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Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about how we all can leverage the power of a fresh start to drive behavioural change. She goes on to say that if we look hard enough then there might be several fresh opportunities we could find in our lives. Very often, we think Jan 1 in a year as a fresh start and have resolutions. But Katy goes on to say that we can have a similar approach if we think wider about a new start. She also refers to an initiative at Google that looked at key moments where people are more likely to engage in a certain behaviour.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving along, Katy, I wanted to talk about this notion of fresh start. You talk about your conversation with Prasad Setty at Google where you say that Google offered its employees a wide range of benefits and programs, designed to make their lives and jobs better and to solve problems like under-saving for retirement, over-use of social media, physical inactivity, and healthy eating and smoking, but the employees were not taking advantage of these schemes. So in that context, you talk about the timing and the power of a fresh start and in the book, you talk about how the fresh start could be applied in different contexts if we are creative about it. So could you talk a little bit about that?

Katy Milkman (KM): Yeah, absolutely. And thanks for giving me a chance to talk about one of my favorite chapters in the book as well. That meeting was really interesting. So I got to go present my research at Google, as you mentioned, about all these different ways we could nudge behavior change and got this amazing question from Prasad Setty about when was the ideal time. So, sort of, convinced that we should, at Google he said, be doing this nudging people towards more saving and healthier lifestyles and more productivity, but are there ideal times to that, that was the question. And it set me on a new research adventure because I thought it was such a good question and I did not know an answer. I did not believe there was an answer yet from academia, but I felt like we should provide one. It was such an interesting and important question. So I teamed up with my then PhD student, Hengchen Dai and also with Jason Riis who is the CEO of Behavioralize and a former Professor at HBS and at Wharton. And Jason, Hengchen and I started thinking about what we knew already and what we could learn about when the ideal time is to encourage change and when are people most motivated just naturally to change in their own lives. What we found is that there are moments, this would not surprise you at all that feel more like fresh starts to people. And the one that we are all familiar with already is New Years. This is a moment when around the world people are setting resolutions at a higher rate than usual, trying to pursue goals at a higher rate than usual, and it feels like a fresh start. The psychology of New Years actually turns out to be familiar and extends to many other moments, but the psychology of New Years is you can say, sort of, well, that was the old me last year, the old me could not achieve this, you know, the old me tried to quit

smoking and failed, but that was a whole different person. The new me in the New Year can do it. And you feel this dissociation from your past failures in this renewed optimism as you open a new chapter in life. What we found is that New Years is actually just one moment that has that new chapter fresh start feeling. There are lots of other moments on the calendar and in life when we also feel we are turning a page and can get that same dissociation from past failures and motivation, and also the likelihood that we might actually step back and think big picture about our lives is greater. So some of those moments include, according to our research, the start of a new week or a new month, the celebration of holidays that feel like fresh starts in our culture, the celebration of birthdays. And, of course, there is other research looking not only at these psychological or temporal markers that give us the sense of a clean slate and a fresh start, but if you physically change environments, that has not only psychological appeal and helps you, but it can literally disrupt routines in a way that is helpful as well. So we have shown people are more likely at these temporal landmarks, we call them our new beginnings, to do things like visit the gym or set goals on popular goal-setting websites online about everything from their finances, to their health, to their education. And if you encourage people to make a change at those moments, a moment that has a label on it, like, hey, you know, want to make a change on the first day of spring or after your next birthday, it turns out that is more attractive, people are more likely to do things like start saving in a retirement account when you invite them to, or just pursue goals beginning at those times when you give them those labels. And if you invite them to save it in an identical moment or change at an identical moment, but do not even point out that it corresponds with the first day of spring or a birthday. So that was a really, I would say, exciting line of research and it points to the power of taking advantage of these moments in our lives. If we want to make a change and encouraging others to make changes and providing with the resources they need to make changes at those moments when we feel like we have a fresh start and are therefore more naturally inclined to change.

DJ: Hmm. And you actually refer to Google creating something called a moments engine and using that to nudge behavior, any nuance there in terms of how the moments engine works?

KM: Yeah, this was really something exciting that I learned about when I called Prasad up after it had been a while since I had made this visit to Google. And I said, hey, Prasad, I am writing this book and thank you again for this amazing conversation, we will spread all this research, which he of course knew about because I had been sharing with him over the years what we had found and I said, has Google done anything or use this in any way, I am curious and he said, yeah, actually, we created this moments engine that we use to nudge employees towards making different decisions or adopting different programs at moments that are appropriate and feel like fresh starts to them. So I thought that was really exciting. I honestly would not have ever learned about it potentially if I had not been writing this book and reaching back out to him to ask what he was up to, how things were going at Google, if they never done anything with that old fresh start research I shared with them based on his question. So it is really exciting to hear they have done that. And I know another organization who Humu, which is a actually a spin-off from Google. It is an HR organization, but they have used machine learning to digitized HR programs and then they help companies manage people more effectively.

