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Context to the nugget conversation

Jeffrey speaks about how nuclear energy can be a boon if used to generate electricity but could be a bane if it is used to make a bomb that kills people. Jeffrey goes on to say that context determines if something is good or bad and says that Power works in a similar fashion.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Let us dive into the book Jeffrey. Maybe to start with, let us get the definitions right. You almost use power like a verb, you say doing power. So, can you talk about the phrase doing power what do you have in mind when you say that?

Jeffrey Pfeffer (JP): Yeah. So, I define power as the ability to get things done against opposition which is inevitable in social context because different people have different preferences and different information and different roles and different rewards and different whatever. And the doing power comes from an assignment that I give my students in both the online and the on-campus version of this class in which I say to them, which is true, if you learn French or the French horn or anything and you do not use that knowledge, it will quickly leave your head. And so therefore what I say to them is in order to cement the knowledge and for you to get some practice at it, you have to not only learn about power by doing the readings and the cases in the case discussions but you have to go out and during the quarter that we are together or the eight weeks in the case of the online class, do something, try to change something, try to actually, in some sense, do power.

DJ: Got it. And the other term you use, you touched upon it upfront, Jeffrey, is, you say we need to think about power in a value neutral way, almost like how we think about nuclear energy without necessarily thinking about nuclear bomb. You also talk about the knife; it can be used by a surgeon or it could be used by a robber on the street. Before we dive into some of your insights around power, what is the user manual, what should it have in terms of where it should be applied and where it should not be applied? Is there sort of a guiding framework that you would like to outline?

JP: No is the short answer. I do not think that I have either the knowledge nor actually frankly the right to tell people what they ought to do with their lives or how they ought to use the power that they have. I find a lot of the discussions on social media to be frankly either virtue signaling or worse that people say, you know, I believe I know what a good leader is and therefore, I am going to tell you Deepak what a good leader is, I am going to tell you what you need to do to be a good leader, and we have used success and good and all these other terms in a very sloppy fashion. I still remember when I wrote the book Leadership BS, a colleague of mine read it and he said, tell me what I need to do. He said your book is wonderful but I do not know what to do to be a better

leader. I said, you have to define better. I mean, as you know very well, the criteria for organizational performance are not necessarily highly correlated with each other, return on sales, total shareholder return, your performance on various environmental criteria or employee health, are themselves not very correlated with each other, and of course what is the organizational performance indicators are often times poorly correlated with individual performance. So, we need to be much more precise in our discussion of these things. And so, I try to shy away from discussions of what people ought to do. I try to tell them how to get power to the best of my ability and then what they do with it is up to them.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I am reminded of a movie in Tamizh called Nayagan directed by Mani Rathnam, played by the legendary Kamal Hassan. It is considered as a Godfather equivalent kind of a movie in India and was subsequently made as Dayavaan in Hindi. Towards the end of the movie, a child asks Kamal Hassan, who plays Nayagan, the Gangster – Are you a good man or a bad man. In Tamizh, he says, Neenga nallavara kettavara. And Kamal Hassan responds “I don’t know”.

I guess, it is a bit like that with Power. Very often, it gets a bad rap but like Jeffrey says, I think it could be really helpful if we could look at Power in a Value Neutral way and hopefully apply from what we learn while listening. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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Jeffrey Pfeffer - 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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