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Context to the nugget conversation

Raghu speaks about his journey on three fronts as an action researcher – Understanding how Systems work, Study of Yoga in depth with Krishnamachari, Process work with Prof Pulin Garg. He also speaks about how he has experimented and engaged with institutions like the Murugappa Group, TCS and Core Healthcare. He speaks about how he has used some of these organizations as a laboratory to try and develop some leadership development and culture building approaches that have been tried and tested.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): That's a point you made about operating in the edge of the organisation.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA): Exactly, exactly.

DJ: Fascinating. As we bring the conversation to a close, Raghu, couple of questions. One is more personal; I am on this journey of being a coach and a sounding board for leaders and you have been doing this for decades. One of the questions I keep asking myself is how do I continue my growth over time? When you look at your journey Raghu, what's been the nature of evolution? Let's say if you look at the kinds of conversations you have with leaders today and compare them to maybe the kinds of conversations you had two decades back or three decades back, what are the kinds of dimensions in which you have grown over time?

RA: See, if I look at my growth, I don't think, you know, a large part of my growth has been through dialogues with leaders that we know in business. See, if I look back, I look at myself more as an action research person than a consultant, or a coach, or whatever. And there have been three areas which I have been working on in depth. One is, of course, systems engineering and how systems work. The second has been studying with Krishnamacharya and yoga in depth, really understanding the yoga sutras' psyche. And the third has been process work with Professor Pulin Garg, theatre, all of these kinds of things. I have always been innovating between these three. And where can I innovate? I can only innovate in an organisation. So, I have had this tremendous good fortune of CEOs who have trusted me. So, there's Mr. Subbaiah; he and I have had a very nice relationship over time and he invited me to work with Parry; it was a turnaround situation. So, I did my study, whatever, whatever and then they asked me to work with Parry Sugar. And there, I was also, my orientation towards working in organisations has been to look at operations first, value creation and things like that and then see how other factors are coming in to aid it or stop it. So, I actually had to work with an organisation, which I stayed in a house that Clive had stayed in on my way to Nellikuppam. So, some of the mindsets there are that archaic. And here you have to design an organisation for response because that's why it's going sick, there's some responsiveness issue

there. So, when I went in and I was working with the organisation, I had to contend with how to create a sense of flow and accountability this way horizontal versus the high colonised idea of vertical control. So, I played with it and that's when this idea of totally aligned organisation came up. Because by that time from my initial work and all that, I had also got in touch with... Productivity Consulting Group from the US had got in touch with me. There was a guy called Norman Bodek, who is generally called Grandfather Lean now, but he was one of the first people to study Japanese management, bring it to the world, phenomenal guy. So, they were looking for Indian partners and they are Muktananda followers. So, he was looking for a person who was involved with yoga and all that so whatever this combination happened. So, I was learning these Japanese methods which are very powerful and obviously, I mean, it went very well with my OR thing and you go into an organisation, you start working with this horizontal thing and the management is vertical. So, the culture it does not fit flow. So, then I experimented with how do you get these mindsets to change. So, like I told you, I don't do behavioural lessons, I make exercises and games. So, I have made this game and made them play and there are two teams, one is vertical, the other one is completely customer-faced. So, how do you organise yourselves, whatever, whatever, the lessons are very, very clear. But I asked him to give themselves names. So, one of these guys said, sir, we are an aligned organisation, we are a boss-face organisation. So, that is when I developed this whole thing of what does it mean to create a totally aligned organisation, total alignment, which will go with TQM and TPM and all the rest of it. And Mr. Subbaiah was willing, I mean, I discussed it with him and the CEO was willing to look at all this and work with it. So, once you do this, the organisation then doesn't look vertical with all these things. It looks like a rocket or a bird because like I told you, the CEO is at the edge, he is saying this is where you go. So, he is pointing the organisation to the customer and the value chain gets aligned behind it. And then you have the financial things that are helping this process, you have the human processes helpings to make sure that flow is happening. This is an agile organisation; this cannot be an agile organisation. And then I had to work with Parry what became Parry Agro, CWC was taken over, again colonial. So, all these lovely tea fields with these huge colonial bungalows and all that. And when Parry took over, they are not that mindset. So, we worked with it and there the issue was how do you read the fine work so that it's not so saheb based and things like that. And there, I developed this whole thing of saying can we shift the focus of work from being oriented towards job towards being oriented towards my links with people. Yeah, that's what comes from the earlier picture also, but here it had to be very clearly defined; we had the issue of redefining work itself, So, like that now I have been applying from this and that and developing answers to situations and each of them would take a couple of years but because the trust I had like, for example, Mahabharata, this book is actually based on ten years of working with TCS on a program called The Leader Prepares. We have done about 100 odd things where the Mahabharata is the core. So, I bring in theatre, I bring in lots of ideas from yoga quietly, we do some yoga practice but also peppered in the program and the Mahabharata insights. We actually make them do theatre; we make them do a lot of these things over a five-day six-day period. But the origin of that was in the Murugappa Group where I did a leadership training program, which was a two-week thing at that time. One week was theatre; the second was outward bound. So, these have been really the incubating spaces.

See, while most of my initial work was actually supported by Mr. Subbaiah, there's a lot of space and trust whatever I was given by the Handas, Sushil Handa and Sunil Handa, where I worked with them for more than maybe 20-25 years or more, I am not sure, but it was like, an ongoing thing where I would look at the organisation, there would be a problem to be solved, how do you look at it, bring all these elements together and things like that. So, at one point of time now they had to really look at their cash flow and things. So, we set up this goal of saying, what's one rupee going into the organisation, when is it coming back. So, can you make that the one point around which the whole organisation works? So, from 240, 250 something we said, 120 and then 60 and so on. So, all of this

you set out the problem and then you discuss with the CEO saying, I am going to try this, I am going to try this. And then I am bringing in something from systems theory, I am bringing in something from theatre, I am bringing in something from yoga and seeing how it works and working it through. And the other space that I got was in TCS where Mr. Ramadorai and his team gave a lot of space to first study the organisation; there's a whole model that I have developed called the Tensegrity Mandala, which is based on Tripura Rahasaya. So, going back to Dharampal, study something, take the principles, see how it can be applied. So, the Tripura Rahasaya talks about how the entire universe is actually a tetrahedral with chit shakti, ichha shakti and jnana shakti and kriya shakti and how this whole thing happens. Now, at the same time, there's a very good friend of mine called Prasad Kaipa, who's also used tetrahedrons. So, I worked with this and developed a whole model of how to look at the organisation. And then we worked a couple of years with the top management team and things like that and then developed this training program and all that. So, without these kinds of spaces and the trust that was placed on me by these CEOs and their team, I wouldn't have developed anything. So, that's the action research part which happened in that space with the CEOs willing to incubate these things.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Couple of things strike me here. One is the point Raghu makes about his identity as an action researcher and how he frames the three workstreams that he engages in. That clarity of who we are, I find, to be super helpful and clarifying in terms of what we say yes to and what we say no to.

The other piece I really liked is the experimentative approach to forming solutions rather than walking around with a hammer looking for a nail to hit.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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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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