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Context to the nugget

Vinay speaks about how tactful politicians like Vajpayee understand the notion of an “Overton Window”, a skill that CEOs need more and more as the levels of complexity compound in the world we live in.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other theme I would like to pick up, you talk about Vinay is decoding the Overton window. In page 246 you speak about Vajpayee being in the central hall from 1957 onwards and decoding the political common sense of the time, the Overton window of what India would find acceptable. I find this notion intriguing, right? How do you make sense of a complex sentiment and that's a trait that a lot of leaders try to develop as they grow senior because a lot of us, let's say I come from an engineering background where you give me a problem $a + b$, I will solve it but as you grow into complex roles, you need to make sense of complexity which can't be described in equations.

Vinay Sitapati (VS): That's right.

DJ: So, talk to us about what can we learn from Vajpayee especially on how he did it?

VS: So, Deepak the definition of an Overton window is that the window of what is considered acceptable in any political discourse. So, there's something is considered unacceptable, something is considered acceptable and that shifts but at any point it's pretty clear. So, for example, until the arrival of Donald Trump, it was considered unacceptable in the U.S. to question the results of an election, it was considered unacceptable. He has shifted the Overton window where you could allege fraud, you could say this, you could question this, and he has shifted that.

DJ: And what is the origin of this term?

VS: I actually don't know; I don't know it.

DJ: It's a curious term.

VS: So, your listeners should Google it because I don't know this and I did not Google this to find out, but that's the question. As I mentioned here politics has an Overton window.

Quick Reply from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: “A quick clarification here since I had the benefit of Googling while editing this conversation. Joseph Paul Overton was a Senior Vice President at The Mackinaw Centre of Public Policy. This term came up in the 1990s. He unfortunately died piloting an Ultra-Light aircraft when he was just 43 in 2003. Let’s get back to Vinay now.”

VS: That’s the question; does politics have an Overton window? On economics, for example, in the 1950s and 1960s in India, it was outside the Overton window to say that India should have a free market, outside the Overton window, state had to play a role, should it play no role, should it play some role, should it play a lot of role, that was the debate. And I say that this was not confined just to the Congress but to all political parties and for the BJP, which was out of the Overton window when it came to religion, on every other aspect it wanted to be within the Overton window. And Vajpayee was very good at divining that. Now all leaders need this and I will give you an example within the corporate boardroom itself. Today, for example, the corporate, you know, in corporate boardrooms they are talking about gender quotas, for example. Ten years ago, you could criticise it, Today, if you do you lose your job. So, the Overton window has shifted. Again, this is just being descriptive there but it tells you something that is live that your listeners are thinking about it right now. Any smart CEO needs to know this because these are not his or her personal views but this is what is acceptable, what is unacceptable environment that is happening around you. Now, Vajpayee knew that enormously and he had to navigate that over a 60-70-year period when Indian Overton window is changing. I would say today that on social issues the Overton window has moved decisively right. But that takes some doing and I think Vajpayee was extraordinarily good at seeing the Jana Sangh and BJP through as the Overton window gently moved and his critics would argue that he played a big role in actually pushing that Overton window right.

DJ: And given that you spent a lot of time studying Narasimha Rao as well, and that was one thing I picked up about him as well, his ability to sort of decode complexity. Did you pick up any nuances or differences in the way they went about forming that nuanced view? Is there anything that we can learn?

VS: Well, I have to say that Rao was an intellectual; I don’t think Vajpayee and Advani were intellectuals. I think Rao had a deep philosophical view of India. I don’t think Vajpayee and Advani had it. What they were, were supreme tacticians and they understood the 50-year arc of India very well, which is by the way 10 times more than what any politician needs to know. A politician only needs to know a five-year history of India because that’s when the next election is. They had a 50-year sense of India. But in... and of course Vajpayee was this charismatic leader, he was the best speaker parliamentary speaker in India’s history. Rao, as I pointed out to you in our last session had the charisma of a dead fish unlike Advani, who is a straightforward man, what you see is what you get. Narasimha Rao is absolutely the opposite. I also point out here that Advani and Rao never warmed up to each other, there was cold chemistry. On the other hand, Vajpayee and Rao were great friends, they got along hugely. And a source of mine who I will tell you offline told me that they used to meet once in a while to complain about their problems in life. Vajpayee would complain about Advani and Rao would complain about Indira Gandhi at a particular moment. And it worked very well because they belonged to very different parties with very different trajectories.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: How do you make sense of complexity? It is one of those things that are never taught in schools and colleges. But at the highest level, this is a super-power indeed. Is this of interest; you might like the Nuggets around the theme, Judgment. Please go to playtopotential.com and visit the

Curated Playlists section and see the Playlist on Judgment. You might also like my conversation with Sir Andrew Likierman of London Business School as he has researched Judgment for several years now.

End of nugget transcription

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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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