



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. To its right are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129*', a Twitter icon with the handle '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with the website 'playtopotential.com'. Further right, under the heading 'Also available on:', are icons for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the far right is a portrait of the host, Deepak Jayaraman, with the text 'Podcast Host' and his name 'Deepak Jayaraman' below it. A small disclaimer at the bottom left reads: '*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

Context to the nugget

Capt. Raghu Raman, shares his perspectives on a career in the armed forces. Listen to the three main reasons he gives you as to why the army can prepare you to tackle the battlefield of business and life!

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): A lot of us spend the initial years focusing on acquiring the hard, technical skills and the notion of leadership starts kicking in later in life. In the army, from very early on, the principles of leadership start getting drilled in. So, from an individual standpoint, how should somebody think about a career in the army?

Capt. Raghu Raman (RR): For a career in the army, there would be three drivers and these aren't mutually exclusive. You can have all three or even if you had one of the three, I think, it should be considered as a serious career option. The first, of course, is if you are passionate about serving in the forces and wearing the uniform and leading the troops. I mean, which other career gives you the chance to jump out of an airplane or take 16 tanks into the desert? All your foreign missions are jumping out of a plane or jumping out of an amphibian landing craft or stuff like that. That kind of a high, that kind of a thrill, no other career can give it to you. For people who stand on the top of a mountain and look out and say that this is the ultimate goal of my life or a view that I have never seen... Imagine the fighter pilot who sees the curvature of the earth, who actually sees the sun rise over the curvature of the earth and not over a mountain or something. Or imagine any college kid who says that I want to drive a motorcycle, which is a Harley Davidson or whatever, which is 100 horsepower... Imagine the honour of driving just one horse and sitting on top of it and escorting the President to the presidential dais and bringing him back. We can only do these things in the Indian Armed Forces. So, there is definitely that piece, to touch the limits of your own potential, whether they are physical, mental. If you go for a commando course, as I did, those 30 days and 30 nights, they help you discover yourself, they help you discover reservoirs of you that you never knew you had. The bonds that you will forge, they are blood brothers, like you have, probably in colleges you have course mates. But the moment you come out of the army, you have blood brothers. They are not course mates, they are blood brothers. So, for the rest of your life, you just have to say, in my case, I just have to say 81st Regular, and whoever is part of that course is honour-bound to help me. There is no debate in his mind whether he has a choice. There is no conditionality. You are sworn brothers, so that band of brothers — that phrase actually goes back almost to King Henry's time, he is the one who actually coined that phrase — and it is truly a band of brothers. So, that is one driver.

The second driver, I believe, is, as you rightly put it, the fundamentals of leadership. If you want to learn how to take men into battle without ESOP, pay hike, employee of the month, or any other material tool but purely your own personal leadership quotient... The stakes that you take them into, they are not about losing market share or a campaign going wrong and you losing a key account. Here, if a campaign goes wrong, you make widows, you make orphans. So, the stakes at which you are being taught leadership, at an age of 20-21, you are holding the lives of sometimes up to 100 men in your hands. Now, to my mind, when you are learning any lesson, whether its leadership or otherwise, the key differentiator in learning it is the stakes at which you are learning it. It's a bit like you draw a chalk line and walk on that chalk line. Big deal! But if that line is a tightrope between two buildings, the game changes completely. So, it's not about the width of the line, it is about what will happen if you fall off the line. I think that element, no other career can give you, where you actually carry the burden of command, and you carry at times the body of your comrade on your shoulder, not just literally, but also as a metaphor, because your decisions will have the potential to create widows, to create orphans. Now, in that context, when you look at leadership, every lesson is a lesson drawn in blood. So, in terms of just learning how to lead people, learning how to communicate, learning how to create a shared reality, learning to create a vision statement that can get people to jump on a grenade, learning how to motivate and create a larger-than-life mission which will get people, soldiers under your command, to volunteer for a mission in which they know the attrition rate could be as high as 80%, which means that eight out of 10 people will sort of buy it in that operation, and still they volunteer. To my mind, there isn't a better school of leadership to learn that, and that should be the second driver. I think the army now gives that opportunity in terms of short-service commission where you can join for five to eight years, and after the eighth year, you can take a call whether you want to leave that and pursue a second career, as I can personally vouch for. Everything that I did, whether it was in the corporate world or in the bureaucracy, a large part of that training happened in the armed forces, so it gives you a rock-solid foundation for rest of your life and that should be the second driver.

