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## Context to the nugget

Navigating your career in a large, complex MNC can often be challenging and confusing. Vinita talks about how she navigated her career across different roles in Cadbury's and the Coca Cola Company.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I am curious about the multiple transitions you have been through in multiple continents across several countries, I would like to spend some time on some of your big transitions and the one piece I am curious about is the first 90 to 180 days where often the hairline cracks become fractures very quickly if not addressed properly so give us a sense of what are the omissions and commissions in these first 90 days both from an incoming perspective but also from a hiring leaders perspective, what can the two do to ensure that the transitions go well?

Vinita Bali (VB): So there are many questions in this one question so let me try and segregate them the first is the transitions you make, I think in my case every transition was about in my evaluation at that time looking to a different and better. Better not in terms of money I think the word really would be looking for a more different and diversified opportunity except the last one which is when I moved back after eighteen years to India to work for Britannia that was purely a personal choice and a decision, my mother had had a stroke and I just decided that this was a time to be close to my parents, so that was very largely driven by personal choice and by a career that or by a company that would not require too much of overseas travel etc. because I was moving back primarily to be with my parents so that was a very different and it came at a very different life stage both professionally as well as personally everything before that was about the opportunity for a diversified role, the opportunity for a bigger impact the opportunity for a larger footprint, including the transitions I made to move from country to country, so with Cadburys for example I had an opportunity to work in UK, which for the first time in my life was going and working overseas in a very developed, so it was the number one market for confectionery for Cadbury in a very developed market, so huge learning opportunity then to go and work in Nigeria, which was really part of a leadership trajectory that I was on in Cadburys where a bunch of us had been selected to do different roles and I was actually supposed to come back to India as CEO of Cadburys in 1993 when I finished my Nigeria assignment which went off very successfully at that point in time Cadbury gave me a choice of course you can come back to India which was part of this whole leadership program we were on, we were connected with INSEAD and so on I think there were just 10 to 12 of us globally and so they came back to me and said well there's an opportunity to go to South Africa and the first question I asked them was how do I fit I am neither black nor white and they said that's exactly why you fit and they gave me this offer, I must say Cadbury approach things in a very nonlinear fashion they said go and spend ten days in SA on our expense, travel around the country meet with the Cadbury people and then you decide and I came back very clear that SA is what I wanted to do and so it was going as

Marketing and Sales director on the board of Cadbury South Africa, not as CEO but one of the other things I wanted to say is titles have never been important to me, it wasn't I wasn't craving a CEO title for me it was the adventure for me opportunity to really create a line in the sand at a time of one of the country's most profound transitions in South Africa, Mr. Mandela was released in 1990, the country was having its dialogue between the national party and ANC, elections were going to happen in 1994 and number of countries that had continue to operate in South Africa we are operating in a very limited market there was this huge opportunity of how do we connect with the new SA and this was a marketing persons dream for me, I would never chase the title, so I do think I have also operated from a sense of adventure form a sense of possibilities, from a sense of horizons, from a sense of a something which is definitive and deterministic.

DJ: The reason this is interesting because in large MNCs again when I look back, when I was a search consultant at EgonZehnder, I would find there are a lot of people who have had good careers in MNCs often find a repatriation quite challenging, because you sort of, you fly and you go to different places at some point when you want a comeback and land in the home territory gets much harder so did you think about that? There's sort of coming back to base at some point or you would set off and...?

VB: No, as I said I had no plans to come back to India I was flying, I was doing what I wanted to do I was having a great time and therefor my decision to comeback to India was not a professional decision it was a personal decision and at that point in time that personal decisions were very important for me.

DJ: And just persisting with this theme of navigating a large MNC, any themes on, see one is the sense of adventure and clearly one is the sense of delivering mandates you have given but are there other themes around how you manage your career in large corporate without getting lost?

