Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about how gamification of something is an art and if done well can really draw people into activities that they might otherwise consider boring. But she also goes on to say that if such games are not intuitively fun to people, they may not enter the magic circle, i.e. they may not embrace the implicit rules of behaviour that is required for everybody to have fun. She talks about how individuals and organizations should think about this.

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you also talk about gamification as an approach. I guess it is a little related to the discussion that we are having but one of the nuances I found interesting was this notion of entering the magic circle, and you actually say that very often organizations come up with these interesting things but not many people enter the magic circle, so it does not really have the impact it is supposed to have. Could you talk a little bit about the context in which use the term magic circle here?

Katy Milkman (KM): Yeah, absolutely and I should say that this is something I learned about from my Wharton colleague, Ethan Mollick who studied this and sat down to teach me about gamification when I was writing this chapter of the book and knew I needed to learn a lot more. He explained me concept of the magic circle to me and the ideas that in order for any game to work and to be fun, the players need to enter the magic circle. They need to basically accept the rules of the game, agree to abide by them, sort of, suspend disbelief. So entering the magic circle in Monopoly, for instance, would mean that you are not going to just steal money from the bank, you are going to follow the rules and only use the money you earn to play the game and according to the rules of the game. And it is no fun if you do not enter the magic circle, if you do not, sort of, say okay, I will be bound by the rules, I will play along with the game, you are not going to get any joy out of it. And what he found interestingly is that a lot of organizations try to gamify things that might not be fun for their employees in order to make them more enjoyable but a lot of the time this does not, or at least some of the time, this does not turn out so well. In one study he did, he did a study with my other Wharton colleague Nancy Rothbard where they were trying to give sales people a gamified bit of encouragement to achieve more work to, you know, sell more, and some got a gamification, I will say, overlay on their daily job and others did not. So like all of a sudden, every sales call is scoring a layup and there were graphics to go along with it, and the more you score, more likely you are to earn a bottle of champagne and there is a leaderboard, so it is all part of a game. What they found is this actually did not improve employee performance and it even sometimes seemed to backfire. It worked okay when employees entered the magic circle. So they surveyed employees and stuff like, you know, did you find the game fun, did you understand the rules, did you want to abide by them and so on, people who were into it, they actually saw some benefits, but a lot of people were not

into it and they saw some harm generated. So net net, it was not much of a positive because it was imposed from the top and it was not helping people achieve things that they intrinsically wanted to achieve. So they did not enter the magic circle, they did not jump in and say like this is great, this is fun. I think there is a couple of key points, one, if a game is not fun, it is a bit of an art to create one that is, it is not going to do anyone any good and second, if it feels like forced fun or mandated fun from the top down, it is not going to be a way that helps you achieve more. If you are trying to achieve a goal and find a way to make it fun for yourself or choose to use an app that gamifies goal achievement and that resonates with you and you enter the magic circle, it seems like there can be really big benefits because then, the fun resonates. But there is just a lot of boundary conditions. I think like a decade ago, there were a lot of management consultants saying, let us gamify everything and we can get people to be more productive and then, I think, the research just has not borne out that promise for this reason that often people are not bought in and so it does not have the desired effects.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In my previous company, EgonZehnder, I remember, we had embarked on this thing called the Stepathlon challenge, which calls it the Movement for Movement. We as an office were divided up into teams of 5 across geographies and we were given a pedometer tablet that would measure the number of steps we would take and we had to keep track of the total steps taken by the team. The objective for each one of us was to walk around 10,000 steps a day. And there were awards for individual performances and for team level outcomes. To use Katy's language, initially it took a while for everybody to get into the magic circle. Some one said, well I could just tie this device to my dog and clock the hours. Or someone else said, I could give it to my neighbour who runs 20 km every day and clock my hours. There was another person who said, who is checking if I am entering the right number. I could just falsify the data. After the initial back and forth, we all settled into an interesting dynamic where it turned out to be fun and I would like to believe that it really nudged a lot of us to adopt a more healthy lifestyle and it did improve the inter function and inter geography communication significantly. I still remember that if I was in an airport like the Delhi or the Mumbai airport, and if I had an hour for the flight, I would just walk up and down the terminal rather than sitting in one place, just to clock some steps. And that habit still remains. Its been 18 odd moths since I took a flight but the last time I did, I do remember walking up and down the terminal when I had time on my hands.

These things do work but I guess, a lot of work needs to happen to ensure that everybody finds it fun and chooses to enter the magic circle.

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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