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Context to the nugget conversation

Sally speaks about how women often end up getting assessed for performance in their current role while men are seen for their potential. She says, this coupled with women often focusing on loyalty to the role often leads to a double whammy that keeps women stuck in their current place hampering their progress. She speaks about how we can avoid this phenomenon.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And changing topics, Sally, you talk about the phenomenon where men and women are seen differently when they are evaluated for a role. And the way I read it was that men often end up being assessed for leadership potential, while women are assessed for performance. And you actually go on to say, on the other hand, women also end up prioritizing their current job over their career and I like the pithy language. Could you talk a little bit about how this phenomenon plays out and therefore, what is the implication for both men and women in ensuring that this bias is avoided?

Sally Helgesen (JG): Yeah, I think, well first of all in terms of the evaluation being a set of men being assessed for potential and women being assessed based on their contributions, there is a lot of research that backs that up, that men tend to get assessed as, you know, he is a real potential leader. And it is not even necessarily based on something that he has done but on the perception that he carries himself like a leader or has a personality or operating style that is like a previous male leader, that sort of thing. So that is a very common thing that happens whereas especially if you are in an organization or culture where there have not been that many women leaders, it is often, you know, you just fall back on judging women based solely on what their performance has been, not on what you think they could contribute strategically because you have not really thought in that frame or had experience with it. So I think that that can be problematic for women often and, you know, was sort of an inherent problem in that, you know, 1990s or early 2000 obsession with high potentials, sorting out who is a high potential, who is not a high potential. Before anybody never even done anything, you kind of decided this person was and that person was not. So I think that that has often, to some degree, disadvantaged women. It is a little bit different than the habit of about putting your job before your career, which is something that I have noticed and I think it was really one of the most popular, if I could say, or the most endorsed habit in the book that so many women identify with where you pour your energies into the job you have feeling that if you do the best job that you can at the job you have, that will translate into being rewarded so that you will be the person who is chosen for a promotion or whatever. And guess what, it often does not work that way and the reason it does not work that way is because of the two other legs of the successful career: visibility and connections. You value your job, so you are putting all your energy, all your time, all your skill, all your effort, all your learning into doing the best job that you can. So you are

underinvesting in building those relationships and gaining the visibility that you need and so you are not promoted. Someone else is promoted who has perhaps done a more balanced job of courting visibility and of building connections and then it feels very, very disappointing to you and you feel like, well, wait a minute, how come I did not get that promotion, I did the best job. It may have been your overvaluing what your job was. And also, there is a loyalty element there. A research demonstrates that women tend to see themselves as more loyal and put a higher premium on being loyal to the people around them. And that part of overinvesting in your job at the expense of your career is showing that you are loyal. And I know I have worked with numerous women who have said things like, you know, my boss has really believed in me, so I am not going to talk about what I would like to do next because then my boss is going to see me as being disloyal. Now your boss did not get where he or she got by only doing the job they were doing and not thinking about what the next step might be. And so they understand the realities. And if you are a smart person who really believes you have something to contribute, then you probably want to take the next step in your career, and it is not a great idea to pretend as if you do not because you think you are going to get loyalty points for that. So I know that I have worked with women directly. I remember a woman at a technology company in Boston and her boss actually said to her, I was going to recommend you for this other position that came up. He said that I realized you are invaluable and I do not know how we could lose you, so I did not. And she said, she actually felt very good about that him saying that to her for a number of months and then she thought well, wait a minute, if that is true, does that mean I am going to be in this job forever. And she decided she had to take some initiative. So the next time it was a listing that came up in the company for a job she really wanted, she took that listing, she walked into his office and said, here is the job that I would really love to have and I would love your support in thinking about how to potentially position myself for it. And he said, of course, you have done a wonderful job here. So that really surprised her because she thought he was going to think, oh she is so disloyal. It has only been 11 years doing the same job. So I think little bit more of that thinking. You know, in any case two things, in any job you are in, think about it, of course you want to do a good job, you are never going to get anywhere if you do not do a good job. But how do you see this is leading to something else. And then once you have a clear picture of that, talk about it a little bit, not incessantly, but talk about, you know, I am really hoping and go into somebody who is in a position and power and say, I am really hoping this job might translate as to such and such, do you have any suggestions, are there any skills you think I could acquire or areas for improvement, any connections that would be useful for me to build in order to get to that next place. So coming out with it being to some degree direct and clear about it is a powerful thing to do.

DJ: And as I read that insight, Sally, I was also wondering how this dynamic plays out with working couples where if we go with the observation that you make about men being assessed for potential and possibly being career-oriented, while women being assessed for performance and being the current role oriented, there is sort of one path leads to growth and the other path leads to stagnation, do you see that phenomenon playing out on the personal front in the way dynamics play out?

SH: Where I see it in dual career couples is often a very healthy synthesis whereby each person becomes the other person's real champion. I have heard this so many times, when I talk about, when I do a program, and I am talking about putting your job before your career, I cannot tell you how many women come up to me and say, this is what my husband tells me, I have been doing exactly what you are saying that I need to think of this more in a career context, that I need to talk more about it, so what I get from that is their husbands are encouraging them and sort of giving them some help on that, which is something that in many, certainly not all, cases, men are a little bit more comfortable with. So that is a very, very good thing. And I think that that is one way and obviously, there are ways in which women can help men to be more articulate about what their skills are, how

a given job fits into their larger sense of meaning and purpose and can help them develop more sensitivity and all kinds of things. But I think that that can be a very positive thing in a dual career couple. We learn from each other and we learn from each partner sharing strengths and insights in a very helpful way.

