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Context to the nugget

"What should I do with my life" is often a question that we grapple with at different inflection points in our life. Vinita talks about the dimensions along which she evaluates opportunities that have come her way at different points in her journey.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Any insights on how people should think about direction, given the sea of options in front of them?

Vinita Bali (VB): I certainly think if I were to think about the time that I was making those decisions and now I think the choices have dramatically increased and therefore the confusion about what am I interested in, what am I going to do has also increased I also think that the environment in which we are operating is different today I think it's much easier to follow a certain career path and then move and do something different I think those choices also enable a degree of fluidity which was not available certainly when I was making these decisions which was late 70s early 80s so I do believe it's very important to be clear about, what are you interested in or what are the things that you are interested in? And not that I thought about it. That clearly at that stage but on reflection I have always asked myself three questions which are that is this something that I can learn from? The second is, is this something that I can add value to? And that obviously not in the context of academic pursuit but in a broader sense and the third is will I have fun doing this? and if the answer for all three is yes, it actually makes it very easy, you have talked about my journey in terms of what I wanted to do, I was very clear, I loved to travel, I wanted to travel abroad and in my mind when I was a student the Indian Foreign service was a way to do this so that is why I was saying I am going to join the IFS then I get to travel and see the world and the reason I went to JNU and D school was because I enrolled for and masters in economics my undergrad was in eco honours from LSR in Delhi so I got admission in JNU, I got admission in D school I really petty the children who are, who have done their CBSE exams and they have all got 98% and they are still not getting, they still not getting into the colleges of their choice I worth about the 78% in my senior Cambridge had a choice of any college I wanted to join in Delhi university and after that D school or JNU, IIM Cal and the reason only I decided to go to Bajaj was had nothing to do with anything, a cousin of mine who lived in Mumbai came down and said why don't you come to Mumbai? You have always studied in Delhi it will be great and if you want to sit for the exams in any case you have to do a masters do an MBA and the right the Foreign Services exam and I thought it was a good idea and it was as casual as that and that's actually been quite true of everything that I have done, it hasn't been that I am very clear that this is what I want to do and I pursued it, things have actually fallen into my lap and once they fall into my lap then I very quickly decide what interests me and pursued that, so that's how I went

to Bajaj and once you go there I remember in February the campus interview started and even though we were going to finish in June had jobs in February and also IFS went out of the window.

DJ: And any reflections on the enrolling for the PhD and moving on in two years?

VB: So I was always interested in academics, and somewhere how about this thing of maybe I need to become a professor so what happened was, and I was clear that if I wanted to do a PhD it was not going to be in India, it was going to be overseas and I needed some work experience so that's how, so this is after about two and a half years of working, actually again that is also very casual conversation but cut a long story short, I got this wonderful scholarship from the Rotary international which paid for everything including my air ticket from India to wherever I would have got admission for a year and so I got that scholarship first and then I said, ok I need to write my GMAT my TOEFL I was late for everything but anyway I did all that I was late but I got into Michigan state university at East Lansing so I went off and Cadbury were wonderful enough. So this was the PhD in management and I was very clear, I wanted to do competitive strategy, that was also the time early 80s where Michel Porter so there were all these books on the strategy of war so that was an area of interest for me but anyway I try and enrolled I actually finished all my 45 credits in a year I got myself transferred Columbia to Pursue my PhD and then after about a year and a half I just got bored, I got bored because for me business and management was about doing not about studying about business and management and I think Cadbury, my employer, when I went from India I think they understood me better than I understood myself and they gave me this wonderful offer they said ok we give you a year to a year and a half for a study leave if you do decide to pursue your PhD you resign and if you don't you come back and there's no down side in an offer like that so from that PhD there was an internship in the UN so I was kind of end this very experimental phase of my life so I went and worked in UN for about four months, I was a part time graduate intern there and so on but that also helped me clarify what I did not want and what I did want to come back to, and it was clear to me that, doing a PhD in economics, would be different from doing a PhD in business, so business is about being in the activity and in the sort of the everyday decision making of the business world and not studying about it so that's how I decided to drop a PhD, Cadbury then offered that I go and work with Cadbury in the UK which was actually my first time living and working abroad and it was quite unusual this was 1984 unlike now when multinationals have opened up not many people especially in marketing and sales went and worked overseas so it was quite a thing, I loved it, I was in the UK I launched the first every aerated chocolate and that exposure was just wonderful.