The third driver, interestingly, if you look at the B-schools and the education whether it's in terms of management, frameworks, and all of that you realize that the fountainhead of all of this is in the armed forces. I am not necessarily saying just the Indian Armed Forces. If you look at the grouping of a platoon, it's 40 people. And it's 40 people across the world; it's not just in India, Pakistan, or Commonwealth countries. It used to be 35 to 40 people, whether it was the Incas, the Mayans, the Mongolians, and the Tatars, who didn't even know of each other's existence. So, when you look at a company, for instance, a company is what is commanded by usually a captain or a major and that's about 180 to 200 people, the span of control, and that's roughly the size of a Facebook group. So, you suddenly realize that the basic fundamentals of management framework, James McKinsey is a colonel. He basically took the logistics which was used in war planning and converted it into a company. So, all these companies that swear by McKinsey today are basically listening to an army colonel. So, as I tell a lot of young people, if you have to learn these management principles, then why not go to the fountainhead? Why are you learning it second-hand from a B-school? Because the origin of all of these principles is in many ways. More contenders fighting for fewer resources are the definition of war, more contenders fighting for fewer resources is the definition of business.

So, I think, for a young person who is looking to embark on a journey which allows him a multitude of options, I think the fundamentals of learning how to manage people, how to manage frameworks, how to think out of the box, how to communicate under adverse circumstances, how to reach into your own self and find that extra few ounces of strengths that you need to tackle the adversity there

isn't a better institution which can teach that. I think these should be the three drivers, sort of, why people should consider the forces as a top three career option. Because it gives you the option of doing that and going out and doing anything else as well.

DJ: As a corollary, what are the lows in a career path? What are the type of people that joined the army for the wrong reason or joined the army and very quickly realized that it's not for them? Any insights on what questions people should ask themselves to ensure that they don't make the wrong choice?

RR: That's a very good question. I believe that one of the strongest filters that exist in the system to make sure that the wrong people don't join or rather there is no wrong or right the people who are not suitable don't join is the Services Selection Board, SSB. That intensive process, which is, you've got a group task officer, you've got a psychologist, and you've got experts who can understand where your heart lies, where your mind lies, and will you crack under pressure. These people, I think, do a very good job of seeing whether you have it in you or not. Now, fact of the matter is, I actually encourage a lot of kids of my friends to give the SSB at least once. Whether you decide to join or not is a subsequent step, but the very act of appearing for the selection board gives you a very good insight into yourself, whether you have it in you or not. I must say, one of the most fascinating things I found at the Services Selection Board and I think a lot of companies can learn, HR especially, can learn from that is they have this five-day process and at the end of the five-day process, out of a group of about 50 to 60 people, one or two people get selected. After all processes are done, they are reassembled in the hall and the names that are read out are the names of the people who did not make it. And it is not about that batch. They will begin by saying Amitabh Bachchan did not make it in so and so board, in so and so year, or a Kapil Dev did not make it. So, it's an amazing way to tell the 48 people who have not made it that there is another career waiting for you, and this is not the end of the world. Finally, they talk about the two who have made it. So, I think, that in itself is a great lesson. How do you send back 48 disappointed people, but send them back with a high, with wind under their wings rather than telling them, 'Yeah, buggers, you did not make it'? So, I think starting from that moment, in many ways, the decision gets made for whether you have it in you or not.

Having said that, obviously, the army is not a piece of cake. You are learning how to lead people through life and death situations. The training is traumatic, it's not a piece of cake. It draws upon your reserves and your mental toughness, mental robustness, it tests it to the limit. There is obviously separation from family. That's one way to look at it. Another way to look at it is, you redefine family. So, an Indian army jawan, for example, will spend two months in a year with his family and 10 months with his unit, and he will do that for 20 years of his life. So, I think, that's a redefinition of what family is. There is, obviously, a lot of instability if you look at it one way. I choose to look at it from a point that every two to three years, you get a different exposure. You are in, physically, a different space, in a different portfolio. You are dealing with different kinds of challenges and that brings a kind of a diversity to your thinking, your growth, all of that.

