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Context to the nugget

Sanjeev and Hari speak about their respective journeys and talk about how they transitioned from one orbit to another. Sanjeev speaks about his journey from the corporate world to entrepreneurship at Daksh to investing in Helion and Fundamentum. Hari speaks about his journey from engineering in Tata Steel to how he serendipitously ended up at Daksh and how that has taken him to head HR at BigBasket and on a wider note, engage with the start-up ecosystem.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Before we dive into the book which will be the meat of the conversation Sanjeev and Hari, *From Pony to Unicorn*, I would love for you to maybe share your journeys in brief with the listeners so that they get a context of where you are coming from and what led up to this book if you will.

Sanjeev Aggarwal (SA): Okay. So, Deepak actually my professional career has really been in three buckets. One was as a corporate executive. I started my professional career working with DCM as a management trainee, which was a very good development ground in the 70s and 80s. And then I had about a 15-year stint in corporate India. And my second stint was that of an entrepreneur, where I helped start a business process outsourcing company called Daksh, which was acquired by IBM. And my third innings is around venture capital investing and company building, where I have been involved with two venture firms Helion, which tilts more towards early stage and fundamentum which I am doing along with Mr. Nandan Nilekani, which is more aligned towards scale up stage. So, one of the privileges that I have had is to be able to see things unfold in India's entrepreneurship firmament from very close quarters, and seeing these companies grow and scale we thought that we would try to put all our learnings together and kind of put it in form of a book and Hari has been a partner in crime now across many companies where either we were working together like a Daksh or portfolio companies of Helion where Hari was a member of the senior leadership team. So, in that sense, we have seen each other's skills from very close quarters. So, we thought that we can put our brains together, because we have come from the same context, and that is the origin of this book.

DJ: Lovely. Maybe before we go to Hari, Sanjeev if I may, you know, one of the themes we are curious about in this podcast across conversations is around how people transition from one orbit to another. Any... do you want to share some headline context around how you transitioned from the corporate world to entrepreneurship and from the entrepreneurial world to investing, if you want to provide a little bit of context there?

SA: Yeah, sure so, actually when I turned 21, this was in 1980, I started a company and given that I didn't have too much maturity at that point in time, I did that for a year and then went on to do my business education and started to work. So, I did realize that I did gravitate towards entrepreneurship very naturally. And in my corporate career also I was attracted towards new projects, turnaround, so I was not happy with business-as-usual situations; I used to be more like an intrapreneur in a corporate setting. So, obviously that urge was there to give expression to that underlying desire to fully leverage my potential. So, from that being an entrepreneur inside the organization, I turned a full entrepreneur. And then when I was doing my stint as an entrepreneur the chance to engage venture capitalists came into play because we were raising money from folks while building Daksh. And when Daksh was sold to IBM, I had to make a career choice and very clearly, I thought that having learned how to build a scale company in a compressed timeframe how can I leverage my learnings to make a larger impact not only on one company but multiple companies. So, I think, that's the transition from one to the other and my learning is that when you are in a particular career you always get cues if you are honest about your next move. So, in that sense, I think it has been a very organic process, because I have still stuck to the same strengths, which is reasonable strategic thinking, ability to empower people and then strive for excellence if I may say so about myself. So, I think those principles haven't changed across these three different careers and there is a pattern, I mean, one leads to the other. So, in that sense at one level I have stayed within the same ecosystem; it is just that I have changed the context every now and then. And that also keeps me very energized and young, because there is learning curve which is in play in every stint.

DJ: I love the way you put it, you know, you keep the core at some level the same but you listen to cues and you sort of move maybe from one context to another without fundamentally, you know, shaking the core.

SA: Yes, I think that would be a very good summary.

DJ: Lovely. Hari, maybe a little bit of your journey including the transition points?