DJ: That is the one headed by Laszlo Bock?

KM: You got it. Laszlo was at Google at the time when I was doing this work. I am now an advisor at Humu and Laszlo has told me they also use, in their algorithms, fresh start moments as points in time when they try to nudge certain behavior change. So I know at least two organizations that have used this in their algorithms to try to promote positive change and I hope there will be many more if there are not already.

DJ: Got it. Actually talking about identity, you spoke about how sometimes during these fresh starts we try to think from the lens of a different identity, and I was talking to a gentleman called Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi who is at MIT Center of Ethics, he is actually a monk who teaches Business Ethics at MIT, and when I spoke to him, he said, you know, covid, in a way, is like a timeout given by mother nature to mankind, saying, go figure your stuff out. So I was just wondering, you know, this notion of a fresh start.

KM: It is quite a timeout from mother nature.

DJ: Correct, so I was just wondering covid is a sort of a giant experiment we have seen in terms of a reset for a lot of people. So in that context, have you seen any interesting fresh starts that come top of mind?

KM: Yeah, it is a really interesting question. I do think, you know, applying the word fresh to covid always makes me, because that has a positive connotation and I certainly do not feel if there is any positive about what has happened around the world in the last year and a half. But, just in terms of the temporal landmark component, the fact that we have had a chapter break that was forcing us to step back and think big picture about what our values were, forcing us to experiment with new ways of living and working and think about our values in that respect as well, it fits the psychology of a fresh start, but I feel like it should have a different kind of label.

DJ: Lifequake, you know, one of the...

KM: Yeah, a life disruption, maybe we should have called fresh starts life disruptions.

DJ: It is a good point. See I think maybe if I could frame the question better, there is something agentic about the notion of fresh start. Sometimes, lifequakes happen without you having any control by external circumstances, so is there a nuance there, does it have to be necessarily chosen versus imposed?

KM: Actually, fresh starts typically are imposed. I would say that they are typically, the ones that we have studied have been moments on a calendar that come without, you are going to turn 35 or you are going to turn 55 or 70, you know, God willing, if all goes well without your intentionality. So, right, you know what I mean, it is going to happen. So those things come about without your choice. And so that is the nature of most fresh start moments but when we see them, they have meaning to us because of the way we think about our lives, the way we bracket time and think about our lives as if they are taking place in chapters. So I do think that covid has felt like a chapter break for many of us. And I think all of us are also hoping there will be an end to this chapter and a new beginning after it, that is better, where we have hopefully learned some things from this forced experiment over the last year and a half with different ways of working and living. And the question is what will we do with that. I certainly have heard, I would say, it was, I heard more conversations like this in May and June than I have heard of late in the United States. Obviously, where you are in the world has a big impact on how you are experiencing different months. And what is happening in May, I think everyone in the United States was starting to feel optimistic that we had turned the corner, vaccines were widely available. There was a sense that maybe we would put this behind us, go back to work, go back to normal. I think people are feeling differently now. We have the Delta wave is hitting us in the U.S. right now. Obviously, May was awful in India and so it was a very different moment there. But back in May, when people were feeling optimistic in the United States, I did hear a lot of talk about fresh starts and new beginnings and what were the resolutions people had made about how to live differently and better in the new era, post-covid, a lot of reflection, a lot of people choosing to move to new jobs, this felt like a good point, you know, good moment to do that or move to new

communities, maybe they were going to be able to work remotely on a long-term basis, so they could rethink where they wanted to live. So I do think that it was a major fresh start moment and I think we will have more of them because we are going through ebbs and flows on this and everybody is feeling like okay, I see the light at the end of the tunnel or this is a pivot point for me at slightly different times and different places. And it does cause reflection, it does cause, I think, an increase in people's willingness to change. That is my guess based on the data we have from very different fresh start moments in time.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: After recording this conversation, I was reflecting on the last few months at my end and when I think about it, I moved homes Mid March and I got a new phone a month back. While I hadn't used this frame, each of these actually presented a fresh start opportunity for me to take a fresh look at some of the behaviours.

I guess if we look hard enough, there are enough and more fresh start opportunities around us.

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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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