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Context to the nugget conversation

Raghu speaks about the notion of resolving Dharmasankatas – the double bind situations where there are no easy answers. He speaks about how Indian leadership (going back to King Vikramaditya) has had an emphasis of resolving Dharmasankatas. He goes on to speak about the Leadership traits that help in resolving these tricky situations.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I want to talk about one of the other elements in the book, dharmasankata. And you talk about that in several situations and you say that Arjuna archetype is a lot about confronting these dharmasankatas is really resolving them. You know, one of the other professors I have studied a gentleman called Joseph Badaracco in Harvard talks about this concept of right versus right. He says in leadership it's not right versus wrong. Very often you have to choose between right versus right. So, what's your approach... I mean, we can have a full two-hour conversation just on this but as an advice for leaders resolving dharmasankatas as they go through their journeys, what have you learned from the Mahabharata that can help leaders?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA): Yeah, see, one of the things that has always troubled me like I told you is the current discourse or, you know, till recently. Now, there's a lot of people who are talking about contextual intelligence and all that, last five-six years, the idea of a leader being a powerful leader, a Bheema type leader comes from a military understanding of leadership and all of that. And I am sure you know this that most books on management have actually come out of studying war and war theories. So, you know, words like progress, all the strategy, all the critical words in management are all drawn from war literature.

DJ: As an aside, my father was a Retired Brigadier in the Indian Army so I have also had conversations about leadership in the Army.

RA: Yeah, I have questions about leadership in the Army and team-building in the Army.

DJ: We'll come back to that.

RA: Yeah, and also, I think the colonising, last 200 years of colonisation has also given a very different idea of leadership as fundamentally plunder and acquisition. Now, the Indian idea of leadership has always been somebody who can deal with dharmasankata. Vikramaditya is the original model, and I am sure all of us have read Vikramaditya and Betaal. Every story is a double bind dilemma dharmasankata story and how he resolves it is what shows his wisdom. To solve a dharmasankata kind of a situation requires wisdom, it's not other capabilities. It also requires a deep understanding

of the situation of the various forces in the situation and how to balance them. The word mandala, for example, which is the word in India that's used for any, you know, Cholamandalam, the word mandala means there are diverse forces that have to be brought into coherence. Now, if you have been in leadership you know that it's always, always a question of balancing priorities. Quality versus cost, cost versus delivery, delivery versus product development or whatever. You are always talking payoffs. And there was one management scientist I forget his name who brought in the word satisficing. It's a very interesting term and that is what... a dharmasankata you can never have an optimum solution. You can only have a satisficing solution and if you really have been in leadership situations you know that neither part of this dilemma is going to go away. You solve it for now and in another context, it is going to reappear in a different way. So, wisdom lies in how beautifully you understand this context and how you solve it in a way that it is most coherent. That is leadership. I have a big problem with many of the current ideas of leadership. Every leader knows this, long term versus short-term. Everything you answer has this kind of a... and these are not binaries. These are two sides of a polarity and like a like a magnet they will always be there. You try to cut it; you will have a north and a south again. So, that's the difference between great leaders and successful leaders who don't leave a great company behind.

DJ: And if you look at, if we persist with this Raghu, the leaders who are good at resolving dharmasankata versus those that struggle with it, is there something that is common to some of these leaders who have that wisdom?

RA: Yeah. See, there are two-three things that I find with leaders who are capable of looking at dharmasankata. They are also people who understand different types of power, who are not linear, who are not one-dimensional, who actually understand that different contexts require different parts which is the five seats of power types. Very often I find that these are people whose reading is very wide, they are phenomenally well-read. So, it becomes possible for them to model a situation not in the terms of the situation, but to use something else to change and that helps to change the paradigm. So, they actually have a kaleidoscope kind of possibility of different associations. Many of them have an aesthetic sensibility. There are people who know music, there are people who know art, who are interested in it, many of them are pattern thinkers and that's not very common. They actually think, they can actually think systems, they can actually think systems, no not systems, thinking whatever, not a force think. They actually see different parts of the puzzle and they can play with it.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I love the point Raghu makes about having different mental models and frames from which we see a situation. Something similar came up in a different context in my conversation with Ashish Dhawan (AD), Philanthropist and former Private Equity investor at ChrysCapital. When I asked him about what it takes to be a good PE investor, he spoke about how it is critical to be a macroeconomist and a historian in equal measure.

AD: *"you have to be a big picture person, almost a macroeconomist and a historian. Macro because you got to understand how the economy works, different sectors, what the drivers are and at a very fundamental level have a sense of that. But historian because you have to understand how industries have developed over time, how market cycles have played out, having that perspective of how it has happened before, how bubbles were created, what were the best times to invest. So, I think having historical perspective I believe is absolutely critical and being a little bit of a big picture thinker is important. You can't just say oh, I am looking at this company and doing due diligence, you get too*

narrow and you are... you lose the forest for the trees in a sense. So, I think, having that trait is important."

DJ: I guess all of us have a certain lens with which we see the world given our training and early wiring. To Raghu's point, it is critical for us to get exposure to different ways of looking at the world and form our mental models.

If you want to dig deeper into this notion of resolving Dharmasankatas, you might like my conversation with Sir Andrew Likierman of London Business School who was on this podcast earlier speaking about the notion of building Judgment.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Ashish Dhawan that is referenced: [What it takes to be a good PE Investor](#).

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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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