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Context to the nugget conversation

Amy speaks about the asymmetry between silence and speaking up in the way people size up the trade offs. The upsides of speaking up are often felt (if at all) way down the line while the downsides of speaking up are felt right then and there. Given this pay-off structure, people often end up preferring silence to speaking up. Amy also speaks about Ray Dalio and Bridgewater Associates where he frames silence as an unethical choice.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Amy, in the book *The Fearless Organization* you also speak about the calculus of silence, I love the way you frame it, you actually say that there's an asymmetry of voice and silence and you talk about Bridgewater Associates in that context where you say that Ray Dalio frames it as, frames silence as an unethical choice. Could you say more about how this plays out in different situations?

Amy Edmondson (Amy): Sure, and so, the calculus that I describe is something that's very simple which is that if you are at work where there's an old saying better to be, better to risk being thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it beyond a reasonable doubt or something like that, it's a bad saying, but it's wrong, right? It's wrong in today's world but the calculus is such that if you think about it this way, if I think your plan might be fatally flawed and I am your subordinate, you are my boss, in that moment I might be wrong, right? So, in that moment I can speak up and maybe save the day but maybe not, maybe you won't be mad at me but maybe you will and whether or not all of that will happen is going to be delayed for sure. I mean your anger might not be delayed but whether or not my intuition about the plan was right or wrong is going to be hard to sort of figure out objectively for a while, whereas if... and so I am taking a risk in other words, whereas if I stay silent, there's no risk in that. If I stay silent, I am just there, nobody knows, you don't know, nobody else knows that I had a thought in my mind, I had an objection and I didn't share it. So, I talk about that as this fundamental asymmetry between voice and silence. The voice calculus will always lead subordinates towards silence not voice. Therefore, as leaders, you have to override that natural instinct. Now, the Ray Dalio case Bridgewater is a very special case, I call it an extreme case, where he understands, he so deeply understands that voice calculus, that asymmetry, where silence is generally cost free and voice is expensive for people that he says, why don't we flip that on its head? He says, why don't I reframe silence as unethical. And think about it, it's a really strong statement and yet there's a way in which we have to agree with that statement, because if you had a concern about an important decision or issue in a work environment, a strategic decision or a patient care decision that doesn't matter and you decided to hold it to yourself because it's safer that way, that is unethical, isn't it? Because you have training, you have expertise and we hired you to share some of that training and that expertise with others. And so, I think, it's rather interesting and that's why I

highlighted in the book that Ray Dalio labels it as such where he just comes right out instead of saying, hey, we would love to hear from you, he says, hey when we don't hear from you, you are really not doing your job. In fact, you are so much not doing your job that I believe it to be unethical, right? So, it's pretty extreme but it's provocative and I love that.

DJ: Hmm. It's a bit like, you know, whether you commit to the murder or whether you help somebody commit the murder, you just committed it, right, it's that type of framing.

Amy: Right, it's true, it's true. It's what we used to call, sort of errors of co-mission or errors you actually make, the errors of omission are the things you didn't prevent that you could have prevented.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I like the way Amy speaks about the way we calculate the trade-offs here. Like she says, the gravitational pull of silence is much higher than the pull of speaking up and it is the leader's duty to compensate for that default state and create a space for people to speak their mind.

End of nugget transcription

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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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