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Context to the nugget

Whitney speaks about how we should think about our identity when we experience the free fall when we move from the top of an S curve to the foothills of a new S curve. She speaks about the criticality of having a clear “Why” and the notion of smaller S curves to make it less risky when you transition from one trapeze to another.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Another theme that we explore in the podcast Whitney. I had Professor Herminia Ibarra from London Business School talk about this notion of identity and working identity and you talk about it in the book as well. You talk about the fact that we often attach labels to ourselves based on the roles we play or the job we do and if we adopt the Tarzan model if you will of jumping multiple S-curves, how should people think about their identity especially during this phase of transition when you're moving between two curves?

Whitney Johnson (WJ): Such a good question. Yeah, so you know, I love that, so this idea of Tarzan. I remember a couple of years ago I was talking to Saul Kaplan at the Business Innovation Factory and he said, you know, my life has been about jumping from one S-curve to the next, swinging like Tarzan from one S-curve to the next because that's where I do my best work when I am always in that sweet spot of an S-curve, but as you pointed out when you're at this top of an S-curve and you make that decision to jump there's this moment of free fall, this loss of identity, the PE because in financial terms Puke to Excitement ratio can get so uncomfortably high that you basically feel like you're on this throw right to zero and so what do you do about that? And I think the first thing is just to be aware that it's there, whenever you're stepping back from who you are and to who you can be there is that moment of free fall and it's normal and it's natural. Think the way that we allow ourselves to do that or to manage that is to say, okay I am jumping from this S-curve to this S-curve and you think of these little baby S's right but then within the... sort of because our life and our career there's this fractal of S-curves, if you can think of it as I am on this little mini S-curve that I am jumping to a new one but that's on a much bigger S-curve which then goes to your purpose and your why and who you are and you're fundamental sense of who you are then it becomes a lot easier to do. A quick example that I think will help here is I remember, as I said earlier, when I was investment banking and then they moved me polite term into equity research I remember having this moment they said well, here's what we want you to do. Like they didn't force me to do it. I got to make the decision but this is what they want me to do. And I remember having this experience of evaluating it and saying okay so does this make sense for me to do and you know, should I do this and I had this, I still remember where I was sitting. I was sitting in our apartment on 71st Street in Manhattan. We had this new born baby, I think he was like four-months-old at this time and I remember thinking this is a good decision like I could feel it, it was a good decision for me to do this that somehow some

way this step back was going to be a slingshot forward which goes to our broader purpose in life, right? What's our why? What are we trying to get done in our life and when we can think about what am I trying to get done in my life that allows us to have a sense of what our identity is? And so then these smaller S-curve jumps are just within the broader context of the identity of who we are and that allows us to hold that and so that free fall instead of feeling like it's you know a jump of a hundred feet down that S-curve there's this and there's a safety net. It's a jump of two or three feet because we know that within our broader identity our broader sense of self, it's not quite as big of a jump as it feels right in that moment.

DJ: I guess at some level it sounds a bit like having some clarity around the why not just jumping for the sake of jumping but having a clear sense for why it fits in to your overall life context probably.

WJ: Yeah, absolutely Deepak. I mean if you think about it again back to this graph paper, none of us would ever go from 18 to 15 unless we believe that there is a slingshot forward. And so, when you're doing that calculus you are saying to yourself. I mean, it's just like a business right, you invest in PP&E, you invest in Product, Plant and Equipment because you believe that that equipment, that plant will allow you to build something for the future and it's exactly the same for us as an individual. We part with something today business its cash, we start with prestige, we start with status, we part with status or standing our prestige today because we believe that we are investing in a future which we can envision for ourselves, which as you say goes back to our Why, our purpose and why we believe we're on this planet.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this is a topic of interest, do listen to my conversation with Herminia Ibarra where she speaks about the notion of Liminality where our identity is in Limbo. She speaks about how we should think about divergent exploration and delayed commitment when we evaluate options. You can visit playtopotential.com to tune into the conversation with Herminia.

End of nugget transcription

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Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Whitney Johnson - Nuggets

- 62.00 Whitney Johnson - The Full Conversation
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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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Podcast Transcript [62.07 Whitney Johnson - Handling our identity](#)

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