, when they realize. Sometimes they don't, but most of the times, you can actually show the parents themselves that what they majored in and what they are doing now has no connection.

DJ: It puts the choice in perspective.

PS: Correct. So, that then opens up a whole host of possibilities about what this kid could do. And, I think, that's when you move to the point of saying, OK, so what are your choices really. And there are a host of choices. I mean, you could choose to go just study science or psychology or history or go abroad or stay in India. And it takes off the pressure of having to get the decision right. I didn't give you the three-four questions, but I think that is the thought process, very tactically, of what you go through.

DJ: Also interesting is, it's about setting the right climate in which the choice is made. And as a parent, I guess, it's also important to set the right climate where the pressure is taken off, as you said.

PS: And a lot of times, to be fair, the pressure is also on the parents. Because they are looking at their peers and some of their peers are sending... now we have people sending their kids to high school in the UK for some reason. And it's like, OK, now what's happening here? So, they are all wondering whether they are doing something not right by their kids by not sending them. So, I think, there's a lot of pressure on parents also. So, by just first easing that peer pressure, you are helping them think.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I remember a conversation when I was a Management Consultant in the UK and one of my team members was a young graduate from Oxford with a major in Political Sciences. I remember asking him why a consulting firm would hire Political Science graduates. His response was that a Political Science degree equips you to solve complex, fuzzy open ended problems than a degree in engineering which equips you to solve tough, closed ended problems. India is probably a few years behind in terms of acceptance of other disciplines into fields like consulting but the point Pramath makes about the tenuous link between educational qualifications and the profession is a profound

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one. The key takeaway for me here is that one is better off focusing on equipping the child with the decision making and iteration capability that will equip the child for navigating the future than trying to over-finesse the decision beyond a point. In a lot of ways, the disciplines that emphasise the right brain capabilities might actually be better equipping the children to deal with the future we are growing into. If this topic is of interest, you might like this book by Dan Pink titled - A Whole New Mind - Why Right Brainers will rule the world.

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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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