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Context to the nugget

Vinay talks about Narasimha Rao's habit of reflection and journaling which helped him deal with the ecosystem he was in. Vinay talks about how Rao used the habit of journaling to develop a nuanced understanding of the context he was in which helped him deal with situations of grey effectively. He also talks about how he managed to gather intelligence around what was happening around him despite his lonely nature.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Talk to us about his habit around reflection and introspection and what can we learn from it?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): So I think one is what the cause is and two is, is it helpful? I think the cause was firstly as I said he was a lonely guy so what is he doing in the evening? He keeps a diary and he didn't have too many friends, so the diary was fundamentally a diary that you are talking in the absence of a friend but luckily for him he was lonely from childhood so when he reaches the top in politics, when everybody is lonely he was pretty used to it so he is not worried at that point because he was prepared for loneliness all his life but the diary was way where he could be true to himself because a lot of politicians get fooled especially when they are in power, they are fooled by the world around them unable to tell flattery from the truth and Narsimha Rao's ability to be introspected to be inward helped him sift the day into what or to put in statistical terms to be able to sift the signal from the noise so I think that is the first thing that introspection taught him that one is it taught him don't trust anyone except your diary which is a pretty good skill in politics second is that you should be able to sift the signal from the noise who are the people you met every day how many people are being honest? How many people are lying? To give you one example one of the diary entries which I have in the book is from 22nd May 1991 this is the day after Rajeev Gandhi has been killed near Chennai and Narsimha Rao until then basically eased out of the congress and was about to become a Monk in monastery called Kutrallam in Tamil Nadu and was closing his bank accounts he suddenly realising that by virtue of being the least ambitious man in the party he's prime to be Prime minister of India and the diary shows 22nd May he's back in Delhi, he's in ten Janpath where Soniya Gandhi and Rajeev used to live and the pieces of Rajeev Gandhi's body there were just pieces, not the full body are kept there and all the congress men around the body pretending to cry some of them were actually crying actually trying to manoeuvre to see who would succeed him? And he has this wonderful passage about how Pranab Mukherji who was in the boon docs them but would later recovered to become president of India beadies up to him and said we think you should become congress president which is the proxy for Prime minister of India and Narsimha Rao immediately says "I immediately told him that I am not the right person knowing full well the kind of person he is, I also gave him the name of ND Tiwari for Prime minister of India knowing even he was that he was

even less likely a candidate than I am” and I think the introspection in the diary allows him to do that it allows him to reflect over the day, otherwise somebody else, Pranab Mukherji came up to me and says maybe you should be prime minister of India I wouldn’t stop to ask what’s his angle? So I think the introspection gave him that ability and I think the third thing introspection gave him was to take the long view, often we are so caught up in the movement that we are unable to see short term benefits from the long term cost than unable to separate that for example Narsimha Rao was frequently side-lined from the party, frequently. He never complained, he never protested against Indira Gandhi, he never protested against Rajeev Gandhi and very soon he would be back whereas people like Sharad Pawar or Arjun Singh or ND Tiwari at the first sign that they were out of favour in the Nehru Gandhi court was either form a separate party or sulk or protest, and their careers would end instead of just kind of taking it and hoping that your luck changes which has happened to Narsimha Rao, not everybody is luck changes but I think Narsimha Rao’s ability to take the long view and not make silly short term beneficial decisions also contributed to the kind of career he had.

DJ: Decoding the signal from the noise, it’s very interesting that he is sort of decoding the signal from the noise in a lonely fashion, how do you think about that? Because how do you decipher intent in a lonely fashion, common sense would suggest that you need to have your agents out there who would come and give you information for you to make sense so how do you reconcile that two?

