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Context to the nugget

Suresh talks about his experiences in transitioning across companies and roles. He moved from HUL to Nestle and within Nestle, he moved across markets such as Egypt, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines and India. He talks about how he thinks about settling into a new context and also what it takes to build systems and processes so that even when you transition out, the organization continues to run effectively.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You have worked across these three companies and even in Nestle in the last decade you have worked across Singapore, Egypt, Philippines and India I am curious about how leaders should think about, the first three to six months in a new culture whether it's a new geography in the same company or a new company, having done multiple transitions, what are the three four things which often get missed out, what are the things that people don't do enough that they should

Suresh Narayanan (SN): Number one is I would really suggest, Prepare yourself. I think a lot of cross cultural, cross wires happen when you are not well prepared. By preparation I mean not only in terms of trying to read up a bit about where you are going to, what are the kinds of issues and challenges that those people face but also develop the attitude of receptiveness, that I will not super impose my cultural value sets on a group of people to whom that may be alien. So the preparation is in terms of understanding and the preparation in terms of having an open attitude that I will look at the positives of what that culture offers, rather than making comparisons between this culture and my own culture that's number one. Number two is before you act understood and assimilate. What happens to us that being operating managers for better part of our lives, our immediate worry is how do I get my next week sales or my next quarter profits or whatever. Especially at senior management levels it is important to step back and observe, so what I used to do in all the new situations is, I always walk around. I don't sit in my chair, I will walk around the office, I walk around to the sites, I walk around where talk to the common people, what are the kinds of things that interest you, what are the kinds of things that bothers you, what suggestion would you give to build this company better, I think there are ways in which you touch the lives of people, the minute you touched the lives of people you as a leader do not become unreachable anymore and in cultures which are fairly hierarchical, I mean Egypt is pharaonic, very hierarchical culture, Singapore meritocratic but still very authority driven, Philippines again is very rigid in terms of the structural tenets of who's the boss and who's the subordinate? Thailand similar, they have a strong sense of position rank and society, so if you are able to break that then you get a very clear path and in that first three six months if you are able to assimilate, understand and then draw up the four or five big issues that you will address, you will be more successful in the balance part of your stint, than if you

were to go there with a preconceived notion that these are the four things that I will do and launch into it. I think the preparation is where the issue is.

DJ: And how do you think about, there is a point of view which says that, there is sometimes merit in making one or two key visible decisions that signals that there is a new sheriff in town, how do you think about that, which sort of goes against the grain of assimilate, don't do anything and before you make up your mind how have you thought about that?

SN: I would say for me that is contextual it is not a recipe, let's say when I went to Singapore, I did not have to make any significant changes in the way in which the organization was working for the first couple of months and then of course we had the 2008 economic down turn, at which time I had to make certain dramatic changes to the way in which the business was being conducted but it gave me sometime in Egypt on the other hand the cultural nuance always has been that whenever there is a new leader, there will be one or two things that will change and in that organization I found that for example empowerment and speed were clearly issues, people were waiting to be told to do something because they didn't feel a sense of empowerment and they always felt that just like the Nile flowed perennially that there is enough time to take enough decisions and there is no need for any speed and urgency, so I took one or two decisions that signalled that the new sheriff in town is interested in empowering you as leaders, he wants to things to be done from a signalling perspective. So for me it is entirely contextual, when I came back to India obviously I was in the thick of the crises there a lot of signals had to be sent out in order to insure that the ship started to settle down a bit.

DJ: Specifically, in a consumer goods context I guess you need to understand it not just about settling in to the company it's about, understanding the nuances of consumer behaviour, so how do you do that, when you transitioned from one culture to another how do you pick up that, I mean you grew up in India so I think some of the Indian consumer behaviour comes naturally but when you are moving to a new geography is there a...

SN: One of the things that I get from probably functional exposure and confidence that I have built up I spent of fair many years of my career in sales so I was used to and I love to walk the markets and I still believe and I still do that every month I am out for almost 10 15 days I travel and when I travel I travel to either our factories or I travel to our markets and I walk, I was last week in port blare I was there in one of their islands to look at how we were distributing and what we were doing their? The best way of assimilating is by seeing, all the reports are there, the presentations are there, Nestle is full of it and I will get it, I know it I don't have to ask for it but for me walking the markets automatically gives you the window to the consumer, what is it that the shoppers looking for. So when I walked the streets of Cairo or Luxor or any of these places or I walked in Singapore I could pick up the kind of products the kind of shelves the kind of retailer reactions, the kind of position that they kept Nestle in as far as the shoppers concerned, all these with experience you are able to pick up the signals very quickly and then you come and for me the presentations that I got for more confirmatory in some cases not the main source of data, so for me it's always been that if you are really with your feet on the ground and you walk the market, talk to your salesman, some of the greatest lessons I have picked up in management have been from my salesman, they have taught me, pricing, trade promotions, activations, new brand launches, support, leadership, managing distributors in crises, these are the guys, we have to be humble to be fact that these guys may have much less education than you but that's unfortunately the accident of birth and opportunity but they have a lot of wisdom and for me I always respect them because they are the ones who run this company.

