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Context to the nugget

Suresh talks about how serendipity got him to Hindustan Lever Limited. He speaks about initially appearing for the interview as practice for the IAS entrance but provides context on why he joined HLL eventually. He also speaks about how one should think about navigating their career through a large corporation during the early years where it is easy to get lost in the maze.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other transition I am curious about is Education to Career and I remember reading about you wanting to join the IAS initially but joining HUL when they came to campus to hire, so talk to us a little bit about that but actually now with the wisdom of hindsight, what sort of advice do you give to somebody who is at cross road of direction of career?

Suresh Narayanan (SN): It was an interesting journey for me, because actually having belong to a family where my father was a technocrat my grandfather was a bureaucrat, my great grandfather was a bureau crat so their family's belief was always that the government job and something that gave pension and stability was the job to be so in fact after doing my honours in economics I was one of the few people in my batch not to give the CAT exam, I didn't give it at that stage because I was very clear that I wanted to go and do masters and then apply for the IAS so I went on to the Delhi school of economics and did my masters in economics, specialized in monetary policy and in agricultural economics and I had either of two paths, I said either I will go for the IAS or I will apply for a PhD and go overseas. Being the only child of my parents I think my parents kind of dissuaded me from applying overseas because I think heart of hearts I think my mother had the horrification that I might produce a American daughter in law and that was something that was not palatable at all in the context of Tairsadam that would have been on the dining table so I instead chose that I will go for the IAS. At about that time someone mentioned one of my uncles in fact mention that and it so happened, Hindustan Lever, I always believe in a hand of fate, sometime it happens, Hindustan Lever never came to Delhi school of economics before this, in 1981 they chose to come to Delhi school of economics, why they came I have no idea, this is for management trainee position. My placement secretary at that time in Delhi school of economics takes full credit for it saying that it was because of his charm that it worked, whatever be the case they came the same uncle told me that look it is a good practice for the IAS exam because Hindustan Levers have good interviews and it will help you in the IAS interview so I said fine this is a good idea and I will apply for it and HUL at that time in the early 80s was still the organization that would insist on you being in the top 10 even to apply so I was happen to be in the top 10 of my class to apply to HUL and I went through the first round of interviews in Delhi I had a formidable bunch from FMS and from St. Stephen and from other places, and I just went I said for a luck let me just go and give this interview, I gave this interview and no one behold the feedback came saying that you have been selected for the final

interview in Mumbai those days you have to go Mumbai, unlike your time interviewers would come in and pick up from IIMA, so I was told and then I thought I will through a curved ball my exams were around the corner so I said and they were offering first class rail fare, so I said look I would not be able to come because it was very close to my exam unless you give you me an Air fare, it so happened again faith intervened and they said OK we will give you air fare, and which in those days pretty expensive, so Lever actually gave me an Air fare, I borrowed some money from my cousin in order to by the ticket because I didn't have that kinds of funds and my father was in Dhanbad so I went to the actual interview and I was surrounded by candidates from IIM Ahmedabad IIM Calcutta I think about the least there was faculty of Administrative and somebody then asked me said where are you from? I said Delhi school of Economics they said what? I said Delhi school of economics and then they had a case study and you won't believe it Deepak, I didn't know what the case study was, I never done a case study, I have done perspective theorems and those kind of things, never a case study, so I went through that case study and I don't know how I managed it, the bottom line for me is that I believe that whenever you are, you really don't care about the consequences of what you do, you do a fantastic job, I wasn't dying for the HUL job, honestly I was there for the interview that was my objective, no one behold I finally got this job and two fabulous men were part of my or three actually were part of the panel who finally selected me, one was R. Gopalakrishnan one was the gentlemen called Shunu Sen who was Marketing wizard at HUL and third was a gentlemen called Tarun Sheth, who later on set up a search firm called Shilputsi. So they finally called me in and said look we have selected you as a, and I was the only on that day out of 14 candidates, who have been called, so I don't think people expected me to get the job, I never expected it, so I got the offer later and I came out.

DJ: If I may double click on that, just may be being immodest about yourself, what would you say they saw in you that lead to them picking you?

