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Context to the nugget

Jennifer speaks about the distinction between feeling something is right versus thinking that something is right. She mentions that the feeling of rightness often arrives a few milliseconds before the actual process of cognitive certainty around a problem and this could lead to us forming an opinion first and then back-filling the data to suit the answer we end up feeling right about.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to the second trap you said our sense of being right about something is not really a cognitive process but an emotion. It has nothing to do with whether you are right or not. I found that an interesting nuance. What's the crux of the insight here and how do we overcome this issue?

Jennifer Garvey Berger (JGB): I know, I think it's actually mind-bending, right? I think when we think about it, we have the sense of ourselves and I was teaching this to a client once and he said no, no, no Jennifer, this might be true for other people but I actually think things through before I come to conclusions about them. And so for me, this one is not a problem. And then... and I said, you know, yeah, that's the way it feels for all of us actually like we all think that and he came back to me about a week later and he said, oh my goodness! You have... I have been noticing I make up my mind first and then I backfill data, I do this all the time and that is of course the way it works. In a brain scan we see that the arrival of the emotion of certainty comes before, not hours before but milliseconds before the cognitive part of our decision-making actually comes online. And so this shows that we feel certain and then we figure out why as opposed to we feel like we don't know and then we figure out what we believe. Now, of course sometimes we absolutely do it the other way, but by and large we don't.

DJ: Is this related to the point around having a gut instinct or are these two different things?

JGB: No, they are two similar things and it's one of the questions that people often ask me is like what do we do with our instincts? And I think the thing is we want to understand our instincts particularly if they come from a non-cognitive part of us, our bellies, our bodies, we want to understand them pay attention to them because there's really important data there. We just don't want to have blind faith in them just as we don't want to have blind faith in our ability to think our way through these challenges.

DJ: So, how do we... so maybe just sticking with this Jennifer, so how do we ensure we are not carried away by the emotion, but we ensure that we are rational? What do you advise leaders to ensure they are not caught in this trap?

JGB: I have us look for what certainty feels like and begin to notice that as separate from a cognitive process like what does it feel like when you feel certain. You can often notice some things your body does like I move forward in my seat, I start thinking ahead to how I am going to defeat the disagreement or the perspectives of others, like I have a sense of righteousness in me. Now when I notice those things I am able to say oh wait, wait, wait, this is an emotion, this is closing me down to new possibilities, new data, and I could totally be wrong here. So asking myself what is it that I am really believing right now, not what's true but what I believe is true and then how could I be wrong about this allows me to listen in a new way not to defeat the other person, not to listen to win or listen to fix their ideas, but to listen to learn from them to hold my mind open as a practice, as an intention or practice as opposed to just going with this emotion that bowls over my capacity to learn.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The piece around listening to learn as against listening to win or listening to fix is a profound one. One of my earlier guests was Arun Maira – former member of Planning Commission and Chairman of BCG India. He is the author of the book “Listening for well-being – conversations with people not like us”. In that conversation, he speaks about how we could listen better to different perspectives.

AM: *“OK we look at data and so there are a lot of questions about data, where is the data? How does the data add up? So you go down that path about the data and trying to see reality through, re-organizing and adding or subtracting in the data itself and you can go down to the path also into the logic behind in the data itself. So this wait could lead to that so it comes to next level on that which is not just addition or subtractions but you go to more calculus math and so there's a more ways to thinking about how to make sense of the data and I say fine now the data is being interpreted by mind the data is also collected by the people who felt that, that was good data to get so that was mind who chose which data to select, what data to select so there are minds here so there's a reasoning about mind. Why this is important data? So I learn to switch myself off the deductive track pretty quickly and to ask why you think one should be looking at this data. And then I would notice quite often that why the person thinks this data is important is... the reason to probably ask the question I think is what the point of this data is? I don't think this data is important but this person is presenting all this stuff, why do you think it's important? So I am learning about another person's way of think and what another person gives value to? Which apparently is not what I give value to, is not my way of thinking so this is how I am 'people not like us' as I say I am listening to someone who's not like me in this situation both of us could be let's say in BCG or in world of business and VCG they are people like us, so we have a way of thinking and things we value and the data that we consider as important which is similar and when you come to people who we consider ill-educated or people who are rapid in their thinking they are not like us but they are human beings and many of them have got PhD if you want to count that as that they have education or they have been through life very successfully in some field but they value different things and they think about the world in a different way, so then I have to ask them about more question about how they came to believe that these things are important, so learning about them, their journey how they developed, their values and their mental frames and so, that's how then I am learning at even deeper levels but in the formation of my own values I mean how did my values formed.”*

DJ: Focusing not just on the message but on the messenger and how the messenger thinks about the data and why might give us insights that are in our blind spot and help us understand a situation from multiple perspectives.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Arun Maira that is referenced: [Art of asking good questions](#).

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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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