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Context to the nugget

Suresh talks about how he took charge when he came back to India after the Maggi crisis. He talks about how he prioritized the various elements of the business and how he spent time for the first 6-9 months. He also shares his views on what it takes to build resilience in the organization while dealing with a shock.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): May be taking the Maggi example, you transitioning to India, it was sort of landing into a fire, I have heard you talk about Neruppu Da (Fire) in some context in one of your speeches, but let's say the first 6 to 12 months in terms of what the pie chart of time look like, is that any different fundamentally different in that context versus let's say may be moving to a different market, I am sure its but in what ways?

Suresh Narayanan (SN): Very different, let me just highlight two or three things that became imperatives in my involvement with the crises situation, Number 1 was an organization that had imploded, people were completely and totally shattered, we are a proud company, we are known for our ethics, we are known for our probity, we are known for our quality and safety and this is something that hits at our gut. People became my number one priority, usually when you get into a market, different market situation is the business that becomes their priority but for me it was the people that became the priority. Number two, I had a huge issue with the regulator, so the environment became my priority, I was spending a lot of my time in engaging with the authorities, engaging with the people, trying to get the blood pressure down, India as an excitable place. The third one is reaching out back to the consumers and that is managing the whole media and the media has got into a big frenzy on the whole Maggi issue because unfortunately it was a perfect storm, no other news was making the headlines except Maggi. So these were the three things, I would say that being with my people managing the environment and managing the external stake holders in the media probably took 60 to 70% of my time, and only 30% of my time was really spent on, navigating the business, I mean I had my team to take care of it, they were feeding me in but the key decisions I said you guys take to just ensure that the engine room doesn't get flooded that's all, just ensure that, rest of it managing the sale and ensuring the we steer the ship leave that part to me so that let me along with my compatriots there try and manage that.

DJ: Given your several stints, Maggi was a case in point but I think you were in Singapore when the 2008 crisis was going on, you were in Egypt around the Arab Spring, what have you learnt about ingredients of resilience if you will and I am curious about there's two levels, one is personally what

does it mean to you, if you had to break it down what would you break it down to and secondly how do you build resilience in an organization, how do you think about that?

SN: It is surprising Deepak how sometimes we pay very little heed to the six inches between our years to me resilience begins with a capital A "Attitude", it has got nothing to do with how well qualified you are, how intelligent you are, how strategic you are, it is you have a problem in front of you, what is your attitude prima facie, what does your gut tell you that I should do? For me a problem is always an opportunity, I see it as an opportunity, I say wow this is happened. Let's go and try and do the best we can to number one – come out of it and come out of it strongly so resilience is built from a deep sense of commitment and attitude that I will overcome, number two is discipline, resilience demands discipline, it demands the capability to say I will repeat this action again and again and again and not give up because I believe that these sets of actions are what is going to get us out of this hole and I am not going to be giving up and saying ok fine, let me try something else, because in a crises situation you will have 25 different advices coming to you but you need to as a leader take the call and say this is what I will do. So second spirit is discipline. Third, Team work, resilience is not just your personal resilience but it is the capability you have to transmit it in your team and that's when I point out to the fact that in leadership, it is not important, sometimes what you say, but how you say it, you can get the most bitter news across people and they will smile and you can get a sweetest news across and they will frown, and I think that the leader has to understand that in a situation that demands resilience, how we say things is as important as what he says.

DJ: Give us an example or a little bit of colour around this theme how?

SN: I will say like, when I came on the first Maggi crises, I think the first meeting I had within 24 hours I had a meeting with my team, we had a town hall here. The first thing I told them was I said look and I genuinely meant it because I love this team and that why one of the reasons why I came back was because I genuinely love the Nestle India organization for giving me so much. I said look I am delighted to be back in this team I know you give me a lot of trust and you give me a lot of respect but let me start by saying that we will come out of whatever situation we find ourselves in even though I don't have the answers. A leader when he transmits sincerity and trust but he also transmits vulnerability becomes a more lasting leader than a super hero who walks in saying I know all the answers, come on guys let's go and do it. When there is a fire around and you don't know where the fire has started, if the guy comes and says chill, I know exactly what is to be done, you cannot get a bit very, this is humanness this is vulnerability because what happens is the minute I open that window of vulnerability, that I don't know all the answers, I had twenty people come up to me saying sir I think we could do this, the minute I say I know all the answers people will say ok fine he knows all the answers and why should I tell him something he may take it badly. The other thing is in trying to get and dissect the root cause of the problem, if you take the approach of doing a clinical inquisition that who is to blame? The outcomes are very different from you were to do actually a decision tree to say what are the different things that we could do or that we could have done then people move away from being threatened to a sense of involvement in what you are doing, how we frame the inquiry so these are things that you have to understand the cultures well sometimes in some cultures let's say in Europe this might have been seen a very roundabout way of getting to the problem, I mean the question would have been, what's a bloody problem? Who was the guy who's behind it? Let's clean it up and move on. Whereas in India if the minute I started saying you are the guy ok fine, let's have the conversation. How I treat Deepak will immediately transmit itself in 200 people and they would say Suresh is a nasty guy don't go to him, don't suggest because it will bite you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It was fascinating to hear Suresh talk about the fact that in the first 6-9 months, he let the business run on autopilot while focusing on People, Regulators and Media and handling the reputational damage that Maggi and Nestle had incurred. Back to the point he made earlier, good leaders, I guess have an instinctive sense of modulating their leadership style based on the context.

The other piece that struck me was the point he made about being vulnerable and thereby building trust and connect with the team. This is so relevant in the world we live in today where there is so much change happening across various functions in a company driven by technology, digital and data. Several leaders, who have grown up in a world where the premium is on knowing the answer, struggle to move to this new paradigm where you need to be vulnerable and say “lets figure it out”. Given this is less about skill-set but more about mind-sets, it can be a hard shift for a lot of leaders who have grown up in the older paradigm. If this is a topic of interest, you might also find Nugget 19.05 by Dheeraj Pandey relevant. He talks about the notion of anti-fragility where an organization not just withstands shocks but gets better with it.

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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Driving change: Ability to drive change in an organization is one of the critical Leadership Competencies for a CEO today, given more and more is getting done at the intersection of different ecosystems, and a large portion of value add is not directly under the leader’s control but in the wider realm of influence. In this segment, leaders talk about how they drove change through a complex system/organization. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Podcast Transcript [24.04 Suresh Narayanan - Maggi crisis and decoding resilience](#)

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Suresh Narayanan - Nuggets

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- 24.01 Suresh Narayanan - Early formative years
- 24.02 Suresh Narayanan - Career - getting off to a good start
- 24.03 Suresh Narayanan - Transitioning effectively to a new context
- 24.04 Suresh Narayanan - Maggi crisis and decoding resilience
- 24.05 Suresh Narayanan - Building good business judgment
- 24.06 Suresh Narayanan - Rebuilding trust
- 24.07 Suresh Narayanan - Increasing productivity
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- 24.09 Suresh Narayanan - In Summary - Playing to Potential

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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