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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayelet speaks about the four steps involved in Goal setting and what it takes in getting the right balance between inspiration and action orientation of the goal. She also goes on to speak about the roles of approach goals (going towards something) and avoidance goals (moving away from something) and how we can work with the two as we move forward.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And diving into step one Ayelet, you talk about the goldilocks balance while setting a goal, it needs to be aspirational enough, but at the same time, it needs to be specific enough, and you cannot swing too far on each of these extremes. Can you talk a little bit about getting that balance right, maybe illustrate that with an example if possible?

Ayelet Fishbach (AF): Yes. So the problem with very specific goals is that they feel like chores. If your goal is to, let us say, apply for a job, that feels like a chore, like I need to write a resume, I need to send many applications, I need to interview, that is not exciting, that is not pulling me. Too abstract goals and now I will go all the way to the extreme of like being happy or being fulfilled, it is hard to know how to pursue them. So I might feel very excited about being happy and fulfilled but I have no idea what is the action that needs to happen tomorrow at 7 a.m. for me to be there. And so we try to find the right balance that it is a goal that is as abstract as you can be, is most inspiring and least like a chore, but it is nevertheless connected to action. So, for example, having a job is better than applying for a job. You apply for a job because you want to have a job, so you know what it takes to have a job, you know what the steps are, but having a job is fun, it is good, it is like having a career, is something that people aspire to have. Owning a house is better than searching for houses is another example. As an exercise, you can think about it as asking yourself many why questions, like why do I do whatever I do, and why do I do that. Now, let us say, I am writing a resume, why do I do it because I want to apply for a job. Why do you want to apply for a job because I want to be employed? Why do you want to be employed because I want to do something interesting, because I want to make impact on the world depending on my career, and so on? And stop at the level of why questions where you can still see the action that relates to it, that it does not become so abstract that you just do not know how to answer how anymore.

DJ: It is a great perspective, just dig deep enough so that it is still driven by action rather than go too deep that it becomes too abstract.

AF: Exactly.

DJ: Fascinating. And talking about goals Ayelet, you also talk about approach goals and avoidance goals, and you say that each of these works in a certain context and it is important for us to recognize that. Can you shine the light on this one?

AF: Yes. Approach goals are the do goals and avoidance goals are the do not goals. When we ask people to list their goals, we have recently asked many people to list new year's resolutions, some people talk about what they should do, other people talk about what they should not do. So if you tell me that your goal is to stop smoking, that is an avoiding goal. An approach goal is to start exercising, do something that will make you healthier. The problem with avoidance goals is that they are often harder to pursue. They often make us think about a thing that we are trying to avoid. Dan Wegner back in the 80s asked people not to think about white bears, it is the ultimate avoidance goal, try not to think about something really how to do. The more you try not to think about white bears, well, guess what, you think about white bears. And so avoidance goals are hard but avoidance goals seem urgent which means that if you need to do something immediately, then often this is the right way to think about it as what I should not do. Approach goals seem like, well, I do not need to start right now, I can start next week. So I say, in general, try to avoid the avoidance goals, try to think about what you want to do, not what you want not to do, unless you are trying to motivate yourself to act as soon as possible.

DJ: Hmm, let the approach goals crowd out the activities we are trying to avoid, I guess, is a way to look at it.

AF: Yes. Now some people are also in the personality, more approaches, others more avoiders. Now some people tell you that it is more natural to them to think, let us say, about their career in terms of avoiding and messing up other than approaching success, but for most of us, approaching success is easier, is more motivating than avoiding failure.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If I go back to the four-step process that Ayelet speaks about, in driving change, I really find the piece around social support very relevant in the context of the Coaching work I do. When I work with a leader, typically, I end up speaking to 20-30 people around them across personal and professional domains to understand them from multiple perspectives. After I do this for about 2-3 months and share my feedback with the leader, I generally suggest that they share the findings with a few people around them (at least a couple of people who are vested in your growth on the work front) and a couple of people on the personal front. It does a couple of things I notice. One, it provides greater colour to some of the points that are made in the assessment report. They often act as the feedback loop as you embark on the change and can keep coming back to you with progress and let you know if you go off track.

I also like the point Ayelet makes about approach goals crowding out avoidance goals. I find that specifically relevant in the context of tech addiction. I have noticed that the only way I can get myself and my kids away from the screen is to substitute it with something else that is more interesting and engaging so that we are not gravitating towards the screen. Just telling myself or the kids that screen time is to be avoided beyond a point is pointless I notice.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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Ayelet Fishbach - 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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