Context to the nugget

Jennifer speaks about how the desire for control is an essential part of human-ness but unfortunately in complex situations, going after control often leads us on a wild-goose chase of chasing superficial metrics while missing out on the bigger picture. She suggests that we focusing more on direction than outcomes and mentions that outcomes are an emergent property of a complex system and it is hard for us to control them given the number of variables that are outside our purview.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving to another theme about control, right? A lot of us have grown up in a paradigm where control is often seen as a virtue and you say that desire to control actually distracts us and often leads us focusing on small proxies that seem controllable rather while missing the bigger picture. What is the insight inside here, what is the nuance here?

Jennifer Garvey Berger (JGB): Ah, humans just have this… we have this wrongheaded sense of control and complexity. We often hold our leaders responsible for things that they could never conceivably be responsible for, we don't understand lag times, we don't understand interconnectedness, we don't understand exponential change, we don't understand emergence, like there are all these features of complex systems that the human brain doesn't understand and that makes us anxious. And one of the human responses to anxiety is to try to control things because in the past when things were out of control and you could control them then suddenly things got better. But now as you say we come up with these proxies so classic example is people are dealing with customer dissatisfaction with call centres and one of the things customers complain about is wait time. And so leaders say oh, that's a thing that we could manage and solve for; so let's focus on wait time, we can really make a difference on wait time. And so they tell everybody you are going to be really measured by wait time because that's going to make customer satisfaction go up because customers hate waiting, they always complain about that. So as people focus on wait time, they have this perverse effect, wait time goes down, but it tends to go down because people are saying to their customer oh, I can't deal with this right now because the phone is ringing and I need to pick up the phone, you'll have to call back later, which means customer satisfaction goes down even as wait time goes down because we picked this proxy measure and humans consistently solve for these proxy measures and then lose the big picture that actually mattered to them in the first place. You see this on large scale with these scandals about people opening up bank accounts in customers' names because the proxy measure there for success was how many bank accounts do you get to open or how many credit cards you get to open or whatever. And so humans are oriented to try and control things that can't be controlled.

DJ: And maybe reflecting on the current situation we are going through Jennifer, Covid-19. As you think about how people are processing and making sense of the evolving situation, would you say there are simple proxies people are latching on to instead of trying to grasp the bigger picture, bigger and more nuanced picture?

JGB: It's funny right now; we are in a place that's even more complex than complexity, right? Dave Snowden would call this place that we are in chaos, because we actually are having a hard time even seeing patterns at this moment. We are kind of scrambling to make sense of patterns, but the thing is changing so quickly it is hard to see patterns. And so in those cases, the first thing a leader needs to do is to try and figure out how to keep people as safe as possible. It is safety that's most important and complex in chaos. And so sometimes that looks like making everything stop, so that we can get a handle on things and that is in fact a pretty controlling move and it's what you are seeing happening all around the world, like you and I are both in places where our governments have said stop, just stop and let's see if we can get a handle on this thing. That's actually buying time which is a clever thing to do in in a chaotic situation, but it obviously is not a go-to that you would want to use very often because it's breaking the economy. So sometimes there are these situations where a heavily controlling blunt instrument is important. But in general complex situations you would want to stay away from instruments like that and instead nudge us into a better place over time. But the threat to life and limb is so significant right now that a kind of nudging approach which is very useful in complexity is deadly right now. So leaders have to use a different approach which does come across as more controlling. In fact, each of these mind traps of course has its own light as well as its own shadow and in moments of real danger it is super useful to be able to take direct action because you feel you are right, to be able to tell a quick and simple story about what to do next, to be able to get everybody to like rely on their tribe and agree to get to have somebody have like these very significant controls. Each of these mind traps in the moment of great life threatening chaos can be useful.

DJ: Got it, and in way tying back to evolution, I guess, maybe that's why they've gotten so hard coded because they did serve a purpose for all these years.

JGB: That's exactly right. They have saved our lives so many times.

DJ: Got it, and maybe talking about nudging Jennifer as a coach how do you get leaders who have grown up in a control heavy environment to transition to being effective in moving towards a nudging kind of a approach, it sort of requires deep unwiring and rewiring. What's been your approach as a coach to nudge the leaders you work with to moving a little towards a little more of a nudging kind of leadership if that makes sense?

JGB: Yeah, it's really about helping people first connect to how much of their controlling behavior is not about making good things happen in the world but really is about protecting themselves from their own anxiety and fear. So much of our control drive comes from our anxiety. And as leaders realize that very often they want to change that because people don't tend to find that their best self comes out as they are driven by or reacting to their own fear. And so as leaders come to understand that connection, they are more willing to start experimenting slowly gently with taking their hand off the wheel and see what happens and we design… with my clients I design very safe experiments that they will do for a week and then report back on and very often what they find is oh, you know, I didn't… I was going to send this set of instructions out, these PowerPoint decks to show people what to do, I was going to do that, I experimented this week in not doing that and it turns out the solutions my people came to were much better than the solutions that I myself was going to propose. So maybe I am going to just like not do that anymore or only do that 10 percent of the time. So the benefits of it become more and more available to folks and that's very convincing.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This insight reminds me of my conversation with Prof Kartik Hosanagar Ep 2 (KH) of Wharton who has written a book on AI – A human's guide to Machine Intelligence. He was on the podcast a few months back and he spoke about unanticipated consequences of human decisions and he narrates a story that illustrates this fallacy of going after false metrics!

KH: *"the Cobra effect is an interesting effect where we don't know the exact details of this but legend has it that way back during British rule in India, specifically in Delhi one of the governors there wanted to get rid of what he perceived as a cobramanous, there were just too many cobras and therefore the government announced the bounty for anyone who catches or brings the cobra head and so the idea was this would result in hunting or cobras and snakes and would ultimately help bring down the population. Now, initially it seemed to bringing lots of people who would come in and produce cobras and collect the bounty but again the legend has it that what was happening was that once people realised that there is a bounty if you bring in Cobras they started breeding cobras and they started breeding these and bringing it in and collecting the money and so it wasn't really addressing the problem and in fact when the government realised it and said the bounty is no longer available people just released whatever they were breeding into the wild, making the problem worst so it was one of those situations when there were perverse outcome awaiting this person and essentially what I call unanticipated consequences, you thought what this would do is reduce the cobra population but the unanticipated consequence was that it actually might have increased the cobra population and I bring that up because this notion of unanticipated consequences has been around and sociology for a while and certainly with a lot of human decisions we know these things happen where you intent to fix something and you make it worst by your intervention"*

DJ: Kartik goes on to say that AI systems are a bit like that and we need to watch out on how much we tightly control. We might be hurting the system in other ways. Back to Jennifer, one of the things she says in coping with this is for us to start thinking more and more about direction and less and less about specific outcomes. She says that solving for direction opens us up to different possibilities. So, instead of saying "I want my daughter to take over my business, we say, I want my daughter to be independent and entrepreneurial". Instead of saying "I want to retire by that beach side house in this city, we say I want to live by the nature when I retire". You get the broad idea.

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End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Kartik Hosanagar Ep 2 that is referenced: [Unanticipated consequences and "Cobra effect"](#).

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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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