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## Context to the nugget

Indranil talks about his challenges in transmitting some of the elements of the credo he had crafted as the head of Marketing and Strategy of his organization. He underscores the risks of abstraction when we craft values such as honesty, excellence, customer-delight etc. and adorn the walls. He takes the example of a story to illustrate the point “no room for ordinary” a value they were trying to live in his company. He goes on to share how he transitioned to the world of story-telling and reflects on some of his early lessons in solo-preneurship.

## Transcription

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DJ: I want to take you back to the point in time let's say early 2013 you were the chief marketing officer of Mahindra Holidays and you decided to take the plunge and start story works, so talk to us little about that transition, how did you take the decision and what gave you the conviction? This was the plunge that made sense for you.

IC: That's been an interesting journey, so the year was 2011 when Mahindra holidays decided to do something very different in the sense that they uprooted their head office which was in Chennai and brought it to Mumbai to Mahindra Towers, they had a transition of CEOs, the new CEO transited a lot of people in the leadership team so we were all very new and the good thing to do at when you are new is to decide that everything everyone had done before you is not up to the mark so you change everything and I was head of strategy in marketing, so I was there to change the strategy of the company the vision the mission the brand the logo and all that and one of the things we had to do is to rewrite let's say the vision and mission, now I have always found the vision and the mission to be a funny thing because for most companies to me it reads like a score card not something that I would want to come to office Monday morning and we want to be the third largest insurance firm by 2020 that's just score card. So, instead of vision and mission I came up with something called Credo and our credo was “making every moment magical” it seemed to tick all the boxes, it was inspirational, we thought it was! It was measurable, it worked for the CEO, it worked for the janitor, and the next question was how you ensure that everyone, all employees across Mahindra Holidays is delivering magical moments. So we did need some guidelines for behaviour and the HR guy rightly said that's Values. And like most of the companies we had something on the wall which said things like integrity and sustainability and stuff like that and my thing was that even if the employees maxed out on each of those we won't be able to deliver magical moments because to me for most companies these values are really table stakes today. There might have been a time where there could be a more ethical company and less ethical company today you can't be not in ethical company that's not a choice so to me I call them hygiene values not winning values and I needed winning values, values that will help employees deliver magical moments. Of course the problem was, no one had the guts to go to Anand Mahindra and say integrity is no longer a value so we

