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Context to the conversation

Bill speaks about how Amazon uses written word as a source of differentiation and a competitive advantage. He speaks about how meetings are run in Amazon and the impact on productivity and effectiveness when people submit written documents. He also speaks about the PR/FAQ process which, in a way, is the backbone of the Working Backwards culture at Amazon.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Just picking up on one of the things you spoke about Bill, written documents and the other thing that struck me was how Amazon uses a written word to develop and communicate and has almost turned that into a competitive advantage, right? And having been a consultant in my past life, you know, I have grown up in the PowerPoint school of communication, so it is fascinating for me to hear you and Colin talk about how a descriptive word document sometimes often is more impactful than PowerPoint. So, could you talk a little bit about just the science and art of the written word and how Amazon has developed that over time?

Bill Carr (BC): Well, again, this is just another example of where Amazon had the same issues that every other company had but they came up with actually what is in fact a retro solution to this problem. And the problem is, well, let's take a step back. The point is like how do you have the most effective meetings and make most important decisions? So, let's set aside what I am not talking about is how do you hold like an all-hands meeting with your whole team and ra-ra and give them an overview of what's going on? I am not talking about a meeting you would have with an external partner. I am talking about a meeting you would have and in this case the origin was that Jeff would meet with his leadership team every week for a multi-hour meeting, four or five hours long and in later years frankly it became even longer. And what they would do in this meeting is that different teams and groups would come in and present ideas or new product ideas, updates on a business, follow up on problems, whatever was but something important for Jeff and the leadership team to review and give them input and make a decision. So, there are... so the input to any such meeting is information. So, everyone in that meeting first needs to get on the same page about the facts of the situation and then the second input is a productive discussion about those facts and the different possible paths or outcomes and then the final outcome, the final part would be a decision. So, Jeff, you know, Amazon was using PowerPoint for those meetings just like every other company but you know who here hasn't had an experience with the PowerPoint meeting where either any of a number of things happened. Number one, you and the audience were frustrated because you just felt like you could, it took forever for the full story to come out or you are frustrated observing when some other executive jumps in two sides and he starts asking the person a series of questions and the presenter says oh, all that information is in subsequent slides, would you like me to answer that now or you would like till then? Or just that the amount and the depth of information presented in a

PowerPoint is so thin and so minimal that you don't really feel like you have a full grasp of the details. So, Jeff was killing, Jeff and Colin were talking about, you know, after a day of a set of meetings were just felt like frustrated that they weren't having productive enough meetings, they decided to try something new and they said let's try, they were influenced by Edward Tufte, the Yale Professor and he suggested that a better way to conduct meetings is with a written document or a narrative. And so, we sent out a directive and said from now on the meetings with Jeff and the S-team are going to be with a Word document. And this was setting aside the change management, like its cold water on people to make this adjustment. What we found over time was this was just a much more effective way to conduct a meeting. So, at Amazon today, the way meetings are conducted is the team that's responsible for presenting writes a Word document or Google Docs document and if it's a one-hour meeting the page limit for the document is six pages. So, six pages are fewer and the reason for that is it will take you a couple minutes for each page and so you don't really want to... you want to limit the reading time to about 20 minutes. So, people will read the document in advance so literally read it at the meeting and that's important because this way you can't have the problem where people say, well I didn't read the document yet or try to weigh in on it without having read the document and fake their way through it. This forces that everyone is going to spend 20 minutes all inhaling and ingesting the same data. The other benefit is in that 20 minutes, they will inhale and ingest the data at a much more effective and detailed rate than they would have if it was PowerPoint. So, first of all, you can read about two to three times faster than you can listen to someone speak and second of all the pixel density of a Word document is 7-8 times greater than a PowerPoint. So, this is going to be a lot more information you are going to get not to mention the fact that if you, you know, the hierarchical form of PowerPoint doesn't lend itself well to multi-causal arguments, the way a Word document would. So, a good author of a document points out many different data points and strings them together and tells a story for the audience so that they are in fact more well-informed after that 20 minutes. And then you can use the next 40 minutes to actually have to get feedback and questions from the various participants in the meeting and then have a lively discussion to debate and discuss the right decision or outcome. And so, for those of us at Amazon that have been using this method for several years, I can tell you that it's quite frustrating and chilling to go back to the PowerPoint world where candidly you can't help it think that everyone else is at a huge disadvantage because you simply do not have as much information in the meeting and you simply are wasting a lot of time with this delivery of the presenter not to mention a lot of bias he's come and play about the skill and suave style of your presenter versus the substance of the document. So, Amazon went to this method and they believe, I believe it is a huge competitive advantage that they have the fact that they conduct meetings based on Word documents, PowerPoint, Google Docs a written narrative versus PowerPoint.