SN: I think what they saw in me was, I was really most un-management like, my thinking was not the usual, predictable stuff that they were getting out of IIM graduates, I think that was part of it, I was analytic but analytic in a very economic social science way, I was not analytic in a management way, I didn't know any jargon the word margin to me was more to do with marginal utilities and stuff like that it was not marginal cost and those kind of others or margin itself so I think probably they have found that and at that stage Levers was also trying to look and see whether they were able to get in candidates other than just B-school grads to join their management ranks because some of them people like Gopalakrishnan and Shulu Sen did not have the benefit of going to B-school but were successful people in the organization, so I finished that, came out and came back home that I was staying with my aunt and uncle in Wadala in Mumbai and I called up my father trunk call in those days no mobile phones and he told me this is, I said Dad I have got the job, he said oh, he said how much salary are they paying you? The first question, so I gave him my number, he said good Suresh it's a very good salary its only about 30% lower than what I am getting but I am getting this after 30 years so I think it must be a good salary, any case he said talk to your uncle who was in the IAS and ask him whether you should take this offer so I met my uncle I asked him I said uncle I am still interested in the IAS but I have got this, and uncle said, oh yes my friend Shulu Sen is there who was classmate at Stephens, he said he is doing very well, he has got an air conditioned ambassador car so I said ok that is so good, and secondly he said Suresh what gives you the confidence? That you will get the IAS you might get a service that you don't want, so then are you going to regret it? So I said yes I might regret, he said then Suresh go for it. So I took the offer and now I must say now 36 years beyond I have not regretted it for the single day because I can say hand on heart in these 36 years I have worked in organizations where competence where culture, where contribution, where credibility, where trust, where hard work and where strong ethics are valued and are cherished in their employees and I can say hand on heart there has never been a situation where I have had to

compromise on my values and I think that is something that keeps me happy and that keeps me going because I have always believed in and this is my only advice to youngsters is choose a profession where you live and work on your terms, if you are doing something which in my case management happened by accident, it was not something that I was looking forward to but when I got into it I said how can I live this life on my terms? And live this life with the purpose and values that I have been imbued with and it gave me that opportunity and I was lucky that I worked at Levers at Colgate at Nestle three of the finest consumer good companies, and I have enjoyed this journey.

DJ: And you spoke about 36 years across these companies and again these are all large multiple geographies, multiple functions, multiple business units kind of companies what would you say to people starting out in terms of just given your journey, wisdom in terms of navigating a large corporation, sometimes people there is a fear of will I get lost somewhere, so having spent this time if you had to decode your lessons would you break it down to three or four things in the context of managing your career in a large organization?

SN: First thing I would really say is work to your strengths, know what your strengths are, and work on aspects that will only enhance and will show these strengths in good light that's number one. Number two is work with commitment and work with passion, these are if you are passionate about something and you are committed to it, you will do a fantastic job there is no two ways about it, I mean it will come out it will show, whatever is your potential huge for that. Number three don't keep broking across your shoulders which unfortunately, I must confess that it was part of my career, I was doing that in the HLL system which was a pristine meritocracy in every sense you had to make it to certain level within certain years especially if you are a management trainee, if you didn't make it, it would be seen that this guy is not good enough to take on the top mental or sit on the chair in the executive board room one day, so but when you take away that fear of trying to be as successful as somebody else I think you do a fantastic job. And the fourth one is have the courage to speak up and to speak out when you think that things are going wrong, you don't have to be abusive, you don't have to be to make career limiting moves but I think organizations appreciate that and number five I believe is work for your people ultimately we are successful as professionals even if I have head a 10 billion dollar enterprises or I head a lakh of rupees enterprise I succeed because of the strength and because of the competence of people around me, if you take care of your people they take care of you and I think this is the philosophy that I have applied in my career and I have never failed to be rewarded for it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Three things struck me here. What struck me the most in what Suresh said was the point he made about not looking over your shoulder to see how some of your peers are doing. In a world with diverging paths, it just doesn't make sense to benchmark yourself with how some of your peers are doing (whether it is your classmates from school, college or your cohort at work). Philosopher Alain De Botton addresses this in an elegant way in the book – Status Anxiety.

The second thing that struck me was the point about playing on your strengths and passion. In a large corporation, it is very easy to get carried away by the various gates that are opened to you especially when you come in as a prized management trainee. It is interesting that both minimizing status anxiety and having clarity of direction require people to do inner work (to have a clear sense of what is important for them and what their utility function is – to use economic terms). I remember the famous badminton coach Pullella Gopichand saying that his best years as a

badminton player happened when he stopped comparing himself to others and really set an absolute bar for himself and started pushing the limits`

The third point is that around hiring for potential. If we look at the way Suresh was hired into HUL over 13 others who had management degrees and quote unquote had the skills. No wonder, HUL is the leadership factory that it is. While there are all kinds of commentary around hiring based on intrinsic potential given the VUCA world, it is fascinating that Suresh was hired for his intrinsic potential 35 odd years back. A testament to the robust hiring processes that go beyond the surface and look for long-term potential.

Thank you for listening. If you are new to the podcast and want to get a sense of the nature of content that is covered, you might want to go to YouTube and type "PlaytoPotential Highlights from 2017". I have tried to capture the key takeaways from my various conversations last year with leaders across disciplines. From people such as Zia Mody, Nandan Nilekani, Viswanathan Anand, Vijay Amritraj, Amish Tripathi, Vinita Bali and the like.

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End of nugget transcription

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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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