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## Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about the power of problem framing in the context of Coaching. The way we frame a problem can have a profound implication on the path we undertake.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And as we wrap up Thomas, I spend a lot of time talking to leaders as a coach and as a sounding board, as you think about the application of your work in the realm of coaching and sort of, let us say if we frame it as broader leadership advisory, any specific themes that jump out at you as obvious opportunities to use this tool of reframing to get to a better place?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (TW): The most powerful collaboration you can have with a coach or with any other type of person who is helping you, this be consultants or even friends or what not, is when you become joint explorers of a problem. So it is not that it is your job as a coach to say no no, this is your problem, it is rather that you, with your client, together go through this process of asking questions about the problem and trying to see it differently, not just going into solution. So there is a magic kind of collaboration you can get to which also very much changes the dynamic of, now if you go to a coach, you are expecting them to ask questions. But often, if this is in the context of say consulting, very often, you will see a client just treat the consultant as a vendor saying, no no no, you are the person who is going to build this for us or whatever it is, verses that more collaborative approach where you together identify the nature of the problem and then of course help them come up with solutions. Having said that, I was very curious to hear your thoughts on that. You work with this directly, where do you see reframing and problem framing in general fit into the coaching work?

DJ: Hmm. It is a great question Thomas, not sure if I have a clean answer to it but one of the applications I have empirically observed is just that people sometimes come in with a certain framing and helping them to re-evaluate that is helpful. Sometimes they may frame it as a career problem. Let me share a specific example, I was working with a very senior investment banker from Hong Kong and the bank had just shut shop in Asia and he was trying to figure out what next. And he framed it as I want to work intensely for the next 5-10 hours and then do something else in my life. And he said, okay, therefore, what are the options, what could I do, A versus B versus C. And then as we spent time, I challenged the assumption why does it have to be a sprint for the next five years, and then, you move into whatever you call it, retirement mode or chilling out mode, why cannot you pick something that you are passionate about and maybe do this for the next 30 years or 40 years. And somehow, that framing changed the perspective completely and said, okay, if that is the case, then maybe I should really focus on what energizes me and therefore, what is it that I can do for the long term that I can pivot towards which gives me meaning, which gives me fulfillment, which takes

care of the commercial needs, etc., etc. So it is just, to your point, what I found helpful is people come in with a default question because they have framed it in their head in a certain way but when you ask them to consider other framings, it often ends up in a much more powerful place.

TW: Yeah. I would recommend here for those of your listeners who are not themselves professional coaches but want to play that role to an extent for others, I really like the work of Michael Bungay Stanier who wrote the book, *The Coaching Habit*, it is a very accessible guide for people to ask a little bit better questions when they are trying to help somebody else. So there are ways you can do this. The key thing is really just to remember this core idea, you do not necessarily want to try to help people achieve what they come in with, you actually want to step back and say, wait, why is this important to you or exactly as you did with the example you just shared, question their assumptions about how things, what does success look like. I want to share an anecdote here in the same realm and I thought of this because you have been in the executive search space as you can afterwards tell me whether this is still accepted practice but the story is, this is from Robert Sternberg, one of the big names in creativity research. There is this leader who is in an industry he loves, in a firm he loves and he has a boss that he really cannot work with. He is like, oh my God, this is like I hate my boss, it is horrible. And so he goes to a search firm and says, can you find a new position for me as similar as possible to my old job and the executive search person says, yeah, there is a lot of demand at the moment for senior executives such as yourselves, this should not be hard, we can easily find you something. That same night though, he goes back and he talks to his wife and she is good at reframing and they have a good relationship where they can help each other with problems, and together, they find a different approach which is next morning, the leader goes back to the executive search person and says, here is the CV of my boss, can you find a new job for him. Apparently, the story goes that that is what ended up happening, like they actually managed to find a position for the boss that the boss happily accepted without really knowing what was going on and that leader got promoted into his job. Now it is a beautiful story, I suspect that the ethics around search may have changed a little bit and you could not do that today or is that a realistic story?

DJ: My first response if I wear a search consultant's hat with a commercial objective is that the boss is possibly paid higher than the guy, therefore, the boss's position is probably more lucrative for me, so I would grab it if somebody offered that saying, take this search and this is the fee and take the junior search and that fee. My commercial hat tells me, that is not a bad trade-off. But back to the point around ethics, see the point is, it is a free world unless he is sharing confidential information, at the end of the day, it is free markets at play.

TW: Yeah, I mean all he did really was to point...exactly.

DJ: He sold his boss as a candidate which is often value, as long as he did not mislead the search consultant, I do not see any ethical issues here.

TW: Yeah, I am glad to hear that, then I will continue to use the story.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of one of my early conversations as a Coach and a Sounding Board. This was way back in 2016 or 2017. One of the leaders I was working with had been a successful professional with one of the International Banks. He came to me and said, I am 45, I have another 5 years of gas left in the tank. What should I be doing to fulfil my potential. The implicit assumption was that the work he would do would be draining and he couldn't handle it for more than 5 years. I spent time with him and spoke to a few people around him and asked him, what if you could do something that

energizes you and you play the long game so that you don't have to put a retirement date. We discovered that Equity Research and Value Investing would be that activity that he could do for the long run without putting a retirement date. He joined Sanford Bernstein in Asia and subsequently he was hunted down to invest in tech stocks based in New York. I notice that people often come with a certain framing and one of my duties is to get them to think of other ways to frame the situation they are in. Some of the most fulfilling journeys have been ones where I have helped people reframe the mental models with which they lead their lives.

## 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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