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Context to the nugget conversation

Thomas speaks about the context behind the fact that we have mirrors in elevators and speaks about the criticality of not taking problems too literally. He speaks about how our default wiring can sometimes lead us to frame problems in a certain way and how it can be limiting.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And very early in the book, you had my attention with your usage of the elevator problem and that is a great example of how sometimes reframing can lead us to a much better answer. So can you talk a little bit about just that problem and how that is a good case study for us to understand the impact of reframing?

Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg (TW): Yeah. Well, you imagine that you are the owner of an office building and that the tenants in the building, they are complaining about the speed of the elevator, it is too slow. What many people do there is to take the problem for granted, okay, the elevator is slow and then they swing into solution mode and say, how do we make it faster, do we put in a better motor or do we have to go out and buy a new elevator for that matter. What a clever landlord might suggest is instead that you put up a mirror next to the elevator because of course what happens is when people see a mirror, they look at themselves and they fall in love, they forget time and the underlying idea there is, what problem are you solving, that a mirror is not necessary a solution to a slow elevator and mirror is a solution to the problem that people think it is annoying to wait. So it is a simple example and it really encapsulates that difference between jumping into solution mode, going into and trying to analyze the problem which is asking, why is the elevator slow, and then the crucial difference between analyzing it and framing it right which is a question, wait, is this really about the speed of the elevator or is there something else going on, is there perhaps a better problem to solve.

DJ: Hmm. And you go on to say in the book Thomas that as such, solving tough problems is not always about the details or about being particularly a systematic thinker, it can be equally about interpretation and sense-making about seeing what is already there but really rethinking what it means. Can you say more about the statement? It sort of suggests a certain level of perception, a certain level of listening and awareness to what is going on around you, but would love for you to expand.

TW: I really, in some ways, link this to the difference between the humanities and the natural sciences where I noticed many people who are good at numbers, good at analysis, well, they will tend to jump in there. Talking about the elevator problem, they might say, well, exactly how fast is the elevator, how many people are using it. And they are very skilled at that and they immediately

start quantifying the problem and dissecting it and that is all great. But the other perspective I am talking about is really holding back from doing that, like, do not necessarily jump straight into that because then you become trapped in the first framing of the problem. What this skill set is about, it is almost taking a step back and noticing, hey, what is really going on here, we have a client who is complaining about something but is that really the issue that we are necessarily dealing with. So there is this strange, I almost like the physical metaphor of thinking, do you delve straight into the problem or do you actually first take a step back and try to see a broader context, try to reinterpret what you are being presented with, so to speak.

DJ: Hmm. And I love the way you connect it to our wiring or our training. I am an engineer by training and you are right, if you have a hammer, there is a temptation to see the world full of nails and sort of look for nails to hit but maybe there is something else to be solved, and really resisting the default wiring which gets you to see the world in a certain way and look at what else is out there. So I love the way you link it to the way we might be wired because of our training.

TW: Very true and you are exactly right with the hammer. I think it is Abraham Kaplan or Abraham Maslow who first says, it is like, yeah, if you give a kid a hammer, they see everything as nails. It really captures that idea I think.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The point Thomas makes about all of us being wired to see a problem given our training is a powerful one.

I am reminded of an early experience when I was working in the UK. This must have been around the summer of 2005. I remember it was around the historic ashes series with Flintoff and Pieterse on one side and Glenn McGrath and Shane Warne on the other. Every match went down to the wire. England eventually won it 2-1. During one of the lunches, I remember getting into a conversation with a colleague with me who had an undergrad in Political Science. I remember asking him how come he was pursuing a career in Management Consulting after a degree in Political Science. I was coming from an Indian context where most people in Consulting were people including myself with an Engineering/ CA undergrad. He went on to say that of all the various branches in Oxford and Cambridge, consulting firms actually preferred Political Science Graduates. When I asked him why, he went on to say that Engg undergrad often prepares people to deal with tough closed ended problems while Political Science helps you make sense of complex open-ended problems. The numeracy that a lot of us were wearing on our sleeves was trainable but the mindset to look at complex problems is a harder one to crack. I learnt a lesson or two that day. Back to what Thomas says, we need to ensure that we are aware of the limitations of the way we see a certain situation and ensure that we open ourselves to new ways of framing a situation.

End of nugget transcription

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Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg - 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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