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Context to the nugget

Michael speaks about the criticality of assimilating into an organization without triggering the immune system that could easily start working against you. He goes on to say that even if you have been hired as a change agent, earn the right to drive change before you start moving things around (unless it is a turnaround and shock therapy is warranted) in the new organization.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to the other challenge you talk about Michael on boarding challenge. When leaders come in the new organization I'm curious about the notion of decoding the culture right especially some of the hidden elements of culture which often are not visible on the surface so can you share your insights on what can leaders do to be effective in the way they decode the culture when they come into a new organization.

Michael Watkins (MW): I think the process has to begin before you even arrive which is asking people through the process of the recruitment about the culture in the organization nobody the real rules in the game how do things really get done? What gives people influence? What sorts of behavioural norms operating you can into a few dimensions that it help to think about this right one example is decision making is this more a consensus based organization where you need to you know touch based about the key stake holder or is it more you know I'm more authoritative kind of model meeting one of my favourite ... As an anthropologist right as an organizational anthropologist it's the watering whole some up you are right up in the organization where you can visible a lot what goes on. In organizations socially and politically right so are meetings place is where issues are openly debated or meeting is a place where understanding is the reach into the meeting before the meeting... as an example. You know process verses relationships obviously a critical on terms of how you get things done. So its things like that you know is it a culture that's more culture of individual accomplishment and start culture using more collectively and you know there are frameworks that obviously you know you think about those but you know this is most subsequent to getting into the organization engaging in that kind of observation. Sometimes they can help to find people in the organization that can help you understand what's going on. I think I'm in a sort of cultural interpreters but there is no magic fairy dust that can help you to understand the culture instantly.

DJ: And you also talk about the trade-off between degree of adaptation where the leader assimilates into the new context and the degree of driving change where the leader asserts himself in a new situation of course it's contextual but what have you seen leaders do effectively walking that tight rope?

MW: So I use a metaphor for organizational culture which is like hall of the organization immune system and like the human immune system organizational culture is there in large extent to keep bad people and bad ideas in taking root and so that risk if you do thinks that are nit cultural you know is that you will be attacked by the immune system right and the and isolated even digested if you want to go further with the biological metaphor. So, unless you are part of the critical mass that people have the power to change the culture and that's the big IF Then in general what I recommend is you become enough part of it of the place to win the ability to change the place and that means If you continue using my metaphor doing a reasonably amount of fool the immune system and not trigger things before you establish the probability, establish relationships build the mandate right with other to drive the change process. It's very different if you are part of group of people are they really there may being brought in from the outside to really drive change that's a completely different dynamic during that situation so the advice that I give is more about the kind of the be individual coming in and those organization sometimes set people up to fail and one easy way to set people to fail is to bring them into an organization as an in quotes, change agent. When there isn't really consensus the change is necessary, I mean I have my little jokes in this again right in the organization decides that some level intellectual clear out of emotionally necessarily the change is necessary so the hire change agent and the person comes in and my goodness they start trying to change things. So, and then the reaction begins. I guess that is the essence if the advice you know but it is the trade-off right because the other thing is you stay too long operating by the way the organization operates the risk... that kind of change if necessary.

DJ: And may just trying to map it to a time clock have you noticed any trend in terms of let's say leaders moving from observe and assimilate mode to taking calls mode is it 90 days or is it 6 months

MW: It's funny...actually I have never asked that Deepak and it's just an interesting question and 6 months just an wash it my mind I can't tell you why I think that right but I can tell you 3 months is the enough time to really establish the foundation sufficient to begin to drive that kind of change. How unless right you are in a turnaround where you got that scope to do it but don't try to hold me to 6 months out of 1 month, I'm not sure I can support it was just kind of intuitive response.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It is interesting to hear Michael say that it arguably more important to earn the right to drive change before you start driving change even if you have the right ideas that will move the organization forward.

This reminds me of a podcast conversation I had with Ravi Venkatesan (RV) who used to Head Cummins in India and then transitioned to head Microsoft in India and now is UNICEF's special representative for young people. He speaks about how he thought about his transition when he took on the Chairmanship of Bank of Baroda given he had limited knowledge of the Financial Services Industry and Public Sector Organizations.

RV: *"So, as you know about 18 months ago I took on a completely new role as the chairman of a public sector bank, now I know nothing about banking and I know even less about public sector, but yet Raghuram Rajan and Jayant Sinha felt that it was important that I take it on so I did, now what you do in this situation? And you know that the place is filled with landmines and you can step on anything without realizing it and get blown up, so what you have to do in is listen intently and I did I made it very conscious effort to listen to a bunch of people retired chairman of a bank of Baroda so it helped me understand from your perspective, what I should do what the issues are? How would you handle them? And you get a certain perspective, I went and spoke to Waghul of ICICI and P.J. Nayak*

of axis Bank because they had, they have been around and seen revolution of banking sector, I met a lot of our own employees and so forth, so from this you begin to piece together first the situation and then out of that emerges a theory of change which is, what interventions are really going to Make a difference and who are going to be an important alliances if you don't listen and you start to imide you are coming with the point of view you starts jumping into action right away you going to make a lot of mistakes because you hadn't built this nuance and reasonably accurate picture of the landscape"

DJ: Piecing together the theory of change after listening to a range of people is critical before we start moving things around in the organization. Unless you are brought in for a turnaround where the context is different and where there is premium for early action.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: [Listening intently during Transitions](#).

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Michael Watkins - Nuggets

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- 45.03 Michael Watkins - The Transition timeline
- 45.04 Michael Watkins - Fit for purpose feedback loop
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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 [45.10 Michael Watkins - Onboarding a leader](#)

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