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Context to the nugget

James speaks about how we sometimes get crippled or limited by the identity we carry about ourselves. He makes the case for a smaller identity for us to evaluate new possibilities and walk down new pathways and reinvent ourselves.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And just moving on to another thing that you explained in the book James, you talk about one of the investors Paul Graham and you refer to his quote “keep your identity small”. You go on to say that more you let a single belief define you the less capable you are of adapting when life challenges you. I found that really thought provoking. So, talk to us about the insight here and how it links with building or breaking habit.

James Clear (JC): Yeah, so I think identity is a huge factor of life but also particularly tied to our habits. So, let’s think about this from a big picture level first. So, you have identities that can build you up, for example, like I am a type of person who reads a lot or I am a type of person who finishes workouts or I am a type of person who finishes what I start and then you also have identities that hold you back. So, something like I am terrible with directions or I am bad at remembering people’s names or I have a sweet tooth or I am bad at math and we are all a collection of identities like there are multiple things that are a part of you like you might say I am a dad, I am a brother and a neighbour and a volunteer, and a teacher or whatever and it’s not just labels that are part of your identity like dad and teacher and friend and neighbour, it’s also those internal beliefs, that narrative that you assign to yourself and the more that you let one of those beliefs take over your entire identity or occupy too large of a portion the more that you are fragile and brittle in that way because if you lose that one thing then it feels like you lose your whole self. So, as an example you often hear this with people who are in the military. They might define themselves part of their identity might be I am a soldier, right, I am a good soldier and then once they leave the military suddenly, they are not that anymore and so there’s this like loss of identity versus sense of self that they feel like it was. On a similar level I felt that when I stopped playing sports. For like 20 years a big part of my identity was I am an athlete and then all of a sudden one year that was the final time I played and then I wake up the next day and what am I not going to play anymore and that’s like whom I was defining myself as. So, I think one way to get around this is that you can focus on the more enduring aspects of a particular identity that you can take with you or carry with you into a new context. So, for example, in the soldier’s case they could say well rather than assigning the identity I am a soldier I could assign identities like I am reliable or I am a good team mate or I have the back of those around me. Well that’s something even once you are not a soldier you can come back into the workforce or go to a business you can still be reliable and be a good team mate and so on. Same way for athletes, they could say something like I am the type of person who trains my body hard or I am consistent and

show up to work each day and like you can do the things as an athlete you can do those things as an individual. So, a part of that is the separating of the identity or the defining it in a better way but the other aspect of this and this is the part that you referenced with Paul Graham's quote "keep your identity small" is that the tighter you claim to any individual identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. So, you see this in pretty much any area of life. The tighter you claim to the idea that like a teacher who has been teaching for 20 years and have their lesson plans figured out and it's like this is the way it is, the tighter you cling to that the harder it becomes to grow beyond that, learn new different learning methods, new learning modalities, change your course structure etc. The surgeon who is like this is the way we do the operation even though there might be a new technology that allows them to do it in no less invasive manner, the tighter you claim to that previous identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. And this is one of the real challenges for building habits which is that early on building a new identity is a really valuable thing because it can get you to stick to the habit. So, for example, let's say that you are not fit right now but you want to start getting in shape, building the identity of I am runner is a really valuable way to get you to stick to that when you are running. But then what happens you know 20 years from now if you injure your knee or your hip and it's not possible for you to run anymore and now you feel like yeah, you have lost this sense of self and so you need to transition to a new identity. So the process here is not like a line, it's much more like a circle, you are continually evolving, continually updating and expanding and revising your beliefs and you really need to be committed to doing that and if you can keep your identity small it makes that process easier because it's like retouching a painting. If your identity is so large that it consumes everything about you then all of a sudden getting rid of that aspect feels like you are tearing yourself in two. So, for all of those reasons keeping your identity small could be a valuable way to continue to grow or evolve and expand.

DJ: It reminds me of a term that is often used in the context of... I have come across that in the context of Buddhism which is attachment yet detachment. So, it's interesting you are talking about identity as something that is helpful at some levels but at the same time being too attached to it at the same time can be a constraint later on. So, it's interesting the way you phrase it.

