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Context to the nugget conversation

Dan speaks about how we can think about our strengths when we are at an inflection point. He goes on to say that recognizing our strengths is not about being stuck to the past but really about stretching into new areas that could help us lead a more authentic life and sometimes cues for this could come from domains outside of work.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to link it to one of the things that I discussed with a fellow London Business School faculty member, Herminia Ibarra, she talks about this notion of liminality when it comes to our identity, especially when we are in transitions, can you talk a little bit about how we could take advantage of the highlights reel to help us get a better grip on our Identity or identities, if you will, any nuance there?

Dan Cable (DC): Absolutely. Yeah, the first thing I want to do is I want to point out, I am going to call it an area of confusion for me but then, I will point to where I think my own research and my own teaching is going, okay. Herminia talks about this authenticity paradox, which is a beautiful concept that she is known for, which is a lot of times when we start doing something new, it feels awkward and like it is not authentic. And then that holds us back from becoming great. It holds us back from changing into a bigger, better, more impactful identity because we are handcuffed to what we used to be. Now when we talk about playing your strengths and you have had good discussions with Herminia about this, what sometimes people think is, oh, playing your strengths just means like kind of mailing it in, like almost hanging out with what you are already good at. And therefore, you know, you are kind of like holding yourself back and what I am talking more about is stretching into your strengths. What I am really interested in when you talk about the liminality, so the liminality idea would be neither betwixt and between for a little while we have to just play, we are not our new person yet, we have to play our way into that. And the way I am thinking about that is thinking hard about what unique strengths we have to make an impact and then asking the question, how can I grow that impact, how can I use the strengths and abilities that I have to make an even bigger affect on the world, a more positive impact on other people. And I have to tell you, that is what drags us positively into new strengths. See, in my own opinion, when we play to our strengths, it is energizing, our strengths strengthen us. When we use our strengths, we feel strengthened. And so that is quite, it gives you a resilience and it makes you robust. And so when we can keep playing our strengths in a new area, it does not go perfect at first but it is energizing to try, whereas when we try to shore up our limitations and kind of improve what we are not good at, it actually can be very detracting. It can even burn people out if you do it sort of too much. If you are overfocused on your weaknesses and trying to become average, it actually can wear us out, year in and year out. And so I think that in that long-winded answer I tried to give there, there are these little nuggets of not

continuing to do exactly the behavior you have done in the past but to use your strengths to improve your impact. I think that that is sort of my best answer forward on this issue. But I am really happy for you to challenge or, push because this is an area that, I would still say, it has some elements of confusion for me.

DJ: You clearly have spent a lot more time studying this than I have but the way I see it, Dan, I think strengths are a little bit around the what domain, what are the situations where you make an impact. Identity is a little bit of who am I kind of a plane. So I was wondering if this exercise of the highlights reel can throw light on the who am I plane, especially lot of my work is with leaders around midlife, right. Now of course, we are moving away from the midlife to the anytime life crisis given the paradigm of careers these days but that is where I was coming from. But you are right, there is no clean answer. I guess what I take away from you is the highlights reel tells us where we are distinctive in terms of when we use our strengths to make a big difference to the people around us and then we play with it to discover who we are and move forward possibly. Does that make sense?

DC: Hmm, it does. And some of the things right in between there too and that is where I am really happy to allow the confusion, you know, because life is not clear and identity definitely is not clear. And I think that these are very cloudy concepts in some ways. Easy, maybe, for an academic to define but maybe, not always so easy to see it as a differentiation in real life. So one thing that is really, whatever words we use I am not sure but I will say one thing that I have been really happy to do for people when we create these highlight reels is, certain things jump off the page to people and they capture people in almost an emotional way, beyond the words, beyond the concepts, beyond, sort of, the cognitive consideration, almost like that makes my heart sing or seeing that I have had that impact on those people calls to me, or when I think back to those moments, it make me feel more alive. I think that we are very complex machines, us humans, and sometimes as an academic, I can tend to be over cognitive but when I work with people that are actually trying to make improvements in their world using the highlight reel, let me give an example, you know, because this will really show what I mean, and I mentioned this person in the book, there was somebody that got the highlight reel. And in all of the stories from family members, and friends, and uncles, and friends from high school, curiosity and their natural insatiable asking why it came up, and they loved it about this person. And he was always inventing things and playing and like, trying to figure things out and being curious but none of his work colleagues brought that up at all. They mentioned like punctual and efficient. And so, it is really interesting. He started thinking more about why he does not bring that to work and why does not he bring his curiosity to work. And, you know, he talked about how, he is now a partner in a consulting firm and so on, he starts meetings really abruptly and he looks to get very efficient and his wife got so crowded that efficiency became his major watchword, but really, since he was a kid, he has been one of these sort of curious investigators. So what he started doing after realizing that he was not bringing the best part of himself to work, he just started playing with that self. You know, he started, for example in a meeting, instead of diving in and being on the agenda, he would start by asking some question of somebody in there that he was genuinely curious about it, maybe like what movie you have seen recently or did you hear about this new news about, you know, blockchain or whatever it might be, just to be curious. And if he was meeting with a client, he was trying to like, you know, meet with a CEO of a firm, just being more curious about like the industry and what is the person seeing that is hot and what is not, but just being curious rather than like work efficiency kind of thing. And he said, we are number one. He said the meeting started going a lot better, that he enjoyed the more, yes, but like other people seemed to enjoy that more too and he just seemed more useful. It felt like the work became more giving but also people liked him more. People enjoy him as a human, why, because he was more authentic or because he was just being more curious and inquisitive. But the bottom line is a year later, things are

