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Context to the nugget

RG speaks about the criticality having a healthy friendly relationship with the Board. He speaks about the narrative that CEOs often have around Board members being another “layer to manage”. He suggests that if we instead treat them as founts of wisdom and as mentors, there is a lot of value that CEOs can unlock from the Board members.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Just moving to a different theme Gopal, you talk about the notion of a CEO having the right mental model with the board and you say that the CEO needs to treat the directors as your senior friends. Say more here. I found that quite nuanced. What do you mean by the mental model here?

R Gopalakrishnan (RG): You know a board has different kinds of people on it. Some will irritate you... and I have been a CEO and I have also been a board member so I have seen both sides as it were and for many years not for just one or two years. When I was a CEO, I said my mindset unexpressed of course what do these founders know about my business which I don't know. I would be respectful to somebody who was 10 years older than me or more senior to me hierarchically. I might have been dismissive about somebody who was closer to me, I didn't see them as people who would add value until later in my CEO-ship I said, hey, you know, there are so many dimensions here, I should listen to these guys. And I started to change my method, when I first became a CEO, I took that attitude. It happens to every CEO. He sees the board as an unnecessary bunch of old uncles who are paid to do nothing in particular and get in his way. Now if he changes that toggle switch in his head and thinks of them as friends, I use the word senior friends, I don't mean in terms of age, some of them may be age, some of them may be experienced, some of them may be in wisdom, they may be are lawyers or accountants, it doesn't matter and that he could go and chat with them then he would get a different outcome. It becomes a bit like who is the CEOs mentor? He doesn't have one, nobody in his organization is going to tell him and his wife can tell him, that's where the Clementine Mirror comes which I have also referred to in one of my books, but assuming he doesn't discuss his board meetings with his wife every evening and assuming she's not greatly interested he needs a mentor, a person who can pull him down a few pegs or push him up a few pegs and a board member may be able to do that, it's not guaranteed. But if you don't even keep the window open and keep them as your circle of friends and not say no to them there's a chance that one friend or the other will tell you think about it. And therefore, I think CEOs hopelessly fail, hopelessly fail and I have done so myself by the way in my time not all the time, but for the first few years of becoming a CEO in regarding their board as potential founts of another opinion. They are like the walls of a cliff, you are shouting in the cliff in the mountain side, you need some cliffs to reflect back signals to you. If you don't use those cliffs you've got to be lost in the mountain.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I like the metaphor of cliffs reflecting signals back to you. However, the point to mention here is that sometimes Board members are a little far removed from the situation on the ground and in my work with transitioning leaders; I observe that if the leader is not settling in well, the organization often goes silent. And when you don't have a critical mass of relationships, it can be extremely difficult to decode silence on your own. That's why I think it is critical for leaders to think about architecting fit for purpose feedback loops that can keep reflecting the signals. And sometimes, it is hard to extract real data through org processes given the biases and conflicting agendas. As a Coach working with the leader in transition, my first step is to build trust with some of the key stakeholders early in the journey so that I am able to get closer to the real signal so that I can help the leader with that input. Earlier in the podcast, I had spoken to Michael Watkins (MW) (Prof at IMD and Author of First 90 days – a great resource for transition acceleration). He speaks about the criticality of fit for purpose feedback loops)

MW: "Just to start with a basic premise that you know in general organization do a poor job of providing feedback to leaders in transitions. Especially when they are broader from the inside and why is that because there is some sort of sense they have to get their feet you know that give us a chance you know or a reluctance on part of direct report to kind of give upward feedback or on the case of the board the board that just may not see you know what's going on and so I'm a huge believer in providing structured feedback after pick a number 90 to 120 days certainly no longer then that because that provides some discipline in the sense of giving some serious structured guidance to the new leader upon which they can act before things have gone to a... There is very serious things that are going on and so you know you can the leader do that themselves absolutely should be for sure better thing it's often better done by having a coach who can out and conduct those stake holders interviews and by process basically ... I do an industrial stake holder interviews and then after 60 and 90 days I go back meet the same people right so I have got a little bit if the relationship with them you know I can just makes it easier to kind of collect the sort of real feedback about how this person is doing."

DJ: Getting this piece right can be critical and can be the difference between a hairline crack being corrected and turning into a full blown fracture. 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 Michael Watkins that is referenced: [Fit for purpose feedback loop](#).

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R Gopalakrishnan - 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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