JC: Yeah, and you can think of your habits as... I think this is one of the ultimate reasons that habits really matter. We often talk about habits as the pathway to getting external results. So you might say something like oh, yeah, build better habits and you can get six pack abs or lose weight or double your income or reduce stress and it's true, habits can help you do all those things but the real reason that habits matter is that they reinforce your desired identity. So, every time that you perform a behaviour the way that I summarize this in the book is every action you take is like a vote for the type of person you want to become. So in a sense your habits are how you embody a particular identity like every time that you make your bed you embody the identity of someone who is clean and organized, every time that you make a healthy meal and cook that at home rather than eating out you embody the identity of someone who is focused on eating healthy. Every time that you write one sentence you embody the identity of a writer and know those little actions, those tiny habits do not radically transform your body overnight, they don't lead to a written book in a single day but they do cast a vote for being that kind of person. So early on that's really powerful because those habits provide evidence of this new identity that give you a reason to root that belief in something. So it can be a very powerful thing to adopt to a new identity, could be very powerful to look at yourself in this new light and habits and think of the best path to doing that but use down the line when it's time for another change or another upgrade you also have to be willing to repeat the cycle again and continue to grow and evolve.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When I work with leaders in transition, I often find that they attach surface level labels to themselves which is often either tied to one or more of 3 things - the profession (I am a consultant or a Banker or an investor), to the industry (for instance people say, I work in Financial Services, Health care or Consumer) or to the function (I am a Finance person, Marketing person or an Ops person). Building on what James says, there is often a different way of looking at ourselves and sometimes this input can come from the outside. One of my guests in the podcast – Atul Kasbekar (AK) – spoke about how he transitioned from Photography to Producing movies. He traces it back to a chat he had with a family friend who looked at him differently.

AK: "I mean I have more of a friend who is a spiritual guy and he lives in Bangalore and he was saying that this is the excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true, he says you know you actually a very habitable platform for people otherwise who would never meet each other to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create."

DJ: There is an inverse correlation between the range of possibilities you consider when you are in transition and the identity you carry about yourself. And sometimes, this new insight doesn't come from the inside but comes when you speak to or get some-one to speak to the people around you. Bearing that in mind would be of great help as you evaluate possibilities during your transition.

DJ: One of the entrepreneurs I was working with came to me saying, I have spent 10-15 years building a business. I now have the opportunity of taking it from 100 to 300 X with my brother, or I could start something a fresh and build something from scratch. Or may-be I could start a PE fund and mentor start-ups given my experiences in my journey. Or I could take a break since I had kids recently and spend time as a father. I was speaking to one of his close friends from childhood on how I could help this leader because he was known to be a good problem solver and a strategic thinker. So, I asked this friend "how can I really be of help to this leader with the question he is grappling with". His response to me was "help him sort out his identity and he is smart enough to figure the rest out"; is he an entrepreneur, a husband, a father, a brother or a mentor or something else. Not that these are either-or but the point I want to make is that especially when people are at cross-roads, solving the identity is a key part of the equation without which we may not get to a meaningful answer. If this topic is of interest, you might like the book Working Identity by Herminia Ibarra (HI) (one of the leading thinkers in transitions).

HI: "These are people who have been very driven in careers that are very greedy that take all and so for a lot of us we do have other anchors for identity and may things that we do outside the main day job. The more that main day job is kind of a monolithic thing that takes all. The harder it is to extricate yourself and then you know you start to see that it's just not just the money it's that is your identity and it is really scary to move beyond that."

DJ: You could specifically listen to the nugget – transitioning from well-paying time greedy careers where she speaks about such careers not just being time consuming but identity consuming. You might also find the curated play-list on identity of interest.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Atul Kasbekar that is referenced: [Entrepreneurial pursuits beyond photography.](#)

Nugget from Herminia Ibarra that is referenced: [Transitioning from well-paying time-greedy careers.](#)

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Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Reinventing self: “How do I stay relevant” is a question that all of us have to grapple with as we go through our respective journeys. Careers aren’t linear any more. Some of the leaders talk about how they managed to pivot during their journeys and significantly change trajectories. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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James Clear - Nuggets

- 52.00 James Clear - The Full Conversation
- 52.01 James Clear - Journey to studying habits
- 52.02 James Clear - Building habits in the right areas
- 52.03 James Clear - Keeping the identity small
- 52.04 James Clear - Plateau of latent potential
- 52.05 James Clear - Systems versus Goals

- 52.06 James Clear - Building habits with awareness
- 52.07 James Clear - Environment and habits
- 52.08 James Clear - 2 minute rule - the gateway habit

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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