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Context to the nugget

Atul speaks about his career in building out the IT business with his brother. He speaks about how he had gotten to a point where he was seeing good commercial success in the business but it was wearing him down and he didn't quite have the mojo for the business that he had when he set out with his brother. He speaks about his desire to try something new that led him to trying DJing and Bartending!

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): So, you clearly had a good run in this business with your brother? Boutique business with good margins and profitability. Give us a sense of the nature of the inner angst you were going through after about 2 decades in the business?

Atul Khatri (AK): So, this was going on very well and it was in actually 2012, after running a business for like that was 22 years into the business, so I felt that it was getting very... I would not say boring because IT field as such is a fairly exciting thing, every six months there is a new Intel processor, which is doubling its capacity, there is a new Cisco technology, so there's something new happening, some new printer. Technology at that time was moving very, very fast. I saw Wi-Fi coming in front of me, we saw the PC coming in front of me, we saw PCs with two floppy drives getting into right now the supercomputer kind of technology which we get into laptops and palmtops and mobile so, I saw that entire phase. So it was very, very exciting but still it was very, very boring like I felt that there was some element other than you may call it midlife crisis also I don't know but there was something that you are missing something in your life by just not exploring a second part, it was just... and IT field you are more or less working like 24/7 because at that time and probably in 2012, we were maintaining like very, very high critical networks of customers here and from abroad and sometimes get a call at 2:30-3:00 in the morning, the server is down, some this problem has come, this error has popped up, you are coordinating in the morning and sending engineers to that place plus we were also representing a very, very American company in India who was into support of very high-end servers and critical network systems. So, we were their support partners in India. So, for them also we used to do lot of high-end support work. And this means like you have to send an engineer in like 45 minutes anywhere in Bombay or a one hour in Bombay and that was really, really, you know, you get a call at 2:30, you had to wake up an engineer somewhere, one engineer is not picking his call, call up the other engineers, if nothing helps, I used to go there personally because I am an engineer. So, I knew... I was always abreast of what's happening in technology.

So that 2012 I felt that... and honestly my wife also said, I can see you just burning every day, you leave home at 9:30, come home at 9:00 in the night and I felt this crazy burning happening like what am I doing, like you are only making money, you are happy, but still there is something else. So, my

wife said why don't you try something different in your life? So, I said, okay, so I set out a task in 2011, in mid-2011, I said, I want to be a DJ because I used to love music. So, I went for this DJing course somewhere in suburban Bombay. So, that time there was no course, you had to know a DJ, a friend knew a DJ who used to teach people over the weekend. So that dude told me, that time I was 44, he said sir come on Saturday at 12 o'clock to my house, I will teach you how to be a DJ, get 25,000 rupees. I am on a corporate background, I reached at 11:45 sharp, 15 minutes before the meeting and I was outside his house 12:00, 12:30, 1:00, 1:30, 2:00 this bugger just didn't open his door. I was calling on his phone, he was not picking up his phone, so I said shit this guy is unprofessional. So, I left from that place and I think after an hour he called, so sorry sir, I had a gig last night, I had overslept, please come back. I said no dude you are unprofessional, I hate dealing with unprofessional people; I am a stickler for time. So, my DJ career ended there, and I said I should become a bartender and another thing I used to love at home on Sundays to mix drinks, to experiment with drinks and I bought this cocktail set at home to just experiment and things like that. So, I said I should become a bartender. So, I signed up for a bartending course next on some two Sundays later on. It was on a Sunday at 3 o'clock again in some bar somewhere 3 o'clock in the afternoon in a bar somewhere again in Mumbai.

DJ: So, it was conscious effort to learn something new and start something new?

AK: Yeah, I somehow, I always felt, I don't know... I am a marketing guy, I am a sales guy, I always felt that I should be always in a B2C kind of a role, I hated like a B2B, I hate backend stuff, be customer-facing. So, both these even DJing and this was you get instant gratification both these things. So, I said, okay, let me be a bartender. So, then this course was at 3 o'clock and I am a Sindhi and we had a very, very heavy lunch on that Sunday. Sunday lunch used to be always very heavy and after that I used to always believe in that 25-26 years of corporate life Sunday that sleep in the afternoon for 3-4 hours is like the battery for the entire week. So, I overslept and I didn't go for that course. So, my bartending career ended there only. So that was this. I was not really disappointed but I felt there was something I should do more.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I really like what Atul says towards the end of that piece in terms of how he saw himself. I am going to play it again just to reiterate. Sound of tapes rewinding.

(REPLAY)

AK: "Yeah, I somehow, I always felt, I don't know... I am a marketing guy, I am a sales guy, I always felt that I should be always in a B2C kind of a role, I hated like a B2B, I hate backend stuff, be customer-facing. So, both these even DJing and this was you get instant gratification both these things. So, I said, okay, let me be a bartender."

DJ: While he makes this point in a matter of factly way, I find that this a profound point which several people miss out on. We often see ourselves with specific labels which can be constraining. How do we abstract the key elements of what gives us energy without getting caught up in the specifics of what we have been upto is not as easy as it sounds.

Here is a snippet from Nandan Nilekani (NN); he had the opposite insight, that he was more of a B2B person than a B2C person. He speaks about this in the context of his experience as a politician transitioning from Rajya Sabha to participating in the election to get into the Lok Sabha.

NN: "I think that was one transition where I step too far in some sense, it was way out of my comfort zone, so after the election campaign and after that I realize that this was not where I want to be, that I didn't have the leverage, I didn't have competitive advantage in that area I didn't think I would be very effective so I realize actually my effectiveness comes from being what I am good at which is a technology lead transformation agent and use my talents and abilities to solve large intractable problems and make that available to anybody who wants to use it, so that was my shift and them of course I explained to you that I was looking for something to do and this except happened and then the whole portfolio approach.

I said if I am going to be in this game I should win an election that's the rights of passage if that business but then it becomes very retail intensive, because in every constancy there are millions of people, it's a B to C business, its B to C kind of thing and everybody wants real time attention, you can't say send me an email or call centre or something, so it's very time intensive it's also lots of pressure groups, different caste, religions this that all that stuff and also I was hampered by the fact that I was not a good public speaker in any Indian language, and I don't think you can win an Indian politics unless you are very good at it being a public speaker in Hindi or Kannada or Marathi or whatever, so I didn't have leverage so they quickly realize that I was not going to be effective in this."

DJ: Having this self-awareness of who you are and the environments where you thrive in at an abstracted level without being caught up in the specifics of what you are doing can act as a steering wheel in helping you experiment new pathways as in the case of Atul or cut your losses as in the case of Nandan who moved away from politics after his experience there.

Thank you for listening. If you are enjoying this conversation, you might also like my conversation with Papa CJ, another stand-up comedian who transitioned from a career in Management Consulting to discovering Stand up. You might also like the way Amish Tripathi transitioned from a career in Financial Services to writing or how Atul Kasbekar transitioned from studying Chemical Engineering to becoming a Photographer and subsequently a producer. You might also like the playlist reinventing self where several leaders speak about how they thought about their journeys when they were at cross roads.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Nandan Nilekani that is referenced: [Reflections from Politics as a Career](#).

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Atul Khatri - Nuggets

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- 61.03 Atul Khatri - Fertilizing a new possibility
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executives / 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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Podcast Transcript [61.01 Atul Khatri - The mid-life angst](#)

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