DJ: Fascinating. And just picking up on one of those things Bill, we spoke about the written word, but we didn't specifically talk about the PR/FAQ. Do you want to spend a couple of minutes talking about what makes this so unique and why it makes Amazon distinctive?

BC: So, there are a lot of ways to do new product innovation. Some companies will build prototypes, they will create an R&D unit and they will make a lab and they will create prototypes of different technologies. Another common way that we were using at Amazon was to first develop mock-ups, you know, work with designers to create a mock-up for what the website or in later years an application would look like for a specific service. The challenge with many of those methods is they are in fact very heavy weight. If you want to create high quality mock-ups of a new product idea you need talented designers, you need to spend a lot of time thinking through the details and it could take you several weeks to come up with high-quality mock-ups. A prototype might even might take months. But what you really want at the beginning of a product development process is a very lightweight way to allow you to consider, evaluate and discard and narrow down from a big list of

ideas to a small list. And so, we came up with a process called the working backwards PR/FAQ process. And so, the lightweight way that you use this process is you start with by writing a press release, which is typically the last step in a product development process. And the reason you start there is that when you are writing the press release for a new product you are hyper-focused on the customer, you are hyper-focused on describing why, what is the big problem that you as the customer have and why is this product the solution to that problem. And so, in doing so you can and a press release would be less than one page long. So, anyone who is creative and innovative could you could come up with six or seven or eight of these in a day. But when you come up with and you have a group of people doing innovation and brainstorming you can come up with 30, 40, 50 or 100 but it doesn't take very long to read a one page press release, but after you do so you can quickly kind of read through and see which ones actually seem the most compelling, which ones are you really solving an important problem for customers and in which case is the product solution elegant enough and in which cases is this product problem and solution big enough that it can result in a big business. And once you find those, find a good press release, and by the way in many cases you have to do like 8 or 9 or 10 drafts to sort of get to that point but once you have got a good press release then you can take step 2, which is the FAQ process and this is where you would ask write down a series of FAQ's, some would be standard questions that customers might ask like how much does this product cost, how much does it weigh, where can I buy it, do I need Wi-Fi, etc., etc., etc. And then you would also answer a lot of the questions that your team internally would ask. Well, how many people engineers will be required to build this product? What kind of marketing budget we need? We need an inside sales team to help you sell it? What hard technical problems will we need to solve? So, then the point is though you have started with the press release at the customer and envisioned an ideal product solving an important problem. And then from there you start to work backwards to step into what are the different challenges and constraints that you will need to solve which you addressed in the FAQ to make this viable and then taken in as a whole you can then see with the press release is this an exciting product and then in FAQ is this viable and what will really take and you can really evaluate a new product idea fairly holistically, but in a lightweight manner that anyone, you know, anyone can write a PR/FAQ.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Often when I catch up with some of my friends from IIM Ahmedabad, we end up recounting the past and we ask ourselves, what is the one course that has left an impact on us when you look back after 20+ years. It was not one of those hard core courses in Finance, Operations, Marketing or Strategy. It was actually a course called WAC – Written Analysis and Communication. We were presented with a Harvard Business School case and we had to present our understanding of the situation, outline the options, layout the criteria and then say what is the decision we would make net net. And that is one course that a lot of us struggled with and found very difficult. And those were the days before computers came in, so we used to do it in hand. So, we didn't have the option of multiple drafts and chop and change that soft copy offers. In a lot of ways, that exercise was very similar to the 6 page Memo that Jeff Bezos speaks about. If the deadline for WAC was 10 am on a day, people would be found writing till 9:58 and then running to submit the document. It was termed the WAC run! Of course, it is less relevant in the digital world we are in where we submit online.

After having brought up with a generous dose of PPT, where the emphasis was on brevity and saying more with less, I do think that there is power in the written word if we use it thoughtfully. I think there are different ways in which we can use the written document in our lives. For instances, one of the things I do now is if I am interviewing an individual for a role, I would ask them to respond to 5-6

open ended questions (almost like how US Universities ask you to write an SOP). And then I would schedule a conversation with them. I find that I get a lot more out of the conversation than if I did if I went cold into that conversation.

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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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