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Context to the nugget

Bill Campbell was known to have a “salty language” filled with expletives. Alan provides nuance around how Bill used his directness to land tough messages. He also goes on to talk about the safety net that Bill would create around the difficult conversation so that the leader does not get overwhelmed with the feedback.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to a different theme Alan, the other thing that really struck me was Bill’s ability to land tough feedback and what’s striking is he is not necessarily Mr. Nice right like you said quite tough and quite filled with expletives I understand in terms of the language he used. Give us a sense of what we can learn from Bill on landing tough feedback or having difficult conversations.

Alan Eagle (AE): Yeah, first on the language he did have a rather salty vernacular that he grew up and used, he cussed all the time. It was almost always jovial sort of like you would expect football coach or some other old guy oh F this, F that but always sort of in a fun jovial way. I think actually when he was giving feedback, he was never angry. Sometimes people using expletives can do it in anger and then in that case it is harsh and it is too harsh and that was never Bill’s practice. When you knew he was cussing at you it was don’t F it up but sort of always said with a smile and a wink. He also hugged a lot which was just part of his personality, part of his style. But I don’t want anyone to get the impression that this was just an always easy-going nice big teddy bear of a guy. He was first and foremost an excellent business manager. He was an excellent operations person and he expected people to speak up and to have a perspective and perhaps maybe they would disagree with a decision but they needed to rally behind the decision. And so, we talked to a lot of people about Bill’s approach to firing people, Bill’s approach to giving people feedback and letting them down easily and so he would give a lot of candid feedback and occasionally he had to fire people but again people always knew what was in the best interest of you as an individual and for the team. Jonathan tells this story of how he was. Jonathan could be pretty demonstrative, pretty outspoken as a manager and he actually landed himself on a list that came out, I think it was in 2007, on one of the local I think it was Vallywag or something... it was just one of these rags that cover Silicon Valley and this list was the top 10 terrible tyrants of tech and it was Steve Jobs, Steve Ballmer and Mark Benioff and all these people that can be famously difficult and there was Jonathan on the list and Jonathan was pretty happy because it was a pretty notable list of people. When he went next to see Bill, Bill was not happy, Bill was angry at Jonathan about this because he didn’t feel like this was the feedback he was giving Jonathan, it was like no we didn’t bring you... we brought you in to manage and coach people not to yell at them, that’s not your job, that’s not what ought to be doing. Maybe a Steve Jobs can get away with yelling at people because he is a brilliant genius; Jonathan you are

not, and that was the feedback and so it was a pretty harsh meeting and then Jonathan said okay, what else we are going to talk about and Bill said, that's it, we are done, go think about this. So, he really chewed him out, gave him a lot of feedback but what was interesting and Jonathan found this out later that Bill then called Shona Brown who was our Head of Human Resources at the time and said hey Shona, check in on Jonathan, I chewed him out pretty good, make sure he is okay. And this happened a few times where Bill would give someone really tough feedback but then he would go around the corner to appear and said hey, check in on that person, make sure they are okay. So, he really was . . . even when he was giving direct honest feedback and sometimes it could be pretty harsh, he also wanted to make sure that the person was okay and I think this is a lesson for all of us. We talked to Diane Greene who was a Google Board Member, a former CEO of VMware, ran Google Cloud for a while and she said when she was talking to someone in public she always said you can always come up with something nice to say about someone even if let's say they are massively screwed up, say something nice about them, give them some positive feedback but then in private give them the harsh feedback, you are not doing them a favour by holding back and that was Bill's practice as well.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Couple of things struck me in this nugget. First is the point Alan makes about Bill's tone in the context him using cuss words. I realize that while having a tough conversation, 80% of the battle is in creating the right space and setting the right tone for the conversation. Alan talks about the fact that Bill never got angry when he had to have tough conversations. It always came from a place of "I care for you and your success". I do believe that people can smell your intent from a mile.

The second piece that struck me was the notion of creating a safety net around a tough feedback. It was interesting to hear Alan speak about Bill walking up to the HR leader to check in on the person when Bill would have delivered tough feedback. I go back to a recent episode where we had the founder of Café Coffee Day – VG Siddhartha who possibly jumped off a bridge. It is lonely at the top and in a way it is arguably the moral responsibility of the person giving tough feedback to ensure that he or she creates a safety net around the feedback so that the leader in question doesn't tip over the edge.

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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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