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Context to the nugget conversation

Amy speaks about the case at Fukushima Daini, where under the leadership of Naohira Masuda, 400 employees worked non stop for 48 hours, when their lives were under threat, to achieve the cold shut down of the nuclear reactor thereby saving 1000s of lives in that process. She speaks about the brand of leadership that Naohira demonstrated through this phase.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other story that jumped at me was the story of Fukushima Daini. You talk about the other plant in Japan?

Amy Edmondson (Amy): Yes, the less well-known one.

DJ: Less well-known one but you talk about the leader there Naohiro Masuda leading a team of 400 people working in extreme uncertainty and fragility to achieve cold shutdown and saving thousands of lives. It was... I hadn't heard of that story before and it was just awe-inspiring, you know, people going without sleep for 48 hours when their life is under threat to do the right thing and saving thousands of lives. Could you talk a little bit about the story and what we can learn from that story here?

Amy: Yeah, I thank you for asking about it and I do think it's a very powerful story and clearly most of us have never been in that kind of situation, right, where our actions could literally save thousands of lives and we are going to go, we have to work at an almost heroic pace over a long period of time as you said. But what I love about that story is the leader wasn't profoundly charismatic or larger than life; he was very grounded. He was honest, he was trustworthy, he had their respect but he kept, he did where I think leaders in challenging times and times of upheaval and times of crisis should do more reliably but often don't which is you tell the truth, tell the truth about what we know and about what we don't know and you ask, you ask for people. It's like you are not telling people, you must do this and he was... it was very clear in that story, he was asking them, please help, right? This is what I think we will try, I think it can work, I can't guarantee it but please help, please join this effort because I think if we give it everything, we have we can shut this thing down and indeed they did. But it's very is his style was straightforward and honest and transparent. Even his style of management much of it rested on the use of a whiteboard, right, just a whiteboard to kind of keep capturing the knowledge as it developed and he's also, he was able to be present and supportive of people and appreciative of the work they were doing along the way.

DJ: The other thing that struck me in that story was along the way they realized that they are sort of working in the wrong direction and they had to

Amy: Yes.

DJ: And after about let's say 24 hours including a sleepless night on a cold day with life under threat, they had to completely change direction and they did it; it's just mind-boggling.

Amy: Yeah, it is mind-boggling and yet that's the way progress is made in a VUCA world, a volatile uncertain complex ambiguous world. You can be... you can do all the best thinking at time zero and believe that path A is the right path, but as you go down it further you get more information and then you... it's not that you were wrong before, it's that you have now learned more and the world has changed maybe a little bit and then you realize, oops, we got to go down path B. And for most of us that pivot, that being wrong is devastating and say you almost want to just give up but the leadership in this case was about helping people not give up because of what was at stake and because they had... the learning they had done in the failing course of action was mission critical to figuring out what needed to be done next.

DJ: Hmm, I guess something that's probably not as emphasized here is sort of pointing to the broader purpose behind the work here, in this case, for example, was that explicit or was that understood by the team? Is there a piece there around rallying them around the big picture and why we are doing what we are doing?

Amy: Yeah, it's interesting because it would be tempting to think or to conclude that in extreme stress like that and similarly for example in the Chilean mine rescue that the goal, the purpose, the importance of the purpose is so obvious that the leader doesn't need to refer to it, right? We got to save many communities from radioactive catastrophe or we have got 33 lives hanging in the balance, stuck deep in a mine, it doesn't need to be said, right? Wrong, it does need to be said because time and time again, making the purpose explicit even though it's obvious is really a powerful thing to do as a leader. Just I like to say what you are doing is reminding people and think about the word remind its re mind, put it back in your mind because all of us, especially when you are tired or frustrated or things aren't going well that emotion and that distraction makes it hard to stay focused on the technical work that you are doing. So, a leadership function is to remind people of what really matters, make it explicit.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Another similar situation where an individual had to act under extreme pressure when his life was under threat was Captain Sully Sullenberger who miraculously landed a plane with 155 people without any loss of life. One of our earlier guests, Rich Fernandez (RF), CEO of Search Inside Yourself, a Leadership Development institute incubated at Google spoke about it. He highlights in the context of the distinction between responding to a situation and reacting to a situation. That is the other piece to bring to your attention here. Before we get into a discussion about how we lead people, I think there is a piece about how we handle ourselves.

RF: *"for the listeners who aren't familiar with Captain Sully Sullenberger he is the man who landed the jet plan that was flying over New York City. It flew through a flock of gags so they lost all jet proportion because the gags flew into the engines and burnt them out so in the space I think I have about 3 minutes to make a split second decision to land the airplane on the Hudson River it was the only available large open space over New York City but he thought about it very calmly. So, I'd ask you to Google it or YouTube it you will see interview with him he explains it. But how did he do that he says he trained his whole career for it. He said I have 30 years as pilot and so I just know the routines. I knew what needed to happen and he just calmly proceeded to do that he didn't react and*

become over blown or over-whelmed by the situation and this is why we talk about emotional resilience is being a key quality of a leader in a digital economy”

DJ: In my work with leaders, I realize that this piece of emotional resilience doesn't come overnight. It takes years and years of inner work for leaders to be able to be agile and nimble when a tsunami of stress hits them. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Rich Fernandez that is referenced: [3 levels of resilience](#).

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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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