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## Context to the nugget conversation

Darleen sheds light on how leaders and organizations can get more thoughtful in the way they get the cultural assimilation right when a new leader comes on board. Leadership derailment is a lot more about Leaders missing out on the “how” of a job rather than the “what” of the job.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And just picking up from one of the things you mentioned Darlene, a leader transitioning in the first 90 days, 100 days, I am assuming it's much harder in a remote context where you haven't met people, you haven't as one of the Professor Sumantra Ghoshal says you haven't smelt the place so you don't get a sense of the culture and how things get done. What have you seen about transitions in a remote context that we are seeing? Any headline insights around what leaders and organizations should bear in mind to make this effective?

Darleen DeRosa (Darleen): Yeah, I mean we have had to do a lot of this at Spencer Stuart both in our Search and the Coaching practice that we are working in, but I think there's a number of interesting things that companies have done. As an example, one CEO said, he literally would change his video background to sort of make it look like he was in his Switzerland office one day and he got off to such a fast start because rather than taking three months to travel to every office, he could do the same thing in a month and so he could have so many video meetings that were much more effective and one-on-one meetings by the way where he has bigger reach in terms of the employee population plus a number of townhalls and said, he would never go back to the way he was doing it before. That's just one example of how yes, it's harder and you have got to be more thoughtful, but there can be a lot of efficiency if you do it well. And so, we have seen some really interesting examples of organizations who have done a nice job rethinking their onboarding strategy. So, sending people care packages to help them understand the culture of the organization even before they join and sending care packages. So, it's not like you are just getting a laptop, you are getting things that help you understand and learn about the company. We have seen some organizations hiring and creating new roles to really think about onboarding and culture. And so, we at Spencer Stuart, for example, have seen some clients create roles like Head of Remote Work or Head of Culture, because this is really important from an onboarding perspective. Some organizations have created, as I mentioned earlier, culture buddies or onboarding liaisons that are helping guide people throughout the journey and even things like cohort-based onboarding programs for mid to senior level leaders so people feel connected from day one. So, I think, those are just a few of the things. Leaders who we coach, who really are thoughtful about this and set up a series of one-on-one and group meetings to rapidly build trust and foster those relationships clearly are more effective than those who don't. So, again, it comes back to Deepak that notion of being purposeful and being thoughtful, but we have seen some great examples of people onboarding virtually very successfully.

DJ: I discussed this piece with some of the colleagues from SpencerStuart India. Atul Bhandari (Atul) spoke about how companies are assigning two kinds of mentors (formal and informal) and we need to pick them differently.

Atul: *“That is a much harder one, Deepak, because, you know, culture is all about how does the workplace function. It is the subtle nuances that you observe at the workplace, the way things get done. How do you do that in the virtual world, it is much harder to replicate to be very honest. What we have seen people do effectively is get people to meet lot more people even before they join. So the onboarding process which traditionally used to start once you formally join, now people are saying it is important for me to get to know who I am going to be working with. So let us not wait till the individual formally joins, let us actually start that. The other thing that we have observed is to assign both a formal and an informal mentor who can kind of be your, you know, one who you can talk to at 2 p.m. in the afternoon, the other who you can have a very candid conversation at 11 o’clock in the night about how you are feeling about things. So those are a few things that companies have done. You cannot completely replace the physical element. Having said that, we have seen lots of CEOs and CXOs onboard over the last 12 months and done so effectively.”*

DJ: And maybe just picking up on the point about the 11 p.m. informal mentor, any perspectives around how to pick that?

Atul: *“Couple of things, I think one, it is somebody where they will build a very strong comfort level quickly or typically somebody that you have known from your past life who, you know, because it has got to be somebody that you trust and somebody that you are comfortable with, so those two are critical criteria. And again, it is not going to happen in each and every situation, Deepak. So you need to be cognizant of that.”*

DJ: Rohit Kale (Rohit) makes an interesting point here. He says that the interviewing process has become more elaborate these days but that also gives more touchpoints for the candidate when he or she comes on board. So, in a way the widening of the interviewing pool is not only helping in decisioning but also in integration.