DJ: The other aspect of transition I wanted to talk about was, what a predecessor can do in setting a successor up, for example if let's say you are moving from Philippines, let's say as you were leaving Philippines, how should leaders think about setting the next in comment for success?

SN: Unfortunately, I must say that Philippines for me is not a good example because I was there for barely four months, but if I would look at it let's say my experience in Egypt and Singapore before that, what always concerns me is not the nuance of leadership but the capability of imbedding and internalizing the practices into continuity. So internalizing best practices, internalizing the good processes for the future is what I would always try and focus on so let's say even in Nestle India what I have been trying to know was through with my team, is through a program, where basically what we do, we call it 'Rise together'. So 'Rise together' initiative really focuses on four big themes on the purpose of the organization on the caring part of the organization on the learning part of the organization and on the order and process part of the organization so we have different teams now as a result of what happened to us in the crises and as a result of our rising like a Phoenix, what are the practices what are the disciplines what are the good things that we can disseminate within the organization, so that long after I cease to be leader of this company that some of it at least continues. For me the agene of leadership and that's the agene of many shareholders is that suddenly you have got a good leader, things start moving it's a person specific thing, and that is the tragedy, if you look at organizations that is where things go wrong. I have not come across and you are better read than me Deepak so you will know it better seldom have companies failed because of absolutely stupid strategies they are failed because of two things leadership translation to execution and I have always believed that strategy is execution, for me the strategy part is the simple part the execution is the bigger piece.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The biggest takeaway for me was the point Suresh makes about his style being completely contextual. I see so many people coming up with prescriptive lists for the first 90-100 days that I get a little anxious when people are too sure too early.

What also struck me was the point Suresh makes about walking the market. He talks about that in the context of getting a pulse of the local culture and consumer behaviour especially in a B2C business context. In a way, I guess this comes naturally to people who have spent adequate time in the Sales function. But when I look at leaders who move to the CEO/General Manager role from the Finance function or the Marketing function, this piece doesn't come intuitively to them and ends up getting deprioritized. Apart from learning about the business and get a pulse of the consumer, I guess there is something to be said about building relationships and having organizational sensors across the organization. Walking the market, I have noticed also gives the leaders a unique insight to the culture of the company and a channel for them to glean what's going on at the ground level as and when required.

This piece of my conversation reminds me of my chat with Vinita Bali (VB) a few months back. Vinita has had the distinction of working in 6 countries across 5 continents. Among other things, she spoke about how she settles into a new geography.

VB: *"I think if you spend the first few days curious, listening, not jumping to conclusions we tend to get very judgmental very quickly I think if you spent the first few days as tourist in a place which is really about as a tourist you are exploring, you are curious, you want to read about this that and the other so if you spent those few days more like a tourist more from the point of view of understanding and not judging more from a curiosity orientation rather than I have the answers and more from the*

point of you of really knowing that you are the new kid on the block your hiring manager may have hired you but none of the others owe you anything I think if you find that level of acceptance and I learnt it when I went to new countries, what did I know about consumers in Nigeria? What did I know about consumers in South Africa? And you have to very quickly go and figure out what that module of collaboration or cooperation is going to be and I think if there is that attention paid including to some of the softer things this is not a task oriented framework"

DJ: If this is of interest, please go to Nugget 16.06 at playtopotential.com. You might also find my conversation with Nandan Nilekani relevant as he spoke about multiple transitions – Infosys to UID, UID to fighting elections in Bangalore and then to being an enabler in the Fin Tech ecosystem.

I hope you are finding this conversation purposeful. I would really appreciate if you could take a moment and rate the show and write a review on iTunes.

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.

For more, please visit playtopotential.com (where you can access the content by speaker or look at curated playlists across speakers by theme). If you want to listen offline say during a car ride home or during airplane travel, you could also access the Podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Saavn and several other podcast apps.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Vinita Bali that is referenced: [Navigating the first 3-6 months](#).

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Curiosity: "A Curious Mind" by Brian Grazer (Oscar winning Producer of movies like A Beautiful Mind and Apollo 13) was the inspiration behind the Play to Potential Podcast. In this playlist, Leaders reflect about the role of curiosity and how it has helped them in their journeys. As Alvin Toffler says, the Illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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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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