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Context to the nugget

In the book – Sponge – Ambi shares an illustration. Let us say, you have an architect who designs a house for you with 5 pillars. You feel that this doesn't look good aesthetically and you want her to design it with 3 pillars. She does so and builds a house for you. A few months later, the house collapses. Whose fault is it? Architects or yours? Ambi talks about how clients with varying styles (ranging from Dr Varghese Kurien to Mr Rohinton Aga) work effectively with experts to get the most out of them.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other piece that caught my attention in the book Ambi is the story you mention in your attraction with Dr. Varghese Kurian I think that chapter is titled Architect and Pillars and I really like the crux of the statement that you are saying you know an architect design a home. You ask the guy to knock off a few pillars because you think aesthetically doesn't look well, later the house down whose responsibility is it? So, I guess it just got me thinking on as an advisor where do you draw the line in terms of accountably in the sense this my domain you stay off because I am the expert and where do you let the client in. so I was just wondering you know what's been your experience around this theme of what is sacrosanct where you don't let somebody change stuff because it's an expert opinion and where do you let yourself to other people to shape stuff?

Ambi Parameswaran (AB): The Dr. Varghese Kurian story is part of our F C B Ulka folklore you know I personally I never worked on the business its part of the Folklore and that company embodies this. They select you very carefully once they select you they trust you. The contrast to this is what I have written about Mr Rohinton Aga for Thermax. Now he wrote the body copy of the 6-ad campaign in 800 word but I think now on the one had source someone asked me the question on the one hand you would saying Dr. Varghese Kurian said don't suggest, don't tell the client, don't tell the agency that they changed the colour from blue to green. Tell the agency what is your point of view let them decide whether they want to change it from blue to green or red or orange or yellow you think that's a great managerial or a leadership way of two and the other side you also praise Mr. Aga because he took you know he wrote body copy for an ad. Now who was right you know should Aga have just told you I don't like the body copy because it doesn't read well should him to write you know.

DJ: It's so great I have never sort I didn't somehow see them as different of the same spectrum but they are.

AB: Yaa but they are. So, I said look what Mr. Aga did was very interesting because he read the copy, he knew the stories were great. But he didn't say look let me give it a shot. He wrote what he

thought was good copy gave it to us and said you want to use it use it, don't want to use it don't use it.

DJ: More interesting he still left you the choice.

AB: Yaa Yaa exactly this is my suggestion for copy it's up to you to then use it. So it was one he was a client he could have said use my copy he said no you people are the experts. See if this is ok. If it is not ok whatever you write is fine. So, I think that's also the sign of humility of a leader that you know for example going back to the old story that architect comes to you and presents a house with 5 pillars and you are the house owner and you said I don't like 5 pillars let's make it only 2 and then tomorrow when the house collapse so whom will you blame. Will you blame the architect? Will you blame yourself? But if I were let's say MR. Aga does it look I don't know we should have 5 maybe it hurting the look of the place. I have drawn something with 3 take a look but do you want to go back to 5 we will go back to 5 and the agency would have said yes sir let me look at what you have done with 3 pillars and let me take a view and I may come back to you with a different one or may be or may be this is fine. So, think its same problem handled very differently by two different people.

DJ: It's very interesting and in both cases I guess what's unsaid is that they still trust your judgment varies in the level of how hands on they are. One is hands off and one is hand on but they end point is they still trust your judgment saying you are the expert you take the call.

AB: Exactly they are saying look you are the expert you will take the final call but this is our thought. Our input into your process you can reject it.

DJ: It reminds me of my days at EgonZehnder sometimes clients would say you are doing a search you have these 5 candidates I think this might be, this person might a good fit why don't you through him into your mix and evaluate independently rather than enforcing their view on the candidate on the search firm they will say you take a call you evaluate this person but I think he could be a candidate.

AB: Exactly that's the better way to go that way you are not where as if they had said let's look at him then why should you waste your time with the other 5 candidate if you want to look at him, look at him and take him know Yaah lets finish the process.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I guess the key insight for me is that we often look at leaders in terms of how hands-on and hands-off they are. I like the distinction Ambi makes between activity and judgment. As a leader you might still be hands on with the activity like he takes the example of Mr Rohinton Aga and do the work yourself. But it is critical that you trust the judgment of the expert that you have employed often at a premium. Decoupling the two is an interesting insight indeed.

If I may narrate a personal episode. About a decade back, my father was dealing with the last stages of his Stage 4 Colon Cancer. He had been undergoing chemotherapy for about 6 months but it had come to a point where the situation had spiralled downwards and the cancer had metastasized. The Oncologist at that time at Apollo Hospitals in Chennai looked at the blood reports and said that we had two options. We could intensify the medical treatment or we could minimize prolonging the pain and let nature take its course from here. For me it was the first time, I was dealing with the situation but I realized that the Oncologist had seen 1000 such situations before. I remember asking him, what you would do if this was your father. I recollect him going to a long silence, gathering

himself and telling me, If I were you, I would take him home and make him comfortable and let nature take over.

I narrate this because; I had no framework to make a decision because it was one data point for me in my life. But the expert in front had seen patterns and had a sense of what made sense all things considered. And I am glad I asked him that question because I felt my father had a good quality of life for a few days after that till the end. I could do this because I could trust the Oncologist at Apollo Hospitals in Chennai, Dr Ramesh Nimmagadda.

Clients often use experts to get the job done and use them as operating leverage. But not tapping into their wisdom and their cumulative experience is often a lost opportunity.

I guess, the implicit assumption is that you have a rigorous process to figure out which experts you want to work with before you start trusting their judgment.

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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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