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Context to the nugget

Bruce speaks about how his research led him to identifying 52 different disruptors that could change our life context across 5 categories – Relationships, Identity, Beliefs, Work and Body. He speaks about how his research suggests that we might go through a disruptor every 12-18 months and how one in 10 ends up being a lifequake. He speaks about how we end up spending half of our adult lives in transition without having any adequate training on how to deal with this.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And in the book, you make the distinction between what you call disruptors and lifequakes. Could you tell us a little bit about what these are and how they might affect our lives differently? And maybe just to pick one of the parallels you draw you talk about 52 different disruptors that you had sort of discovered in your research and you equate that to a deck of cards. So, just say more about these two and how you see the deck of cards play out in our lives.

Bruce Feiler (RS): So, let's go back in the story a little bit and let me just remind you that I did not go in looking for disruptors or lifequakes or life transitions or any of this stuff. I went in with the basic idea of let me ask people to tell me the story of their lives and let me listen very closely and let me try to hear what they are saying and find patterns and takeaways that can help all of us. And the big idea that emerged here is that the linear life is dead, it has been replaced by the what I am now calling and in fact coining the nonlinear life and that involves many more of these kinds of life disruptions. And so, I made a master list of all the disruptive events that people described to me and I cross-referenced that with sort of very careful analysis of public data on relationship challenges and health challenges and business challenges and every kind of possible problem that is disruptive. And I ended up with a list of 52 items and yes, I called these disruptors. And what's and these... the parallel to a deck of cards was unavoidable and they are kind of... so I nicknamed them the deck of disruptors but there are five suits not four and so they kind of are divided... I am actually going to open the book which I have here in front of me and I am going to talk about sort of so, you can actually hear me rustling the pages, right? This is real live podcasting maybe you can actually hear me putting my glasses on. So, the five categories are love so, relationships, that's the biggest number of disruptors and that could be an illness of a child, the death of a partner or the divorce of your parents, getting married. And by the way, this will come up a little bit later but some of these disruptors are positive events, right, like getting married is a positive event, but it is still disruptive in every way. So, the second most popular in terms of the number was identity so that could be a change in your living situation, that could be change in sexual practices, being homeless or change in gender identity. Then beliefs so that's changing your political views or your religious views, or maybe you become more observant or less observant or maybe you go on a kind of sabbatical or a pilgrimage of some kind. Then work actually was kind of small on the list. So, that's a change in work

responsibilities, changing jobs, changing careers, sexual harassment maybe you got public recognition, may you retired, and then the last would be body. So, that would be a chronic illness, a mental illness. So, the thing about these disruptors is that they come much faster than people really are acknowledging. So, that my data show that we go through one disruptor every 12 to 18 months. That's three dozen in the course of our adult lives. But here's the thing most of them we navigate pretty well, we are actually pretty good at this pace of change and so we get through it. But one in 10 of these becomes a much bigger change and that leads to what I call a lifequake. And so, a lifequake is kind of a massive, kind of sudden burst of change. It is either because one of these events is very big or more common and this is an idea that I am prepared to say I just never read in the literature of human development. And that is that these disruptors tend to clump, right? Just when you are thinking about leaving your job, you know, your wife gets cancer, right or just when you wreck the car your daughter has an anxiety disorder and your mother-in-law needs surgery. So, for whatever reason they clump; I actually think the reason is sometimes coincidence but more often it is like one disruptor kind of weakens our immune system. So, when we are weakened something that would otherwise be a small disruptor kind of tips over to become a lifequake just because we are tired or exhausted or we are just sort of in the mood to change or sort of, you know, whatever let's throw caution to the wind and now is the time to really okay everything's already destabilized, my partner has got an illness and my child has a problem and you know what I might as well change jobs. It is just something about the confluence of them leads us to kind of push in some ways and embrace change. And here's the I would say signature piece of data from this entire experience and that is the average length of a life transition that comes out of one of these lifequakes is five years. So, if you think three to five in a lifetime, it takes us four, five, six years to get through it. That means 25 years; And so, that's why this book is called Life is in the Transitions to realize if you are just kind of kind of grit or gravel or kind of, you know, kind of grind your way through these you are missing half of your life because they are difficult and we can get into the steps of how you navigate them. But these are potential opportunities for growth and renewal and if you don't look at them that way you are missing essentially nature's way of telling you now is the time to rethink and reimagine your life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: What was telling for me was that Work was a distant 4th in the pecking order or disruptors and it came after Relationships, Identity and Beliefs. But somehow in our adult life, our mental model is often around treating the work events as points of transition but missing out on all the other disruptors that might change our life context.

In my journey, if I look at events that have profoundly changed my life.

- First lifequake was when I was about 12 years old. My father was a Public Sector Banker with a Bank called Indian Bank and he had a transferable job. I had spent my childhood in small towns in Tamil Nadu (Vellore, Cuddalore, Salem and so on). Then we spent 4 years in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. At that point my parents realized that me and my sister weren't getting the right kind of education and they moved to Chennai. Even there, they had a choice between a low cost school which was average and a slightly expensive school but one with a higher reputation. This was a school called Padma Seshadri (also called PSBB). That move really changed a lot of things for me. From then on, I would say peer momentum took me from school to IIT Madras from IIT Madras to IIMA and from there to KPMG Consulting, London Business School and then McKinsey in the US. I would attribute this phase of my life to that positive lifequake that changed a lot of things for me.

- The second life quake I would say was when my father was diagnosed with late stage cancer back in India and my wife and I decided to move back to take care of his treatment. We subsequently decided to stay back in India and this phase of life also pushed me to an inner journey of sorts and got me to join EgonZehnder as I felt I had a passion for the people side of things. At that time, it felt traumatic but when I look at that event from a distance now, perversely enough, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise
- The next lifequake I would say was when my son was born in November 2013. I am sure he will hate me whenever he picks up the audio when he grows up. But his coming into our life really changed the work home equation for me. I tell people, he is like Usain Bolt on Red Bull. After he came into our life, suddenly I felt the work home equation broke down and I was trying to reassemble the jigsaw once again and I got to a point where I felt that I would find it difficult to make it happen in a Corporate context because somebody else sets the pace of the treadmill. I was looking for an opportunity to slow down, reorganize some of these domains and then pick up speed. In a lot of ways, I tell people, he was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back in the context of my transition from EgonZehnder to doing what I do now. There were a few other reasons as well but this possibly was a very strong trigger.

I guess, all I am saying is let us be mindful of the events on the personal front as we look at making choices as we go through life. I find a lot of people go through a bit of a frog in a boiling water type situation as they make professional choices in a certain context, then a series of things happen on the personal front (kids, parents aging, health issues and so on) but they keep marching on till they hit a funny break point where something has got to give.

Thank you for listening. If this topic is of interest, you might like the playlists we have on Transitions. You can go to playtopotential.com and look at the section Curated Playlists to find these.

End of nugget transcription

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Bruce Feiler - 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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Podcast Transcript [70.04 Bruce Feiler - Disruptors and Lifequakes](#)

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