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Context to the nugget

Vinay talks about how Narasimha Rao combined the notion of intellectual agility (ability to fundamentally shift one's beliefs when new data presents itself) and implementation agility (knowing how to drive change through a complex system). He talks about how Narasimha Rao could play Lion, Fox or Mouse and the criticality of timing in these situations.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): You speak about how he quickly changed his opinion the notion of intellectual agility, how leaders have strong views but when they see data saying something else they are very quickly able to shift their beliefs, so talk to us about what gave that agility to Narasimha Rao?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): Firstly there are plenty of examples of this and the most famous one is which is used on economic reform it was the one few post he hadn't held he never been an industry minister before he became prime minister he never been minister of finance and that was one area he didn't know very well to the extent he knew it he was in Indira Gandhi's style protectionist and when confronted with change in evidence and when confronted with the fact that the Indian economy was simply not working we had a balance of payment crisis when he became prime minister in June 1991 he changes his mind in a couple of days and what is remarkable is once he changes his mind he has this ability to execute to implement, implement, implement in India full of ideas NR's remarkable ability is this is underrated because people think of him as intellectually agile as being a scholar they forget the fact that he was tactically agile too he knew how to get things done he would have an idea he would have a view but also knew the art of the possible and I think that this agility, both these were a kind of jugalbandi they worked hand in hand that he could change his mind when it came to ideas and he could also constantly refine implementation of those ideas lest take the classic example of Air India, initially he believe that Airline sector in India should be a national sector you should not allow private competition and you should certainly not allow foreign money but he changes his mind in early 90s and he realises that look we need private competition when it came to Airlines Indian airlines alone just won't do so therefor definitely had the ability when faced with data to change his mind he also had the intellect the agility when it came to implementation which is what I call Fox, Mouse and Lion he realise that you needed private competition, he allowed Jet Airways, Damaniya, East West Airlines. Jet Airways takes off I think in 1993 and today again correct me on the data but 80 to 90% of domestic travellers don't travel on Air India they travel on Indigo on Go Airways so NR's bet worked at the same time Narsimha Rao had the intellect or let's say the implementation agility to realize that if he went too far and he privatise Air India at that time the unions would protest hugely and his entire liberalization agenda would fall because he was a very weak prime minister so he publicly swore that not a single Indian Airlines or Air India employee would lose his or her job as a result of privatisation that's exactly what he did so the unions were

happy because they won't get fired, he created things like VRS for the unions who were happy as well as the consumers were happy but NR was smart enough to realize that you can't keep hiring in Air India and Indian Airlines if it isn't making profit so you should just look at the data hiring into Indian airlines and Air India and other peers begins to freeze after NR comes to power because NR realises that those who haven't yet got jobs aren't going to protest against him so I think that there was an intellectual agility of the man, his ability to frequently change his mind when confronted with data there was also an implementation agility and NR's genius was both ideas and implementation came naturally to him and that's what makes him really rare.

DJ: I want to pick up on the three animals that you use to sort of make the point Lion fox mouse so let's double click on that talk to us about what you have in mind when you say that but more importantly how does Narsimha Rao exercise judgment to figure out what to be when?

VS: So that's very hard to answer, I mean ask this question to yourself like anyone listening to this podcast would frequently be in situations where you have to play lion you have to be aggressive and you have to play to win, slightly smarter ones who are listening to this podcast would also know that sometimes you have to lose, there is this American phrase "Do I want to die on this hill?" like some battles are not worth fighting because you may win the battle you may lose the war and sometimes you have to lie you have to cheat you can't say what you wanted to say NR's ability to get both timing and circumstances very right and is very hard to just to push that into the set of transferable skills because and that's why judgment is so precious but to give you just one example of that India opening up to Israel just one example of that since the mid-80s it was pretty clear that India had to move away from the Soviet Union towards the US was clear that the Soviet model of economy was not really working and Rajeev Gandhi was trying to make an outreach towards Washington DC, it didn't really go the way he really wanted to go when NR becomes prime minister he was told that look the Berlin wall has fallen and America is alone super power and we were on the wrong side of the cold war so we have to make an over churn to Washington DC and NR was also told by his IFS officers his diplomat that the road to Washington DC runs through television that India currently doesn't have diplomatic relationships with Israel for a variety of reasons we need to have diplomatic relations with Israel as a signal to America that we are America now this was a domestic political hot potato because there was a feeling in India that Muslims might object, there was a feeling India that for the most of India's independence we had supported the Palestinian cause so it was sensitive issue opening up to Israel having full ambassadorial relation so what does NR do? He invites in Jan 1992 Yasser Arafat the head of the Palestine liberation organization as chief guest to India he hugs him he tells his cabinet secretary Naresh Chandra to spread that photograph, the message is India is not deserting its Palestinian allies. In private however Narsimha Rao tells Yasser Arafat that look you are talking to the Israel is what would ultimately culminate in Oslo accords of 1993 if you want us to lobby the Israelis on your behalf we have to have an ambassador and Yasser Arafat was as much wily as NR publicly states in Delhi that exchange of ambassadors is question sovereign question and we won't interfere with what our brother India does, NR immediately announces full diplomatic relationships with Israel goes to parliament and says publicly with the blessing of my brother Yasser Arafat I am sending an ambassador to Israel that is timing, its understanding political context understanding the different stake holders and getting the sequence exactly right and contrast that to someone like Rajeev Gandhi who came to power in 1984-85 with the largest mandate any prime minister got in India, he actually tried in 1985-86 to open up to Israel and he failed so just power alone, just mandate alone, if you don't understand timing if you don't understand your opponents and that what NR was genius.

