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Context to the nugget conversation

Sukhinder speaks about the notion of White spaces in an organization. These are the activities that are often at the interfaces of different functions and are often not captured in role descriptions. She says that very often people might be “green” in their respective roles but the project might be at a “red” in terms of status. She speaks about demonstrating and looking out for that behaviour as a leader wherever you are in the organization.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): In the book, moving on Sukhinder, you talk about this notion of stepping into the white space and delivering, can you talk a little bit about that, I like the phrase, stepping into the white space, can you expand on that for us?

Sukhinder Singh Cassidy (SC): Sure. And I will try and hit again on how it applies to leaders. I have seen many people who think that their biggest point of impact is doing their own job really well, let me say that again, doing your own job really well. We live in a world of specialists. I grew up in BusDev and Sales, you grew up in a different field but we all grow up a specialist of some kind. Until the CEO suite, one could argue you are specialist in a functional life. So often you get really smart people who think excellence and impact is about doing their thing extraordinarily well. Yet, we all as leaders, all of us, are frustrated when you can take a group of A players and put them in a room and, say, okay, we are on our way to, we are trying to make this project succeed, and it is a red right now. And then you kind of check in with every individual person and their thing is a green, and you are like how can you each individually be a green, yet, the status of the project is orange or red. Well, it is very simple. It is not because of the things that are owned, it is because of the things that are unowned. It is because as an old colleague of mine said, if you would stand and draw a circle around yourself, you would call that circle your job responsibility. And then if you lined up all the circles in a grid of all the people who are employees in the company, you would find that there are gaps between the circles. Who owns the gap? When projects fail, it is because of the thing that is failing us between the gap because everybody thinks their job is only the thing they own. And I am like, no no, great leaders of any dimension - Individual contributors, managers, all the way up to the CEO, step into the white space where the gap is and deliver what needs to get delivered and stop thinking about what your job responsibility is and think about what is needed to get to success. So that is what I mean when I say step into the white space.

DJ: Give us an example here. Let us say for a CEO or for a CXO?

SC: Yeah, here is a good example of a CXO, let us just say product and tech. Let us say, you have a Chief Product Officer and he has delivered the specs. You have a Chief Technology Officer, he said,

like, well, I delivered the specs. And then you look at the OKRs, like, okay, well, you delivered, you know, I mean this is a simplistic example, but you are like, you say you wrote the rights spec, you say you delivered the spec and yet, the product they just released to enterprise customer was buggy. Alright, so if we can all just sit here and say you guys both are perfect but together, you are failing. That might be a time I am making it up, where I am the Chief Product Officer and even though it is not my responsibility, theoretically, I might say like, hey, what I would love to do, can we just get both teams into a room and literally, let us just get everybody in the room altogether, park our egos at the door and let us just go through step-by-step. What were our strongest points and what were our failures is delivery or should we think about what is failing in our two ways. But like that key about stepping in the white space although is not to point fingers at someone else. That is very easy. That is very easy to say, the thing is to say, hey, guess what, I am not talking about your blame or my blame, can I just, like, I am happy to take the action item of, like, can I just call us altogether, like, all of us together in one room. I am happy to create an agenda, I am happy like, I have to go like, you know, have, you know, and go hear from everybody what they think their ideas are and create the doc that we can discuss. Those are all examples of like it is not my job as the head of product. But if we fail to deliver this project that, is a high-quality product that was not buggy enough in our first release, then it kind of does not matter whose job it is, can we just get that job done. So sometimes, it is uncomfortable to say, like, well, somebody needs to own that thing and we think we are stepping on somebody else and so you can just see be a facilitator, not because you are saying, you did it, I did it, you need the answer but when people do not take the opportunity to go step in, the most things just aren't done. And everybody is worried about looking perfect in their own role. And as a CEO, I love the people who step into the white space. Unlike those, we are extraordinary leaders. They kind of, like, yeah, it needs to get down, so I got it done. I am like, okay, awesome.

DJ: Got it. It is about owning the interface, sort of the stuff that slips through the cracks and sort of taking ownership.

SC: Absolutely. It is about taking ownership of the whole, not just your piece and whatever that requires you to do. Be a facilitator, be a facilitator, be a note taker, be a note taker, be the person who asks the question, ask the question. But not from a place looking to blame the other person, most of like, what does it need to get from here to the finish line. Like literally, what needs to happen for it to get over the finish line.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love the mental imagery of drawing circles around each one of us as the defined role and responsibility and the white space as the space between these circles that often moves the project forward. 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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