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Context to the conversation

Bill speaks about how decisions are made and how well people are listened to which ensures that there is minimal dissonance post the decision leading to “passive aggression”. He links it back to the writing culture in Amazon to ensure that complex ideas are presented with all the nuances for people to appreciate the various trade-offs.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other piece which I see a lot of organizations struggle with Bill is this notion of disagree and commit. You know as organizations grow large, often they get quite political and this becomes an issue because there's a lot of passive aggression and other dynamics that come into play. What's been your observation about how Amazon brought this to life?

Bill Carr (BC): So, this is an interesting area and actually a lot of my thoughts about this topic have actually been colored now during the six years that I have left Amazon, where I have come to appreciate more and more that most of the organizations are terrible about this and the reason they are terrible about it is because they have not created a standardized and well understood and data based and holistic process to make decisions. And I didn't appreciate this until I left Amazon that Amazon has that and let me describe to you what that is. So, in a lot of companies the way especially in an early-stage company, here's how a decision gets made, someone who runs department X walks up to the CEO in the hallway and says, hey CEO, I have this idea that we really need to go do XYZ and here's why I think that's a good idea, what do you think? And the CEO says, yeah, great, go do XYZ. And that is how a lot of these decisions were made. Now, if the peer to that person who got the CEO to approve it will later hear about this and say, I don't agree with that at all and so what is the recourse for how they are going to deal with that? And usually, the recourse seems political because they then say the recourse is that they go up to the CEO in the hallway and say hey, I heard that you told Joe that you could go do XYZ. Well, let me tell you why I think XYZ is a bad idea. That now seems like an affronted Joe, it seems like a political attack on Joe and maybe it is, maybe this person doesn't like Joe too, but really what's going on here is this company and a lot of companies just don't have a good form for decision making that is a terrible and unproductive way to do it. A better way is that if I am the CEO and someone comes up to me and says hey, I really or on a one-on-one or whatever form say, I really think we should go do this important new initiative. I say, great, go write up a document describing your proposal and your plan, be concise, it needs to be six pages or fewer and if it's an hour long discussion that's going to be required or three pages and fewer if it's going to require a 30-min discussion, write it up and then at the next executive management team meeting we will put your topic on the agenda and then the CEO and all the other executives, and by the way, any other key stakeholders that need to be in this meeting invite them in too and we will all read this document and then we will have a discussion about your idea and debate and discuss this topic and

go from there. And so, I would argue that in fact a part of the reason companies are so bad at this is because they don't do that, they don't have this system of that the CEO should never just make a hallway decision with someone else. The CEO should always include, be inclusive, go back to be right a lot. They are seeking diverse opinions and they seek to disconfirm their beliefs. Well, you can't do that in a hallway conversation, you need to have a group. Now this sounds like, oh my gosh, now we are going to have so many meetings, we are going to slow down. Well, you need to be able to do this to have a high-functioning organization. You need to have a clear method and oh, by the way, when you have that meeting to review the topic, you are either going to come out of that meeting saying well, there are some takeaways from this that the owner of this idea needs to go do XY and Z and come back to us before we can decide or you just decide. So, you have to have a very clear process for understanding like how you are going to decide and when you are going to decide. And if you don't have any of these things then yes, all you have will be politics because your decision making will be siloed and random.

DJ: Hmm, hmm. Got it. And picking up...

BC: But sorry, do you ask specifically about disagree and commit?

DJ: Yes.

BC: This is actually related to this topic. If you the way to make this effective is in those meetings when you disagree even if like the whole room says, I agree with this proposal from Joe, the easy thing to do would be to go along with the group and for the sake of social cohesion just say yup, sounds good, I agree with you too. But actually, the right thing to do is to say no, based on my data and my experience I don't think we should do this and here's why. But once that information and then to make sure that their point of view is heard and that once it's been heard and once it's clear that the other people in the room and the CEO acknowledge that and understand it and have factored that into their decision and they say yup, I hear you, I hear those concerns you have but we are still going to go do this because of XY and Z, that's how this process should work and then the person that brought up the concern should then say, got it, now, I understand even though I disagreed then and I may still disagree, now that we have factored in all the information and I had my day in court to make my case, we have made this decision and I will back it up like it's my own.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I think there are 2 or 3 pieces here to learn.

- 1) First is the point around the climate in the team and whether there is psychological safety for people to share their opinions and to be truly heard
- 2) Second is the quality of decision making - are you looking at the various layers involved in the decision, seeking the right inputs and trading off appropriately
- 3) The third, often underappreciated element, I feel is the quality of the communication post the decision. Very often leaders make a good decision but don't do enough in communicating the underlying thought process behind the decision. One of the CEOs I am working with had an issue with being too democratic in the decisiveness democracy spectrum. That was coming in the way of the speed of response. When I gave him the feedback, he promptly made adjustments and a few months later when I did a dipstick, it turned out that he had swung too far. The team members were

not saying they wanted a say in the decision. They were just saying, we wish we knew how he thought about the decision and the trade-offs involved.

Of the 14 Amazon competencies, if there is one that a lot of organizations struggle with, it is this. How do you carry the organization forward and get your people to disagree and commit. As Bill mentions, a number of pieces need to fall in place to ensure that we build this culture in an organization.

End of 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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