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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayelet speaks about the fact that we often have celebrations at the beginning of a journey and at the end of the journey and it is the long messy middle during which we often struggle to find the motivation to keep marching forward. She shares some insights on how we can overcome this long middle.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Ayelet, moving to a different section in the book, you go on to say that we do a good job of motivating ourselves at the start and at the finish line, but it is a long middle which is the hard part. Can you say more about how we should think about sustaining a motivation in the middle?

Ayelet Fishbach (AF): First, we should realize that it is going to be hard in the middle. We celebrate beginnings, we celebrate ends. When students come to campus, we have a party, when they graduate, we have a party. At the beginning of the year, we celebrate the new year, at the end of the year, we also have our holiday parties. We celebrate beginnings and ends, and the middles are not so easy. Once we realize that, we can start to address it. And one thing that we can do is having short middles. Let me give you an example, in our studies, we found that people relax their both, like ethical and performance standards in the middle, and so we shorten the middles. One example is a study in which people were cutting shapes out of paper, so we kind of drew shapes with many corners and we gave them a pair of scissors and they had to cut the first shape in the second shape and the third shape and so on. The first and the last shape they were not having any trouble with, they were doing perfect job, the middle is when they were literally cutting corners, there, they did not do a good job. And so what do you do, well, you make that the middle short. You set subgoals, you think about a weekly goal, or a quarterly goal instead of an annual goal, and all these keep the middles short. You also remind people that their identity is attached to their performance, and so it will make it harder to hide from yourself in the middle, you will realize that, you are watching yourself in the middle, and that helps. And another solution is to just have a fresh start, and Katy Milkman has worked on the fresh start effect. Now a Monday, the first day of the month, my birthday, always seems to have a fresh start of your goal, you are no longer in the middle, you are at the beginning.

DJ: Hmm. Katy was in this podcast a few weeks back and she spoke about how Google had used fresh start and tried to create moments around which people could be triggered to action, so it is fascinating to hear that.

AF: Yeah, like she did a lot of work on it. And the nice thing about the first start effect is that it is not really the beginning of the goal, it is some other cue that makes you think like this is a beginning. You are not starting your exercise goal because it is a Monday, you are just using Monday to say oh, it is the beginning of the week and if my subgoal is to exercise three times this week, then the beginning is on Monday.

DJ: Absolutely. Just to give a different example, one of the entrepreneurs I was talking to on this podcast, he actually spoke about his family business and the fact that there were a lot of internal conflict, and he said what helped in resolving that was actually the death of a loved one in the family. In a way, it was an opportunity for a fresh start for everybody to huddle together and move towards a better relationship with each other which is interesting. After I spoke to Katy and when I used that language, it seemed to make sense that we can have fresh start opportunities in various things that are happening around us.

AF: Yeah, I like this. I mean it is a sad example but I like it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love the point Ayelet makes about short middles. Dan Pink (DP) speaks about the notion of having punctuation marks in the context of catching drifts.

DP: *“Peter Drucker has a technique that I use, because Peter Drucker figured out everything that you and I thought we figured out 50 years ago, I cannot think of what it is called Deepak but I do it myself, is that, what you do is you write a memo or you say, here is my prediction of how the next six months are going to go, this is what I do, and I cannot think what, it is not my idea, it is Drucker’s idea, I am going to think through the next six months and here is my prediction of how things are going to go. And then, I put it in drop box and I never look at it, except that six month from that date, I put a tickler in my calendar to look at that. And then I see, okay, so where were my forecasts right, where were they not. And at some level, that kind of punctuation mark, that kind of assessment might allow us to do that. I feel like there is the way to avoid the frog in the boiling water, is to, sort of, set up a timer and stick your finger in to see how hot the water is getting.”*

DJ: The other thing that Ayelet speaks about is the notion of a Fresh start. Here is Katy Milkman (KM) of Wharton who has researched this notion of Fresh Start and how we can apply it to our lives.

KM: *“What we found is that there are moments, this would not surprise you at all that feel more like fresh starts to people. And the one that we are all familiar with already is New Years. This is a moment when around the world people are setting resolutions at a higher rate than usual, trying to pursue goals at a higher rate than usual, and it feels like a fresh start. The psychology of New Year’s actually turns out to be familiar and extends to many other moments, but the psychology of New Years is you can say, sort of, well, that was the old me last year, the old me could not achieve this, you know, the old me tried to quit smoking and failed, but that was a whole different person. The new me in the New Year can do it. And you feel this dissociation from your past failures in this renewed optimism as you open a new chapter in life. What we found is that New Years is actually just one moment that has that new chapter fresh start feeling. There are lots of other moments on the calendar and in life when we also feel we are turning a page and can get that same dissociation from past failures and motivation, and also the likelihood that we might actually step back and think big picture about our lives is greater. So some of those moments include, according to our research, the start of a new week or a new month, the celebration of holidays that feel like fresh starts in our culture, the celebration of birthdays. And, of course, there is other research looking not only at these*

psychological or temporal markers that give us the sense of a clean slate and a fresh start, but if you physically change environments, that has not only psychological appeal and helps you, but it can literally disrupt routines in a way that is helpful as well.”

DJ: The way I see it we need to have shorter middles and find the right punctuation markers, whether they are journal entries, Fresh start opportunities, mini-goals or something else. We need to find what works for us to keep us on track during the long road in the middle. If you want to learn more, do tune into the conversation with Dan Pink and Katy Milkman. You can just go to playtopotential.com and find them in the Guests section.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Katy Milkman that is referenced: [The power of a fresh start](#).

Nugget from Dan Pink that is referenced: [Rifts and Drifts](#).

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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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