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Context to the nugget conversation

Raghu speaks about the Nakula archetype that often creates the emotional infrastructure in an organization. He speaks about how such leaders might have to flex and demonstrate some of their other elements to build trust when they move to a new context. He also speaks about the link between having this emotional infrastructure and agility that a company might need to respond to sharp changes in the reality of the world.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Raghu, one of the themes I am curious about in the podcast is around transitions, both organisation transitions and leader transitions. In the book, in one of the sections you say that organisations often praise the Bheema types or a Sahadeva types. They are often visible and they are celebrated but the Nakula types often are behind the scenes connecting the...

Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA): That is the Nakula archetype.

DJ: So, when the Nakula, let's say, people with a dominant Nakula characteristic transition from one company to another what has been your observation on how they build trust and how they build traction as they take on charge in a new environment?

RA: See, there are couple of questions that come to my mind in what you are asking. One is, has an organisation selected you and said I need you, a Nakula type to come in.

DJ: Yes.

RA: Yeah, then it's a wise choice. So, this organisation has probably been through an entrepreneurial phase, and now it needs to create a stable team and create order. If you keep on pushing the Bheema at this point of time, the organisation will never stabilise.

DJ: Correct.

RA: So, it's a wise thing to do to bring in a Nakula person to really create the institutional grounding, not just the win but the us and what does it mean to be us, who are we and why do we exist, what does it mean to work together? These are the kind of questions that a Nakula can enable, that energy can enable. You also need stability and certainty. So, you actually need these three people to work together. So, if the organisation has made a wise choice, it is very easy then because the Nakula is valued already when they are coming in and they have a space and others also know this space though the basic characteristic of a Nakula is to stay in the background, is to create the infrastructure.

DJ: In fact, coming there Raghu, I used to be a search consultant earlier in my previous life and in a lot of these situations I would notice that the hiring manager often appreciates the Nakula characteristics and often has made the choice. But if you look at the leaders, incoming leaders' playground, the subordinates, the peers, and some of the others may not, may have to discover that characteristic, may not know that on day zero. So, sometimes, I find that in those situations derailments can happen, so I was wondering.

RA: It is difficult but see it depends on... I might have a dominant Nakula characteristic but I can also supplement it with some Bheema and others. Now, to get into certain general management areas, if I am in a specialised management area then let's say if I am a very good Sahadeva, I don't have to worry about creating too many other capabilities, but if I am in a general management area, I have to balance my dominant propensity with other capabilities. A Nakula, for example, has to know how to bargain, has to know how to say no and things like this. If they don't the probability of their being taken for granted is high. And the other... and this is why I was talking about understanding the shadow and all that before. The Nakulas generally tend to wait to be bestowed honour, or bestowed recognition, they very rarely ask for it. If as a Nakula, I am not aware of this and if I don't know how to look at it and say, okay, I have to learn how to draw boundaries and say no, it will become a problem. And general tendency is not to understand how much of value a Nakula brings in.

DJ: True.

RA: It's their absence that pinches because people have taken this person's offering for granted and gone on doing all kinds of things. Like, even in the Mahabharata, Arjuna goes gallivanting all over. If Nakula hasn't kept his weapons clean and his horse ready and all that, when Arjuna comes back there will be no horse or weapons to fight with.

DJ: He's the enabler.

RA: He is seen absolutely essential enabler and I have a feeling going forward you were asking me earlier, the more uncertain the world becomes, the more the creation of reliable infrastructure will become crucial. You can't make agile changes without a stable infrastructure.

DJ: That's interesting when you say infrastructure it's not just the traditional sense in which it is used but also this human infrastructure.

RA: You come suddenly and you tell me, hey man, yesterday's business is gone, tomorrow's business is this, if I don't have a strong feeling of us, if I don't have a place to speak about my anxieties and discover a way of responding, it's going to become very disturbing. So, who creates this emotional infrastructure especially to take sharp changes in the reality of the world? Without this emotional infrastructure it would be very difficult.

DJ: Another tradition context you talk about Raghu in the book, I will read from the book, you say, Mahabharata tells us that the mark of a leader is not one who's great at solving problems like a Hercules but one who can understand a dharmasankata, inflection points call for wisdom and re-anchoring of one's values, finding new inner resources to make the right choices and investing one's full conviction and energy in that choice. I found the, you know, it's not somebody who comes and pushes and pushes but somebody who can sort of question that paradigm and move the system. So, can you expand on this?

RA: See, traditionally leadership has been looked at from the centre of the organisation. The moment you click and you say organogram there will be one pyramid that comes up. Now, this is an

archaic, I think, in today's context meaningless way of thinking of an organisation. What you really need for leadership is somebody who's at the edge of the organisation not sitting in the centre. Now, what is this person doing sitting at the edge of the organisation? He's having a view of the world as it is emerging and he's having a view inside to see what are the capabilities of this organisation. And it's very simple Ashby's law. The capabilities of an organism have to be greater than the challenges from the environment for if it has to survive. So, leadership today in a changing context is to continuously ensure that the capabilities of the organisation are one step ahead of the challenges that are going to come from the environment. You are not going to know this if you are sitting on top here and trying to make people do what you want, you got to be at the edge and be able to look at what the future is and then communicate it back and create a response structure which can follow this. That is critically the Arjuna capability, the capability of staying at the boundary, where does Arjuna ask all his great questions between the two armies.

DJ: Middle of the ground.

RA: So, you have to stand there, understand what's going to happen here and then pull from here and say, hey, this is what's going to happen. And if you have this Nakula, this thing of a very capable set of core group, and you have created the capabilities here, they will know how to respond, you don't have to direct them beyond that. That's the ABCD I talked about. So, this person has to be aware, balanced, contextually intelligent and know the values. He cannot... the values of an organisation cannot be changed quickly because they are the deepest layer. You can change the technology, you can change some structure and systems, but the value thing you cannot change. So, why am I in business at a human level has to be answered clearly. And then the navigation you can do is largely based on that; that will not shift that easily.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of an insight on this podcast from Amy Edmondson (AE) of Harvard Business School. She was recently voted as the Number 1 Management Thinker in the world by Thinkers 50, in what is considered to be the equivalent of Oscar Awards for Management Thinkers. She has been studying Psychological Safety for several decades' way before Google and some of the others popularized it.

AE: "So, I define it as an environment where people feel free to take interpersonal risks and maybe I should clarify what an interpersonal risk is. That's anything that you might do or say that creates a risk that others might think less well of you, right? So, if I ask a question, you might think I am stupid. If I offer an idea that you think is really a crazy idea you might think I am not in touch with reality. If I ask for help, you might think I am weak, right? So, all of those are in the category of interpersonal risks, and I would argue those are the interpersonal risks that good employees take every day because if you aren't offering ideas or asking questions or asking for help in a complex interdependent world, you are not doing your job."

DJ: Like Amy says, psychological safety or Emotional Infrastructure as Raghu says is a prerequisite for companies and if I may say, families to be agile in these times. If we look at how families came out of Covid, I would say, one could see the difference in outcomes between families that had that infrastructure and families where that didn't exist and that showed up in all kinds of ways in terms of mental health problems, separations and so on.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Amy Edmondson that is referenced: [Nuances of Psychological Safety](#).

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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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