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Context to the nugget conversation

Sally speaks about how women often think about ambition slightly differently from men. She also goes on to say that the paradigm of leadership has evolved over the last few decades that a lot more men today also have started looking at ambition in a holistic manner compared to a few decades back. However, she says – “women got there first”.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you also talk about women thinking about ambitions slightly different from men and you say that there are different dimensions to it; could you elaborate on the nuance here, Sally?

Sally Helgesen (JG): Yeah, I think that women often struggle with defining themselves as ambitious. And part of that is because they have seen women who are perceived of as being ambitious. They have seen them get so negatively typed for. And you can go back, I mean you can see someone running for president, oh, she is so ambitious. Yeah, she is running for president, what do you think? People who are going to be running for president are going to be pretty ambitious. Women who are in very high positions are often criticized while they are so ambitious, you know, they must not have any personal life or any home life or, you know, just being very difficult to be around. So I think that women often get kind of scared off from being seen as ambitious. And in the book, one of the things that I quote this psychiatrist on the Upper East Side of New York City work with women who are mostly either very senior women in investment banking or very senior women in law firms and she said that about 80 percent of the clients who come to see her in the first session say, I want you to know I am not ambitious. Well, you do not get to be partner in a New York City top 10 law firm if you are not ambitious, it does not just fall into your lap. So it is that discomfort with being perceived of as ambitious or the language around ambition. And I think that that has inhibited women often from making the commitment to develop to their full potential.

DJ: Hmm. And you also talk about the different dimensions around which they are ambitious in terms of some of the other domains of life and other interests, could you expand on that, just for women to take note of what else could be called ambitious?

SH: Yes, certainly. Again, that is changing a little bit. Women have always looked at ambition at work as being balanced or calibrated with being, to some degree, ambitious for the quality of their family life, ambitious for the relationships within their family, ambitious for the ability to be a good family member, a good team player in a neighborhood association, recognized as a good neighbor, a good contributor, good in a non-profit role that they may take. So I think that women have often had a rather balanced way of viewing ambition as something you strive to have, you are ambitious to have

a well-balanced life. And I think there was not that much room for men to do this in the past, but I certainly see that as beginning to change, whereas men are more likely to also articulate their own ambition in terms of the capacity, the launching they provide for their daughters and the kinds of relationships that they have at home. So I think that is really changing slowly again but in that way.

DJ: Hmm. And one of the other leaders, women leaders when they looked at this question or looked at this insight from you, they said, given that women often think about ambition in a little more of a holistic manner beyond just work, there is a reasonable chance that they end up finding the true north probably more often than men, do you see the two connected and empirically or anecdotally, do you have a view on women finding their true north in life more frequently than men?

SH: I think that women have more awareness of wanting to find their true north because men will often feel that they do not have much of a choice that they have just got to get the best job they can and go for it, make it a success and they do not have the options. And women will be more likely to think, they will want to ask themselves, am I really enjoying the quality of my days, do I feel that I am making the best contribution with my talents, am I making the world a better place through what I am doing. I find women very avid to ask these questions even at a midpoint in their career, whereas I think in the past, that has been tough for men unless they are in a position of great privilege to feel that they even have the option to ask that question because they just have to buckle down and do whatever they do and sort of, you know, as Marshall would say, they have to suck it up rather than using as an opportunity to really think about how is this serving me, how is this serving the world, how is this aligning with my purpose. So I think we are now at a time in the workplace where there is a lot of language around that, around purpose, around meaning, etc., and I know that it is often considered to be something millennials brought into the workplace. But I have been for the last 30 years, my observation is that women kind of got there first, there were more women thinking in those terms. Women sort of pioneered that idea that, you know, really we need to look at work in a larger context, holistically as you say, about meaning and purpose in life, it is an element of that. And I think that that sort of opened up permission for people to look at that. And now it is something that men and women are both much more comfortable with.

DJ: Hmm. And if I may persist with that, Sally, what do you think is driving the change among the men? Millennials definitely probably are one factor, any other factors you think that are driving this slow change in men overtime?

SH: Yes, a couple of things. One I think is that again, having watched this up close for so long, how we define excellence in leadership in organizations, has really shifted over the last 30-35 years. In the 1980s for example, which was really the last period when women had virtually nothing to do with leadership, the idea of a leader was execution, performance, somebody has got to be top, you have got to make your numbers, drive everybody else to make numbers and we had some of these, and remember, Fortune Magazine used to have an annual issue called America's Toughest Leader and it was a profile of a man who seemed like he was the most difficult person on the planet to work for. And sort of underlying theme was always you have got to be tough. Of course, I do want to say that one thing I got to watch was how most of those men actually ended up driving their companies if not into the ground into very serious, serious problems later on. But it was, you know, just sort of how we thought of leadership in a corporate setting and that has changed. And I think part of it has been the participation of women, but big part of it has been the change in the nature of technology to be much more interactive and networked and weblike and naturally to some extent, inclusive. So I think the technology has shaped what we expect from leaders and also the nature of the economy, the switch to more of a knowledge economy where knowledge is distributed more broadly. So the top dog leader cannot be expected ever to know everything because there is so much knowledge distributed through companies. So through the 1990s and early 2000s, we really began to get a

different way of looking at what constituted excellence in leadership. And Peter Drucker wrote about it, you know, someone like Tom Peters certainly wrote about it. And I think that that kind of beautifully, there was a confluence between what women were bringing and that larger change that has served women well, has served organizations well and has helped bring forth more and more men who are thoughtful, reflective, self-aware and humble leaders than would have ever been possible 30 or 40 years ago.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of my conversation with Prof Stew Friedman (SF) of Wharton who speaks about 4 domains of life that we all should think about – Work, Home, Community and Self not necessarily in that order. Out of these 4, I find that Work and Home are well understood. So, I asked Stew what he meant by the other two – Community and Self. Here is what he said.

SF: *“So the community piece just to answer your question about what is that and how it is relevant? People struggle with that I often get questions about what is community and why does that matter? Community captures everything you and your work in your family. So that includes your networking friends and neighbours that people place where you live but it could also include people that you are engaged in with in some kind of political group or religious group. That usually has some meaning for it may not be the most important thing but some people it is and the self of course this is who are you as an individual in your own private sphere, the things that matter to your physical health, your mental health and emotional growth and your spiritual life which is important to some people and not for others but these aspects of our existence are for most people pretty important. So these four buckets if you will seem to capture most of our experience and it’s also simple there is not 12 categories there is just four and last point about this I ask people to define these domains of their lives in ways that make sense to them so there is no rigid definition that I impose but rather it’s a device to help you to think about the differentiated parts of their life. That helps you to make sense of how to bring them together in order to make sense of the whole you have to see what the parts are and so people make their decisions, choices about well what does home mean to me how do I define family and the way you define might be different the way I define and etc. so it’s useful in that way that everything about this approach is subjectively defined by the learner or the user.”*

DJ: Back to what Sally says, very often we think about ambition only in the context of work. But it’s worth having a holistic view of the various domains of life and has a calibrated ambition that can serve us in the long game of life!

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Stew Friedman that is referenced: [4 porous domains as Self, Work, Home & Community](#).

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Sally Helgesen - Nuggets

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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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