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Context to the nugget

RG speaks about how transitioning from one context to another is a bit like moving from driving a race car to rock climbing. You need to feel the surface before you transfer your weight and move forward. He speaks about the criticality of adopting (not appointing) mentors around you. These informal mentors often act as a feedback loop for the leader to course correct ensuring that hairline cracks becoming fractures.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Lovely. So just coming back to how leaders can settle in and the point you made around cultural fit Gopal, listening intently often comes up as a key theme right for leaders settling into a new context. If you had to double click on that could you expand a little bit on how a leader can listen more or intently as they settle into a new context especially for the first three, six, nine months?

R Gopalakrishnan (RG): You know, I think the most important thing is introspection within yourself. This is my experience, okay?

DJ: Sure. Sure.

RG: When I was Vice Chairman of Hindustan Lever the shoes would click and I would get all the salutes as I entered the building, everybody knew me, they sir'd me and, you know, I was amongst the older members of the management committee therefore you sort of automatically feel that you are a proven guy. When I was entering Bombay House 22 years ago, no heels clicked, nobody knew who the hell you were and at the most my imagination allowed me to have a few people say in a hush tone oh, he is the new guy they have brought in, you know, because some media coverage had been. I was an unproven person and every person was sizing me as indeed I was sizing them. This is a very good situation to be in because it jolts you from your complacency of thinking you are a proven fellow, saying that I might have won Wimbledon, but I am now in Roland Garros, and I think it brings a certain amount of humility that I may get knocked out in the second round. So, this was the most important self-introspective thinking that must come. It doesn't come automatically because for 30 years you got used to being seen as a... you know get to the General in the Army, if you now go and take charge of the Navy one shouldn't assume that you are going to be successful. The second aspect that would come to me is to informally adopt not appoint adopt some mentors. Some guys who are senior people or people in your interaction zone whom you can go and chat with and who will give you if not a direct hint at least a lateral hint that you know this is not the way we do things here or while your reaction was very logical the way you expressed your reaction could be better. I found these two to be very helpful. The third has of course lasted that don't be afraid to make a

mistake. Don't make a fatal mistake like punching your boss on the face, but you will make mistakes and you must be willing to admit that you made a mistake. When I was Vice Chairman Hindustan Lever in a sense, I knew what to do; I could do it, if I was a bit ham-handed people understood. Here, I wasn't sure what to do, but I still did a few things and when I was ham-handed I got the signal back because I was looking for the signal, nobody was coming and telling. And I think therefore it's like climbing... being in the company you have been in for the last 10 years, 20 years is like driving on the highway, you can race the engine 60 kilometres, you know where the restrooms are and where the restaurants are, going into a new company is like rock climbing, you are not sure where your next foot is going to sit at least for the first two, three, four years.

DJ: Of course.

RG: And if you go with that mindset that you are not the racing car... if Narain Karthikeyan has to go rock climbing he had to better change his methods.

DJ: It's a great metaphor. You need to feel the new surface before you start putting your weight on it. And just back to the second point Gopal in terms of having that informal set of people who tell you a little bit about how things work here. Any insights around where you could find them? Are they around your peer group, is it superiors, is there any wisdom around how we look for them?

RG: Around your peer group is what I did but it could be subordinates as well, it could be a boss, it could be a combination but the important thing is not that you adopted them because it is not a conscious process, you are not sort of saying from tomorrow so and so is adopted as my mentor, but some people who seem to be more forthcoming even if in tangential term so they want to hurt you and it's the signals that you look for, in other words the transmitters are all around you but you have to tune your receiver. If you have the wrong frequency and your receiver is not receiving what is the use of the transmitters.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my work with leaders who transition into a new context, I realize that suddenly it feels that the organization has become introverted. People stop speaking with you. And just like one says that if you are leading a team of introverts, you need to find a way of listening to the silent voices. Ravi Venkatesan (RV) speaks about how he adopted a few internal and external mentors as he took on a Chairman role in a Public Sector Bank.

RV: *"So, as you know about 18 months ago I took on a completely new role as the chairman of a public sector bank, now I know nothing about banking and I know even less about public sector, but yet Raghuram Rajan and Jayant Sinha felt that it was important that I take it on so I did, now what you do in this situation? And you know that the place is filled with landmines and you can step on anything without realizing it and get blown up, so what you have to do in is listen intently and I did I made it very conscious effort to listen to a bunch of people retired chairman of a bank of Baroda so it helped me understand from your perspective, what I should do what the issues are? How would you handle them? And you get a certain perspective, I went and spoke to Waghul of ICICI and P.J. Nayak of Axis Bank because they had, they have been around and seen revolution of banking sector, I met a lot of our own employees and so forth, so from this you begin to piece together first the situation and then out of that emerges a theory of change which is, what interventions are really going to Make a difference and who are going to be an important alliances if you don't listen and you start to imide you are coming with the point of view you starts jumping into action right away you going to make a lot of mistakes because you hadn't built this nuance"*

DJ: The point around developing a High Resolution picture of the Theory of Change is an important one. Most of the transitioning leaders have a clear sense of the “what” they need to do, but often the failures are because they didn’t appreciate the how well enough.

And I like the point Gopal makes about adopting these mentors and not necessarily appointing them. In my work with leaders, I find that leaders are a bit like an engine that is raring to go. But unless the engine builds a strong connect with the compartments; it is going to snap at some point. So, if I may double click on the point around adopting mentors, I think it is key that you invest in informal relationships internally so that over time you develop a cohort that you connect with that warms up to you and can act as an informal feedback loop. I have noticed that this is something organic that evolves and not a list of 5 names that is given to you. The key however, is that the leader often comes into a fire and there are 50 things clamouring for his or her attention. It is key that he or she creates the mind space and the discipline to slowly build these relationships and develop a circle of mentors who can act as guard rails as they move forward.

Thank you for listening. If you find this of value, do take a moment to visit the podcast archives at playtopotential.com. You might specifically be interested in my conversation with Michael Watkins on how leaders can settle in effectively in a new organization. You might also like the theme “settling into a new context” where we learn from leaders across different walks of life on how they navigated the first few months in a new environment including someone like Gandhiji when he moved back to India from South Africa.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: [Listening intently during Transitions](#).

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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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