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Context to the nugget

Rich discusses the distinction between choosing a response to a situation and reacting. He also speaks about the difference between events that unfold and the story we tell ourselves about the events that unfold. He links it to the notion of agility where he says we need to be agile in the way we stay present to the world around us and that agility is a prerequisite for us to be agile as leaders in the business context.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): One of the other things that struck me in the book was the notion of the grasping an aversion and what struck was Meng says that this accounts for close to 90 percent of the suffering and the related theme that comes up is the notion of meta distress, feeling bad about feeling bad so talk to us about what these terms mean and how one could deal with them?

Rich Fernandez (RF): Very often there are the facts and then there is the story we tell ourselves about the facts and it's the story we tell ourselves the narrative that we tell about something that happened that causes us distress because often that narrative has to do with A) How poorly we did, so I'm grasping for a different outcome that I could have probably done or where pushing away that experience because we feel it's difficult and not something you want to do with. In our curriculum what we often like to talk about is the ability to shift from this existential experience and narrative where you are all bad or you are all good or you are grasping or you are being averse to a situation to simply allowing yourself to notice that you are experiencing this in your body and that sounds a little funny but let me explain further. What we are really talking about is shifting from an existential state or a perception of an existential situation where for example you are failure that's a pretty popular one a lot of people have that narrative in their head this happen that I'm an failure, I'm terrible that is an existential state that you are saying about yourself and you will experience suffering if you let yourself stay in that state. When in truth you might had a set back and you experience emotions as you resulted that set back but those are emotions are actually just emotions in other words, they are physiological processes happening in your body. The moment you are able to move from that existential state to this experiential process that has to do with the situation you are able to get a little bit of distance from it. You are able to have a little bit one small degree liberated from it so that you can see it happening to you and within you and it's valid and it's real and you don't deny or suppress it but having the ability to just notice that this is the process that moving within you and through you. It sounds terribly and esoteric but it's actually based on science because most people start to suffer and tell stories about themselves based in their feeling but if you look at what a feeling is and emotion it's a set of physiological reactions that happen in response to our environment or to thoughts we have sometimes and if you see emotion as a process and you really able to see that and take that meta perspective or exercise meta cognition then you are able

to free yourself a little bit of it from it and navigate it. So, let me give you a concrete example because this might seem like I'm talking about riddles. So recently we did not meet a certain financial bench mark and I started doing that narrative like how did I do this. This is a complete failure. I can't believe that I miss this particular thing would have changed everything of we have seen this and I felt myself berating myself and along those lines until I realized wait a minute, I'm feeling upset about the fact that this was missed and I'm having the experience of stress and frustration around it but it's just an experience that I'm having at the moment and it doesn't need that we can't remedy this things doesn't mean we can't learn from them but I'm just at the moment experiencing frustration. So I note it and in noting it starts to diminish somewhat and I'm not governed by it anymore. I'm not defined by that experience and my mood states starts to shift actually as well. So I'm not just an angry grumpy leader because we missed financial targets. But one whom is like starting to develop this agility, this ability to learn, this ability to see the next path, see around the corner and actually look at other solutions so it's a way to kind of manage yourself moving from the facts or moving away from the story that you tell yourself about the facts and simply dealing with the facts directly. Hope that it makes sense to the listeners it's trying to explain a very complicated concept.

DJ: Make sense it's about sort of looking at things it's like stepping away from the movie and watching the movie playout rather than being consumed by the moment.

RF: Can I draw a linkage here because we started this podcast with you asking me what is the difference about leadership in Silicon Valley and this the very thing I'm talking about when you dealing with disruption and then you need to be agile? You don't have the affordance of being able to be stuck in frustration and being able to stuck in narratives about failed solutions you need to be agile and this is very much how we develop this skills.

DJ: You are also even saying agility in terms of how you are thinking about yourself and how you deal with is not just agility to business development but its even agility in terms of how we deal with our emotion and situations

RF: That's actually the bed rock because it actually informs your world view and how you show up as a leader so this skill is something that we teach we call it response flexibility the ability to respond rather than react to challenging situations and most people in business face challenging situation all the time but if you are only reacting to them and being very hot and angry all the time you are being responsible actually. You are not being balanced and you are not being clear headed and that's the difference being response flexible in the face of challenges and disruption is a critical skills for business leaders and for technical leaders and it does very much have to do with your own internal landscape and that's why we call the curriculum Search Inside Yourself because we believe that to be an effective leader and a thriving person a lot more you need to develop those skills of awareness and self-knowledge and self-management in order to be effective.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love the distinction that Rich draws between reacting to a situation and responding to a situation. I am reminded of an HBR article by Edward Hallowell. It is titled Overloaded Circuits – Why smart people underperform. The crux of what the article says is that the cerebral cortex is the one that is responsible for us to be nuanced in our executive functioning. But when our brain gets overloaded, he goes onto say that the signals start going to the inner-core of the brain which has more of a flight, fight or a fright reaction to situations. Given that we live in a world where there is an epidemic of being busy, I just feel that there isn't enough appreciation of the downsides of being

busy. You actually end up becoming a poorer leader when you overload yourself with initiatives and that can come in the way of you being mindful, thoughtful and being response flexible to use Rich's words here.

A similar point came up in my conversation with the chess legend Vishy Anand (VA). He talks about how the context changes suddenly when you get to move 40, where extra time gets added and unless people are present in the moment and re-adjust their minds, they could end up making big mistakes.

VA: "I will give you one quick example, I would often get to move 40 and move 40 is significant because it's the end of the first time control, which means that you get a fresh amount of time on your clock and normally your time pressure is over. But a lot of people, the moment, the time between move 32 and 40 is so tense and they are so caught up in it, they are not able to stop till make the 41st move anyway, and especially once upon a time I was very prone to this error. And I was also prone to an error that when I had half-an-hour and my opponent had three seconds, I would try to go fast so that he wouldn't have remaining time to think. It doesn't take a lot of intelligence to stop yourself and see that if you play fast do not give him any time to think, you are not giving yourself any time to think either."

DJ: In a world with rapidly shifting context, I guess, building response flexibility rather than just reacting might just be a superpower that can make a significant difference in the quality of decisions you make and determine how nimble you are as the context around you changes suddenly.

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End of nugget transcription

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Rich Fernandez- 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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Podcast Transcript [41.06 Rich Fernandez - Meta-distress and Response-flexibility](#)

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