

# How to make the transition from the corporate to the social sector

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The email was from a good friend. "For 22 years Ravi has played leadership roles in various businesses...he wants to move to the social sector and is interested in the Foundation; can you talk to him?"

I get more such mails than I can handle. Eventually, it does result in meeting many wonderful people. However, talking to such people takes time, lots of it. Over time, I have developed some methods and filters, to balance conflicting considerations: utilization of my time, giving the best advice I can, not demotivating a well-intentioned person and being nice to my friends.

Those who don't pass my first filter, I dismiss immediately. This filter has two parameters. The first one doesn't stop surprising me. While certainly not a majority, but a significant minority seems to believe that they are doing a favour to society (or me) by even considering such a movement and the mere idea of the material sacrifices that they will make in such a transition entitles them to a "leadership" role. Do I need say more about such people?

The second is those who say that they want to move to the social sector because they have had enough of the intensity of the world of business, and they want a better work-life balance, that is, something less intense. Trying to change the world is less intense than selling soap or structured investment products, is it?

My schedule feels the strain, but on the whole, the happy result is that 75% pass through this first filter. Then I apply my financial filter: whether they are willing to accept a substantial change in the trajectory of their compensation. In some cases, this starts with a significant drop in salary while joining, and it does in all cases mean substantially lowered earnings over the rest of the working life of the person. Some have not thought about this at all, and develop cold feet.

It is only after this that the real conversations begin. We caution them at the beginning that there will be many rounds of discussions, and in all likelihood a couple of visits to the field. During many of these discussions, one of the first question the person asks me is how I made the transition. The brief answer is: my extraordinary good luck of having a boss who let me apprentice (sort of) in the world of education for 10 years, combined with growing up immersed in education from early childhood because of the work of my father.

Through this process we have discovered many capable people, with a genuine desire to contribute. But this is insufficient for a successful transition: two other factors seem to be important.

First, the person must understand and clarify for herself, whether she wants to work in an organization which has direct impact on a few people or whether she prefers to work with an organization attempting larger scale impact. Since both kinds of work are equally worthwhile and needed, it may seem like labouring on a fine distinction, but I have seen many cases where this eventually becomes the cause of disenchantment. This happens with those who have fulfilment only in seeing their efforts making some difference day on day, for instance, in a school or at a hospital. In an organization that is attempting large scale change, one doesn't see such things, and so such people over a period of time start feeling, "Did I leave that life to come here and work in another large organization?" So it's best to clarify this for oneself, as much as possible, and then choose.

Second, many of these capable and committed people are preoccupied with their own idea of what changes are required and how to make these happen. Often this is not at the level of specific solutions, but at the level of ways of thinking. For example, many have a preoccupation with market mechanisms. It's not surprising that those who have spent so much time in business tend to frame all problems in terms of the market. There are other problematic preoccupations, e.g. technology will solve everything, it's all about "accountability". Certainly, what I am calling preoccupations are in a range, but at some point they become dysfunctional.

After all this, we do find many good people. Some don't join us, but end up with other social sector organizations, which is as good. The social sector already has very capable and committed people, but the scale of the issues are such that many times more the number are needed.

PS: My memory of growing up in the world of education is filled with some remarkable people. One of the most remarkable of them was Vinod Raina. He introduced me to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, we played cricket together, and in the past three decades didn't remain much in touch. He passed away last week. Educationist, thinker, relentless warrior for social justice and architect of Right to Education (RTE). He was that and more. Any bit of effort to improve the RTE on the ground will be a real tribute to him, more than any piece of writing or a speech.

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