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Context to the nugget

Vinita speaks about how executives and board members could navigate these choppy waters as the COVID 19 is playing out. She specifically alludes to the transition we are making from the firefighting mode of dealing with the situation to seeing this as a marathon over a few months now. She also speaks about the leadership competencies that would be required for leaders to cope with what we are experiencing and for the future we are marching into.

Transcription

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is a Part 2 of the conversation with Vinita Bali. She was earlier in the podcast around 3 years back to talk about her journey, her various transitions and her career across 6 countries spanning 5 continents. Given what we are experiencing given COVID-19, we wanted to get her take on how leaders and boards should navigate this situation and cope with the unfolding situation. Hope you find this conversation purposeful.

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Vinita, thanks for coming back on the Play to Potential podcast.

Vinita Bali (VB): Thank you so much Deepak. Very nice to connect with you again in these rather bizarre Covid times should I say.

DJ: I know, I know. A lot has changed since we last spoke, but maybe that's a good place to start Vinita. How are you experiencing Covid given what you do and given the portfolio of things on your plate?

VB: Yeah, quite honestly Deepak, I consider myself to be quite fortunate in terms of being locked into my own home and doing whatever I do digitally, online, remotely etc. So, in a sense you can say that work has not stopped, board meetings continue; in fact, there are more not less board meetings. There are additional factors like webinars and talks and seminars and so on. So, life has actually been very busy, quite hectic and different in the sense that you know, the day is very full but all of that fullness happens in front of a computer sitting on a chair. But it also has given one time for reflection. There is a lot that I have caught up with in terms of theatre and arts, there are wonderful programs from around the world that are available from museum tours to real-time tours of the Kruger National Park to theatre and ballet and classical music. So, I am not complaining, at the same time I have spent some time working with colleagues and people I know on.... with NGOs trying to

do what one possibly can to support raise funds and help in whatever way the cause of so many people who have been dislocated.

DJ: Hmm. You are right talking about seeing theatre I was watching the musical Hamilton with my family a few days back, quite fascinating how they have taken a theatre experience and have translated that to a two-dimensional experience. So, you are right, I think in a way you can sort of watch the world from your screen, but yeah strange times indeed.

VB: Yeah, but the most important thing is, you know, if you can make the time and everybody has to do it in their own way to pause and reflect and prioritize what is important and what is not. I think this is a good time to actually introspect and reflect and really determine what is it that you really want to do and what is just extra noise. And if we can use this time positively and bring about positive energy to what we are doing, what we want to continue doing, it's not a bad outcome.

DJ: Hmm, true it's a good reset button for a lot of us. I guess in a way back to your earlier point the fact that we have the privilege to reflect and make these choices is something I guess we need to have gratitude for that I keep discussing with my wife and kids. The fact that you do not have to fight any fires and we have the luxury of reflecting and pausing and moving forward.

VB: Yeah, and I think gratitude is a good emotion to experience, and you use the word reset Deepak, I feel that the reset has to be at a different level. If we reset in terms of our own ways, which is to say, okay, you know, now the Covid behaviour of restraint and refraining from stuff is over and now it's back to how we were living our life. I think me as individuals and we as people on this planet would have missed a fabulous opportunity to make our lives and the lives of everybody else who we share this planet with better. You know, we are right now as bewildered I think as the polar bears and the orangutans with the arctic ice melting and the jungles disappearing and we have to therefore say what does the pause and reset look like and it cannot look like what it was before the pause happened.

DJ: So true. Actually, it's interesting the way you frame it. It has taken us by as much surprise as for human beings who made significant progress in making sense of the world. We are at some level reduced to some of these animals in terms of our ability to cope with what nature has thrown at us. But bringing it to your experiences Vinita, you are in a few boards, you get to see how boards work, how leadership teams function, in what ways do you see this impacting the leadership ask both at a management level at a board level? In what ways has that shifted in the last few weeks and months?

