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Context to the nugget

Staying relevant is one of the key challenges that facing the leaders of this generation. A few decades back, they could check into a career on graduation and check-out at retirement. Pramath talks about how leaders (entrepreneurs and otherwise) should think about scaling up their capability as they go through their journey.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving forward, if we were to reflect on some of the entrepreneurial activity that we are seeing. Nandan Nilekani pointed out that India has a lot of start-ups but very few scale-ups. Give us an insight into how some of these young founders need to suddenly start building the leadership capability which requires them to exercise many more muscles. What's your take on what does it take for them to individually scale up their leadership capability?

Dr Pramath Sinha (PS): I think, Nandan is right and I also feel that a lot of these start-ups not scaling up are really leadership failures rather than idea failures. I think, what people see are all the successes. So, they see a [Mark] Zuckerberg or they see a [Steve] Jobs or a [Bill] Gates. And some of these are examples of people who didn't complete college, they did not do enough, they didn't have any entrepreneurial history either, and they hit it big. But that's almost like a lottery, to my mind. I mean, these are extremely talented people and you have to give them credit for their persistence and so on. Equally, there are many, many more such talented people who didn't make it. We can't look at the example of these few people and say, all of us will be successful.

It's great that they are inspiring people to go on to start and so on. But there are two-three elements that people are missing out on. Number one, I have always believed in, and I think it's true even if you study the lives of these people that entrepreneurship is actually not about the idea; it's about being an entrepreneur. It's a way of life. You have to love entrepreneurship and not your idea. If you are an entrepreneur, then you will just persist. You may start with one idea and you will give it up and you will pivot and you will adapt and you go into adjacent spaces and so on. That's how all these guys have been successful if you study their history. I think, a lot of the people who are starting ventures today are really one-trick ponies, and I don't mean it in a deprecating manner. They are so wedded to a particular idea they got that they are jumping in because they think this is the best thing since sliced bread. The truth is that it may not be and most often is not. Success lies in recognizing that and quickly pivoting. So, that's the real essence of entrepreneurship which they are not aware of. So, they think it's about the bright idea they have.

I think, the second thing is that being able to scale up your leadership skills is a hugely non-trivial task. Nobody has really talked about that to people. How do you manage just your peers, your top

team, people who are more senior than you, more experienced than you, who you inevitably will need to bring in? Your founding team will go away. These are not the issues that you worry about on day one, so you don't know. And you don't know what you don't know about yourself. So, that's the other hidden factor that becomes very quickly limiting where people are not able to retain other people, they don't know how to scale up even if they have a successful idea.

How do you solve for that? I don't know. I think, on both, you solve by mentoring. I feel that and this is what people like Nandan and others, I think, are doing or trying to do some of these folks have to mentor other folks into being successful as entrepreneurs. I think, it's great that we have such a wave of entrepreneurship in this country but it would be important for some of these learnings to be passed on from generation to generation. I am not suggesting that you should not become an entrepreneur even without experience; you should, of course, give it a shot, but you should be thinking about the right reasons for success or the right drivers of the success, which I don't think will come through self-realization. It will only come through somebody being able to sit you down. I think, it's true not just for entrepreneurs but for everyone. I think, it's important to have good mentors, it's important to have the humility to say, listen, I really don't know this stuff and I need to sit down with somebody to walk me through this.

I think, the other small, or big, problem I see these days is that a lot of the investors haven't really been entrepreneurs. At least, I remember I don't know how it's like in the US today but in the early days in Silicon Valley and so on, the bigger VC and VE guys had all been entrepreneurs. They had actually either been entrepreneurs or they had been involved in entrepreneurial organizations. They had worked and they had built. They hadn't just been consultants like you and me. They hadn't just been people who had been investing all their lives. I think, somewhere you are not then able to provide that mentorship. You can bring in the money and the resources and how to scale up and examples of how to monetize, and so on. I think, that's very valuable too. But finding people who can scale up leadership skills in proportion to how your business is growing is difficult and you have had to live that life. I have seen that between two investors that I had in 9.9, my own venture, one of the investors had actually built something from scratch. So, some of his insights about how to scale up your own leadership, how to look at the scaling up of the business, how to think about leading a sales force, was very granular and very, very pithy, which I would have never learnt if somebody hadn't actually gone through that process.

DJ: I recently spoke to Avnish Bajaj and the downside he spoke about was if you have done it, then there's a tendency to step in. So, it's about bringing that empathy from the past, but without sort of micromanaging.

PS: Which is why I used the word 'mentor'. Mentors do this very well. As a mentee, you go to a mentor with a problem. They will tell you, listen, if I were in your place, here's how I would do it. Then, you as a mentee, think about that and you sometimes reject. You would say this is maybe the wrong context, he was in a different era. That could be your arrogance or..., but you take a call. At least, you have input from somebody who has been there, done that, rather than having to figure it out yourself.

DJ: As we think about the evolving business landscape and the complexity, if I switch back to people in their 40s and 50s who in a way built their leadership, for a lack of better term, in the industrial paradigm or the traditional way of businesses and now are seeing a new way of dealing with new information. The velocity of decision making is increasing in some of the industries. As you look at some of your peers who are CEOs, what have you seen good leaders do in terms of adapting well to the changing business context?

PS: I think, there's no one example, but I think that the people I have seen be successful are those who are somewhat reflective and introspective about failures and mistakes they made. They focus a lot on what could be the learnings that they could take forward and what does that mean for them personally in terms of their own behaviours and attitudes that they have to change. So, I have seen some of the most successful people be much more reflective about these things. I think, several of them have also then gone on to expose themselves to more and more different situations, either within or in newer opportunities outside of whatever they were doing. Because they recognize that multiple experiences make you richer and prepare you better for the future from a learning standpoint. I think, several of them are using coaches, executive education programs, doing things with peers that are very focused on professional and personal development. They seem to understand that self-actualization and finding purpose is not something airy-fairy or spiritual only. It directly impacts your success and then satisfaction from what you do. So, I think, there are a host of these things that people are realizing.

I think, it's tough though, because earlier you didn't need, perhaps, to do all of this in your work life. You could do a set of things and be very successful and be quite mechanical and industrial about it. I think, in some contexts, you can still do that and be successful, but in most contexts, that has completely changed: one, the kind of problems that you are dealing with and two, the expectations that your own employees have of you. People want a different kind of workplace, they want a different kind of boss. They feel almost entitled that they should all be very respected and that whatever they do should inspire them and that they should be excited by the purposefulness of their work and so on. So, creating that kind of environment for wherever you work and sometimes in very boring, seemingly less exciting environments is tough as a leader and how to do that is a big challenge.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my leadership development work with leaders, I find a huge difference between the leaders who are self-aware and those who aren't. This shows up in two ways 1) they get a mentor or a coach to show them the mirror and keep chipping away on the blind spots and fine-tune their leadership capability as they move along 2) They have a strong conviction of the why behind the what that Simon Sinek often talks about. Unfortunately, these are things that are normally not taught as part of an educational curriculum, but when people start building out organizations, people who are brilliant but with lower levels of self-awareness often take off like a rocket but start tapering off as they start leading teams and the battlefield starts shifting as they grow. Just recognizing that and working on themes such as awareness and purpose can be helpful as organizations scale up.

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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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