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## Context to the nugget

Sudhir speaks about the close link between IIMA and HUL in terms of the approach towards problem solving and Marketing. He speaks about the role of PL Tandon and Labdhi Bhandari in helping build the IIMA Marketing curriculum along with Prof AK Jain. He also shares an example of when he failed at framing the right question when he was in the Ice Creams business.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And yeah in my past life as a search consultant, I guess I did some of those placements as well, but I want to take you back in time Sudhir, close to two decades back when we were in IIMA and you referred to Professor A. K. Jain and the book and we were in the same section and we witnessed some of his marketing genius. You speak about getting the problem right, problem definition right. Talk to us a little bit about what you mean by that in the context of business and marketing but maybe if you could also reflect a little bit on how you have applied that in your journey.

Sudhir Sitapati (SS): DJ the... HUL and IIMA firstly have a very, very, and I realized this only when I was researching the book, a very, very deep relationship. So, P. L. Tandon who was our first Indian Chairman and one of the founders along with Ravi Matthai of IIMA, so he was right up there. And the person who is credited along with Professor A. K. Jain of building the marketing faculty in IIM Ahmedabad is Labdhi Bhandari who a lot of people ... he was an HUL Brand Manager. So, in marketing in some ways the IIMA way of thinking and the HUL way of thinking as I've realized having been to both are very similar and at the heart of it is problem definition. It's always more difficult to define a problem than to solve it and you can always get people to solve problems and a lot of our time in our education a lot of us try and focus on being problem solvers, but the difficult thing is to, you know, as Professor Jain used to say what is the problem and I guess that's the big learning. If you ask me that what's the big learning in marketing is you got to keep asking that question what's the problem and I'll give you an example of when I was in ice-creams when I actually despite saying this all the time I failed myself. I had just joined the ice-cream business 5-6 years ago and I was going to Bombay markets and I found they were small and I asked people why don't you keep an ice-cream cabinet and they said because there is no space. So, I said look, let's go and design a small ice-cream cabinet. So, we designed this small miniature ice-cream cabinet, which we thought was the solution to Bombay outlets. But as we started placing them, we realized that it was one-third the capacity but it was two-thirds the electricity consumption of the regular cabinet. So, while it made sense in terms of real estate, it didn't really make sense in terms of the overall economics. So, the question I should have asked at that time is how do I make ice-creams profitable for the retailer not how do I get a cabinet into the retailer? And had I asked that question I wouldn't have spent the kind of money and had the fiasco that we had with the Chhotu cabinets.

DJ: Interesting. And back to your journey Sudhir in the context of how you framed your choices, have you found this clarifying in terms of the question you asked leading to a different way of looking at a situation.

SS: I don't know Deepak. I certainly do a lot of it and I certainly am very conscious about it and especially when I'm confused. See very often decision making, and we can talk about it later, is actually the crucial secret sauce of management and one of the key things that Levers teaches you and a good decision has to be both intuitive and rational. And often when you find these in conflict that's the right time for you to take a step back and say what the problem is? What is the real decision I'm making? So, when the heart and the mind are not in tango for a decision that's when you know that you've not really clarified the problem. So that's the way I look at it.

DJ: No, the reason I ask is in the context of the work I do. Sometimes I tell leaders who are in transition what are you solving for? Are you solving for impact, are you solving for harmony across domains of life or are you solving for something else and that determines choices?

SS: That's right.

DJ: So, till you have that clarity around what you are...

SS: And it's hard. I'm saying to raise the question but you know all of us and it's a very, very hard thing and it's not an obvious answer on what the problem is. In fact, that's the hard work and once that is answered then everything is quite easy after that.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: The point that Sudhir makes about asking the right question is quite a profound one and something that came up in one of my earlier conversations at the Podcast with Tasha Eurich (TE). She is one of the leading thinkers in the space of enhancing self-awareness. One of the paradoxes here is that you would think that people who reflect a lot would be quite self-aware. But often they go down what she calls the rabbit hole of rumination. She goes on to speak about how we should conduct the enquiry and frame the question.

TE: *"so what we wanted to do in our study was understand if why is the wrong question what is the right question you know what are these unicorns doing differently than the rest of us and it took us a little while to find this pattern but we discovered that when unicorns introspected they almost never asked why question they asked what questions and at first sight I thought ohh that just a weird sort of flock or weird nuance but as we started to look into it started to make a huge amount of sense. So, one example would be you are going back to the question why I didn't get that promotion unicorns if they were in that situation wouldn't ask themselves that question. Here is some question they might have asked instead. What did I learnt that can help me be better position in the future? Or what can I do to close the gap between you know where I thought I was and where I need to be? Or what support can I enlist from the people around me to help me you know to achieve this goal the next time I set it? Or they are going back to why am I so upset about that conversation with my co-worker they might instead ask what part of that situation did I owe or what can I do differently in the future to avoid that kind of conversation with that person and so what we found was asking "What" instead of "Why" really helps us avoid so many of the pit falls of introspection where we you know what excavating for the truth that whenever gone find and we are focusing on our problem and feeling victimized and disempowered."*

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## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Tasha Eurich that is referenced: [Limitations of introspection](#).

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## Sudhir Sitapati - Nuggets

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- 51.02 Sudhir Sitapati - Choosing to stay in HUL
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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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