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Context to the nugget

Indranil talks about the criticality of story-listening and how it is critical to ask the right questions to elicit stories. He speaks about the fact that we often have a propensity to ask the How, Why and What questions because we are looking for a net-view but sometimes the rich data can be found by asking the When and the Where questions when you take people back to a moment in time.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to jump to another term that you use in the book Indranil story listening again first time I came across the term I have heard listening but story listening was interesting so again talk to us about what the nuance here I think you talk about how we should frame our question so that we elicit a rich story? So, give us a sense of story listening and how it is different from listening?

Indranil Chakraborty (IC): So, the person to credit with the word story listening Shawn Callahan is the term he coined its basically says how do you collect stories and the reason we need to be looking at this differently from just the obvious which is if we just go and say tell me a story because tell me a story in business context doesn't work. So, if I come to you saying tell me story of great application of knowledge and you will look at me and say what did you smoke last night whereas you do have various examples from your work life of great application of knowledge, I am sure you have. Now I need to frame questions in a way that will help you really go back to a moment in time because that's where the memories are right - a moment in time. So, the kind of questions that you need to face to take you there so one of the things that will take you there if I tell you another story which is about application of knowledge so I say you know Deepak in this company they had this this what a brilliant application of knowledge. Sometimes stories trigger stories because you remember another moment in time where something like that happened. So, one way to elicit stories is to tell another story another way to elicit stories is to actually turn the story pyramid ups and down. What is the story pyramid and you have been in McKinsey so I am sure you read the whole book a is the most important question is "WHY"? Pyramid Principle? No this is not the pyramid principle this is basically saying that question pyramid so the most important question is "WHY" then "HOW" then "WHAT" the country cousin because somewhere is not important "WHEN" and "WHERE". The problem with this when it comes to elicit stories is the "WHY", "HOW" and "WHAT" are opinion generating questions. Why does project go wrong in this company you are not gone get a story? It will say because of you know they are underfunded or don't have management over sight. How do you choose a great trainer oh you choose a great trainer by doing A B C. No stories? But I would have turned this pyramid and put "WHEN" and "WHERE" question is the most important. When was the last time you actually got the right trainer and how did it happen? That will take you to a moment in time and get me a story. Where did you last see the great application of knowledge it will take you

to a moment in time and get you a story. This process of asking question that take you to a moment in time and get a story is what we called a story listening.

DJ: How do you and again wearing a consultant's hat here sometimes when you ask the "WHY" question or the "WHAT" question you are expecting people to process multiple stories and come up with the net insight and sometime asking them to throw up a data point might you know the deprive you of that aggregated insight. Is there a loss there?

IC: I don't think so this is an either or situation there are time where I might want to and I am sure that there many times that I want to ask the why question. Where I want to aggregate your understanding there are time when I want an individual example. One of the things that I think is grossly misused in this listen. I have been told this for many times as a marketer and I wish I had the answers I have now. I would go for a market visit I would come back very excited about an observation and I would table it saying you know what I saw was this this and then some senior guy would say there is no room anecdotal evidence. We need data. I wish I had the definition that I have now my new definition is data is nothing but plural of anecdote. So, there is nothing wrong looking at individual stuff because the richness is in the individual stuff. When you give me a why I don't always have the reason why you have come to that why. If I have to understand how you have come to that why I have to go behind and look at some of this individual stuff. So again, I don't think it's either wrong. It's when you want that richness, the texture of where that final opinion comes from that a story listening might be more important.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of a conversation I was having with a candidate in the context of a search I was doing. This must have been around 2015 and this was for the India country head for a large European Engineering equipment company. The candidate was a senior leader who was heading a BU for a large American conglomerate.

When I was going through his CV, I noticed that he had spent 5 years to get an engineering degree which typically takes 4 years. I walked in with my assumptions about the individual and had my biases. But I happened to go through his journey and ask him about that passage of time?

He went on to talk about the fact that he grew up in Kashmir and militancy there. He spoke about how he was 30 seconds away from being blown up once and how he survived. He went on to talk about the fact that his college REC now NIT Srinagar was shut for a few months because of this and as a result he had to complete his education in a different REC and that added extra time to his graduation. I walked away from that meeting with a very different understanding of the leader, his resilience, attitude to life and so much more. I realize that I wouldn't have learnt this about him if I hadn't taken him back to that moment in time.

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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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