created a new piece of document which we called the code of conduct and moved all this integrity, sustainability moved all that into that piece of paper Table stakes and in the blank piece of paper we wrote down things like no room for ordinary, why? Because ordinary can't be magical, we said experience is everything, why? Because half the company which was the guys in sales were tapping people like you and me and saying five-star holiday. Now, what is five-star holiday? I mean we are not technically five star and even if you were what does that mean to a consumer? And I said you know we need to sell experiences and then I went to the other side of the company which is the resorts, we had the people from the Taj, the Oberois running these resorts and I went and told them, we need a differential experience and they said sure, give us some more inches, more inches of TV more inches of mattress and I was trying to tell them that you know hard bed in a tree house might be the most magical experience and so experience is everything became the second and so on and so forth so now all that worked in the head office, everyone got it, everyone is actually very proud of it, we even won a few award within the group for the kind of values we had but what went into my head was this funny place which said oh my god maybe I have made another poster, how do you ensure that values are understood by everyone across the company and its not about translation, how does the housekeeping boy in Himachal understand no room for ordinary and I had no answer, I read, I wrote to people, I asked questions and finally what I found out was that you run workshops, so I run workshops, made lots of posters, T-shirts, Coffee cups and nothing seems to have worked and in that search, I don't know what I searched but I searched something on Google once and I landed upon the blog of a guy called Shawn Callahan, Shawn had this little company in Australia called Anecdote and he talked about how stories worked and he talked about how stories can help abstract things can become concrete and it seemed to make sense and I was lucky because Shawn and his business partner Mark visiting India in the next three months, I went and spent two days with them when they were in Delhi and they taught me narrative work and what they said was that, we never looking at things that were abstract, instead of writing more abstract lines to explain that abstract word use stories to make them concrete. So, he said go collect stories from the organization of what people in the organization think is that value being lived and he said when you collect the stories 80% of the stories will be junk because people don't understand that value but you will find 20% of the stories which are absolutely what you meant and they also taught me how to collect stories because if you go and tell a person tell me story of no room for ordinary I don't know how to react. So having learnt that as I came back every time I visited a sales branch the resort I got people together and I did what I called story listening which is collecting stories and I came back of course like Shawn had predicted with 80% junk let me give you a junk example so this house keeping boy in Rajasthan has telling me, "sir one day an extra-large family came to the resort" so, said what is an extra-large family, he said sir four children and mother father and parents wanted two extra towels and then the children started demanding two extra towels, I didn't say anything and I provided 18 towels in one room and that's no room for ordinary, now he wasn't pulling my leg, he genuinely believed that instead of four towels, you gave 18 towels with a smile is his understanding, but that's not what I had in mind because that is not a magical moment when you get two extra towels but in all this junk you get stories like the one I have written in the book about, which was told to me by a receptionist at the cool resort and he talks about his colleague who gets a call from a member and takes the message and then he calls the lunch room and when the colleague is talking to the lunch room the other guy the story teller over hears this and his colleague tell the lunch room that member is coming with two children and his wife and they are stuck in traffic they can't make it for the lunch service can we pack some lunch boxes and keep? When this guy over hears he asks, hey did you ask the member? Which route he is coming from? He said this route, they he said call the dining hall again, he said why? Tell them to pack some tea and cakes, he said why, he said don't you know there is a flower show that will be inaugurated by the politician, the police have blocked that road there is no way these members are going to come by 6 o'clock so he says, OMG there's children in the car, half an hour later the shift gets over, this guy without telling anyone,

without taking any permission goes to the lunch room, picks up those lunch boxes ties it up on his bike travels through some interior roads for some 8-9 kilometres keeps calling the members mobile locates the car and goes and gives these boxes and says your children must be hungry and that is living the value 'No room for ordinary!' and suddenly people get it because what you did with that is you converted something abstract no room for ordinary into something concrete, because stories are concrete and then of course you need to tell those stories, so we rechecked our entire process of let's say induction program, every company that I know of or that I worked with has an induction program which has one section called values and in those values you take abstract words and then explain it with more abstract, so you take an English word and use more English word to explain that English word, I won't name companies but companies with the word in the value statement called stewardship, what does stewardship mean? Or something as simple as respect and everyone thinks yes I know what respect is. I have worked with the companies when I have asked questions so tell me about respect give me an example of respect in your company, oh sir we respect people very much, I said ok I understand give me an example, he said last year when I over shot my target in November itself my CEO called me and personally congratulated me, he treated me with a respect, no he didn't, he gave you recognition that's not respect, so that's what the problem with abstraction is. So we redesigned our induction programs etc. and any speech that any senior leader gave, if he ever opened his mouth to say we believe in he had to support it with a story and the transition that I saw was magical, one year of my trying everything was not working and now suddenly people were getting it, I won't say hundreds but over the next two three months I got at least 7-8 stories from the system which showed me people are getting it and that's when I was also, I mean when you look back a lots of dots connect, I was looking at many things happening in my head and this gave me an opportunity to step out and do something on my own, so that's really how I got into story telling.

DJ: In terms of that transition with the benefit of hindsight, it's been five odd years since you have gone ahead and set up your practice, again what have you learnt on this journey that you didn't anticipate on day zero when you took the plunge again just in terms of advice to Solopreneur who are at that stage of life where they want to sort of move away from the corporate, let's say complexity of the corporate word and set out something on their own , so what's the word of caution or what's the word of advice given your perspective?