VB: So Deepak it's different across the board if I could use that pun and companies have to accept and internalize it in their own way, but I can tell you the more effective boards are having conversations around what are the new skills, how do we manage through this chaos, because this is very different from what anybody has experienced. In fact, there is no playbook for this crisis that you can refer to. There is a playbook for managing through recessions, there is a playbook for managing through natural calamities and so on but there is no playbook for what starts as a health issue, becomes a pandemic, very quickly morphs into or adds to its momentum economic turbulence and upheaval, which is a combination of people losing jobs, there are constraints both from a supply side as well as the demand side, people being in places of work which are not their homes and therefore wanting to get back to where their families are, where their homes are whether that is a student studying outside of his or her country or whether people who have gone on work, people within the country who are working in other cities and so on. So, I think the chaos that has been unleashed is something that nobody has ever experienced before and therefore you have to say what are the new skills to learn and what are the new capabilities that institutions, organizations whether you are in the corporate world or an academic institution or an NGO or a hospital, I mean,

imagine the load and the stress and the challenge in hospitals and those systems. And as I think about this in my mind, I think what we really need to hone in on is what I would call adaptive skills. This is not about functional skills, which are more often than not linear, here is the problem, here is a solution to it, and so I know how to solve the problem. This we have to adapt and therefore have to improvise. We have to improvise through this chaos because nobody has seen what could happen next. Everybody has hypothesis and conjectures about what needs to be done to flatten the curve and some of this is borne out of empirical evidence as well, but there is nothing to say that if we do this the curve will be flattened in the same way everywhere we do it. So, to my mind this is more about adaptive skills, the ability to improvise. In many ways it's almost like saying that we have to learn to engage with incomplete information, we have to learn to engage with chaos. We often times talk about we have to engage with our customers and our employees and so on. Of course, we have to do that, we have to listen better but this is almost about unless we learn to embrace this chaos and the ability to make decisions with incomplete information the ability to manage decision-making with speed and risk. So, I think it is calling upon many, many competencies, skills, experiences that have not been called into question at least in the same way or simultaneously. And therefore, effective boards and managements are those that are actually embracing this and learning to work through this turbulence, this unprecedented environment, this chaotic time, this VUCA world that we all talked about and wrote about but it is upon us now. I think those engagements between management and boards, between management itself are very crucial and very critical to how companies come out of this.

DJ: Hmm... and in a way when we say VUCA we often talk about known unknowns or predictable uncertainties, I mean, predictable uncertainties is a wrong term but uncertainties that could be modelled. I would say this is in a way a black swan event that has hit us. Anything that you see different in the way this particular shock in what ways has it tested managements and boards that some of the other shocks haven't?

VB: I think Deepak the most significant way in which it is testing, it is still testing organizations around the world is the confluence of several factors across domains simultaneously. So, we have got a healthcare pandemic that we have to deal with, we have got an economic issue that we have to deal with. It's not about how fast we are growing; the question is are we going to grow at all. In fact, IMF as you know has forecast a 3% decline in global GDP and so on which is very significant and of course it varies by country. We are seeing simultaneously the creation of new physiological and psychological and sociological issues. You know, suddenly we have moved from a world where people got up every morning, students went to school or to universities, working people went to work, the farmers went to the farms, etc. etc. And now, most of us except for the farmers, they still have to go to farms, they cannot do virtual farming but, you know, most of us are spending time whether I am a student, its online classes, of course, we talked about how companies and boards are working work from home. This whole idea of social distancing which to my mind started with physical distancing because you know we wanted to be physically separate that has resulted in huge social distancing and it is causing anxiety, it is causing problems of adjustment where people suddenly are finding themselves locked into the same space with each other whether those are families or nuclear families or joint families. So, it is a very what should I say? It's a very different experience to what we are used to and it's not something that is going away in a hurry. At least in India we have been in this state since the 25th of March and it doesn't seem like it is going to ease off completely. Yes, there are flights, but people are hesitant to take flights, there is a certain trepidation and rightly so. So, I think the uncertainty this has caused both economic uncertainty, the uncertainty of relationships and by that I don't just mean family relationships or interactions, but as a student my relationship with my school, my class, my studies, my exams, all of that has been thrown into question. And we are trying to find simultaneously these multiple answers to something

which I believe is hugely systemically related, but we are not able to sit through this. Usually our problem-solving ability is to say, okay let me focus on one thing at a time or maybe two things at a time. Right now, we have disruptions in the supply chain and we don't have enough demand. We have people who want to go to work somewhere, but there aren't enough jobs, unemployment is increasing. So, everything is in turmoil, it's turbulent and therefore to keep a cool head and think through what is the best way of dealing with it requires both individual effort as well as institutional effort.

