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Context to the nugget

Hari and Sanjeev share their perspectives around how founders can think about improving their self-awareness. They also speak about the effectiveness of Coaching in gathering nuanced feedback and helping founders and the leadership teams scale up.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And maybe moving forward, you know, one of the other pieces you talk about in the book is around how founders can improve their self-awareness, right? I am curious about your experience in this whole space. As they think about their own evolution, one of the observations I have had empirically; clearly, I haven't spent as much time in the start-up world as the two of you have, but I get a sense that the feedback, there's a lot of noise in the feedback signal at least bottom up coming from the organization especially to founders. So, I am curious about what you have seen good founders do in getting a good signal in terms of feedback and in driving the self-awareness?

TN Hari (Hari): Sanjeev, you want to take this?

Sanjeev Aggarwal (SA): Yeah, sure. So, I think a good founder Deepak has really two very good points of feedback. One is the set of people that report to the founder, which is the first line of leadership, that would be the CXOs layer and other layer is the Board of Directors which is comprised of investors and independent board members. So, I feel that the board can give very good input to founder on strategy and business and the executive team can give very good feedback on leadership and delegation and empowerment. So, if a founder wants to know where he does stack up then these are the two constituents that he can look up to for getting a sense of the hard stuff, which is business and the soft stuff, which is about leadership.

DJ: And there in your experience Sanjeev if I may persist how much of this do you think can be done by themselves versus a need for an external, you know, call it whether it is a coach or a facilitator or you know a sounding board. Do you do see good founders being able to do this on themselves?

SA: You probably do need some kind of mentor support who is a neutral party and not vested in the success of this enterprise that you are running. So, that is very important to help you become aware that these are two excellent constituents which are actually watching you day in and day out and can give you a very high-quality input about those two skills: business and leadership. So, I think that awareness can be inculcated by somebody who is external unless the person is very self-aware which also happens. But what exactly is one giving feedback on I think that should be discovered by

the founder himself by talking to these two entities, but the need to listen to these entities and see them not as either a vehicle of execution or in case of the board people that you are accountable to? So, I think that perspective a good mentor can be very, very useful in helping founder appreciate that there is lot of wealth of information surrounding him and he should tap into those resources. I don't know whether I was sounding coherent or not?

DJ: No, makes a lot of sense Sanjeev, with you. Hari, did you have anything to add there before we move forward?

Hari: Yeah, and I think much more accepting that having some very respectable, credible external party conduct some of these conversations with either the board or with the one downs and then collating that and being able to provide that through a conversation to the founder I think is going to be very helpful. And the second is I think and certainly what Sanjeev said which is an external mentor who has no stakes in the organization who the founder can speak to very openly without the fear of being judged I think is also going to be very helpful.

DJ: And a related point I had was specific to coaching as we think about founders developing themselves as leaders and also just enhancing the capability of the leadership team. I was curious what your observations have been around the role of and I am sort of using the word coaching in a broad sense but what sorts of interventions have helped in scaling up the leadership capability of the founder and the organization in your observation?

SA: Hari, you want to take this?

Hari: Yeah, I can take it but this is not a topic frankly I have a great point of view or experience Deepak.

DJ: Sure.

Hari: I have not seen many cases where either senior leaders or founders have been coached by external coaches very effectively. I am sure there must be if I racked my brain hard enough, there will be a few cases I can surely find and I actually know one or two cases where I am told that apparently the coaching made an impact, very rapidly growing start-up valued at 500 million where the CEO was struggling between work and had a lot of other personal challenges at home and was therefore ineffective on both fronts. I think we got an external coach and that coach who was... the founder was very sceptical, in fact told the concerned board member that you are forcing a coach on me, but then you know, I'll go through this process, but I don't know if it is going to change me in any way. But apparently after three or four conversations and scepticism, a relationship of trust slowly began getting established and things actually changed. So, this is a good story I have heard, but I have also heard a few stories where coaches have not been who don't necessarily completely understand the context have not been very effective as well. So, I think coaching is an extremely difficult art, it is how much of do you coach intensely, do you coach delicately, how do you help an individual discover himself or herself or figure out what's right or wrong with himself rather than a coach stating what's wrong. So, I think that is an extremely difficult thing. But I think if it can be made to work potentially my intuition tells me it will be great, but I haven't seen too many cases like this Deepak.

DJ: Got it. Thanks Hari. Sanjeev, did you have any thoughts on this one?

SA: Yeah, I think I will take a cue from what Hari is saying that one, the coach should have the context of where you are working or operating with and two, and a coach can be very helpful in self-awareness, in appreciating what you are and what you are not. So, I think in a transition a coach's role becomes very important, especially helping you unearth what are your strengths and weaknesses in the new context and what should you be mindful of in terms of developing and inculcating.

DJ: And back to one of the points you mentioned Sanjeev, you said context, right, the coach should understand the context. Could you unpack that a little bit? What do you have in mind when you say understand the context, what are the...?

SA: Yeah, I think little bit about your business and your industry. So, is the business a rapid growth business or is the business a turnaround business, what is the current culture in the company, is it a leadership team which requires being micromanaged or is it a much empowered self-sufficient self-starters type of executive. So, I think these are the kind of things I meant when I said context. That if the setting in which the founder is operating if that is understood then coaching becomes a lot easier and which means also spending some time in learning the domain or the industry within which the founder is operating.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I must confess that in my limited experience, I have had a mixed bag with start-up founders. There have been a few occasions where the VC investor feels that the entrepreneur needs a coach and when you meet the individual, he or she doesn't feel the need. I generally tell people that in the work I do, Houston I have a problem, I need help works better than Houston, he has a problem. In the few situations where I have managed to get into a coaching arrangement with the founder, they genuinely struggle to make the mind-space for the work required for coaching. I notice that they are in such a hurry to get multiple things done and are fighting multiple fires that they aren't in a position to be thoughtful on some of these topics. In some of these situations, they feel judged when they work with a coach. In those instances, I tell them that rather than jump into a coaching conversation, let me first show you the mirror, understand your context and let us see if there is mutual trust and respect and if so we could get into a coaching or a sounding board kind of an arrangement. That way it feels more like a neutral context and is more organic.

End of nugget transcription

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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