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Context to the nugget conversation

Ravi speaks about how he thinks about Specialization and Generalization. He uses the metaphor of Birds and Frogs to talk about the ability to adapt to new environments. He urges us to be a Swiss Army Knife rather than super specialty special purpose knife that could lose context if the environment changes.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Moving themes, Ravi, I loved your take on specialists and generalists as well. I love the quote in your book “the world needs birds and frogs, but in an uncertain and fast-changing world birds can find new habitats and food better than frogs and generalists will probably end up having more opportunities and can adapt to change better”. Can you say more about how you see these specialists and generalists’ question and also a little bit around how we should think about this over time? Is there a... the typical paradigm often is diverged and then converge, you know, diverge to build capability and then converge to exploit those capabilities. How do you think about that?

Ravi Venkatesan EP2 (RV): So, of course this framing of frogs and birds is Freeman Dyson’s but like everything he said and wrote about, I love it. Yeah, so, look for a long time again when the world was stable what was valuable was expertise and so it rewarded depth, particularly technical depth in any area. When the world is more fluid and fast-changing that’s both not enough and fairly risky because whatever expertise you have may suddenly not be so valuable. So, for instance, let’s say you are an expert and ustaad on repairing engines in a world that is rapidly trying to shift to electric vehicles, yeah, it could leave you stranded. So, yeah, so, I think what you want to be in this environment is a Swiss army knife rather than a carving knife or a bread knife or some special purpose knife because the circumstances and the food sources may change rather suddenly. And so, that’s the argument I make around generalist versus specialist. But it is not either or so much as is there a way to integrate both. And I would suspect that the answer lies in having somewhat of a T profile, where you have some expertise in some area and that is what grounds you, that’s what gets you going in your journey. But then on top of that is a horizontal, versatile set of skills and that probably is the more optimal way of approaching it is my own sense. Yeah, naturally, I have navigated towards being more of a generalist and, you know, even back 30 years ago when I was studying at business school, I didn’t choose finance or a particular function; I chose general management and I have enjoyed general management more than something more specialised all my life. And I think it is in large part that which has enabled me to make so many different transitions over the decades.

DJ: Hmm. It is a great point Ravi and to your earlier point about really the what do you say the top of the class getting disproportional returns and not having room for mediocrity. So, the tension I see is

how do you be a Swiss army knife, but at the same time ensure that you are top of the class of something, you know and not a me too.

RV: That's the paradox that you need to solve. And in my case for instance, I find that I am relatively good, I wouldn't say top of the class, but pretty decent at working with people, aligning people, getting people working behind a common goal, and that turns out to be a pretty valuable skill because 100 years from now it is probably still going to be relevant. So, you need to find whatever equivalent of that is for you.

DJ: Hmm, and I think back to your metaphor about the T, one of the pieces I learnt from Lynda Gratton whom you referred to is she talks about the notion of a Pi, you know, and the nuance she says is if you look at the symbol pi, the mathematical symbol pi, you have got one leg, one leg straight and the other leg in the air. So, she says one for stability and one to sort of proactively think about the future and I thought it was quite interesting.

RV: That's a lovely...

DJ: It was a little bit of a forward-looking hedge if you will.

RV: Yeah.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is a really tricky one. In Computer Science modelling, this is often modelled as the Explore Exploit problem. How much do you explore and when do you start exploiting in one place? It is not easy to have a clean answer to the question. The big discovery for me is that insights might come in our blind spot where people see us in dimensions that are orthogonal to how we see ourselves. In my work with leaders, I find that they often struggle with keeping the identity loose as they go through life. For instance, Photographer Atul Kasbekar (AK) talks about how he got the feedback that he is a Trusted player in the industry that led him to pivot towards Producing movies.

AK: *"I have a friend who is a spiritual guide and he lives in Bangalore. He was saying that this is an excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true he says, you know, you're actually a very habitable platform for people, who otherwise would never meet each other, to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create."*

DJ: Back to what Ravi says, the key is to be agile without necessarily losing the career capital we have built till date. That is not an easy problem to solve. The two themes that come to mind that might help us here are

- Heightened self-awareness (both internal and external-self-awareness)
- Loosening our grip with our identities

If you want to know more about self-awareness do tune into the conversation with Tasha Eurich. You might find the Curated Playlist on Identity and Self-awareness relevant if you want to dig deeper on these subjects.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Atul Kasbekar that is referenced: [Entrepreneurial pursuits beyond photography](#).

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Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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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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