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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayelet speaks about how we should think about “glass half full or empty” when it comes to motivating ourselves or others around us. Do we look at the ground we have traversed or the distance ahead? She speaks about the nuance involved here and when each of the approaches might make sense for us to motivate ourselves or others around us.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And in terms of motivation, you talk about how we need to be thoughtful about whether we use the glass half full approach or half empty approach in the way we measure progress, do we think about the height we have climbed or the height that we are yet to climb. Can you shine some light on which of these approaches might make sense in which context?

Ayelet Fishbach (AF): You can always monitor progress in terms of what you achieved or in terms of what you still need to achieve. You can look at your job and say, here is what I achieved, here is what is still ahead at me. You can look at some loyalty program that you were involved in and look at the rewards that you already collected or the rewards that are still ahead of you. Turns out that it is really important for motivation and how you monitor your progress will impact your motivation. And specifically when you look back, that helps you establish your commitment. If you look back and you say, well, I have already done so much at my job, then you feel more committed, you feel that what you do is more valuable, you feel more able and your past actions suggest to you that you can do it very well. And so looking back is very useful when we are unsure about our commitment. When we dealt with it, this is something that is useful or something that I can do, look back at what you already did, and you discover that, yes, you can do it, you already did some of it, you are capable. Looking ahead is motivating when it encourages progress, when it highlights how far we are from the goal in a way that leads us to close the gap. When we think about this discrepancy, like I wanted to be somewhere and I am a little bit away from it, I will increase my effort to get there. The metaphor that we sometimes use is the metaphor of the thermostat. The thermostat senses that the room is not warm enough, so the engine gets into action to get temperature higher and our motivation system sometimes does the same. Now the question is when should I look back, well, if your uncommitted, you want to look back. If you are already committed, you already know that something is important, then you want to look ahead at what is missing. To give you an example, we did the study with students that were studying for either an exam that was not very important for them, so they were not really sure about their commitment, or an exam that was absolutely important that was part of their major. Turned out that for the important exam, directing students to think about the materials that they have already covered increased their commitment. For the important exam, directing the attention to the materials that they have not yet covered increased their motivation, thinking about what they still need to study increased their motivation to study.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I find that the application for this in parenting. We often show goal-posts to kids in the spirit of motivating them to put in the hours and work harder. I have fallen into the trap several times. A classic instance was the case of my daughter learning the Piano. When she was in Grade 2 or 3, we discovered that there was a Russian piano teacher in Mumbai who was arguably one of the best in town and we got her to start our daughter on Piano. The lady was very good but we noticed that she would come down really hard on our daughter and would get frustrated and angry if our daughter didn't respond. If you have seen the movie Whiplash, it is a bit like the character Terence Fletcher played by JK Simmons for which he won the Oscar for best Supporting Actor. It came to a point where my wife and I noticed that her self-confidence was being destroyed. Nothing against the Russian teacher but just that it wasn't working for my daughter and to use Ayelet's language, I don't think at that stage of life she was committed to pushing herself to being the best Piano player she could be. We took a call to discontinue with that lady and found a gentleman who was a lot more caring and covered much less ground but focused on bringing the love of the instrument to her. Along the way, as he would come to teach my daughter, he saw my younger son was showing interest in music and got him a Ukulele and got him started on the journey of learning. One thing led to another and now my son is hooked to learning the guitar and my daughter is enjoying the journey of learning the Piano. She may not become the concert pianist that the Russian teacher wanted her to be but may be that is OK. If and when she crosses that bridge of commitment, maybe we could consider a harder approach. One of my earlier guests Raj Raghunathan speaks about this quite nicely. He says that in Love vs Discipline, Love always wins. He refers to the movie Sound of Music and says that the approach of Maria is far superior to the approach of Capt. Von Trapp. Back to what Ayelet says, I guess, the key element to look out for is the commitment to the activity and using that to determine the kind of motivational approach that might work for you.

The last point I might make here is that whenever we are embarking on something new, it takes a while for the compounding curve to kick in and for us to see the ground we are beginning to cover. James Clear, author of Atomic Habits calls it the Plateau of Latent Potential. In that period, it is helpful to look at the small wins and progress and motivate ourselves than the mountain top. Once we see traction and we have conviction that this path makes sense, then we can start using the mountain peak as a motivator to pull us to the top.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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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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