DJ: Sally, moving to a different theme, you allude to the perfection trap and the disease to please as the two big reasons that come in the way of women rising. Could you expand on these two phenomena and how it plays out for women?

SH: Certainly, these are really important habits to be aware of because they really are the two habits that are the most toxic at a leadership level and the most pervasive at a leadership level, you know, many of the habits in book like reluctance to claim your achievements or minimizing or too much, which is too much information, too much background, too many details, too much disclosure, many of those kinds of habits. By the time a woman will get to a more senior level, she will have worked away around those putting your job before your career, but what is remarkable to is to find the extent to which the perfection trap and the disease to please can still linger at very senior levels and the extreme difficulties that they cause. Especially with the perfection trap, I will say that in my experience, when a woman who has extraordinary talents and a lot to offer and has worked very, very hard does not make it to a senior position where it looks like you would expect her to make it, it usually perfectionism is somewhere involved. And why is perfectionism, for example, so toxic when you get to a position of greater influence authority and scope, it is because if you are a perfectionist, you can have a very hard time delegating and as your scope enlarges, the more you need to delegate. It is because if you are a perfectionist, you are going to have a much harder time, you know, not being in judgment of other people and where they fall short, and that is going to have a more negative impact, the higher that you go. But probably the primary reason that being perfectionist and by perfectionist I mean believing you are either doing everything perfectly or you are failing. There is no middle ground. You are either you did everything right and kind of got through that or you messed something up and therefore, you really blew it. So the reason that that is so problematic at a senior level is you create a tremendous amount of stress, you create a lot of stress for yourself in a way that really makes doing your job and doing it well unsustainable because you put yourself under so much stress and tension and you create a lot of stress for the people around you. And I always say this but I have been doing what I have been doing for over 30 years and I have never once ever heard anybody say, I work for a perfectionistic boss and I love it. No one does. No one has a good experience with that. So, even as you are trying to make everything work and pouring your heart and soul into trying to be perfect, you are creating a stress that undermines yourself and others in terms of being able to reach the full potential. Two other things at a leadership level that are problematic with perfection is you can become chronically risk-averse because if everything has to be done perfectly, you cannot take risks or try something because it might not turn out perfectly. So that limits really your ability to learn because we all really learn from making mistakes. And the other thing is, you sort of identify yourself as a micro thinker as opposed to a big-picture thinker because you are focused on the details and getting everything right. So lots of problems with perfectionism at the top.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of an insight from one of my earlier guests, Jennifer Petriglieri (JP), an Academician at INSEAD and Author of *Couples that Work*, a book that talks about the transitions that a dual career couple goes through. She speaks about how the nature of the conversation between spouses have evolved over the last few decades.

JP: *“It’s really interesting so what we see if we track peoples expectation from their relationship, from their marriage is they have really shifted in the last 40 to 50 years and they shift across the globe even though the way we partner with people is different in different countries so if we think back to certainly our grandparents generation and marriage was about bring two families together it was about financial stability, it was about rearing the next generation and there was about companionship you know we didn’t expect a middle age couple to have huge passion in their relationship you know that would almost be a little bit odd and we certainly didn’t expect our partner for growth and development right it was someone who would hopefully provide a stable base with us who would you know provide that comfort and companionship that idea of marriage is really shifting and what we see now is first of all people expect that passion to continue through relationship but that also expect in their partners to be almost a sparring partner in my growth and development to spur each other onto to bring out the best in each other and it’s really interesting if you look at the speeches of people when they thank their spouse she did in the past it would be you know thank you for your love and support and care. Often times now people will say you now thank you for making me my best self”*

DJ: The more we think proactively about unlocking the potential of the people around us, greater the chance of progress. We think about that as a default with our children but how powerful would it be if we take that thinking to other contexts and across genders.

Thank you for listening. If this topic is of interest, you might like the Curated Playlist on Women Leadership that has insights from several women leaders on what it takes to unlock the potential of women at the workplace. Please go to playtopotential.com. Go to the tab Curated Playlist and then look up Women Leadership.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Jennifer Petriglieri that is referenced: [The third transition - Who are we now?.](#)

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Sally Helgesen - Nuggets

- 74.00 Sally Helgesen - The Full Conversation
- 74.01 Sally Helgesen - How women often respond to feedback
- 74.02 Sally Helgesen - How women often think about ambition
- 74.03 Sally Helgesen - Reluctance in accepting credit
- 74.04 Sally Helgesen - Downsides of pursuing mastery
- 74.05 Sally Helgesen - Leveraging relationships to move forward
- 74.06 Sally Helgesen - Delivering performance vs unlocking potential
- 74.07 Sally Helgesen - Impact of COVID on Women vs Men
- 74.08 Sally Helgesen - Executive presence
- 74.09 Sally Helgesen - Leakage in the leadership pipeline near the very top
- 74.10 Sally Helgesen - Changing the game vs playing by "club rules"
- 74.11 Sally Helgesen - Insights for parents as they bring up boys and girls

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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