VB: Yes, in fact when I joined the Coca cola company form Cadburys was the first time I got into a global role and it was a very large global role because it was the global marketing director for brand Coke which operated in 200 countries at that time, this is Atlanta and Atlanta was also really creating this whole global structure for managing global brands it's had some sort of a lose structure before that but they had got back search Zeman as the chief marketing officer, Coke was flying high in 1994 when I joined Coke, I mean Coke was flying those were the days when people like Roberto was the chairman of Coke who was on the cover of fortune talking about economic value added and how do you serve the customers and the market and for me again I was doing very well in Cadburys so why did I moved to Coke, it wasn't that I left Cadburys it was that I moved to for a market year, what could be better than the opportunity to be responsible for the world's most valuable brand and I could not say no and one of the things I really credit Cadbury with and I had this conversation with Dominic Cadbury, who said is there anything we can do to hold you back? I said I am not running away, I am just running to something else, so culturally the two were very different, Cadburys were very British, very quicker and there was the Coca Cola company I got into a very move offs role, we were creating a global sort of architectures and so on and for the first four to six months I was just trying to get a handle on, so what exactly is my role? And there were several of us who had joined at the same time there was a new global brand director for Fanta for Sprite so we used to go off at lunch and talk and say so what are we doing? But I think what happens is if you are ok with ambiguity and there is some degree of complexity and if you are aware of what is happening around you because at the end of the day, success in any role is a function of empathetically understanding what the role is? Where the role can truly add value? And how do you create processes and structures so that things which are multi-dimensional, remain multidimensional then I think you get big doors of success.

DJ: And I am curious about the phrase you used empathetically understanding, say more what do you mean by empathetically understanding the role?

VB: So in this case it was, take a brand like Coke its very local in its distribution and sales it's not unlike few brands where you got three global factories that are supplying the world in a case like Coke, where you have got tens if not hundreds of bottlers and distributors in every country, so the delivery is as local as local can be but here we are talking about the brand, what its stands for, how it should be communicated? As global as global can be. So it is the red can, it is the dynamic ribbon, it is the properties that Coke associates with how do you activate the Olympic, so the decision to sponsor the Olympics is a global decision the architecture of how that is going to be created is what we developed globally but the challenge was that it had to be executed locally, now you are coming into an situation where people have been used to operating in a certain way, so if you understand what are the pain points or where countries are looking for augmentation then it becomes so much easier to create that pull rather than a push, part of that push comes from saying OK, in Coke we created a very simple framework and that's what I liked initially we said it's not about global or local, it is global and local we simply need to define what is global and what is local? We simplified things and that's what I like, part of my initial role was, it was almost like you bringing in a little bit of academic recur into the thinking, we created the whole architecture for Coca Cola, what are the properties we are going to associate with and what we are not? We were associating with everything, the joke used to be if it moves sponsor it, if doesn't paint it red, and we say how do we change this to becoming most strategic about what we wanted to do? We created frameworks and architecture for how do we connect with the Olympics? So India wants to activate cricket, how does Coke associated with Cricket? So it was a very simple framework which said there are ideally four levels of decision making. Level one is it's a global decision with no input from the countries level two is global decisions with country input, level four is country decision with no input from global and we set country decision with global and level three which is where we didn't want to be is our decision so we said it should be one two, four and five so we created a lot of these wonderful frameworks etc.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The point Vinita makes about Cadbury's getting her to spend 10 days in South Africa is an interesting one. Very often, during transition, we are faced with two options where there is significant information asymmetry across the two options. We sometimes don't consider the option of getting more information on a certain path. Whether it is a transition inside a company or to a different role, there is often an opportunity to dip your toes in the water and then take a call on whether the move makes sense for you. Whether it shadowing somebody for a period of time, spending time in a new geography, or talking to people about the day in a life of that role, it is critical for us to make it real for ourselves before we take the plunge. I see several people making a decision based on a romantic notion of what the path is and very soon it often turns into disappointment and disillusionment if you haven't thought it through.

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## End of nugget transcription

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### Vinita Bali - Nuggets

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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
- 16.05 Vinita Bali - Transitioning roles in a large MNC
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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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