going better for him and he was much happier. And it is just one of those things where he had gotten into his head a narrative that curiosity had no place in his job as a partner of the big consulting firm and, you know, numbers, numbers, numbers, revenues, sales. You know I do not know if I am even making sense to you right now because I just wanted to tell that story to reveal that as we reach these different career transitions, sometimes a good strong dose of this is who you are when your heart is singing and this is who you grew up being, you know, this is what you have been as a cohesive person, since you are like a boy or a girl. So I do not know if that is useful to you or if that is even what you wanted me, anyway, ask more questions if I can make it work for you.

DJ: No, it is a lot of sense, Dan. I hear you and I do think there are cues hidden in the way we live some of or other domains, right, in terms of how we are with our children or how we are with our friends and bring some of what makes us come alive from one domain, take that in another domain. So in a way, what you are saying also reenforces the interconnectedness of things, right. As I do my research in this field, I am realizing the value of just the interconnectedness of things, right, who we are as a parent, as a son, as a spouse, as a colleague. It is just that, you know, it is all one interconnected whole. So to your point, I do think there is a great opportunity for us to bring our best selves from one domain and bring that to bear in other domains as well. So point very well taken.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is such a nuanced and a profound point that Dan makes. If I could relate this to my journey, I transitioned from McKinsey to pursuing Executive Search at EgonZehnder because I felt I had that people orientation which I could double down on in a Search Context. I am so happy I did that and I feel it was possibly the right exit post McKinsey. I remember a conversation with one of the Partners in the office around the 4-year mark. The person asked me “what were the high points and low points in the last few months”. A search consultant who was enjoying his profession would typically say things like

- When I closed this search and found a great candidate or
- When I won this mandate from this prestigious organization

For me, strangely enough, I didn't quite get my highs from these kinds of moments. My highs were moments where I counseled leaders on their journey or development and they came back with gratitude for what I had shared with them. Another set of highs were when I published a white paper or a thought piece around some theme in Leadership.

The low points for me were when I had to negotiate an offer with a candidate or a client. Or when I had to pitch a role to a candidate or pitch a candidate to the client. I realized that I was lousy at Sales and lousier at negotiation.

This Partner looked me in the eye and said, that is great but you can't let what gives you energy come in the way of focusing on what drives business. For me that was a Penny drop moment. I realized that I was getting energy from what is a Category C item in the context of a search business and I was getting drained at a Category A item in Search.

As one of my friends put it, I felt I had more of a coaching mindset than a poaching mindset. And in a way, that was the crux of the transition I made about 5 odd years back. I realized that in Search, I was spending too many man-hours in an evaluative counter-party mode and in Pitching mode. I felt I

could be a lot more authentic if I could spend more time nurturing others, developing others. The other thing I realized was that I was lousy at Sales but I was decent at having the discipline to do a few things consistently that could over time possibly act as the Marketing function for the work I do. In a way that is the genesis of the podcast you are listening to which is a labour of love for the long term but also helps people build trust with what I do and what I stand for.

It is still early days in the journey but back to what Dan says, I feel the journey has been about trying new behaviours and opportunities while stretching into my strengths. It is a messy journey, I would have to say but am glad gave it a shot. Time will tell how this story plays out but all I can say is so far so good and I would recommend it to others who feel that disconnect between their strengths and what their role entails them to spend time on.

End of nugget transcription

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Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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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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