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Context to the nugget

Raj speaks about the valley of mid-life and how we can try to bring greater happiness by either job-crafting (look for adjacent spaces around what we do currently in our company), pursuing a vocation on the side that energizes us that could one day possibly become a profession and pick up a hobby or two that could give us a sense of meaning and bring happiness that we could take back to our work.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Now I was curious about how you think about this evolving as people age and specifically may be reflecting on this whole phase of midlife. Any reflections on what are some of the things you have seen maybe looking at your peer set maybe as a point of reference, any thoughts or insights here?

Raj Raghunathan (RR): So, one thing is very clear, I think that the midlife years are among our worst. I think the teenage years are the absolute worst, but after that our happiness tends to pick up a little bit and the twenties are very good, but the midlife years between 45 let's say and around 50 maybe 55, those are the worst. And one of the big reasons for that is that that's the time at which you can't delude yourself anymore that you haven't been as successful as some of your peers have been and you haven't achieved many of the life goals that you wanted to achieve. Maybe objectively speaking you are better off than what you imagined you would be but relatively to other people you are not and so there is a big gaping hole in the middle of you wondering where did I kind of run around chasing all this and here I am and I don't feel as happy, I am getting older, I have got a big belly now and you just end up not being very happy. And that's the reality, this is not among my peers necessarily, it's a reality around the world. This is what the curve show, the happiness curve across the ages. And I think that one of the interesting things is that it does take up after it, it goes up and one of the big reasons why that happens is that you end up reconciling whatever has happened and going past it and not being as concerned about it or worried about running after all the conventional yardsticks and competing with other people and so on. And one thing that I do want to say here Deepak is that earlier on you talked a little bit about this podcast being about transitions and career transitions and all that, so I do have some thoughts on... if you are in that age group say between 40 and 50 or 40 and 55 and you are discovering that this has not been a happy time for you, you are certainly not as happy as you thought you ought to be at this point and perhaps you also recognize that given everything I have I actually ought to be really happy and yet here I am not feeling very happy, I do have some thoughts, I don't know if you're...

DJ: We should talk about that now and now is a good time Raj to dive into that.

RR: Okay. So one thing is that... so I want to talk about three things that you can do if that is what you are experiencing that you are here and most of the listeners are probably going to be in this category of people who have actually achieved quite a bit in terms of conventional success and access to resources and money and power and the status and all that and yet they have this kind of sense of emptiness. So part of that I think comes from social comparisons to other people and I think that there is a time at which you need to stop doing that or at least mitigate it to a large extent because if there is one really big killer of happiness it is social comparisons. It's easy to do, it's natural to do, it seems that sometimes it's helpful to do it because you get inspired by other people or you realize what's possible and so you chase that for yourself, but if it's a state in which you more or less constantly exist where you are comparing yourself to other people to such an extent that it has even become second nature to you, then you are really killing yourself at some level literally, because if you are unhappy you are actually not helping yourself in terms of your health, your physical health, so you need to mitigate it. And I would say that what is far more important than all these resources and comparisons to other people is having a sense of purpose and meaning. That is that feeling that what you are doing for work is intrinsically motivating. It is tapping into your core interests, it is tapping into and nurturing your strengths that you have built up over time. So that is very, very important and also the sense that you are actually helping other people out, be it consumers, be it your co-workers, be it people who don't have a voice in the system, animals perhaps or poor people from other... somebody, you are helping some stakeholder out. So, these two... at least one of these two is very, very important even if you are not helping people out at least are you really into your job. And if you are not doing that then I have three pieces of advice and this is all based off of other people's research. So one is that see if you can job craft, I don't know if your listeners are familiar with this term but it's basically moving a job in a more meaningful direction. I think that I am a good candidate to speak about it because earlier we talked a little bit about this. Why did I end up teaching a class on happiness? I think at some level I didn't know you were job crafting at that time but that's what I was doing, I was teaching regular marketing courses, I am in the Marketing department even to this day, but I felt a little bit uneasy about some of the larger ripple effects that the knowledge that I was imparting was having on the world at large. And so, I ended up concluding that it's not as meaningful for me to do that. And so, I thought to myself what would be more meaningful is to talk about well-being, happiness etc., so I ended up crafting job crafting. So that's one thing you can do. And people are often very surprised to learn that where they do attempt to job craft, they actually do not end up facing a lot of obstacles and they end up actually getting people open up new doors of opportunity for them even within their own firm and it doesn't have to be massive and big. You could be in Sales for example, and you discover that it is really making you travel more than you want to and you have family at home and kids and you are away from them and in the meanwhile you have gathered a lot of insights on what kinds of products people want and so you could actually kind of really help out in the R&D, in the new product group or innovation group. And so most people think that well, I have spent a good 15-20 years in Sales and who is going to accept me in R&D, there is no way that they are going to accept me, but you would be surprised if you just go and talk to your boss or to other people in the R&D department, even if it's only for a temporary period if you ask them to spend time for about say six months in that R&D area you might actually encounter a lot more receptivity than you thought. So that's job crafting. The second is of course that you move jobs and let's say that again with this example of Sales versus R&D, let's say that your company actually tells you that no, you don't have experience with that and we already have all positions full, sorry you can't do it. One thing you can do is to hang out with the R&D group, even if they don't allow you to actually take up a formal position there, just hang out with that group and say that you know what every evening I just want to spend one hour with you guys just to see what you are doing and just listen in. I am not going to actually work here but I at least want to know what you are doing. If you take another example, let's say that you are an accountant and your heart is in say scuba diving or something. Just go spend time at a scuba diving

