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Context to the nugget conversation

Sally speak about how maternity is a point of leakage when it comes to women rising to the top. She also speaks about another place where there is often a lot of leakage. She speaks about how women leaders rise almost to the top but then they look at the person in the top job and have a discussion with themselves around whether it is worth it and often back off.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And in the limited research I have done and the conversations I have had, Sally, I understand that maternity is a place where there is significant leakage in the pipeline of women rising to the top. In your experience, would you agree, number one and number two, would you see any other points of significant drop-off where women sort of move away from the pipeline and any guidance especially for women through some of these phases of transition?

Sally Helgesen (JG): Yes, certainly maternity is historically a place where there develops a kind of leak, if you will, in the pipeline in that, especially after a second or a third child where it just suddenly, you know, a woman will say, I need to take a step back, that does not mean she is going to drop out of the workforce, but I need to take a step back, I may not need to accept this next promotion if I want to keep all these balls in the air. And that can slow a woman's progress down. But, you know what, careers today are much longer than they used to be and slowing down 4, 5, 7 years is not the career killer that it would have been in the industrial economy, especially given that people are hired today for their knowledge and their skills so that those, you know, as long as your technology skills, as long as you keep up with that, your knowledge and that your value often increases. So it is not that big a deal to worry about. There is also a very common phenomenon where the pipeline gets leaky just before the senior leadership level. And that is something that is a little more challenging I think to address. In my experience over these many decades, what I view is the most common reason for that is that women will often get right up close to a senior position. So they are at a point where they can see what the lives of the person who hold that position are actually like and they will often say to themselves, I do not think that is worth it. And in fact, almost every time I have interviewed a woman who has left a job or made a lateral move away from a job at a very senior level, what she eventually at some point says is, I decided it just was not worth it. And that means that the personal toll, it looked like it took, was too much. And often that is because they are looking at someone who has an unbalanced approach to life and has thrown absolutely everything into the self-identification with the role and the position and that they do not want that for themselves but there are many, many ways to avoid that. And so when I am working with clients, I always urge them to not make those kinds of judgments but to say, let me give this a try, let me see if I can make this work for me in a way that would be satisfying where I feel like I am able to make a contribution where I am able to have a meaningful life, where I am able to balance a range of

responsibilities, let me see if I can do that rather than looking at some guy in a position and saying, well, his life looks awful to me, so no, thank you because it is often a superficial judgment, it really has more to do with that individual.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: One of my earlier guests, Roopa Kudva (RK), Former MD of CRISIL and current Country Head of Omidyar Network in India has a slightly different take on the point Sally speaks about. While Sally refers to women coming close to the top asking themselves the question “is it worth it”, Roopa talks about the notion of self-belief that might come in the way.

RK: “the second barrier that women hit is later on when they are in the upper end of middle management or in senior management but when it comes to them taking the top jobs I feel that there is a mental barrier of self-belief that I can and I should ask for the top jobs and I can do it I think women hold back, they hold back in asking for a seat at the table and I think that is where other women leaders can play a very big role, my own thinking on this has evolved in the last 15 years if you asked me 15 years ago I would have said it’s all about merit and if you do good work you will be recognized women don’t need special treatment is the argument that I would have made. Today I believe that the second barrier that I talked about is a very big barrier and therefore it is actually almost incumbent on other women leaders to reach out and talk about this issue and help other women to cross this barrier, I have also changed my views about things like quotas for women on board, this is something that I would have been opposed to fifteen years ago but I actually believe it’s a good idea now and the reason I do so is I believe that if you actually, put women in those positions are they raised to those positions? There is an example that I like to give, which is not in a corporate context but in a context of a Village Panchayat when the constitutional amendment etc. lead to greater devolution of power to the villages and then you had the reservation of the Sarpanch position for women in certain villages and there was this anecdote which is oft repeated of a woman who reached on republic day for the flag hoisting she reached couple of minutes late and she found that the men in the village the elders reached hoisting the flag and had gone home, but when she reached there she said that I am the Sarpanch it’s my job to hoist the flag and she insisted that all of them come back and she hoisted the flag so initially you may get the wives and the sisters and the daughters in law of men coming and occupying those positions and be so called puppets so to speak as it’s well but over time I feel as women come to recognize the power to the position gives them and power in a nice way I think they rise to the occasion and they deliver and it’s amazing the moment you have these quotas etc it actually pushes the boards to go out and look for more women on boards so typically you would get board members through your contacts etc. but the moment you go out and hire a search firm for example it’s amazing the number of women who show up on the list of candidates which otherwise would have never happen for these board rooms.”

DJ: For more, you might find the playlist Women Leadership of interest. Just go to playtopotential.com. Go to Curated Playlists and you will find Women Leadership as part of that. Multiple women leaders share their perspectives on what it takes women to succeed.

End of nugget transcription

Podcast Transcript [74.09 Sally Helgesen - Leakage in the leadership pipeline near the very top](#)

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Nugget from Roopa Kudva that is referenced: [Women Leadership - The barrier that doesn't get spoken about.](#)

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Women Leadership: The fact that we don't have enough women leaders in the Board room is well understood. Leaders share their perspectives on what needs to happen across various stages (education, maternity, late career) for women to rise to the very top. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Sally Helgesen - Nuggets

- 74.00 Sally Helgesen - The Full Conversation
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- 74.02 Sally Helgesen - How women often think about ambition
- 74.03 Sally Helgesen - Reluctance in accepting credit
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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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