Rohit: *“I think one of the insights has been that the integration actually starts even before the hiring decision is made. What I mean by that is given that most interviews are anyway Zoom interviews, remote interviews now, we are seeing the number of interviews that every candidate has to go through increasing exponentially. That allows a) of course, it is part of risk mitigation in the hiring process, but more importantly, it actually allows that individual to get a far better sense of what the overall peer group in the office looks like, starts getting connects with the peer group at a much earlier level and brings the peer group into the decision making process and therefore gets the alignment and therefore gets the buy in from those individuals, even before the hiring decision is made. That allows the hiring and, you know, that just allows that there is a bigger group of people who now have a vested interest in making that individual successful because you have got the buy in earlier.”*

DJ: Sahiba Singh (Sahiba) speaks about how some companies are using this as an opportunity to be a bit more deliberate and reflective about their culture.

Sahiba: *“So yeah, we are seeing this a lot and what this situation has led organizations to do more about is think about what their culture really is and how do they describe it to people who have not had the opportunity to, as you say, smell the culture or learn by observations. So more than ever before, clients are thinking about how do we translate, what our actual culture is into, how things work on the ground. So telling new employees about how we run meetings, how decisions are taken,*

*how we communicate, what do we do, what do we not do and really thinking about their culture. And in that process what is also happening is more clients as they are articulating how things work today, they are also becoming more reflective about how things should work and what is wrong, how can they use this opportunity to actually fix it or change things that they have been wanting to change in their culture.”*

DJ: If you are curious about setting leaders up for success in a new environment, I would point you to three resources at the podcast.

- 1) First is a conversation with Prof Michael Watkins, the author of First 90 days, often considered the bible of transitions and Professor at IMD Lausanne
- 2) Second is a conversation with R Gopalakrishnan, veteran leader in the Tata Group and HUL and the author of CRASH – Lessons from Entry and Exit of CEOs, where he has studied 15 high profile CEO appointments that went south
- 3) Finally, I would point you to the Curated Playlist – Settling into a new context, which has wisdom from a variety of sources ranging including how Gandhiji thought about settling into India after his stint in South Africa.

For the two speakers, you can go to [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com) and find Michael Watkins and R Gopalakrishnan in the Guests section. For the Curated Playlist, go to [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com), access the tab Curated Playlists and within that you will find Settling into a new context under the category of Transitions.

DJ: Hmm and picking one of the things you said Darlene, one-on-ones versus townhalls, do you see that mix shifting in the remote work context as compared to the physical work context?

Darleen: You know that’s a good question, I am not sure. I don’t know if I have seen enough examples of that. I think, I mean, we have seen more townhalls in the last 16 months but I think that that could be because of covid and trying to bring people together and foster community since people were not in an office. So, it will be interesting to see what happens but we have definitely seen an increase in those larger group type meetings and really bringing people together because you can do that really efficiently when you are virtual.

DJ: Hmm, it’s much, it has much less friction to organize these conversations across geographies and time zones.

Darleen: Exactly, yeah, and I think a lot of organizations have done that really well like using technology with a purpose and trying to bring people together to both help maybe help them build a skill or to help them interact with one another. So, using technology well I think has been really some good examples of that versus companies who are just using technology without really thinking about like why they are bringing people together, just having a townhall for a townhall or having a townhall where maybe people have no form to engage. So, I have seen varying levels of success with this.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening and for more please visit [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com)

## End of nugget transcription

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### RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

**Settling into a new context:** Figuring out “where to go” is only a part of the challenge for leaders in transition. How you land effectively in a new context is as critical. Hair line cracks often become full blown fractures if not attended to carefully. Leaders talk about some key lessons Individuals could bear in mind as they transition across contexts (Army to Business world, US to India, MNC to Family Business, Consulting to Industry/Investing etc.) 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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