TN Hari (Hari): Yes, Deepak, you know, this is the first time I am actually listening to how Sanjeev described his entire professional journey and it is a bit strange that I relate to it a lot and we seem to have a lot of similarities. So, my own professional career too can be broken up into three large buckets. The first 14 years I spent working with the large company Tata Steel. First 11 years in engineering. I love engineering; I deeply, deeply love engineering and the last three years in human capital. I never dreamt that human capital would excite me or that human capital was an exciting function, but then when I went into it and then I realized the potential it has of impacting an organization I actually fell in love with it in some ways and it became a placeholder for me for the rest of my life. So, Tata Steel was an exciting place, but at some point of time I also realized that I was a bit of a rule breaker and intrapreneur and Tata Steel was a bit too slow and bureaucratic for my liking and I decided to explore opportunities in a more fast-paced world. And that is how I ended up at Daksh. I think, in my last conversation with you, I described the story of how I landed a job at Daksh. It was such a big accident and then you know...

DJ: You should spend 30 seconds on that Hari, I think it's worth talking about...

Hari: Yes, after working for 14 years at Tata Steel it is pretty much difficult to get out because you get branded. So, I tried everything possible and even, you know, somebody told me why don't you send your CV to a consultant, pay them 500 bucks and they will spray the CV to a bunch of companies and I did that and one of the consultants received the CV and put it up to Aniruddha Limaye, who was the VP HR at Daksh and then Aniruddha spoke to me, he liked me, brought me for

a meeting with Daksh with Sanjeev and that is how I actually made it. I still remember reading Sanjeev's interview notes after I joined the company where he had written that, you know, does not have sufficient experience in human resources, but is a first principles thinker, smart guy so let's take a chance on him. Precisely, I think, those were verbatim the comments that he had made. So, that is how I landed up a job at Daksh. So, the next 18 years for me has been with a string of high growth start-ups and the last six years I would say has been my third stint, which is the last six years overlaps with the 18 years, which is my stint at BigBasket where I really began exploring things outside the company I worked for, began engaging the ecosystem in a very big way, began working with entrepreneurs, talking to founders, writing books, writing a lot of stuff, sharing insights and doing all of that. So, that is pretty much the third phase of my career. And like Sanjeev said, you know, if you are honest you keep getting these cues from time to time and you just need to discover these cues and stay honest to them and finding a new phase of your life or discovering that isn't very difficult if you look for these cues. And I have been a bit of a strange combination between being contented on the one hand and having a deep desire to also simultaneously explore new things, do new things, you know, something very deep inside which makes me want to do new things. But at the same time at some level, I am also contented. So, at BigBasket I thought I might lead a contented life but then the deep desire to do something alongside BigBasket was what propelled me into engaging with the ecosystem, talking to people. So, I love talking to new people; I think, that is where I really these days get the kick in life, talking to new people, interesting people, engaging with them on solving problems and all of that. So, pretty much that is me Deepak.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I really love how Sanjeev (SA) looks at his career in three big stints but weaves them through a common narrative of how he sees his strengths. Let me just play that clip again.

SA: "my learning is that when you are in a particular career you always get cues if you are honest about your next move. So, in that sense, I think it has been a very organic process, because I have still stuck to the same strengths, which is reasonable strategic thinking, ability to empower people and then strive for excellence if I may say so about myself. So, I think those principles haven't changed across these three different careers and there is a pattern, I mean, one leads to the other."

DJ: The one thing I have learnt from people who have made good transition decisions is that they have extra ordinary self-awareness. They look at themselves beyond surface level adjectives. It is very easy to tie our identity to things such as our title, industry or function but looking at it a deeper level often gives us more degrees of freedom to explore while still playing to our strengths.

If you want to know more, you might like the playlist on IDENTITY. You can go to playtopotential.com, go to the Curated Playlist section and find the one on Identity. You might also like my conversation with Tasha Eurich where she speaks about the notion of internal and external self-awareness and how building self-awareness is the Meta skill of the 21st century.

End of nugget transcription

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Sanjeev Aggarwal and TN Hari - Nuggets

- 71.00 Sanjeev Aggarwal and TN Hari - The Full Conversation
- 71.01 Sanjeev Aggarwal and TN Hari - Journey and transitions till date
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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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