shop and volunteer your time and find out what it takes to own a scuba diving shop and go on more scuba diving trips. The idea is that you end up building a set of what might be called tacit knowledge, not formal knowledge, but knowledge that's maybe implicit, difficult to kind of articulate in words but you end up discovering the community that's into that, you end up discovering what aspects of that job that you thought you would really like you actually end up hating. Maybe you don't like the idea of filling up tanks every evening and you thought that that somehow wasn't part of the job of owning a scuba diving shop. So, that's the idea that over time spending two, three, four or five years even sometimes in that area that you thought might be more fulfilling for you will end up revealing to you whether it actually is something that would be fulfilling or it was just one of your aspirational dreams. And what this lady Herminia Ibarra has discovered in her book "Working Identity" is that people who take that path of slowly branching out rather than taking this continuous jump from what you are doing to what you think might be a passion is a much, much more stable way to transition out of the job that you find meaningless to a job that you find more meaningful. What's happening in those three, four, five years is that even though it sounds like a long time you are actually... you are on a journey there, you are on a journey of being from your currently meaningless job towards a job that is going to be more meaningful, but it's not something that a journey that requires you to abandon all your present contacts and your family and put them in jeopardy by doing that. You are taking everybody along for the ride a little bit and you are communicating with them on what's going on and that's a much better path to take, slow and organic path I call it. And the third thing that you can do. Sorry, did you want to say something?

DJ: No, I just wanted to say that I am a big fan of Herminia Ibarra and she was in the podcast a while back as well so completely...

RR: Oh, wonderful, yeah. All right. So and the last one is really let's say that both of these paths are not available to you, I mean the job crafting you can't do it and you really can't afford to spend any more time pursuing what you think might be a second career volunteering for a scuba diving shop for example, then at least, the very least pick up a hobby that's intrinsically motivating for you. Maybe it is solving jigsaw puzzles, maybe it's learning about I don't know Greek history. Nowadays, we have access to so many different resources on the internet that I think it would be a shame if we didn't pursue our hobbies. And it turns out there's lots of work on this that even if you have a job in which you are not into it, it is not meaningful, but you have a set of hobbies that you are into and highly meaningful for you, deeply satisfying that's going to overflow into affecting your job satisfaction. So that's the very least that we can do, I would say.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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

End of nugget transcription

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Raj Raghunathan - Nuggets

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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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