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Context to the nugget

Raj speaks about the habit of medium maximization (we forget the goals but start focusing on the means instead). He speaks about the paradox here and talks about how it shows up in the sub optimality in the way we make choices including critical ones such as choosing between jobs/career pathways.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Just moving topics Raj here you talk about happiness paradox where you say that while it's often the final objective, we get distracted by focusing on the means rather than the end, right and you talk about the notion of leaving a lot of happiness on the table by the choice that you make. Could you talk to us about the insight here?

Raj Raghunathan (RR): Yeah, so in a way this is also related to some of the misconceptions about happiness if you will in the sense that we tend to... first of all most of us I don't think there's very many people who would disagree with this that we prioritize happiness, we think happiness is very, very important. By happiness again I don't mean necessarily only pleasure, but fulfilment, a sense of meaning, I don't think there's too many people who disagree that if it's not the top goal then very much in the top three, right up there. So, you would imagine that as people go about their daily lives, they are acting in ways that maximize that thing that they themselves claim is very important happiness. But what we've discovered is that people will say, that A between A and B, A will make me happier and yet when you observe people going about making choices between A and B, they routinely choose B. So that's what we mean by happiness paradox and I will give you a very specific example here. When it comes to relationships, we often know this that sometimes you can either be right or you can be happy. You get into a big argument with your spouse on something that is really worthless, whether you said something and they misremembered it and they are saying that you said it and you say no, okay and you can go on arguing about it or just kind of bite your ego and say that you I think you're right, I am really sorry. There's nothing that's lost by doing that. Of course, people then immediately say that what if I keep doing it, and then they take advantage of me. And maybe so in some instances that's true but in most instances, I think most of us are guilty of pursuing something that doesn't make us happy, doesn't make the other person around us happy that we care for and so in that indirect way as well reduces our happiness and yet we end up doing it. And it's not just things that have to do with being right versus being happy. It's got to do with chasing money beyond a point at which it's giving us happiness. We talked about, FOMO, so chasing opportunities beyond a point where you stretch thin and yet you want to grab on to this next opportunity to do this thing. Why? You know, what is it going to get you? We bite off more than we can chew sacrificing our own happiness, we want that next iPhone or the next gadget and so chasing material things, becoming materialistic, chasing money, chasing power, chasing fame. So, we end up

exhibiting this idea, this phenomenon that I call the fundamental happiness paradox, which is a discrepancy between what we claim is very, very important for us, which is happiness and how we end up acting, which is we sacrifice happiness in the bargain or instead of pursuing happiness we end up pursuing other goals. So, we sacrifice happiness for the sake of other goals. So that's what I call the happiness paradox and that's the concept there. And of course, in the book I go through quite a few examples and I am happy to go through a couple of them here if you think that would be helpful.

DJ: Sure, I think a couple of examples would help.

RR: Yeah. So, one example is jobs. So, what we did with the University of Texas students is we had them read chewed up two job descriptions. So, one of the jobs was described as highly intrinsically motivating. This is the kind of job that you feel like every day when you wake up yes, I want to get to work but doesn't pay you a whole lot of money not that it's pittance it pays only pittance, it pays you enough for you to lead a decent life, not an extravagant life. And job B that is going to pay you a lot of money, it's considered a very prestigious job, but really the job sucks. I mean, what are you doing for work is demeaning at some level and you are surrounded by toxic colleagues. And we ask people which of these two jobs would you choose for yourself? And what we find to be really interesting is that most of the people say that the job A that's intrinsically motivating even if it's not going to pay as much is the job that I want. They say this especially well before the interview season has begun, and so what we do is in this study, we ask them about six months before the interview season here are actual job descriptions. One of them is going to be more intrinsically motivating than the other, and we take down these descriptions from previous years' job offers and their descriptions and we see a significant effect of prioritizing intrinsic motivation over extrinsic six months before. But come interview season it flips, it flips and people are much more likely to then choose during the interview season the extrinsically motivating job, the job that gives them more money even if it comes at a cost to their sense of sanity or their sense of interest in the job. And the more prestigious jobs, the higher paying jobs, the more well-known jobs, well-known companies rather, those are the jobs that they end up choosing. And so it's in a way kind of very sad but also very powerful demonstration of the fundamental happiness paradox where even for things that actually matter to you a lot, your job, we end up spending a 100,000 hours on average at work, which is two-thirds, well not two-thirds but at least half of the time that we are awake on Earth, so not counting sleep time. We spend about a half one third to a half of our time at work and yet we end up choosing something that's not going to make us as happy. So, I can walk you through another example too if you want?

DJ: No, no this is good. And I used to be a search consultant for six years? So, this sort of hits home quite hard in the way it goes back to my conversations with candidates on how they think about choices and you are right. I was going to pick up from there and maybe link this conversation Raj to some of the work of Bob Kegan, who has done some work around adult development and I am curious about midlife and to use Bob Kegan's language a lot of people are moving from a socialized mind to a self-authoring mind. So, I guess what I was trying to get to was while you spoke about the experiment at an undergrad level in terms of how students respond to job description one versus two, how do we...

RR: We actually did the study with the... we did it with the undergrads too but this particular study I described was with the MBA's.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for reading. For more please visit playtopotential.com

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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