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## Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about the limitations of learning a skill on an online platform like YouTube where there are several videos to learn various skills. He talks about the role of feedback in the way we can grow our capabilities in a certain area.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And changing topics Tom, one of the other pieces I am curious about is the feedback loop when we learn something, right? And in a world where so much is available on YouTube and Coursera and Udemy and all these MOOCs, you know, there are a few skills where there is a benefit of having somebody watch us and give feedback to us real time for us to learn. What have you in your attempt to learn these five skills, what have you learnt about the limitations of online learning and the benefits of having somebody walk this journey with us? Can you talk a little bit about the role of the feedback here?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): Sure. Yeah, I mean I think there are some skills, some things we would want to learn that where immediate or personal feedback is much more important. There are other things that are a bit more let's say mechanistic or much more could be sort of picked up by simply observing but there are things, for example, let's say singing. I had various forms of feedback when I was trying to learn to sing. One of these for example was simply an app on my phone called Perfect Pitch and it is you would open the app and then sing a set of scales into it and it would give you a score of zero to 100 saying how well you had done and I will say in the beginning I was literally in the 50s or 60s and it got to the point through repetition and practice where I was able to get, let's say a 100 fairly consistently or the high 90s. So, that's that motor skill part of singing for those people out there who might think that it is purely an innate talent, you know, you can become a better singer purely by doing this. But that is sort of only half the picture, you know, that is sort of it showed me that I was getting better over time, but it didn't exactly show me why and that is where the coach I was working with vocal instructor came in and actually while I was singing really intently listening to me and intently watching my whole set of vocal muscles work and giving me very precise corrections at the moment and it was very sort of an almost intimate and physical process to me, you know, the whole body is involved and he would correct me on my posture and all sorts of things that a person would not necessarily be aware of themselves just working at home or trying to follow along online. So, I think there are the more complex skills you just have that, almost need that sort of constant monitoring and there is some discussion on the literature whether positive feedback is more important than negative and I think positive is probably more important is that there are something like singing there are more ways to go wrong than there are to go right so you should really emphasize the times when a person has gotten it right because they are probably aware number one that they have gotten it wrong. So, and then there's the motivational component. It just, it

simply makes the learner feel better to hear that they are doing well, which is not to state it needs to be sugar-coated, I mean, that you should be given, it needs to have a corrective aspect, so you simply, you don't want to have a coach who is simply telling you everything's great all the time; that doesn't really work either but it is a very important part of it. And the last thing I will say is just the frequency of feedback can be really helpful. One of the problems with surfing is that the feedback loops can be very long and what I mean is that sometimes when you go to the ocean, you might only during the course of an hour of surfing catch six or seven waves or try to catch six or seven waves because of the what the ocean is during that day and an instructor pointed out to me, can you imagine trying to learn the guitar if you could only strum six or seven times an hour, I mean, that is just, it's not the most efficient way to learn. So, sometimes the feedback loops are not tight enough so it is hard to learn from each... you simply don't get as much practice or as much chance to be observed, as much chance to learn from your mistakes when there are fewer opportunities to actually do the thing. So, that is just another aspect that can come into it.

DJ: And, you know, I am reminded of, you know, let's say maybe a forward in soccer, you get the ball once in maybe 10 minutes, 15 minutes from the defenders to the midfield to the forward and you need to sort of you need to score, you know, of course in practice you probably simulate those situations hundreds and thousands of times but in the... if you really look at match practice, you know, it is just these occasional passes that come to you and you need to sort of score. I can imagine training for match readiness, especially if you are sort of in some of these positions can be tricky.

Tom: Yeah, yeah, it is a very good point which I hadn't thought about but soccer was not one of my skills so I won't say anything else about that but... I did play soccer but I was defense so we...

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: To build on what Tom says, I often feel that the biggest value add in feedback is that it often comes in our blind spot. I have observed it in the work I do with leaders, I have observed it as a student when I am learning something. Let me share a couple of instances from my learning experience.

There was this one instance where I was trying to play a piece of melody at a high tempo. I noticed that my four fingers were getting jammed as I was trying to move up and down the fretboard. I spent a week trying and when I went back, my teacher, looked at the way my thumb was moving and said it was the thumb that was causing the slowness in movement and if I corrected that, it would help me get to the next level. I was so busy focusing on my index, middle, ring and pinky that I hadn't paid attention to how my thumb was moving. That was something totally in my blind spot.

When I was learning ball juggling a couple of decades back, I remember I was trying to transition from 3 ball juggling to 4 ball juggling and I remember that I was struggling there for a while and I kept dropping the balls in the process. After trying for a while, I went to my teacher, this was a guy in a shop called Oddballs in Camden Town in London that sold Juggling equipment. He looked at me and said, there was a problem with my eyes. He said that in 3 ball juggling, the eye is usually focusing on the one ball that is in the air at the top of its flight. But this approach breaks down when you have 4 balls when you have. In 4 balls which is two hands juggling two balls each, there are two balls that are in the air at any point in time and you cannot afford to focus on one ball then the other one would drop. So, you need to find a way of looking through both the balls but somehow maintaining a peripheral view of the balls. Now this is such a nuanced insight, that there was no way I would have picked this up from YouTube.

The other thing I tell the leaders I work with is that it would be helpful for me to observe them in the stadium, not just interact with them in the Locker room. In the current Zoom environment, it is a little easier to be a fly in the wall in some of these conversations and that can be helpful in unearthing some relevant data rather than rely on hearsay on what transpired. It gives me an opportunity to pick up things that sometimes might be in the blind spot of the leader when they are in the thick of things.

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- 76.02 Tom Vanderbilt - How learning works
- 76.03 Tom Vanderbilt - Misplaced pursuit of Mastery
- 76.04 Tom Vanderbilt - Real meaning of baby steps
- 76.05 Tom Vanderbilt - How unlearning works
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- 76.07 Tom Vanderbilt - Role of feedback loops
- 76.08 Tom Vanderbilt - Observing things the way they are
- 76.09 Tom Vanderbilt - Friction in the learning process
- 76.10 Tom Vanderbilt - Depth of learning
- 76.11 Tom Vanderbilt - In Summary - Playing to Potential

### 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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