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Context to the nugget conversation

Ravi speaks about what Leadership looks like in daily life. He speaks about instances of people around him that have taken initiative and have assumed Leadership. He says that Leadership is not a Noun, Title or a Position but is an act and a verb.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you spoke about waste management a couple of times Ravi in the book actually. I love your definition of leadership in the book, right? You say it is not an elite calling, it is the unrecognised potential in each one of us and you speak about what leadership looks like today in the world we live in the context of your neighbour Padmashree and how she moved from being a homemaker and a part-time teacher to becoming a leader in the space of waste management. So, can you sort of talk to us about this sort of this example of if I may use the term everyday leadership, right, and the fact that leaders could come from anywhere, if you could just expand on that?

Ravi Venkatesan EP2(RV): Yeah, so, I make the case and I devote a whole chapter to this idea that leadership is the central issue of our times. And you look at the world at any level, planet, country, city, neighbourhood, company, whatever unit, you will find that there is lots of problems but most of the solutions, many of the solutions exist, the resources exist, the talent know-how exists but somehow the problem doesn't get solved it persists and in fact grows bigger. And the reason for that is lack of leadership. Then you think further, why is there lack of leadership? Because our mental model of leadership is completely obsolete and unhelpful which is it is correlated with people who have title in a formal authority, etc. So, you expect the government to do something, the politician to do something, the manager to do something and mostly they don't. The system is in stable equilibrium because it suits all sorts of people with formal power to keep things the way they are. So, if things are going to get better, you have to get many more people not waiting to be rescued and helped but stepping up and being part of the solution and that's leadership. So, I say leadership in the 21st century is not a noun, it is not a title, it is not a position, it's actually an act, it is a verb. And that act is something that every human being is capable of. And so, I give examples like Padmashree, I give an example of a young boy who lives in a slum, a garbage dump in Ahmedabad and goes to a Teach for India school. I give example of a young mentee of mine who is now a successful young woman who started Kids for Code etc. and I said look, none of these cases that they have any formal authority, nobody asked them to do what they did. They felt a calling, they have decided to act on it and they have accomplished far more than what they would have imagined and what the world imagined they could accomplish. And so, to me this is the most powerful inspiring model for how we create a functioning society, how we create a functioning planet, which is leadership comes from anywhere and everywhere, it is ordinary people doing extraordinary things not about extraordinary people and I lay out what are the steps by which you can get started. And

again, I go back to young people, young children, and my work with UNICEF where we go to government schools, we get them involved in civic activities, little volunteering activities, change making activities of the smallest sort and that gives them a sense of agency. So, the example I give is, in a government school the school toilet hasn't functioned for three years, you have complained to the teacher, you have complained to the principal, nothing is happening, there is indifference apathy all around. So, we said look, why don't you fix it. And in the beginning, there is a shock, what do you mean I fixing it up, people will object or I don't know how to start and then you organise them, go find your friends and then you help them support them and pretty soon the toilet is fixed. And you have now developed that agency that is self-confident, oh, I am capable of doing something about some of my problems and no longer just a passive victim. And by the way, when I decided to go work on this issue others also joined me because they were vexed by the same thing. They just wanted somebody else to take the lead and so you develop followership and that feels pretty good. So, through these actions the flywheel starts and who knows where it may lead. So, I think it is incredibly important that all of us, be part of the solution to some problem that's bugging us. And the other thing I say is, look, this is the mother of all skills in the 21st century. If this is what the world is short of, if you are good at it, you don't have to worry about employment and finding food or how to put food on the table or any of these things. People are going to be beating a path to your door. Now, Padmashree since you talked about her. I mean, she is the most prominent citizen activist on waste. BBMP, the government, the municipal authority will not move on any issue without consulting her. Corporates that are thinking about their waste and recycling issues, they come to her; entrepreneurs come to her. She doesn't have to... and if she chose to monetise it, she could, for her that's not the issue. So, I say this is the most useful durable skill that you could possibly develop.

DJ: And may be just to stay with this example Ravi, can you talk to us about her journey from her beginnings just to give the average listener a sense of what's possible.

RV: Well, she just lives a few streets away from me in, Koramangala in Bangalore and her journey began a few years ago, five-six years ago when she got frustrated, where the garbage in front of her house on the street and despite complaining it was there and it was this ugly festering dark spot. So, her first action was simply to begin to clear it herself. And then other residents decided, this is terrible, you can't have a middle-aged lady doing this. So, they joined and so, in fact many of us on Sundays in the early days used to get together and beautify these spots. So, there was a similar ugly spot in front of our house and I remember the Sunday in 2015, when a whole bunch of people got together, we cleared it, we painted it and then we put some potted plants so that it would stay clean and then made a picture of a God or something so nobody will urinate out there. So, you do these things. Then you say, oh, now we have cleared all the spots, what's next? So, you are feeling good about doing this work, then you take on this plastics, single-use plastics and say, how do we minimise the use of single-use plastic? Can we get every household now to segregate wet and dry waste so it becomes easier to compost the wet and recycle the dry? So, you then, so each thing leads to something bigger. Right now, what she is leading is what is called a 7-star project in one of the wards in Bangalore. 7-star in Swachh Bharat is the highest level of systemic cleanliness you can achieve. So, there is a project which involves civil society, citizens, companies and BBMP to create Bangalore's first model ward, which is 7-star with a plan to replicate that success across the city. I mean, wow, it is just unimaginable in just five-six years.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com

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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