DJ: It's a great point, you are right, it is a systems problem and all of us have visibility to one part of the system or the ability to influence one part of the system but if you move that lever something else moves and the system responds differently so yeah, you are right. And in your experience Vinita, in my observation I have seen people responding to it a bit like a fire-fighter, saying this is a fire we need to fight now sort of coming to terms with the fact that we need to run it like a marathon for the next few months. Any big shifts you are seeing in the way people, as this has played out and continues to play out from the firefighting mode to the marathon mode, any interesting discussions you have had in your in your interactions in boards and otherwise?

VB: Yeah, Deepak, you know, it's fire-fighting and also when we are be talking about running a marathon even that actually is a simpler analogy in the sense that I know that if I keep running, I will finish the marathon. I think the chaos in this is that I am not even sure whether the direction in which I am running is the direction in which I should be running.

DJ: That's true.

VB: You know as somebody who has seen it there is nothing more wasteful than doing with great efficiency that which should not be done at all. So, I think choosing the direction in which to run, choosing how fast to run, choosing the partners with which you want to run, all that becomes very critical. And I think for the most part I think it evolved in stages, of course, the first stage and that is the right way of doing it is to say okay, nobody can go to work, so what do we do? So, a lot of time, effort, energy was spent in figuring out how the workplace could come into the house. So, this entire work from home wherever it was possible, obviously, you can't run manufacturing units by not being there etc. So, I think the corporations did what they are very good at which is linear problem solving. How do I get the operations to move, how do I get my procurement done, my manufacturing done, my logistics done, those people who had the option of working from home said, how do we set up people to work from home? But that was dealing only with the first stage of its doing the bare minimum. It's like the generics of what I need to do. I think the bigger issue of what does work look like when this pandemic is under a little bit of control and I think we have seen some of that. We had seen some of that come back in places like Spain and Germany, where slowly but surely they are opening up more and more. I think we will begin to see how other countries and how other institutions and corporations are dealing with it. Right now I think we are still at the stage of, you know, what you called fire-fighting but I think it is phase 1 of firefighting is over, it's now phase 2 which is to say if this new mode of delivering work is going to continue for some time to come what does that look like? And I think people still don't have answers to where will this finally conclude? But I do believe there are conversations that are happening and I am privy to a few of those but conversations that... but more of these conversations need to happen around so what is the systemic lesson we are learning from this for our business? How does the future of work get redefined? How does the future of teaching get redefined? And are we doing enough in terms of asking those questions? I still think corporations are, certainly the CEOs are still looking at okay, you know, how does my next quarter performance become better than my previous quarter performance? Obviously, nobody is giving any guidance and rightly so. I really think that my message to whoever wants to listen is to say let us not try and artificially prop up this year. I think let us take

this year as one of a complete reset. Let us go back to ground zero and say if we have lost a year and frankly a year in the history of a 100-year-old or a 200-year-old successful company is not a big deal at all. I think if corporations can really have those honest conversations and say what does this mean in terms of how do I look after people? What does this mean in terms of cost effectiveness? What does it mean in terms of rewiring the business model? What does this mean in terms of how we reach across to our customers and so on and so forth? Are there other revenue opportunities in the business we have? I think those are the strategic conversations that I am sure will begin to happen because just muddling through this and hoping that the world will become what we knew it is not going to happen.

