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Context to the nugget

Sudhir speaks about these three types of people and goes on to say that one of the secret sauces of HUL is its treatment of Mavericks. He speaks about the output-oriented nature of KPIs that let some of these mavericks flourish despite not conforming to the “play-book”. He also speaks about HUL being an empathetic meritocracy where people are given some latitude if they are delivering the results (as long as they are not rogues and have issues with ethics and integrity).

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Back to the discussion on people, the other very interesting and possibly borderline counter intuitive insight was you talking about mavericks, company men and rogues and more specifically HULs treatment of mavericks and you go on to say that sometimes companies get too harsh with these people and that's a lost opportunity. So, talk to us about what you mean by these terms and more specifically how HUL deals with some of these mavericks.

Sudhir Sitapati (SS): It's a bit like the entrepreneurship point where it's common, you know, kind of gripe within the organization to say we're not entrepreneur enough. There's a common gripe within the organization and a lot of people repeat it saying this is a clone organization, everybody is the same and that's how we kind of... that's the starting point, right? But when I actually started speaking to people about HUL and people who've been, you know, joined in the 50s to now, lot of the conversation actually came up and people who are idealized were people who are mavericks, I mean, I gave you the example of V. Kasturi Rangan but there were several others like this. And they were able to associate those mavericks with distinct periods of great success of the company and they were able to attribute it to those people. So, I think the interesting thing about HUL is that a lot of people look the same and speak the same language, but there is this... a group of people who aren't the same and who are still allowed to flourish in the company and it's not that easy in a lot of multinationals for that to happen and I was speaking to a consultant friend of mine and I was telling him look this is what I found, I found a lot of the successes I am able to attribute to people and people who have... and did very well, they didn't go to the very top of HUL, I must tell you, but they did pretty much near the top and he said a lot of companies it is fashionable to over-index on teamwork and ultimately what's important is output, team work is input, right? So, it's not an end in itself. And again, I guess it goes back DJ to this collegial camaraderie and this group of people who are there together in an almost familiar sense. So, unless someone lacks integrity and rogues which the company has again traditionally had very strong value systems on and they kind of get ejected, there is a reasonable amount of tolerance for these may not be great team players but value creators and a lot of respect for them as well. So, I think that's a... I mean, I spoke to people I think that it is a relatively unique secret sauce of HUL, it's not obvious because people look the same, they

have the same educational background and so on but you think about it, it ties in with the entrepreneur professional argument. In fact, I think it is the secret sauce if I were to kind of...

DJ: Very interesting and maybe to make it real Sudhir what are the moments of truth and what are the kind of situations where you need to be patient or tolerant with mavericks? What's the friction that you need to live with for mavericks to flourish?

SS: I think the reason that HUL is able to tolerate and live with mavericks for a long time again goes back to some of the HR processes. I think there are strong meritocratic evaluation processes and a lot of the KPIs are quite output driven. Now some organizations find it hard to have output-driven KPIs by the very nature of what they do. I think one of the advantages in the business that we are in is at senior management again one is so (a) we are able to... since again it goes back to some of the earlier points which is since you give a lot of latitude for the first 10 years and you are really evaluating people in the first 10 years, mavericks coast along and that's really where mavericks really had the most friction early on right? Once they come to senior management judgment starts to play a role, mavericks tend to be good decision makers. So, it allows the mavericks to come to middle management or senior management and then flourish. I think it's got good output related KPIs where if you're bringing in the bacon, there's a reasonable amount of tolerance. So, I would say it's a combination of these two but probably the first one. Probably what, you know, one of my former bosses, he calls it I think he calls it an empathetic meritocracy, which is not a hard meritocracy. If you have a hard meritocracy in like investment banks or whatever as you are two years and then you're out it won't have tolerance for mavericks because early on when things can't get attributed people who conform get more attribution than those who don't conform, that's what happens early on right? So, the fact that you don't evaluate for 10 years or you don't hard evaluate and you are supportive throughout I think that's probably what more... when I think about it more than the KPI thing I think this is probably why... it's like a family which allows the black sheep of the family to still be in the... till suddenly you discover a talent of that person and suddenly somewhere it flourishes. So, that's probably why.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This reminds me of my conversation with Alan Eagle (AE), the co-Author of Trillion Dollar Coach, a book that details out the ways and means of Bill Campbell, who coached the who's who of Silicon Valley that included Steve Jobs, the leadership team at Google, Marissa Mayer, Sheryl Sandberg and several other leaders. He didn't charge any money for his work but his work impacted Trillions of Dollars. He uses the term "Aberrant geniuses" to talk about something very similar to Mavericks that Sudhir speaks about...

AE: "Aberrant geniuses often need protection from senior management. We live in an age where individual employees, superstar employees can have a huge impact because they can just be so highly leveraged using technology tools especially if you are in the technology business where in places like Google superstar software engineers and product managers can just have enormous impact, they can create whole new product categories and lots of the times they can be difficult but if managed and coached properly they can have enormous impact both to the bottom line, to your product suite but also to your culture. You need to protect those people because sometimes they are difficult and the culture may want to push them out. So, one of the first lessons I think of aberrant geniuses is to do your best to protect them if they have a few key characteristics correct. What would those be? One is integrity. You of course cannot tolerate lying, abusive behaviour, harassment or anything like that, of course that can't be tolerated. Two, and this is something Bill would always look for and I think it is super-important is a team first mentality."

DJ: Clearly, something for organizations to think about in terms of how they handle mavericks or aberrant geniuses.

DJ: Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com. If you are deriving value for the content and want to show your gratitude to the podcast, I request you to pay it forward by contributing to an organization I am supporting – Antarang Foundation. It helps 1000s of children from challenging backgrounds play to their unique potential. Please visit the pay it forward section to know more.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Alan Eagle that is referenced: [Dealing with aberrant geniuses](#).

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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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