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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayelet speaks about the notion of Psychological reactance – the tendency to “not do” what you are told to do. She speaks specifically about how this shows up in the context of parenting and what we can do to avoid it.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I think moving to measurement, later in the book, you talk about the concept of psychological reactance. Actually, we are still in the realm of goal setting. You talk about the criticality of us owning a goal. And as I was reading it, I was wondering what implications does this concept have in the way we lead and in the way we parent children, could you throw light on this concept of psychological reactance that you talk about in the book?

Ayelet Fishbach (AF): Psychological reactance is our tendency to not want to do something just because we were asked to do that. It is this feeling that we do not have our freedom of choice, we are not allowed to do something or we are asked to do something, and therefore, we do not want to do that. It is very easy to see it with kids and, in particular, with teenagers because they are very strong on reactance. I was saying before the avoidance goals tend to be problematic. Let me quote one study that looked at what happens when you tell teenagers not to eat certain foods, well, guess what, these are exactly the foods that they want to eat. Now I tell my child that they should not eat French fries, and there is nothing that they want more than French fries. So psychological reactance can be a problem, and for motivating others, also for motivating ourselves, it is important to own our goals, it is important to understand that. Whatever someone is suggesting to us to do is a suggestion, we need to accept it, we need to own these goals, and if we do not own these goals, then we might rebel.

DJ: Hmm. So taking next step Ayelet, may be staying with the use case of parenting, any inputs on how to inspire the children towards a certain direction than ask them dos and don'ts, which leads to reactance?

AF: Ask them about their goals, ask questions in general is a way to influence people. We know that the way to influence anyone, and kids are no exception, is by getting them to influence themselves, by getting the person to adopt the idea to the extent that they feel like they came up with the idea, they own the idea, it is theirs, the goal is mine, I decided to have it. You can do it via actions. Sometimes, you have to just suggest activities to kids without necessarily talk about the goals, why do not we go and play soccer. You do not necessarily need to say that this is important because you need to exercise or because you need to be outside. We did the study with food where we found

that telling kids that food will make them stronger or healthy, it was counterproductive. If you just put the food on the table, they will eat more.

DJ: That is a fascinating insight actually, yeah. Got it.

AF: Yeah. They were not teenagers, they were 3 to 5-year old. So they were very young and they were already realizing that if someone tells me that this food will make me smarter, then probably, this food is not good, it is not very tasty, and we just put that food on the table, they ate.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I came across the point around Psychological Reactance in my conversation with Jennifer Petriglieri (JP). She is a Professor at INSEAD and is the author of the book – Couples that work which is about how dual career couples manage both their journeys. She speaks about the notion of how one of them can provide a secure base for the other to explore but more importantly she uses a phrase which stayed with me – Giving a loving kick to gently move them away from the comfort zone.

JP: *“So the couples who do very well I found are those who flick their model of support from that to a model of support called a secure base. Now secure means three things first it means of course there is that level of comfort that level of support but layer on top of that are another two things. One is an if I can think if there is a loving kick away from a relationship so loving persuade say you know I’ll be here to dust you off but you get out there and figure it out so if you aren’t sure if you are having these existential questions the response is don’t worry, we will be fine. It’s okay gets out there then and figures something else this push to explore a push away from the safety of the relationship away from the comfort zone and into that learning there are not risk zone. Now this a bit counterintuitive because in a relationship when our partner feeling a little bit uncertain and a little bit wobbly our natural instincts just like that with our children is to hold them close is to give them a cuddle you know metaphor and this is quite the opposite when we see our partner struggling with something feeling a little bit unsure instead of pulling them close we actually push them away and in a loving way and to it’s quite a different model of support but the third thing about a secure base is also a very arm’s length support so it’s not about interfering it’s not about did you call that head hunter, did you read that book did you go to that networking event that really unhelpful so it’s a real arm’s length push away and what I found in couples was when they could both do this for each other when they could both provide the secure base that’s when the magic happened because what happened was both partner could then go out and do the work the experimentation, exploration and reflection that all of us need to do to get to your transition and both felt very supported in that and both could get to the other side.”*

DJ: Sailing, not driving is a term I came across in one my recent coaching conversations. I think that captures the crux of the approach!

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Jennifer Petriglieri that is referenced: [Securing the base for the other to explore](#).

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Ayelet Fishbach - 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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