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Context to the nugget conversation

Harish speaks about how he thought about some of the key career choices that came his way including his approach during campus placements. He speaks about how he navigated some of the options that came his way within the Tata Group.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Harish, in this conversation, we talk about people's journeys. The three themes we are curious about in the podcast are Leadership, Transitions and Careers. Maybe, before we go into the book you have just written about the Tata Group and the stories, I would love to understand your journey a little bit and maybe, just to frame the first question, it has been about 35 odd years since you graduated with a gold medal from IIM Ahmadabad, as you think about your journey and some of the key choices you have made, what are some of the key choices you would call out in this journey?

Harish Bhat (HB): Yeah. That is an interesting question, Deepak. So if I were to call out some of the key choices I made since I left campus at IIM Ahmadabad, the first I would call out was my decision to join the Tata Group. I did not know too much about the Tata Group at that time, to tell you frankly, in 1987. I had read about them but then I spoke to a few senior colleagues who worked with the Tata Group. But what strikes me about the choice is that I joined a group whose values have been greatly satisfying to me, and a group where I have been able to build a purposeful career because I know that a lot of work I do for the Tata Group eventually goes into building the community and giving back to the nation. And I think that is a choice which will stand out for me throughout my career as being one of the finest choices I have made. That is also the reason why, for the past 35 years, I have been working with the Tata Group. And I love going to office each morning to complete the rest of my work with them. The other key choice I would call out is after an initial process of exploration, looking at different functions within corporates, eventually, I veered towards marketing, consumer behavior, brands as the key area that I would like to focus on. Once again when I left campus, I do not think I knew my passions that well. I had graduated from IIM Ahmadabad doing a plethora of courses in Marketing, in Finance, in Information Systems and so forth. But as I started working within the Tata Group, and in those early days, it was Tata Tea, at a later stage, it was Titan, I discovered that I really loved the art of branding and marketing. I like the science of consumer behavior. And over the course of my journey, I think I made that choice as well that I would like to specialize within this discipline and try my best to become a master of it. So that is the second choice that stands out. The third choice that actually stands out, is I feel very happy that over the past 35 years, I have done my best to develop many professionals who have worked with me. And there is nothing more fulfilling in one's career journey than seeing people who have

worked with you and developed under you, blossoming out and occupying senior roles in their own merit. So those are three important choices that I would call out.

DJ: Hmm. And going back to the first choice, Harish, what else did you have as an opportunity set?

HB: Well, to tell you the truth, the Tata Administrative Service was the first placement that I got out of campus. I had applied to other multinational companies as well. I had applied to Hindustan Lever, I had applied to Citibank, but immediately after I got the placement at Tata Administrative Service, I dropped out of the rest of placements. I spoke to a few people, understood what the Tata Group was like at a broad level, thought that this is the kind of job I would like to do, given the possibilities of inter-industry movement, and the fact that I would be going to work with a well-reputed Indian company. So I dropped out of placement and I stuck to my choice with the Tata Administrative Service.

DJ: Hmm. And picking up the arc of your career, Harish, from running Marketing in Tata Tea, running Jewelry and Watches business in Titan, and then, Tata Consumer Products and now you are a Brand Custodian of the group, give us a sense of this arc if you will.

HB: So I started my career as the Executive Assistant to the then Joint Managing Director of Tata Tea. His name is Mr. RK Krishna Kumar. He later became the Vice Chairman of the company and also a Director of Tata Sons. After few years in that role, I went into the Marketing and Sales function in Tata Tea, helping build our sales and distribution network. We were competing at that time against Brooke Bond and Lipton who had then unified under the Unilever umbrella a couple of years later. So we were a small plantation company, trying to build our own brands and competing against a behemoth. So that entire sequence of events, the Executive Assistant role gave me an overview of what a company was like, what the entire value chain in a company was like. And I could also see difficult and important decisions being made at close proximity. But the Sales and Marketing role in Tata Tea taught me that eventually marketing is all about common sense, it is about understanding the consumer and catering to his or her need and if we could do that smartly enough, we could take on any large competitor. So we gained and gained market share, to the extent that several years later, Tata Tea actually became the market leader in the packaged tea market in India. Then, I transitioned to the Jewelry business in Titan. The Tata Group actually sought my transfer into Tanishq at that time. It was a loss-making business when I joined it. I joined when Mr. Xerxes Desai was the Managing Director of the company and directly handling the Jewelry business was Jacob Kurian, the Chief Operating Officer to whom I reported. Over the next six years there, what came my way was the opportunity to participate in the turning around of a business. From being a loss-making business with a brand which was not very well known, we then took time to build a very robust brand in the jewelry space. Many people were skeptical of it. Many people said that India is a country of family jewelers, building a corporate brand or a modern brand in jewelry may never be successful but I am very happy that in the end, once again through an extreme focus on the consumer and an extreme focus on our business associates and on positioning the brand very soundly, we succeeded. And I am delighted now as I look back over the past 20 years, I mean Tanishq just celebrated its 25th anniversary last month, Tanishq has become such a successful brand today. With the Watches business, by the time I became the Chief Operating Officer of the Watches business, Titan was already a very strong brand. But over the next six years, building Fasttrack and Sonata into very popular brands in India, Fastback, the preferred brand of choice for Indian youth at the largest and most exciting youth brand, and Sonata, the brand of choice for, you know, across heartland India, that was a very fulfilling voyage. Now what all these three stints taught me, the Tata Tea Marketing and Sales stint, the Jewelry Retailing and Marketing stint and the Watches Brand Building stint and running the business, was a masterclass in what it takes to run a business successfully and a business which is focused on consumers. So that long stint, lasting over about one

and a half to two decades, was very crucial in building my understanding of consumer businesses. But it was also very crucial in my building a very good understanding of the Tata brand, what Tata stood for, as well as what it takes to build inspiration amongst people who actually operate the business. After that, I took a brief break. I took a brief break. I requested Titan and the Tata Group for a brief sabbatical to write my first book Tatalog. And I did that because it was 25 years after I joined the Tata Group, I was inspired with many of the tales of this group, and I was also very passionate about writing. So I wanted to put it down on paper so that it could inspire many many more people. That was in 2012, it was the year when Mr. Ratan Tata was retiring as the Chairman of Tata Sons, and I also wanted to write this book as a tribute to him. Thereafter, the Tata Group asked me to take on the mantle of the Managing Director of Tata Consumer Products, which was then known as Tata Global Beverages. And a couple of years later, once again, the Tata Group sought my services in Tata Sons to look after the Consumer and Retail businesses of the group. So that is how that voyage has played out. It has been a seamless voyage. There have been choices that I have had to make in the interim. There were choices of joining the Jewelry business, there were choices of becoming Chief Operating Officer of the Watches business or becoming the Managing Director of Tata Global Beverages. So those are choices I have made. But in retrospect, I see it as a fairly seamless voyage. There have been successes and there have been failures along the way. Not every stint of mine and not everything I have done has been a success. But those failures have also taught me very valuable lessons.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

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End of nugget transcription

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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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