DJ: No, it's interesting you say this, at some level for us to plan it's helpful to have an anchor somewhere for us to plan around it, but in a way, this is almost everything is up in the air and we are solving for a future that is still emerging. And one thing I am curious about is how are leaders and organizations making decisions, you know, what's the... on a normal day you are maximizing shareholder value and you are trying to stay true to the community you are in and so on. There's a bunch of guardrails around which you operate but what's what has been your experience in the criteria? How are companies and leaders trading off purpose, profits, people and some of the other pulls and pressures at the top?

VB: Again, Deepak there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. I think different companies are looking at it differently. We have already begun to read that there are organizations that are letting go of people, job offers that were made to first time hires are certainly being pushed back if not reneged altogether and one understands the constraints under which business is working. But certainly, wherever I can influence personally through boards and through other relationships one has with organizations, my thing is that this is not going to last. Whereas how your people feel about the company, how your customers feel about your products, how the larger ecosystem that is dependent on you feels about you is definitely more important. And therefore, I would say that if we go back to purpose and say why do I exist, what do I do better than anybody else and why should anybody care and answer those questions authentically and with honesty and integrity, I do believe that the effective managements, the great and the good organizations will pull themselves, will differentiate themselves from the others. There are companies where top management has said we are taking a cut in our salary, of course, there is no bonus, etc. etc. So, there are many ways in which you can deal with the issue. I think there is a short-term pain that we have to take but I think that short-term pain is inevitable if you really want to keep your employees and your customers for the long term. And as I keep saying you know what the year is in the long history of organizations and in the long trajectory of people who work in those organizations. But I think decisions have to be authentic, decisions have to be taken for the right reasons. And again, organizations will differentiate themselves in the manner in which they make these decisions, but I do think that every organization has to ask a few fundamental questions. You talked earlier about what is different about the situation that we are in now? I do think that we have got to talk about the elephant in the room and I think frankly there are several elephants in the room, you know, a big elephant in the room for every organization. I can't think of any company or any institution that is not impacted by it is this whole conversation around climate change. So, yes, the pandemic happened, it has exposed the weakness and the vulnerability of health care systems around the world, from the richest of the rich countries to the poorest of the poor countries. I think not just organizations but political leadership has to go back and say what do we prioritize? Most countries have gone and signed the SDG goals. And if we were simply to say how we stack up against those SDG goals you know the first of which is zero hunger and better nutrition. I think if this was an opportunity that and I know I am sort of speaking somewhat naively, if we use this as an opportunity to say what are the priorities of nations, what are the priorities of inter-dependencies between nations which really takes us to this

whole issue of climate change, trade and so on and so forth. I think we will realize that there is some very fundamental work that needs to be done to reshape the way in which we are thinking about our planet, to reshape the way in which we are thinking about the environment, to reshape the way in which we think about climate change. And most of it, you know, and David Attenborough is somebody I have followed over the years and if you look at some of his documentaries, I mean, what is he saying? He is saying most of the damage that we have done to our planet we have done in the last 50 years. So, surely, we can go back and change the damage that we have caused because I think if the planet is in harmony many of the other things that is a fallout of that disharmonious existence will also fall into place.

DJ: And that's true. And Vinita just looking ahead into the future you alluded to some of these things earlier, but what do you see as some of the longer term ramifications of this for business and governance structures in terms of how we think about leadership, how we think about, you know, what sorts of CEOs do we look for and how the board interacts with the CEO? Any thoughts on how that dynamic is going to shift in the future?

