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Context to the nugget conversation

Alisa speaks about the phenomenon where the Founder, as the company scales up, has to give away some part of the job that he or she really really enjoyed. As the company scales up the Founder often needs to get involved with the building of the company and not really the specific activity or function that really brought him or her energy. And that can be a non-trivial transition.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Just moving on, the other term that really got my attention was this notion of giving away your Legos, you talk about the term used by First Round Capital in one of their articles, and you say that when companies scale up, you say that there is a point where you need to give away something that you are really passionate about in pursuit of scale. Can you talk a little bit about how founders manage this dichotomy and how they keep their mojo as they move away from things that give them joy?

Alisa Cohn (AC): Yeah, it is so difficult. Founders start their company to build their thing, whatever that is, and they are excited about the thing they are building. But then overtime, they are like less and less close to the building of the thing and much closer to a need to be focused on the building of the company. So, founders, I am just thinking, like there is two or three founders particularly I am thinking of right now who, you know, they get into the startup and they start to disrupt an industry. And someone I just got off a call with just this afternoon, he is very excited about all the success, they are completely overachieving their success, like a series D startup, really growing up, overachieving and that is fantastic. But over the past few years, this founder has been focused on being external voice for the company, fundraising when necessary, attracting new executives that they need to be successful, and really has very little to do with the product itself or the thing they are building itself, and it continues to be a source of grief for him, like as in that is what he wanted to do. And so, the company is succeeding and the company is going to achieve his vision, however, his hands are no longer, kind of involvements, very difficult for people to realize that they have to give away their Legos and then to actually give away their Legos. I spoke to Dennis Crowley, the founder and former CEO of Foursquare, and what he told me in my book was, which I have put my book, was, first you give away the things you do not like. So, he gave away operations and that was okay, he did not really care what the legal stuff, he did not want to really budget or learn to make payroll, that was not his thing. And then you have to give away the other things like sales and like having no connection anymore to kind of the engineering. And then, you have to give away product, that was his baby and there was like really sad that he had to give away product to somebody else, but that is the Legos you have to give away over time. Now I would say on the bright side of that, especially for employees who come in into high growth situations, they get to give away their Legos, they do not have to give away, they get to, you earn, when you come into a company and you are not the

founder yourself, your job is to be constantly hiring new people, to do the things that you were going to do, and then you get to move on to more strategic stuff or more high-level stuff and managing more people. And it is good for the company and good for you but you as an employee often have to have faith that there will be something there for you on the other side of that.

DJ: Hmm. But with the founders that do this well, any insights around how they, like you spoke about this founder who had to give away product eventually, what have you learnt about how they do this effectively, any thoughts there?

AC: Yeah, a lot of thoughts. So first of all, it is accepting that that is part of the process, that is like definitely number one. Number two is getting real alignment from the executive team what we are trying to do here because even if you do not have your hands in it, you want to feel the satisfaction that it is working. So being clear with your executives, your employees, what we are building, how we are building it, like specific clear goals to get them on the same page. And the third is especially hiring people who you know are in line with your vision and your values so that you will be able to enjoy the fruit of their work and not have to constantly correct them. Because when you have confidence that they are going to do a good job, you are going to be more likely to be comfortable giving away your Legos and less likely to regret that you gave anything up because you know that they are handling it without you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Three things occur to me here.

Firstly, at a personal level, I can so relate to this point about not wanting to Give away your Legos. People have often suggested that I should think of scaling up the Podcast as a platform and may be get other interviewers or scale up the advisory practice by getting more Partners in but I have resisted it. One of my friends once told me that I have an artisanal mindset and I feel that captures who I am. I derive great energy from having deep, purposeful one on one conversations and have tried to anchor around these to lead a life which gives me flexibility to prioritize what is really important at that particular passage of play in life. I do wonder if I have developed a block here and am not being open to possibilities but that is the call I have taken for now.

Secondly, my observations from my conversation with Founders is that a lot of them have a very strong WHY and they use the WHY as a prioritization mechanism to focus on what might be less energizing but still critical for them to do in pursuit of their Vision and Purpose. Without that anchor, it can often be hard for Founders to give up their Legos as Alisa says.

Thirdly, this is where the complementarity of the Founders or the Leadership team often comes in. I was speaking with Sanjeev Aggarwal (SA) and TN Hari, authors of the book – From Pony to Unicorn. They talk about the three themes that a Start-up should think about – Growth, Efficiency and Foundation. They go on to say that Growth often comes naturally to the Founder but the other two don't. So, can they get together with somebody who can bring in that mindset.

SA: *“Yes, actually one very simple way to think about this is that I will simplify it further to say that there is one role of growth and other role of say efficiency and foundation or you can say there is a role of vision and forward-looking and then there is a role of minding the store day in and day out. And in our book we talk about this rhythm of Brahma and Vishnu that entrepreneurs are very good at envisioning a future and if they can surround themselves with a Vishnu who excels in day-to-day execution then magic happens and, you know, if you look at all great entrepreneurs in the country*

like Mukesh Ambani, for example, he has Mr. Modi who plays that role of getting it done or if you have Sanjeev Bikhchandani at Naukri, he has Hitesh Oberoi as his ally in making sure that there is world-class execution. So, founders can think of themselves as more the visionaries because that is a very intrinsic capability that is hard to inculcate and then surround themselves with an execution person. So, a CEO / COO combination can do wonders to disciplined growth.

DJ: As a Leadership team, do you bring in these complementarities, not just in terms of the Functional Portfolio you run but in terms of the orientation you bring (whether it is growth, efficiency or foundation). Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Sanjeev And Hari that is referenced: [Three rhythms of a scale up](#).

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Alisa Cohn - 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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