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Context to the nugget

Indranil talks about the curse of knowledge using the example of “tappers and listeners” – an experiment conducted by Elizabeth Newton at Stanford University in 1990. He talks about how asymmetry of information often makes us poor communicators because we are too close to the content. He talks about the criticality of understanding the context of the receiver while delivering key messages.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other thing that caught my attention on the book Indranil that the point you make about tappers and listener as somebody who is passionate about music, I found the example quite interesting you talk about an experiment where there is asymmetry of knowledge or information and you relate that to why power point sometime is not as effective talk to us about the nuance here?

Indranil Chakraborty (IC): Ok so I am going to tap a tune on the table you are a musician so I think you will get it and I am going to ask you to tell me what the song that I just tapped is. Let's start. You give me some genre or? It's a very popular English song and you learnt it in your earlier days in school. Come on you didn't get it its Jingle bell, Jingle bell. Now what just happened the reason I got it is because the tune was in my head and when the tune is in my head that sound is like jingle bell for me when the tune is not in your head that sound is like noise and that's really the experiment that Elizabeth Newton who was doing her studies Stanford. Infact she went on to become a professor in Howard later so she did this experiment where she took 240 students and divided into 2 groups one group she called tappers and their job was to do what I just did tap on the table the group was called decoders of listener and their job was to guess the tapping and then she told the entire group that listen this group of tappers I am going them a list of very popular English songs, songs that everybody knows Jingle bell, happy birthday, Merry Christmas and they will randomly pick up a son and you guys will decode the song. Here is a piece of paper and pen you will not tell them what you have guessed and I am going to make to make you guys in to pairs and send you out. When they came back, she asked the tappers individually how it went. And the usual answer I think it went up well. Why do you think it went up well? Suck an easy song everyone knows the song and I think I did a decent job of that tapping. When asked what percentage of you are 100 % sure that your partner got it. The usual answer was about 60 to 70%. Then she would go over to the listeners and take their paper work which was the guess that they had and tabulated the result and, on an average, less than 2 % or 2.5 % never got it and that also I think is just random. Yaah you just got it right. This is exactly what she says which is basically what she is saying when she is saying curse of knowledge is when then tune is in my head, we just demonstrated in Jingle bell. I know its working but when your tune is not in your head that's noise. So, to me the analogy that that was the morning

I read this it was my epiphany you know my eureka moment I said oh my god for the last 8 to 10 years in my corporate life and you are senior enough to come up with strategy, vision, mission and stuff like that. I did not come up with that in the morning of the off-site. I had worked with for weeks if not months, with my teams sometimes with a Bain or McKinsey. And by the time I came to the stage that tune was running in my head and I walked up on stage and did the corporate version of tapping which id bullet point on a PowerPoint and I came back came off stage thinking you know easy song descent tapper they must have got it and then 7 days later I am tearing my hair saying you know why don't they get it and now of course the favourite whipping boy is millennials. There is nothing wrong with millennial or any one. It's wrong with the way we have structured our communication. Half of it is in our head and we think everyone has that in theirs as well.

DJ: So, I think the take away from this is again linking it back to storytelling again if you could sort of talk a little bit about what's the so what?

Respond: so, what is one of the big issues that we have in when we are doing this is the context where we are coming from is assumed where the context the listeners has is not the same as the one that the teller has. Now when you just craft your messages you tend to jump to the message without the context without the why. I am thinking that you know that this are your company people these are your team people so you don't really need to explain. When you then are forced to take this message and put it into a story structure that automatically forces you to set context you can't tell a story without a context. So, when you bring the message into a structure of a story you will start with expositions setting up the base before jumping into the action and so that's the analogy.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of a time when I was learning mathematics in my primary school. My teacher was teaching me multiplication tables. 2 2s are 4, 2 3 are 6, 2 4s are 8 and so on. With a little bit of practice then I was able to memorise the whole table. I remember walking up to the teacher and asking her - What is Za; when we say 2 2 Za, what does the word Za mean? Now I don't particularly have a great memory, but I happen to remember this particular incident because my teacher discussed this with my mother subsequently who has remembered it since.

Now that might sound like a trivial example but the point Indranil makes about tapping and listening and the asymmetry is a profound one that we face whether we are a leader in a company trying to get a complex point across, a consultant trying to get a nuanced insight across or a parent trying to communicate something to the child.

Being aware of the context of the listener is so crucial for us to land the message the way we want to.

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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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