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Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about the myth of the False Binary and how that can lead us to choosing from a limited set of options. It is a very powerful concept which can have a profound implication on how we make choices especially during key phases of transitions.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And you also talk about the myth of the false binary. Sometimes, as leaders, people are presented options as A or B, but maybe there is a C out there or D or E or F. So can you talk a little bit about how we ensure we do not get trapped in sort of a false binary kind of a context?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (TW): The first step is really to recognize it. And so part of this work is built on another reframing thinker, Roger Martin who has written extensively about this. I really like the historical anecdote of Henry Kissinger, the U.S. statesman, he is joking and he is saying, well, how do you handle a President and how do you work as a civil servant with them. And he says, well, if you want a President to continue working with your current policy, then you say, Mr. President, we have three options, surrender, the current policy or nuclear war. It really beautifully encapsulates how the person defining the options, they have a lot of power that they may use for good or not for good necessarily. So it is really about recognizing, whenever you are faced with, hey, here are your two options, your immediate question should be, well, is there maybe a third option or maybe even the option of not choosing anything right now but delaying the decision for that matter. We know from a lot of studies of decision making that the second you go in and create more options for yourself, your tendency to make a good choice, it improves dramatically. So be wary of those kind of, here is A or B options that life sometimes presents us with.

DJ: There is a funny anecdote here. As a parent, I have a 12-year-old and an 8-year-old. With the younger one, we actually tried this. In the spirit of getting him to eat healthy stuff, we would present two healthy options as a choice, you know, you want carrots or broccoli, and he sort of fell for it a couple of times. The third time he said, I think there is chocolates in the fridge.

TW: Well, that is on you for having smart kids. It is a lot easier if the kids are stupid.

DJ: It is a double-edged sword, but you are right, I think much to be grateful for. I think maybe a more real life situation, actually, this happened to me when I went for a coffee shop, let us say this is a Starbucks equivalent and Indian equivalent of Starbucks, I remember walking up to the counter looking to order a coffee and the guy said, what do you want, medium or large. And I paused there and said, do you have a small. He said, yes we do. And then he gave me a small. But sometimes

people, especially in retail, present options and they know that you are rushed and they want you to pick quickly and they give you an adverse selection of the menu.

TW: Certainly, and a beautiful example, even you can do this with very small things as well. I would not be surprised if that was not accidental. From that coffee chain, they probably, at some point, discovered, hey, this actually increases our sales if we ask, and it is benign clients, so customers still have the option of choosing the small one if they want, we are just nudging them.

DJ: Nudging, exactly. I was reading the book *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and he talks about the way you present options and how that leads to help people pick whether it is pensions or whether it is Netflix subscription.

TW: Exactly, right, it is a very good point. I would add to that, you can even sometimes do this with choices that seem binary. An example is, let us say, you do not have kids and you are trying to decide should I have kids or not, that is pretty binary by nature. But even then, you can go in and change the question to say, under what conditions would I want to have kids. Then you start to think differently about it versus as kind of a yes or no choice if you want.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is a really powerful idea and I find that several leaders fall into this trap given how busy they are. This is a classic case of being so busy with your current life that you don't have the mind-space to ask the question, what else is out there? A cup of coffee is not a big deal but I have seen it in the way senior leaders approach their careers. As a former Search Consultant at EgonZehnder, when I would reach out to a busy successful leader with a potential opportunity, the discussion would very often center around a binary choice – take this new role or stay on in the current job? But very often, there is a third or a fourth pathway which might not be in the menu card which might be the right answer for you.

I recently came across this term WAY-POWER in the context of resilience. Rather than obsess over will-power which is really about withstanding the shock, Way-power speaks about the power of generating new ideas and pathways that might get you to a better place. I love the phrase that Bruce Feiler (BF) uses in this context. He is the author of the book – *Life in the Transitions*. He has studied several journeys and how they have gone through life-quakes. He says that very often we shape-shift through situations rather than grinding our way through!

BF: *“Well, let me first of all just say that there has not been a more fetishized word in business and in life in the last decade than resilience and the problem with resilience is that resilience is one of those words and ideas that grew up back in the linear age, back when our lives were shaped by the factory and by industrial manufacturing. Resilience actually is a term of physics that began with a spring. And so, the idea was that you would pull the spring and how resilient “the spring” was, was how far the spring would spring back into its original position. So, that implies that you go back after going through a life transition and some people go back but frankly many more people go sideways or forward or to a different direction altogether. So, resilience is not the model and the pandemic is a perfect example of this. If you think when this first happened, we all thought oh, we are going to wait six weeks and we are going to go back to normal. Well, it is we are looking at a year plus at this point and what we’ve now learned is we are not going back, we are going to a different place. And in fact, that’s why when we get in as we go forward in this conversation and start talking about the various kind of stages and phases of a life transition that the first one is to say goodbye to the world that is not coming back, the world without the loved one or without the job or without the title or without*

the legs or whatever has been lost in the original lifequake. So, instead what happens is that we rethink what's important to us. And so, the kind of the quick and dirty on the idea of the shape back to the original shape conversation we were having is that there are kind of three pillars we have to how we make meaning in our lives. I call them the ABCs of meaning. And the A is agency, what we do or make or create. The B is belonging, our relationships, our colleagues, our friends, our loved ones, our co-religionists, people we volunteer with. And then the C is a cause, a calling, a purpose or something higher than ourselves. So, we all have a way that we kind of balance these. I am an ABC, I am a writer so, I am very agentic, I am very involved with family and a very active dad and cause is kind of less important to me. My wife Linda Rottenberg who started and runs an organization called Endeavor that supports high impact entrepreneurs in 50 countries around the world, she's very cause oriented. She gets back to entrepreneurs all over the planet. Then she's very agentic because she's you know a founder and a builder and a social entrepreneur. Relationships yeah, she tolerates the rest of us. So, she's like the CAB. So, what tends to happen when we go through a lifequake is that we rebalance like maybe we have been working very hard and we want to spend more time with our family or maybe we have been a caretaker or caring for an aging relative or a child and maybe we are now moving on from that and we want to give back or maybe we have been giving back in our career, we want to do something more for ourselves. So, what tends to happen in these lifequakes is because they are sort of breaks in the normal, they are opportunities and, in some ways, I would even say obligations to rethink what's most important to us and allows us to kind of breathe, take stock and maybe then shift our priorities somewhat."

DJ: Back to what Thomas says, pausing and asking ourselves if there are options in the menu card beyond might get you to a better place. There is a bias that psychologists call "What you see is all there is" BIAS. If you want to know more, there was a long article I wrote on this on LinkedIn. You can just go to my page and find this in the Artlcles section.

Thank you for listenting.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Bruce Feiler that is referenced: [Shape-shifting instead of resilience](#).

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Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Nuggets

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- 92.02 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Myth of the false binary
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- 92.04 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Presented vs Open-ended problems
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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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Podcast Transcript [92.02 Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - Myth of the false binary](#)

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