DJ: Sticking to that choice of direction, if you had to distil just a given the journeys you have been on and the journeys you have seen, how should a youngster, who is sort of at the cusp of 12th or at the cusp of undergrad degree think about the direction whether it's a PhD or business or Arts or any guiding framework worth reflecting on?

VB: I think one thing is that you must think about what you like to do? In my case my choices were for an undergrad degree, I could have done history, I could have done English and I did Economics part of it also was guided by conversations I had with my parents with my dad, could I have done history or English? Yes, but it would have been a different trajectory after that and I think what is more important than choice is if you realize that you are doing something which you truly don't enjoy don't live with it and I think and especially today there are so many choices, there are wonderful careers in Journalism, in Hotel management so many other things the worst thing anybody can do to themselves is to pursue something inherently you don't like and you don't enjoy, that is a very clear cut reason to go back and think about you want to do what you enjoy doing.

DJ: And even when I reflect on your choices while you suggested that there was sort of happens stands in a few situations clearly quick call on how you were feeling in that journey.

VB: I also think it is another thing which is in everything that I have seen, I think your own attitude makes a lot of difference aptitude is one thing, and aptitude determines how well you do anything that you do? But I think attitude is also very important if you come from a mindset of cribbing about everything then nothing will ever stack up to your expectations if on the other hand you say, I am curious about this this feeling is right for me I am enjoying studying this or doing this and you put yourself completely into it and you immerse yourself I think there is this great joy of discovery that there is that great joy and curiosity and if you don't like to learn then you should never be a student anywhere but I think if you discover joy in learning whether as a student or as a professional or as a chief executive or as in any role that you play then it all becomes very easy I think if you come from the orientation of oh my god my parents want me to do a degree and I have to get this check this box and move on and I see people in organizations come with the same attitude, it's a job that I have to do, it's not a job that you have to do, being a student being a professional working doesn't define your life but is a very important part of your life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Couple of things struck me in this nugget. First was the point Vinita makes around how she evaluates options. In addition to will I enjoy and will I add value, she talks about "what will I learn from it". That is an interesting question that doesn't get talked about enough as we think about choices around a transition. Looking for avenues to pick up new skills in new spaces is critical indeed as we move towards a world where value is often being added at the intersection of disciplines. The other takeaway for me was Vinita talking about how there was no grand plan behind some of the decisions but clearly a reflection process that was anchored around "am I having fun" in this journey. This is similar to the key insight from the book "Designing your life" by Professors from the Design School in Stanford. They talk about how we can apply Design thinking principles to solving questions around transition we face. They make the distinction between wayfaring and looking at a map. They say that having a "Google maps" approach to career suggests that you know where you want to go. Often that is not the case. Wayfaring is the approach that sailors used in the olden times when they were in high seas. They would have a rough sense of direction about where the shore would be based on a compass and then navigate towards that direction. They suggest a similar approach where you use your passion and interest as the compass in helping with direction. The key is to cut your losses in case the path you choose is not turning out to be fun. What we think is fun and what is fun are often different things. Nandan Nilekani (NN) talks about this in the context of his decision to move on from politics after contesting the elections in Bengaluru.

NN: "so after the election campaign and after that I realize that this was not where I want to be, that I didn't have the leverage, I didn't have competitive advantage in that area I didn't think I would be very effective so I realize actually my effectiveness comes from being what I am good at which is a technology lead transformation agent and use my talents and abilities to solve large intractable problems and make that available to anybody who wants to use it"

DJ: If this is of interest, do listen to Nugget 11.08.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Nandan Nilekani that is referenced: [Reflections on Politics as a career](#).

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- 16.02 Vinita Bali - Early childhood wiring
- 16.03 Vinita Bali - Navigating the sea of career options
- 16.04 Vinita Bali - Consumer Goods (FMCG) as a career option
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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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