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Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about the challenges in framing questions that are specific to our journeys. Philosopher Rene Descartes asked the question – Who am I? Is that the right question? Or is it something else? “What the Heck do I do with my life” is the title of a recent book by Ravi Venkatesan (who has also been on the podcast). Thomas sheds some light on how we can frame some of the fundamental questions we ask around our lives.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And maybe just moving into this realm of external versus internal inquiry. One is about solving elevators and solving coffee chain problems but the other is reflecting on our journeys, our lives, our choices and understanding ourselves where clearly we have eyes to see the world but sometimes, the eyes that see ourselves are quite heavily tinted as you would appreciate. So one of the questions that come to mind is, given that there are multiple biases that come into play when we go on the internal inquiry, couple of questions, one is how do we try and stay objective in that pursuit, second is what is the plane at which we conduct the inquiry. As a coach, sometimes people come and ask me how do I play to my potential, sometimes they say, I have made all the money, what do I do with my time, sometimes they say, how do I choose A career versus B career or C career or sometimes they say, how do I make the biggest impact. And you can keep it tactical, you can keep it philosophical and you can sort of go as deep or as broad. So how do you think about getting the plane right to solve some of these lines of inquiry?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (TW): Hmm, I almost want to break that up into two things, there is the external internal thing which you highlighted asking about how do we remain objective despite all of these biases. My answer to that is in brief, I do not think we can. Like, being aware of your biases is not the same as being capable of superseding them. So there is a shortcut to that which is to involve other people in your considerations. That is why I think coaching can be so powerful or even just having good friends whom you can draw on, there is something you cannot get objectivity, but you can get if you like inter-subjectivity, meaning, you pull different people in different biases and somewhere between that or among them, you start to get a more neutral perspective and maybe a slightly more distance perspective on the problems that you are struggling with. So that is one of the reasons we have always had coaches because we instinctively understand the power of having somebody else involved in discussing an internal problem you are facing. I almost want to hear what your experience has been on that front as well. I mean you have worked with those two, do you have other pieces of advice?

DJ: Very true. That is a great point. The one of the pieces of insight I got was from a lady called Tasha Eurich who has written a book called Insight which is about how do you deepen your self-awareness

and one of the things she says which has stayed with me is, she said, internal self-awareness and external self-awareness which is when you involve others are often orthogonal. You would think that they are highly correlated but her insight was that people can sometimes tell you things that are completing in your blind spot and that can be really powerful. A related point came up in my another conversation with a gentleman called Dan Cable, he is a Professor at London Business School, and he says that when you are trying to reinvent your career or take stock and move forward, get others to contribute to your highlights reel. He sort of uses the metaphor of sports and he says, just like you might have a highlight reel of a baseball game or a basketball game, what would your highlights reel look like in the last 40 years, 50 years, whatever. And you might be a poor judge of the difference you have made to other, so get others to contribute and that might tell you something about yourself that you yourself might not be aware of. So I guess all of these point to the roughly similar point, involve others in what shape or form, I guess it is a choice.

TW: I agree. And I think both Dan Cable and Tasha Eurich's perspectives are kind of hitting that same point. Whenever I think of Tasha Eurich's Insights, I am thinking about that person who goes to a two-week retreat in the mountains and thinks deep thought about themselves and really connects to what they are thinking while still being utterly clueless that most of their team think they are arrogant because you are not going to learn that on the mountaintop, you are going to have to talk to people in your life. I love Dan's approach because it is positive, hey, when did I show up as the best version of myself, when did I make a positive difference for you. That is just a great way to both get an outside perspective and also listen into, you know, give other people in your life a chance to guide you a little bit in your path.

DJ: True and lean into what makes you distinctive. Rather than trying to fix issues, I guess it is about us discovering what makes us distinctive and playing the game that lends itself to that distinctiveness. A more personal anecdote is when I was at the cusp of transition between McKinsey and Egon Zehnder about 13-14 years back, I remember a senior director, at that time, I was evaluating options like we see PE strategic planning roles, operating roles, etc., and one of the senior partners, a gentleman called Ramesh Mangaleswaran, looked at me and said, I have a sense that you have an attitude for executive search, have you thought about it. And at that time, I did not even know what executive search was as a profession, the fact that this could be a profession and the fact that I could be a fit. And then he said, I will introduce you to this guy at Egon Zehnder that led to a chain of events which eventually led me to joining Egon Zehnder. But the point is if I really trace back to the genesis of that pathway, it was that outside input that I could have never discovered in a mountaintop, you know, to your point.

TW: Yeah. There is something paradoxical about that because I think of it both as with identity who we are, what we are good at and with the specific problem you are trying to solve. In both cases, we can be too close to see things clearly, like you can have a problem that you have struggled with for, like in career or work or personal life or whatever, you have struggled with it for five years, you really know the problem in some sense and yet, what I found consistently, hearing somebody else's perspective, somebody who is further away from than you are can really be a game changer. It can give you exactly, as it happened to you it sounds like, suddenly a new thought where just like, oh, I had not thought about that before despite having been you your entire life, we still need that outside perspective.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When I work with leaders in the context of helping them play to their potential, I find it helpful to find the first 3-4 months really getting to the bottom of questions like When do you come alive,

what makes you distinctive, when do you experience highs and lows, What matters to you and so on. I do that by indulging the leader in a set of journaling practices and by speaking to around 20 people around the leader at work at on the personal front whether it is close relatives or friends. When I play that back to the leader, that often widens the self-awareness and also gives the leader a certain set of criteria by which they can evaluate solutions sets as they appear. I still don't have a clean answer to what is the right way to frame the question as we go through life? The working version I have is "Am I playing to my full potential in all aspects of my life given my current context and given what I care about"? Needless to say this is a work in progress and am sure this will evolve as I move forward through life.

If this particular question intrigues you, you might like the recent conversation with Ravi Venkatesan, who has authored the book – What the Heck do I do with my life? We cover some of the ground in the context of this question.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - 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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