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Context to the nugget conversation

Sukhinder speaks about the fact that we often make decisions once we have sized up all the risks and rewards. She says that “take risk and iterate” approach beats “plan and implement” as a strategy. She says that people feel that risk taking begins when we make a choice. She goes on to say that taking risks will ensure that we end up with the right kinds of choices.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other piece you talk about Sukhinder is you say that sometimes we think about taking risks only once we know for sure what we want to do, actually risk-taking is a way of seeing what makes sense, it is an opportunity to discover what we might like and where we are good at. Can you talk a little bit about risk as a discovery process?

Sukhinder Singh Cassidy (SC): Sure, I think that the world has trained people to believe you need to have a perfect plan before you have ‘the right to act,’ which I think is somewhat ridiculous. It is sort of what people want to make a choice without having maximized their choices. It is almost like you think that risk-taking begins when you have to make a choice, I would say that is actually the riskiest move of all. You want to take risk to discover what your choices are and it is ironic because if you look at the, I think you did not go to a college in the United States and I did not either but when I watch the process of discovery, children taking United States to maximize their college choices, it is like the art of risk-taking. Yet no other time do they do that. They are like, they apply to Safety schools, they apply to the most prestigious schools, they apply for course X, they apply for course Y, they do it all in parallel, it is like beautiful but when it comes to any other major choice in our life, we are like, I do not have time to look, somebody just offered me this opportunity, should I say yes. And then we somehow reverse ourselves and we take these big risks like a one out of one risk. So I do not think risk-taking for discovery is one of the best sets of risk to take. You are just putting out feelers using little slots of your time and energy to even discover all the things that might be possible before you make one choice. So I think risk-taking is maximizing choices even before we choose which risk to take.

DJ: And you also talk about the notion of choice after a choice while making a decision, I found that phrase interesting. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by that and how that can help us make better decisions?

SC: Sure. Well in the book, I have this very basic formula that I have certainly had in my mind that I think, there is a simple way to think about whether or not we are going to get into action on a new choice. I call it FOMO over fear. People say what does that mean. I am like, well, when we visualize the positive, we have the fear of missing out on a new opportunity. That is often what is galvanizing

us to take action towards a new choice. But failing in our way is our fear of failure. And so it is very clear, the size of your fear of failure is greater than the size of your FOMO. No matter how big your FOMO, if the fear is even bigger, you just won't act and if the reverse is true, you are likely to get into action. So most people think, well, I will just visualize the positive, I will just visualize the positive. For me, visualizing the positive alone is not that comfortable. For me, I like to pre-mortem and say, okay, how do I size appropriately the fear I have right now, so I can shrink it or actually quite frankly just put it in context. So I always say with any choice you are contemplating, think about the choices after the choice that fails. Just think about the failure state, pre-mortem it, not post-mortem, pre-mortem it and say, okay, if I make these choices fail, what happens then. And if you have many choices after the choice, chances are it is not a big risk, like, you should size down your fear failure because if you can imagine the many choices and even say what would I do in all these worst case scenario, if many are available to you, it is probably a smaller size risk than you think. And for me, that not only helped me shrink in my head besides the risk to its actual size but it also gives me the comfort to act. Because once I know that I have thought through the failure state and I have four-five-six choices of what I could or should do or would be available to me, I actually feel some control over my ability to respond to any situation and then I actively feel less fear of failure. So that is what we call the choice after the choice, which is like look through the choice that you fear so much, look through to the failure state and ask yourself how many choices are available. And if the answer is a lot, that should give you the comfort you need to act.

DJ: It is interesting that even in the way you look at the worst-case scenario, it is not so much about the payoffs but it is about the pathways that it generates, so even there, we frame it as a lookout for possibility as a way of making a decision rather than focusing on the payoff.

SC: Yeah, I think so because unfortunately or fortunately, living in Silicon Valley and here, I do see that you do not know which choice is going to pay off. You can never take a 100% of the uncertainty out of any, what we can do is make educated guess. And of course, I make very educated guesses about risk but what we cannot do is know exactly which one is going to pay off. This is why thinking through the possibilities, even at the downside case, is something that gives me comfort.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is a very interesting point that Sukhinder makes. If I look at the world of careers, some of the initial choices are often "off the shelf". It is like going to a supermarket and picking something off the rack. College placements are a classic case in point where a bunch of companies come to campus and you have a dating process that matches the companies and the students.

As we get senior, we need to often cook those options to create pathways for ourselves. Very often, I see people being too busy whatever they are doing and don't have the time to create these pathways. The one category of risks I might shine the light on is inter-personal risks. I realize that as we become senior, we need to be able to be comfortable taking interpersonal risks.

The metaphor I use with people is that waiting for a Search Consultant call and responding to that is a bit like standing on the bus stop and boarding the first or the second bus that comes your way. As you become more senior, the pathways that emerge through the weak links and some of those connects is often significantly undercooked. The other realization I have had is that sometimes close connects don't yield the new opportunities that we seek because very often their networks and our networks are broadly similar but with weak links, the overlap area of the two circles in the Venn Diagram is much smaller and hence we widen the surface area of opportunity that could be relevant for us.

Thank you for listening.

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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