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Context to the nugget

Vinay talks about how Narasimha Rao picked his team members and think about the portfolio of capabilities in his team. He specifically alludes to the fact that he was self-aware about what he knew and didn't know and was able to hire best in class talent without feeling insecure. He also talks about how Narasimha Rao brought in diversity of thought across various topics to ensure it was a balanced team.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I wanted to talk about how NR picked his teams? How Rao mastered this notion of getting the right team to work with him?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): I think the first most important quality that NR brought to team building and team choosing was he personally not an insecure person, that's really really important, now there's a law in India Arun Shourie told me it was called the Indersan law named after this IIT professor saying that in India first rate people hire first rate people, second rate people hire third rate people and so on because second rate people are also insecure about their abilities so they want to hire someone who is first rate and then in India you end up with 9th rate people so that's how institutional mediocracy takes place in India. NR was a first rate guy so when it came to for example foreign policy he knew it really well, he had academic friends in NY university who would send him the latest edition of top academic articles he knew the history of China he spoke Spanish he knew Persian he knew Urdu and he was the rank one in Persian and Urdu in Nizam state in Nizam's Hyderabad and he could talk to Pakistani President in Urdu and most Pakistani said that NR's Urdu was better so he was extremely confident so he was not insecure in selecting diplomats who were very good, he also was confident enough that when he didn't know something, he didn't pretend to know it, he knew nothing about economics, he had an instinct but he didn't know anything about economics so he had the confidence to first ask for the hiring of IG Patel former RBI governer who was at that time London School of Eco head, IG Patel says no arguably the most famous no in Indian history saying that look I have a mother in Baroda she is old I have to take care of her, so then he asked PC Alexander who should I select and he said look there is this guy called Manmohan Singh and he says fine get Manmohan Singh he seems to me the man who has the ideas which will get us out of this hole, he didn't knew anything about economics, Manmohan Singh did knew that and he was not insecure that MS knew more economics that he did he constantly consulted R Venkatraman who was the president at that time a former finance minister, saying that look help me out and he understood very clearly that look the ideas that Manmohan Singh, IG Patel are talking about are ideas that we need to implement in India but those ideas have been going around in India for decades my job is to get it politically off the ground he understood that very clearly so I think that, that core ability to not be insecure meant that he could hire first rate talent around him, he had no

problem with people walking to his office and saying Mr. Rao I completely disagree with you because he was confident, not only he was a scholar if District Magistrate called him up and told him something he could tell a DM what to do because he knew Districts better than DM very often so he was not afraid of talent I think that is very important and in Indian context its very rare, its very very rare.

Second is he had no personal friends as I told you he was not a faction leader Dr. Manmohan Singh who I interviewed for this book likes NR but he wasn't a crone of NR he didn't know NR very well before he became PM so second quality NR was not looking for Chamchas he was not looking for yes-man he was not looking for people who would enhance his power he was looking for people who would get the job done and he has the second very very rare quality especially in the Indian context.

Third is NR had this you can call it ancient Indian philosophy, Hindu philosophy you can call it what you want that all parts had to be represented that change in continuity are the two sides of the same coin that yes capitalism is good but you know what socialism is good too it's a classic Indian trait, Philosophically you call it as a gujju thali everything is there so NR's cabinet was a little like a Gujrati thali there was a little bit of sweet there's a little bit of Sour there was little bit of Papad there was everything so in his economic ministry he had people like MS, Montek Singh Ahluwalia who were quote unquote free marketers in right wing but running his welfare schemes were socialists like KR Venugopal and BN Yogan Dhar incidentally the father and the father in law of Satya Nadella who runs Micro soft so he had leftist, he had right wing people he got along very well which scheduled caste he got along very well with Brahmins, he would speak to Sharad Pawar in Marathi he would speak to SB Chavan in Marathi and Telegu he would speak to someone in clipped English, he could speak to Salman Haider his foreign secretary for a while in clipped Urdu and Salman Haider told me that his Urdu was kind of Urdu spoken in those aristocratic Muslim households in UP so that was his ability to build teams that he realize that you need all kinds to make a team he wasn't looking for yes-man at all and he was confident enough in his own ability that he was never insecure when team member outshone him or knew more about a particular subject than he did and I think that is very very rare.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The first thing that struck me was the point Vinay makes about Narasimha Rao being extremely self-aware about what he knew and didn't know. I am reminded of the phrase Anti-knowledge coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. He says that knowing what we don't know is almost as important as knowing what we know especially in a world that is evolving quickly and a lot is going outside the cocoon we operate in.

The second is the point around diversity of thought in the team. I find that effective leaders are able to not just hire good talent to fill the various posts but are also able to think about the portfolio of talent in the top team across various dimensions (gender, educational background, prior work experience, cultures people come from etc.). No silver bullet here but bearing in mind that there is a strong business case to having a talented well-diversified team is a good place to start.

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

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End of nugget transcription

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

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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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