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## Context to the nugget conversation

Jeffrey speaks about how the opposite of humility might be something like Narcissism. He also speaks about Jim Collins work around Level 5 Leadership where he speaks about combining Modesty with Fierce Determination. Jeffrey says that some of these leaders become modest after they become leaders but not on the way to the top.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other theme you talk about in the book is about how we use self-descriptive adjectives, and you say that we need to find those that amplify power rather than those that diminish our status. And once again as I was reflecting on it in the context of a lot of commentary around humility as a trait, I was trying to reconcile the two to say, what is a distinction here Jeffrey?

Jeffrey Pfeffer (JP): So first of all, the research, you know, in Leadership BS, I have a chapter on modesty, and I do not know what the opposite of modesty is, but one thing that is the opposite of modesty, I think most people would agree on is narcissism, and the research on narcissism is quite clear. The higher you are in narcissism, the more likely you are to get hired, promoted and earn more money and at least by those measures, enjoy more career success. And Jim Collins who wrote about Level 5 leaders who are of course modest with a fierce determination, Jim and I talked and he by the way endorsed the last Power Book, I talked to him about that, he said, well, you know, it is interesting, most of the modest leaders I saw were modest once they were already CEOs. I am not so sure they were the level 5 leaders on their way to the top, and I think that is probably right. And many of the people by the way who claim to be modest and claim to be all these other things, authentic or whatever, if you actually did some due diligence, you would find, you know, and it is one of the things I talk about in the book in chapter 7, one of the things that happens when you have lots of power and lots of resources at your disposal, is you can tell your story. The current thing in the U.S. is the story told in the New York Times about this guy named Dan Price who was this wonderful person with a zillion followers and it turns out most of the stuff, you know, he was also a sexual predator apparently according to the story in the New York Times. And so, here is this guy presenting himself one thing while he is something else, and that is true for many leaders. Safi Bahcall who wrote the book Loonshots has a thing that, he says that the aphorism, that leaders write history is actually only partially true, leaders not only write history, they rewrite history.

DJ: Hmm. So true. In a way, it is quite topical even in India. There is a lot of discussion about how much it is turning out to be a war of the narrative in terms of how people are projecting themselves, how the government is projecting itself and so on and so forth. So, we can have a whole separate

conversation just on that but that is not the purpose of this podcast. You talk about getting over imposter syndrome as often the first baby step towards power, can you say more about that?

JP: Yeah, no one is going to give you more power than you are going to want to take or claim for yourself. And so in order to have power, you have to believe that you deserve it. And certainly, a feeling that you are inadequate for the job or not up to the position, is not going to be helpful for you. People may see you more negatively than you see yourself but it is seldom the case they are going to see you more positively. Confidence is very important, some research by Cameron Anderson shows, so you have to come across as though you know what you are doing if you want people to follow you.

DJ: Hmm. And do you have, in your years of researching this, headline thoughts on how people can begin to overcome the imposter syndrome?

JP: Well, I think you get help. You get yourself a personal board of directors or an executive coach or friends or all of the above to help you through that. Human beings are social creatures. And so, the answer to almost everything is to rely on the humans in your environment to help you become what you want to become.

DJ: Hmm. And you also talk about having some self-awareness of where you sit in the ecosystem and what you need to win. Can you say more about the nuance here? What is the kind of self-awareness you are alluding to in terms of where we sit in the pecking order?

JP: You need to have a reasonably good assessment of your own set of skills and abilities so that you know where you need development help. This is not unlike what you would have gone through when you were at McKinsey or not what unlike any executive would go through where you get assessments and feedback from people that helps figure out what your strengths are, your weaknesses. Gallup wrote a book called Play to Your Strengths. If you are going to play to your strengths, you have to know what your strengths are, and you could start with that. And if you are going to develop the domains in which you are more challenged, you need to know those as well. If I said to you, I want to make you tomorrow a professional basketball player or professional cricket player given the country, you will get coaching from people, you might even videotape yourself and get coaching in addition to that. The coaching would be around how to improve your swing, how to improve your posture, how to improve all aspects of your performance. And so, I do not think leaders are any different than professional athletes where you need somebody to tell you what your strengths and weaknesses are, and to help you play to your strengths and buttress your weaknesses.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I would love to refer to something that Prof Tarun Khanna (TK EP2) from Harvard said in the context of his book – Leadership to Last. He speaks about 3 traits that separate Leaders that build to last and speaks about Humility of demeanour as one of them.

TK EP2: *“I would point to the trio of phrases that we use: audacity of intent, humility of demeanour and steadfastness of purpose. So, I think the stories here in a sense are each and every one of them is an ode to trust, which was the title of my previous meanderings on development in emerging markets in their own ways, in their own kind of beautiful ways. But they have all taken a very long time to painstakingly build, it turns out that’s what it takes to build something that can redirect a society. There’s a lot of humility in these people, may be to some extent they are, that’s what it takes to build coalitions around you who participate with you to co-create the as I said in my earlier book*

*to create the conditions to create with you so that you can collectively be much greater than individual efforts would allow, but they are not shy about what they want to accomplish, they have big goals, they want to emancipate women or they want to cure the world. They are not shy of ambition but they are very cognizant of their human limitations and willing to say sorry and reflect on their life trajectory, and they are willing to take the slow and steady long road”*

DJ: Back to what Jeffrey says, I do think there is a real tension between being humble and increasing one’s power. There is possibly a tipping point beyond which it might make sense to switch to greater humility but not sure about the early days. Let me talk about how I experience this tension. My full time profession that puts bread on the table is what I do as an Executive Coach and a Trusted Sounding Board. The primary element that peoples find value in is my ability to listen intently. But here is the thing. Let us do a thought experiment.

Imagine a room filled with 100 people. Let’s divide it into two groups A and B, 50 in each. Group A are the Speakers and Group B are the Listeners. We will get each member in Group A to speak on a topic of their choice for 5 mins to members in Group B whose job is to just listen. At the end of this exercise, we will probably know who the best 5 speakers are in Group A. But we would probably not know who the 5 best listeners are in Group B, because they are silent because silence is assimilating.

The question that is often in my head, is if listening is what people seek value in, how do I signal that in a way that doesn’t dilute me as a good listener if that makes sense. I don’t have any clean answers here but would welcome any thoughts you might have in this context. Thank you for listening.

## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Tarun Khanna EP2 that is referenced: [Leaders that build to last](#).

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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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