VB: I don't know how it is going to shift but how I would desire it to shift I can certainly talk about. I think we are looking in the future, we are looking at leaders who have the ability to think systemically, we are looking at leaders... and by leaders I do not mean just the CEO, let me use the word leadership because leadership to me suggests behaviour, leader is a position or a title. We are looking at leadership whether that comes from the board or management, actually ideally it should come from the board, management everywhere. We are looking at leadership that is empathetic, we are looking at leadership that has the ability to think comprehensively, we are looking at leadership that displays great adaptive skills, we are looking at leadership that is not afraid to improvise, and we are looking at leadership that is true to what we keep talking about. ESG is something that has become very much part of the governance lingo if you like, environment, social and governance. So, how can we talk about, how can we take leadership on the environment, if we are not conscious of how we are dealing with the environment, how can we make decisions about people and how we deal with people without that social lens because we corporations and every other institution is part of the ecosystem of governance of this planet. We are all microcosms of this larger planet that all of us inhabit. So, I am talking about leadership, which is enlightened, I am talking about leadership that is courageous, I am talking about leadership that has the ability to look beyond numbers and say what is the significant contribution we are making to the environment, to society and to better governance. I think we are talking about leadership that puts into action all the things that it has been speaking about and does that with conviction, with courage and with authenticity.

DJ: And as you look around Vinita any leaders that give you hope... may be I didn't frame it well but who inspires you in these times just for people to get a sense of what good leadership looks like from the business world other than the business world around the world, any leaders that stand out in your mind that are worth looking at for us to get a sense of what the future might look like?

VB: You know that's... honestly that's a difficult one to answer. I wish I could name three people but actually honestly nobody is coming to mind. I think there are companies that have taken very good initiatives to address some of these issues, but I don't know enough to say that therefore everything that they are doing exemplifies what I have just talked about. You know, we talked about organizations that, for example, have taken a conscientious call not to lay off any people but to start with taking cuts in salaries and that is at the senior leadership level, the higher you are the greater is the cut you take in your salary, I think several organizations have done that. Several organizations have been very compassionate towards their employees in terms of setting them up in work from home situations, making sure that if they have been stranded somewhere, bringing them back etc.

What I am not seeing enough of and that could be my limitation not that it is not happening. What I am not seeing enough of is this bold call, this bold initiative to say this is how we are going to manifest ESG in our work and in our strategies going forward.

DJ: Got it.

VB: So, I can pick specific examples and you know most of the leading companies have done that. There's one other point I want to mention which actually I should have also mentioned earlier when you said what is different and therefore it came to my mind when you said what the kind of leadership we want is and I did talk about leadership that is empathetic. Look at the confluence of factors, one of the big things I omitted to mention earlier was the social uprising, which is happening whether it is on account of racial discrimination and what we saw starting in the U.S., what we have seen in our own country and the way we dealt with people who left their villages and travelled hundreds of kilometres and came in to our cities to do our work. We are not even... we are referring to them as migrants, actually they are like you and me, they are citizens of my country. I am a migrant; I am living in a city that I wasn't born in and I came here for work. So, in some sense, we are all migrants. In fact, there would be very few people who are not migrants and yet we treat them or we did treat them very, very differently. And so, I think leadership is about the ability to look at that big picture and say what the things that I need to do are? It's not about business, it is about interactions with people, it is how we respect individuals, and it is the responsibility we feel towards our people. I think that is the kind of enlightened or evolved or conscientious leadership that I am talking about.

DJ: With you Vinita I think fair we do given what we have done to the planet and to ourselves and given the magnitude of what we are grappling with I guess we need a higher, a different order of leadership for us to make our way meaningfully into the future and maybe that's a good place for us to wrap this conversation. I guess we could go on this enough and more to discuss in terms of Covid but it's been a pleasure having you again on the on the podcast Vinita. Thank you so much for your time.

VB: Deepak, thank you very much but may I end with this native Indian proverb that I came across the other day and if I can get recollect it accurately. It goes something like it says "when all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover that you cannot eat money". I think it's a pretty good... if we reflect on it, I think it would teach us a lot.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. If this topic is of interest, you might like the playlist coping with Covid19 in the Curated Playlists section at playtopotential.com.

To know more about the Coaching, Transition and Leadership Advisory work I do, please visit the About the Host section at playtopotential.com.

End of nugget transcription

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Vinita Bali - Nuggets

- 16.00 Vinita Bali - The Full Conversation
- 16.01 Vinita Bali - About Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN)
- 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
- 16.06 Vinita Bali - Navigating the first 3-6 months
- 16.07 Vinita Bali - Functional Leadership to General Management
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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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