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Context to the nugget

Ambi talks about how effective CEOs set a climate so that their teams feel comfortable presenting risky ideas to them. He talks about how if you don't set the right atmosphere in the organization, the team below you can hedge their bets and focus on managing their image with the CEO than really solving for what is right for the organization. He discusses how you can create a culture where the team focuses on "winning in the market" rather than "winning in the system".

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): So let's dive into 'Sponge', I read it with a lot of interest, one of the pieces you talk about in the book is flying without a net and you refer to leaders willing to take risk and exposing themselves to different point of view, so give us a sense of what's your insight here what have you seen good leaders do in sort of keeping the conviction but also living the door open for new opinions to shape their beliefs?

Ambi Parameswaran (AB): Flying without a net I think is a name of a book written by Thomas DeLong and I have quoted that in one of the chapters. So, I think all leaders at some time or the other are really flying without the net, and so you may fall thud and you may actually break every bone in your body or you may actually end up a fly. So I think the big thing a leader has to do is to surround themselves around the team, who can help him take that call, you never have all the answers, for example in that story when we went and recommended to GSK that they should position Cobadex CZS which is a multivitamin with Chromium, Zink and Selenium purely for diabetic patients but no had done that before. There were hundreds of antioxidants, CZS is an antioxidant, hundreds of antioxidants and all the antioxidants were making all the claims, say it's good for diabetes, good for heart patients, it's good for skin, it's good for falling hair, it's good for peeling skin, so we said no you should take it one single dimension and at that stage and I think it was bold of the marketing team, they said look, we are scared I don't know whether we can do this, but it was bold of them to not reject it, they said let's take this to the MD, you present your story to the MD and if the MD agrees, we will go with it, a lot of time what happens is the people in the middle layer put in so many filters that they are so scared of taking any decision and they are always second guessing the boss and by the time the boss gets to see it what is shown is completely mishmash of what was the original thought, so here I think two things happen, one the team felt that yes it was a risky strategy but they were willing to take it to their boss and stand by it saying yes agency is recommended it, we think it's risky but it's worth a shot and the CEO at that time said yes, I agree lets go with it. So, obviously there was gut and brain, so there was analysis which shows that that was a big market but of course it was a gut feel reaction. So, in marketing we see that all the time, most brand managers, brand teams want to hedge their bench, I want to appeal to young women, I want to appeal to middle age women, I want to appeal to young adults, I want to appeal to slightly middle age adults, life can't go

that way, so you have to take a chance and punt and hope and pray it works. If it doesn't work well, you will learn something.

DJ: But staying with that is there something to be said about the leadership style of the CEO at that time, for the team to feel comfortable letting you present the risky idea up there?

AB: I think a lot can be said about the CEO and the team, when the team was confident enough to take something like this to CEO cause they knew CEO will not throw out of the room and the CEO was smart enough to say "Hey, this looks interesting" and he encouraged the team to take such ideas to him. So I think it's both ways, both ways the CEO encourages the team to come up so which is what we say if you are the CEO don't surround yourself with only people who are second guessing you, ensure that you have people that disagree with you, who bring your ideas which you don't like.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This insight reminds me of the findings at Google where they looked at High Performing teams. Pardon the pun, but if you want to Google it, the initiative was called Project Aristotle. The crux of the insight was that when they looked what separated the great teams from the average teams, it was the climate that prevailed in these teams. The great teams were those where people felt psychologically safe to take risks, make mistakes and share their opinions freely. In McKinsey, we would call it Obligation to Dissent where in a problem solving conversation, there is no real hierarchy in the room. A Director and a Business Analyst from college are on the same plane.

While Ambi talks about it in the context of making better business decisions, I have also noticed that the psychological safety is also a key pre-requisite for the leader to get candid feedback. At the highest levels, a lot of the personal growth for the CEO depends on the quality of the self-awareness and a big portion of that is whether you getting the right data flowing in to drive that picture. I have seen too many leaders live in a bubble of hubris, arrogance and aggression and it is often a matter of time before it comes to haunt you.

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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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