VS: I think the key to the answer is to look at the ecosystem that Narasimha Rao worked under, all of us work under different organizational forms in some organizations it’s important to have your tentacles everywhere but in an organization like congress party especially in the 70s 80s loneliness was an enormous political virtue because if you didn’t have too many friends it meant you didn’t have too many enemies the way the congress system worked and this is our famous political scientist Rajni Kothari’s phrase was that especially in the 50s and 60s when there was no opposition to congress all the factions of India the Dalits or Brahmins, left wing or Right wing, south of India north of India was within the congress party so you would have a congress politician who was Dalit like Jagjeevan Ram or Brahmin politician like ND Tiwari, you will have a north Indian politician you will have a south Indian politician you will have a capitalist politician you will have a socialist politician and even at the state levels you would have factions which are not really based on ideology so you will have in Maharashtra alone if you look at the congress you will have an Ashok Chavan faction you will have a Prithviraj Chavan faction and earlier you have had a Sharad Pawar, Suresh Kalmadi factions and the beauty of that system is, it suits the high command very well because everybody is cutting each other so nobody is threatening Sonia Gandhi, nobody is threatening Rajeev Gandhi because at the state level everybody is cutting each other now given that this is the dynamic of the congress party you should not be associated with the faction because the moment you associated with the faction by nature you have some friends but you have a lot of enemies and typically what happens in faction struggles is that and this is what happened with Narasimha Rao when he became the unlikely chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1971 that there were these two very big factions both very powerful and each one said we don’t want other guy to be chief minister and so there was a compromise candidate a person who was weak, who had no friends, who was lonely, who didn’t threaten everyone and that man was Narasimha Rao why was Narsimha Rao made prime minister in 1991 because for Sonia Gandhi and people around her the other far more obvious candidates, Sharad Pawar, ND Tiwari, Arjun Singh were also powerful were also people with friends so the ecosystem of Narasimha Rao was such that loneliness was the virtue but if loneliness is the virtue then how the hell do you get information? And you get information through introspection not by having tentacles within the party but to be fair NR had a lot of tentacles outside the party so he had people like Chandraswami Tantrik opposition member telling him about the congress because within his own party he just couldn’t trust anyone so I think the answer here is that your levels of introspection you have to keep in mind the organizational

ecosystem you work under and it varies from even within the Indian party system the congress organization structure is very unique and it comes from a history of being the only political party in India and therefore the opposition parties are actually within the party itself and in such a situation you have to NR drives.

DJ: Just sticking to the theme of introspection is there anything to be said about the nature of the introspection or the nature of note keeping was there a certain pattern or discipline, or a certain heads under which he would capture his thoughts or was it free flowing?

VS: This is I am just inducting base on what archives I saw but he kept diaries better when he's out of power once you are in power you just much busier but there were frequent periods in the congress party when he was out of power, when he was hanging around, so that time diaries are pretty strong now this is bad for a biographer because you actually want to know a little more about what he's doing when he was in power so for that I used the appointment diary because I knew he was meeting for every 15 minutes so I didn't know what they were talking about but I had the sense of world the people he was meeting with but his own diaries are kind of less detailed and less gossipy certainly when he was in power.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In the coaching work I do, if there is one thing that I end up suggesting the most to my Coachees, it is the habit of reflection and journaling. I see too many people just fire-fighting from day to day that they leave very little time for reflection. The other thing that has changed from days of Narasimha Rao to now is that we have Smart Phone penetration and a tsunami of stimulus hitting us. A very common temptation might be to succumb to that and think of browsing on the net as relaxing and unwinding but it doesn't give you time with yourself which is such an important element of growth.

If I were to take the point Vinay makes about Narasimha Rao's diaries being more detailed when he was not in power, I think there is an interesting piece to reflect there. When leaders are in transition and between roles that is when they need to be reflecting much more to get the direction right – What energizes me, what skills have I picked up? What is my distinctive competitive advantage? What does the opportunity landscape look like and so on?

Even if its five minutes, it is fascinating what reflection, being with yourself and journaling can do in terms of you developing a nuanced view of yourself and the world around you.

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. 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. Google has recently launched an app for podcast listening on Android platforms too. If you went to playtopotential.com, you would also have the opportunity to listen to multiple voices curated by a topic.

To give you a sense, one of the playlists is Navigational principles. Leaders discuss their personal frameworks they used during some of the pivotal transitions they made.

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End of nugget transcription

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

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- 30.01 Vinay Sitapati - Early career choices - Law, Journalism, Teaching and Writing
- 30.02 Vinay Sitapati - Delivering good judgments
- 30.03 Vinay Sitapati - The reflection habit - decoding signal from the noise
- 30.04 Vinay Sitapati - Managing time, unfettered curiosity and resilience
- 30.05 Vinay Sitapati - Leadership under extreme constraints - Lion, Fox and Mouse
- 30.06 Vinay Sitapati - Staying relevant through transitions

- 30.07 Vinay Sitapati - Assembling an effective team
- 30.08 Vinay Sitapati - Making/Not making key decisions
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- 30.10 Vinay Sitapati - 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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