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Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about what we could do in the way we frame the questions so that we can elicit candid responses from the other side.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And another point you make at a different point in the book is about how we frame questions so that we elicit authentic responses. I think you talk about this in the context of having exit interviews with people who leave a company and very often, these end up being very bland conversations. And you actually mention that sometimes, the juice come out when you ask a contract question which is tell me how the company failed you rather than the other way round. So can you talk a little bit about eliciting the next level of insight and the wisdom of framing the right questions?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (TW): So exit interview is such a good example of that because when you ask people so you decided to leave our company why do you do it, people tend to say, well, I got a better offer. Why do they say that, well, it may be true, but also, they highlight that because it is a non-contentious reason for leaving. If you just say, well, I got a better offer, I understand that, you are not burning any bridges, the reality might be that they left it, their offer was only a little bit better but what really mattered to them was to get away from a specific leader that they really could not work very well with. And so that does not come up if you just accept the first answer that is put on the table. It is not that it is wrong, it might be true, but there is typically more to the story. So even just asking, oh, yeah, I totally understand that, what else would you add to that, other factors, like just ask more questions than necessarily having accepting the surface value of the first thing that they put on the table.

DJ: Hmm. That is interesting. For me to provide a contra view, I used to be a search consultant in my previous life at Egon Zehnder and very often, candidates would often call you, the candidates that do not make the final list saying do you have any feedback for me, and very often, the lazy answer or the non-committal answer would be, no, that was a better candidate or, you know, this was not a good fit for you. But really, even if I go back to some of my conversations, it would require courage to give that hard feedback saying, you know, you came across as too greedy or you came across as too operational and not strategic or whatever the reason might be. And very often, that is often the bitter truths in the moment but 5 years later or 10 years later, some of these people call you and say, you know, thank you for that feedback, it is valuable, if you had not told me, then I would not have had the opportunity to correct it. So it is quite a profound point indeed.

TW: I have noticed in my own life that I have sometimes been held back from sharing honest feedback because of the fear of the reaction. And whenever I really think about it when I have tried giving direct feedback, it is very rare to get negative reactions, or even if you do, I think as you point out, they may have an initial bad reaction and then later, it kind of actually hits home for them. And it does require courage and it does require you, it is almost an investment in them, it is a belief in them that they can become better. I am sharing this feedback with you because I think that the next time we work together or you work with somebody else, I think you can actually become something more powerful, this almost comes to your topic of potential, I believe in what you can become.

DJ: And the reason I am giving this feedback is because I care for you in the sense at some level, the very fact that I am, you know, maybe just another anecdote on this came from the man Egon Zehnder himself. When I was leaving the firm, he used to meet all the consultants and he was quite active in the recruitment process, so I met him in his home office in Zurich. When I was leaving the firm, I wrote a note to him saying, you know, it has been a great journey, learnt a lot, thank you for building this firm, etc., etc. And he used a phrase which stayed with me, he said, great feedback, thoughts in your head that you do not share are a bit like gift wrapping a present and not giving it to the person. So it is almost like you are, you know, he almost framed it as an obligation that you have to the people around you to share feedback. So in a way, that sort of, that back to your point about framing, once he framed it that way, each time when I think about feedback, I think about gift wrap, a present that is lying gift-wrapped and it would be a crime not to give it to the intended recipient.

TW: Yeah. And I think to me, the one thing I tend to add to that is to give the recipient permission to wait. So you can say, hey, I have some feedback for you, is this a good time to share it or would you rather take it up at a different time. Because I do notice that people are more likely to act on feedback, once they have kind of accepted, saying, okay, now I am ready for it.

DJ: It is a great point. It triggers another insight that came up in my conversation with a gentleman called Bruce Feiler who has written a book, *Life Is In The Transitions* and he says, when you go through especially life quakes, disruptive events in your life, try and make sense of scars but not the wounds. He says that do not try to process these things too soon, wait for sometime to elapse, let the wound become a scar and then maybe you might be in a better position to make sense. So, to your point, I think there is an element of timing as well, is the person and the position to process what you want to tell him or her.

TW: Yeah. So what you are sharing there is, as far as I know, is supported by some of the research into post-traumatic events, so if you have been through a very rough event of some kind. There used to be a tendency to try to debrief you as quickly as possible, like, okay, we need to get you right away in the talk through the entire thing and so on. And it turns out, that tends actually to have better results if you give it a bit of time where you let the mind do its own kind of, as it is like creating the scar tissue versus delving straight in. If I remember this correctly, what would happen sometimes is, if you debrief too early, you almost actually fixed the bad event in people's minds to a greater degree than if you had allowed them to get a little bit of a distance from it. So I think there is something very powerful about that understanding of when is the right moment to start to go in and kind of either give feedback or process something that happened or what not.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. For more, please visit playtopotential.com.

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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