

People need commitment to work in the social sector

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Why is leadership succession a problem in non-governmental organizations (NGOs)? That is what I wrote about last fortnight. In response, I received a flood of emails. Of two kinds. One set disputed my analysis and was about its inadequacy and inaccuracy. The other strongly endorsed it. The former, all from founding leaders of NGOs, comprised about 5% of the responses, while the latter, from a mix of people from NGOs, including many leaders, was the overwhelming majority. Many of the endorsements were angst-ridden. Poor succession planning had led to depletion of the energy and purpose of their organization, resulting in personal disillusionment and disengagement.

Buried at the root of this reaction is the fact that these people cared for the purpose of the organizations. They had signed up to change the world for the better, which was the possibility that their organization offered. But how many of those who work in NGOs do so because they deeply care about the work and the world? And how many join because it is just another job with a relatively steady and adequate income? These are not questions NGOs ask of themselves enough, though these have significant implications, much like the issue of succession planning.

Let me take the example of our own organization, which has about 1,500 people. Most of them live and work in small towns and villages, in some of the most disadvantaged regions of the country. Almost all of them have expertise in school education. We work to improve education, because we believe that good education can help change the world. But it would be delusional to believe that all our members are motivated by the vision alone and work only for social change. Our 50-odd frontline leaders, who know each of the people in their own teams well, have their estimates and assessment.

Their estimates range from 70% to 30% for those who are energized by the purpose, the rest being those who see their work primarily as livelihood. This binary does oversimplify and lose important nuances, but it can still be useful. As a social sector organization, we are relatively large, financially very stable, and, without doubt, have our own peculiarities. So, our experience may not be entirely representative of the sector. But if some of my more candid friends in the sector are to be believed, it appears that it is. So here is our shared experience on this matter.

First, it is critical to accept reality. Too many leaders and their organizations attempt to keep up appearances that everyone is mission-driven. Since people are good at superficially abiding by group norms, they play along. And this usually leads to low-level engagement of these people with the organization and its work.

Second, commitment to the mission is sometimes used as a gloss over inadequacies and problems. Often, it is the quality of the work. Commitment alone cannot substitute for competence and quality, without which progress is impossible. Worse is the situation where poor work ethic or woolly-headedness are camouflaged by endless discussions, purportedly in service of the goals. And culturally poisonous are those who have a messianic vision of their mission, with no heed to the means.

Third, people don't remain in the same category. Over time those who come with short-term interests build commitment and purpose, and some others who start with commitment lose it. Those who just work at the job, when they start seeing the effect of their own and the organization's efforts, often start identifying with the mission. This builds their energy and commitment.

Many who started off with great energy and purpose sometimes drift into a ritualization of their commitments hollowed of meaning. Often, it is just the many corrosions and burdens of time. Sometimes, because of life's circumstances, such as increasing family responsibilities, sometimes because of uncalibrated expectations on what their efforts can achieve, and sometimes because of organizational dysfunction. Among the most dysfunctional are those situations where the entire organization in itself has lost sight of the goals and direction while paying lip service to them, and has become a job-providing machine.

People who identify with the purpose and work for it with deep commitment are ideal for social sector organizations. But the reality is that such organizations will end up recruiting many who are looking only for a job. If managed well, such individuals can be effective contributors. It is often about acknowledging and accepting such people without any discrimination and effectively demonstrating their work's link to the goals. Valuing their professional contribution, competence and work-ethic leads to substantially better outcomes for the individual and the organization. And, over time, if all this is done consistently they embrace the sense of purpose.

This overall pragmatic response, which makes social sector organizations more effective, must not obfuscate the fundamental reality that unless there are a significant proportion of people who are purpose-driven, such organizations cannot function. It is they who provide the direction, the momentum and the energy.

Nothing else can explain what I saw last week. With the day temperature at 45 degrees Celsius in western Rajasthan, small teams of my colleagues, with no fans and no access to toilets, working without pause for six days with teachers, across six small towns. I was singing in 2 hours, and they went on.

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