IC: One of the things as learning that I have is that when you are coming out and going solo, don't rely on friends and your close network as the sure place to do business actually it's the worst place to do business, not because they are not helpful, is just because they are polite, the number of bad cups of coffee I had in the first two months where, you know I spent my first fourteen years with Unilever, a lot of people who worked with me some seniors, some juniors are in most organization heads in marketing so when I gave them a call and said hey I am going to be working with this other guy we are looking at training people in marketing with real projects etc. and not class room can I have a cup of coffee? And no one said no! when I explained things they said that's fantastic and when I came back I thought I am going to get a call tomorrow to start a project and I never got calls and then I realised that then my calls were not answered and then I started thinking that I am going to lose people that I know and its only much later I realise that they didn't have a positive answer to give not because they didn't like the work I will do it's just that it wasn't right for them at that point in time if I had gone to someone I didn't know he would have told me I don't like this or I think you are too expensive or that and you get directions.

DJ: Here there was a relationship to protect.

IC: Ya and being kind so the first thing if I look back, one of the things I learnt is find your initial success from not people who you know you for something else and where there is relationship where they want to try and protect you rather than tell you what you can change. The second is

when I was kept on thinking am I doing this right thing? I have given up this job and we are doing this marketing stuff, I read somewhere that about 90 to 95% of successful new start-ups and businesses are not successful in the line of business they have started with and that was an Aha! For me. So I said ok this doesn't have to be this in parallel I was having this chat with Shawn and Mark saying why don't we start working together? And they till then didn't really have very solid legally signed partnerships across the word and so that conversation took a few months and by about August which is about three months or four months after my start they agreed and that's when I pivoted from doing marketing to doing story telling. So, lesson one I could have left much earlier and nothing would have changed neither my wealth nor my understanding of the market etc. Two is it doesn't have to be you have all the answers, I didn't and found the way to pivot later the third thing is to do more with, maybe because I was trying to sell something that was new because five years ago if I went I told people I do business story telling many people told me we understand both the words individually we don't understand what it means collectively. And why would you wanted to do story telling in business, today the things are different there is the buzz around the word and I am grateful for that but what happened is because I was trying to sell something which was unique conceptually I landed up I think in first two years selling the plane rather than selling the destination, so I was more bothered about telling them what I would teach them and how they can harness stories and what are my stories structures then saying what happens to their leaders when they learn story telling...

**DJ: It's like selling the category before you selling the product right?**

IC: Not just that, am saying even if you are selling the product the product features are not what I buy into. I buy into what the product finally helps me do not how it helps me do it. You might have a Gillette razor because of vibrations or for some thin magnesium edge whatever gets that. I am not interested about that, I am interested about having a smooth cheek at the end of my shave and I was selling the complexity of the razor so I was telling how story telling can be broken down into science and I am going to teach you these things. Sure I obviously had a method in the madness but what I should have been selling and I am not saying I have completely transited but those are some of the key lessons I have.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Inspired by Indranil, I am going to try and use a story to wrap up my learning here. I am reminded of an incident during my early days at EgonZehnder. It was around 2011, I was few months into the profession and I had gone for a search pitch. This was to find a Country CEO for a large logistics company in India. I had the research all the relevant pages with me (our credentials, our search process, the key leaders in the space and so on). I was carrying a 50 page document with all the credentials and capabilities. I remember going into the meeting with another senior colleague and he engaged in a 1 hour conversation with the promoter on his aspirations for the business, culture of the company and asked really insightful questions that led to a rich conversation. On the car-ride back to the office, I remember asking the Partner why he didn't walk the client through the pages. He looked me in the eye and said, Deepak, you have a daughter don't you? I said yes. He said, imagine it's your daughter's wedding a few years down the line. You are preparing for it and you need to choose between couples of photographers. Would you ever bother to find out which camera they use?

That insight has stuck with me ever since. In most such situations, our professional competence is possibly table stakes. That's possibly the reason we have been called to the meeting. Of course we need to know our stuff, we need to have the track record and have the capability to execute on the

project. But I often catch myself over indexing on selling the metal in the razor (like Indranil says) rather than selling the outcome (which could be a glowing skin)!

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## End of nugget transcription

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### **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](#).

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