So, I wouldn't really say that there are any downsides to it. It depends on how you look at it. If you look at every two years as being unstable, then yes, it's a downside. Then, you are probably meant for a career which you are not going to move down, or you are not going to have too much of instability over, or separation from what you consider to be an essential part of your family, if you define it that way. But if you say every two to three years, you are given a new assignment, a

challenging assignment, and usually a one-up assignment... That's another thing which happens in the forces. Willy-nilly, because of shortage of officers, officers are thrust with responsibilities more than what the org structure has determined, so you do get a lot more exposure at a much younger age. And you start discovering that your rate of growth is not determined necessarily by a rule book but by the opportunities that are thrown your way and how quickly you sort of master those opportunities.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: There were three things that struck me in this piece. First is that how well we learn our lessons is a function of the circumstances in which we learn them. Taking tough calls when lives are at stake, I guess, is very different from solving problems on a piece of paper. Second is that there is a short service option in the army that Raghu alludes to, which makes it possible for individuals to spend a finite period of time in the army and have the opportunity to pursue other career paths if they choose to do so. Third was a personal learning for me. I had been with McKinsey in the US for a few years but I never realized that James McKinsey had spent some time in the Armed Forces before he started the firm McKinsey & Co.

Thank you for listening. For more please visit playtopotential.com or subscribe the podcast on iTunes, Stitcher or one of the other Podcast apps.

End of nugget transcription

RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

Insights on career paths: There's nothing like learning about a path from somebody who has walked it. Professionals across backgrounds (Sports, Law, Banking, Consulting, Investing, Academia, Stand-up, Consumer Goods, Politics, Market Research, Entrepreneurship, Advertising etc.) talk about the path, the highs and the lows and share nuanced views on how people should think about traversing that path. You can access the playlist [here](#).

SIGN UP TO OUR COMMUNICATION

Podcast Newsletter: Join 1000s of leaders who benefit from the Podcast newsletter. Not more than 1-2 emails a month including keeping you posted on the new content that comes up at the podcast. High on signal, low on noise. Sign up for the podcast newsletter [here](#).

Nuggets on Whatsapp: We also have a **Podcast Whatsapp distribution group (+91 85914 52129)** where we share 2-3 nuggets a week from the Podcast archives to provoke reflection. If that is of interest, please click [here](#) and send a message stating "INTERESTED". Do also add this number to your Phone Contacts so that we can broadcast our messages to you when we share a nugget.

Capt. Raghu Raman - Nuggets

- 03.00 Capt. Raghu Raman - The Full Conversation
- 03.01 Capt. Raghu Raman - Armed forces as a career option
- 03.02 Capt. Raghu Raman - How the army looks for potential
- 03.03 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning across cultures
- 03.04 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transitioning from the army to the corporate world
- 03.05 Capt. Raghu Raman - Establishing a common language in the army
- 03.06 Capt. Raghu Raman - Z-KITBAG: Communication lessons from the army
- 03.07 Capt. Raghu Raman - Transmitting intent down the chain
- 03.08 Capt. Raghu Raman - Building culture — Lessons from the army
- 03.09 Capt. Raghu Raman - Building grit
- 03.10 Capt. Raghu Raman - Driving mindfulness and deep work
- 03.11 Capt. Raghu Raman - In summary — Playing to potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock 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](#).

Disclaimer and clarification of intent behind the transcripts

This written transcript of the conversation is being made available to make it easier for some people to digest the content in the podcast. Several listeners felt that the written format would be helpful. This may not make sense as an independent document. Very often spoken word does not necessarily read well. Several of the guests have published books and the language in their books might be quite different from the way they speak. We request the readers to appreciate that this transcript is being offered as a service to derive greater value from the podcast content. We request you not to apply journalistic standards to this document.

This document is a transcription obtained through a third party/voice recognition software. There is no claim to accuracy on the content provided in this document, and occasional divergence from the audio file are to be expected. As a transcription, this is not a legal document in itself, and should not be considered binding to advice intelligence, but merely a convenience for reference.

The tags that are used to organize the nuggets in the podcast are evolving and work in progress. You might find that there could be a discrepancy between the nuggets as referenced here and in the actual podcast given this is a static document.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature without prior written permission.