DJ: One of the things that comes through very clearly in the book as an attribute of NR is “Driving change under extreme constraints” two terms before and four terms after him lasted less than a year see it was fascinating that he was able to last the full term, so again if we think about him being able to drive change under these constraints are there themes that come out which are worth talking about in terms of what he did well to manage sort of the slender context with the heaviness of the stuff that he was pushing through?

VS: Well, this is the heart of the book the central question of book how does the man so weak achieve so much change so it was not just that he was running a minority government his own party hated him, he had to report to Sonia Gandhi and the crisis that India had from secession issues in Assam, Punjab and Kashmir to a balance of payment crisis to fall of the Soviet Union to Rajeev Gandhi assassination so here's a man with a very little power and NR also had the charisma of dead fish so he was a really boring guy so man with very little charisma very little raw political power very little mandate and facing an inbox from hell made this kind of change and that's really heart of the book and I push it again and again, I think a core feature of why NR was successful was that instead of focusing on what needed to be done he focused on how it should be done? I think that's very important the what needs to be done question presumes you have a mandate presumes you have the ability to get things done the first question you should ask as a leader is where do you get your power from? How much power do you have? If you want to do X can you do X or can you do only X-1 in which case you should begin by trying to do X-1 because that's the maximum you can do I think that was NR's genius that he had no illusions that he was a weak prime minister he wasn't easily flattered by normal Chamchas around you who make feel all politician the Alexander the great he knew he was not charismatic he knew people didn't like him he knew he was a fill in for Nehru Gandhi because Rajeev has died and he relentlessly focused on how you should get things done. Second is he had this ability to lay one constraint against the other so he had a lot of people who didn't like him so he spent a lot of time making sure that those who didn't like him were busy fighting each other to give one classic example the main two opposition parties he had to deal with were the left and the BJP and if the two of them voted together in any no confidence motion NR would have been toast, he would have to resign immediately so NR spent a lot of energy making sure that these two constraints, the BJP and the communist were always fighting with each other so for example he would go and tell when the communist would come in to him and complain about the liberalization one communist MP told me this NR says forget about liberalization think of Babri Masjid it is communalism that is the problem today we need to focus on secularism and on this you have to be on my side he does this instinctively, its remarkable this is the fox and think about what that achieves immediately after the demolition of Babri Masjid, when everyone is baying for NR's blood when everybody on India thinks that his political career has ended what does he do, he opens private licenses for bank that's what he does soon after Babri Masjid now in India giving private licenses for new banks is a highly political subject, remember that Indira Gandhi's nationalization the famous socialist phase began with the nationalization of private banks, it was nationalize once in the late 1960s and a second time in 1980 so giving licenses to new banks which are today very famous, ICICI, HDFC for example is a politically loaded subject so when does NR pick the time to do it? Immediately after demolition of Babri Masjid when the communist when the socialist within his party are rallying around him against the on slot of the communal BJP that's NR's ability to lay constraints against each other but at the same time being deeply aware of the fact that it very important to focus on how to do things in India not what to do?

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

Podcast Transcript [30.05 Vinay Sitapati - Leadership under extreme constraints - Lion, Fox and Mouse](#)

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DJ: It is indeed fascinating to see the combination of Intellectual agility coupled with Implementation dexterity in the way Narasimha Rao went about driving change as Vinay points out.

Marrying the knowledge of what is required with the art of the possible as Vinay points out is a unique skill indeed. In the Leadership Literature see a lot of commentary around learning agility but much less around agility in our beliefs. Our ability to continuously revisit our assumptions and change our world view while presented with new data is a unique skill indeed. I also see much less commentary around the notion of driving change and nuanced implementation in the context of a web of stakeholders with multiple agendas around you. As we move to a world where things will have to get done through complex ecosystems, this skills is going to be of greater and greater premium.

As Vinay says, the jugalbandi between the intellectual agility and the implementation dexterity is going to become more and more critical in a world that is getting more and more VUCA with each passing day.

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 Resilience. Guests talk about how they cultivated resilience and dealt with pockets of turbulence that they hit in their journeys.

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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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