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Context to the nugget conversation

Sukhinder speaks about her transition from Google to Accel as a CEO in residence post which she moved in as a CEO at Polyvore. She speaks about some of the challenges in establishing a healthy dynamic with the Founder and the Board and the criticality of values fit in addition to complementary of skills and capabilities.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you speak about transitioning from leading a 2,000 odd member team at Google to Polyvore after a short stint in Accel, can you talk about that transition? And the reason I ask is in India, we are going through a tech boom, like rest of the world I guess, and we have several companies that are scaling up, that are recruiting senior executives from established corporations, not that Google is an established cooperation, but I am curious about your learnings from transitioning from an established organization to a founder-led startup, what is the benefit of hindsight, what are some of the themes that emerge?

Sukhinder Singh Cassidy (SC): Sure. So a couple of thoughts. So first of all before I went to Polyvore, I had been a founder who had a CEO at my company who I helped recruit at Yodlee and worked with him for five or six years. So I feel like I had lived a life of the founder who had an external CEO I had a lot of empathy for it. By the way, after I left Polyvore just on the side, I literally emailed Anil Arora who was the CEO of Yodlee and I said, I just want to say to you thank you for dealing and putting up with me when I was a founder, like let me tell you, on the other side to be the CEO to a founder holy smokes. So after Polyvore, I emailed him and this was like, thank you, and then I think about what I just went through, you have dealt with me for like five years and like very gratefully now I take my hat off to you because I was in the same place, not nearly so gracefully. Obviously, just to be clear, I went from Google to Accel because I wanted to learn e-commerce and study all the available choices before I picked one. So Accel was I was CEO-in-Residence, I sat in on investments and I specifically said, I think I want to go to e-commerce next. So that was what I did at Accel. That was one of my preparations for Polyvore honestly, it was like let me learn the industry. I would say in some ways I tried to be as savvy as I could. Again, risk is risk. You can never take it to zero. I knew the founder. This was the first time he was going to have a CEO. So David Lesser and I literally talked about what could I do to ease his fears. We agreed that in the first three months, I would just listen and try and say nothing, like, not nothing but just listen and hold it. So I said to David, I am going to need you in this transition. David also coached me on how to approach the Board because they had a relationship with Pasha. I remember when I met with the Board, I was like, look, I do not want to pick Pasha out of a relationship with you, that never works but let us just agree that we will have a dialogue. I am like, I know he is going to call you, like you guys have been working together for many years. So I am a new factor in this equation, so let us just agree that, you know, he will keep meeting

with you and that is great, I do not want to cut off that access. I mostly just want to be able to have a dialogue with you about what is going on. So I tried to establish my own kind of channels with the Board without saying like everything goes through me because I knew this he is the founder. And then I established like, you know, the third thing I did was like, Pasha, let us just go to coffee once a week. So these are some of the tactics I used. By the way, you may say what is the value these tactics if you did not end up, you know, having it worked out. But I think in all ways what I tried to do was create room for the founder did not feel like I was trying to assert my control over him. I mostly just thought like you are good at all things, I am not good at, you are a world-class engineer and have great product sensibilities I am go to market and I worked with, you know, and I had been a business founder to five engineers at Yodlee and I know what I know, I know what I do not know and I am really good at harnessing teams. So I would say my learning is, I do not actually and, you know, I do not mean this to be arrogant, I do not think I did anything wrong. I think I created a plan to try and hold his energy next to my own and not being competition. I said multiple times just like a marriage, so what makes a marriage work, it is like you both want your kids to grow up and go to IIT or to Harvard or to whatever, the point is like you have a common long-term goal and that keeps you in when the times are really tough. That is the way you have to approach something like this. It is like, but I would say my learning is and this is maybe useful learning for everybody out there, you can have all the best tactics, if your values overlap with the person which you are, you know, and your self-awareness and their self-awareness is not high, it is a hard marriage to make work. So a CEO-founder marriage is a very unique kind of marriage or quite frankly, COO founder is much harder because you both have a kind of moral authority over the company and you do not want to be in battle with each other where the company has literally been torn apart by the founder saying one thing and the CEO saying another. But I say it is like a marriage, you both have to have a pretty high amount of self-awareness, some decent amount of humility on the things you do not know, a commitment to some communication vehicle when things are really tough and most of all, most of all, common values. And ultimately, the founder and I did not share common values. And I talk about that in the book. He can be world-class, I can be world-class, our values overlap was not there. And maybe that is the thing I regretted, like as there was no way for me to discern, like what our value systems are and they were not the same.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If this topic is of interest, you might like the Curated Playlist – Transitioning to a new context. Several leaders speak about how they thoughtfully moved from one orbit to another. You might specifically like the conversation with R Gopalakrishnan who speaks about learnings from several failed transitions at the top and how we can prevent some of the mistakes that people often make in these situations.

End of nugget transcription

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Sukhinder Singh Cassidy - Nuggets

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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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