

Charu

Hi, Meena, thank you for making the time to join us on Mrigashira.

Meena

Thank you so much for inviting me, Charu.

Charu

Let me begin by asking you to demystify social impact consulting, what does it mean to be a change communicator and that's something I know you have that written on your website, of Niti consulting but, and it really intrigues me, I would really like to know more about it.

Meena

Sure, although we believe in change creation, and not just change communications. So, I just want to sort of put that disclaimer right up front, and I'll sort of explain. So this was about 12 years back Charu, when I had just made the switch from a very mainstream corporate career, to being on the board of a for profit, global social enterprise, trying to help them expand, called Dialogue social enterprise and through my work with them in sort of early 2008-2009, is when I realized that there is an opportunity to do good on well and create sustainable change, if one focuses on very implementation focused consulting services, it was still a fairly alien concept back then, and not very many organizations what doing what we had meaty consulting attempted to do at that time. But the aim was to try and create systems and processes and ideas, you know, to try and build a foundation for change, which is not dependent on organizations, whichever type of organizations they are, eventually, programs that create large scale sustainable change need to be sustainable for them to create large scale social change. So that's, that was sort of like the driving force for even the creation of Neeti consulting. And when we started out, we found that even though there was several people with similar sort of ideas, who wanted to come together, and that's how our network was born. And, you know, little over 11 years, hence, I can tell you fairly, you know, proudly, you know, even if I, if it doesn't sound too humble, is that we've been able to make small difference, I would say, but to large scale social change. So we've worked with fewer organizations, but I think helped create large scale social change, which is not just dependent on us. So, to your question on what does change mean is that if, for example, you are interested in improving educational parameters in a particular geography, it may not be only about setting up schools or, you know, creating awareness about literacy, or, you know, creating teaching programs or infrastructure for development, it could be a combination of all. It really depends on the geography, it depends on the the cultural ethos of the of the place, it could also depend on where things are today, and what they want to achieve. So it's really about building these systems or building change in a way that it becomes catalytic that was the thought process and that's, that's what we aim to do and continue to do in our everyday engagement.

Charu

If I'm understanding this, right, it's really about you know, we, if we look at communication, I mean, we we try and bring in change for the company in what they're doing, not necessarily from the social aspect. But here we are, later you talked about programs are designed to bring in change. So that's, that's really what the whole objective is here. And if we were to really break this down to the basics,

what's the approach you follow while working on a strategy for a social project? You know, you just mentioned that, you know, if it's to do with education, do you really need to know the in and out of a whole system and how it works? What skill sets you need? What is your approach which you need to take? At the basic level.

Meena

Good question. I would say it's a combination of both. I think it definitely helps to have some level of domain expertise in the area that you are striving to create a system's change, but I think more important to people who are attempting to do similar things based on our own experience would be to really focus on asking the right questions, you know, and we follow a lot of design thinking principles when we are creating a strategy with always implementation in mind and one of the things that I feel many organizations get it wrong is that in their aim to create the sort of perfect strategy, they don't sort of consider, you know, ground level realities many times. So that's when we sort of try and create a strategy, it's, you know, being implementable is an imperative and we work, you know, starting with that premise and when we sort of look at systems in person, we always start with a need analysis. So, you know, like you rightly said, when we're looking at, say, education, we would probably say, Okay, what do these people need? Do they need the easy end goal that everybody at least get school education, or is there the ultimate need is to try and create livelihoods? So, once you understand and do the need analysis, then you work sort of backwards in terms of trying to convert into short term and long-term goals and objectives, but with the view that all of the activities that lead to these short term and long term goals are eventually implementable. So, whenever we are approached, for example, to create a change strategy, or to try and develop ideas to execution sort of plan, our aim always is to go back to the drawing board, irrespective of whichever stage that project is, and then ask the right questions, frame and reframe the end objective focus on the wants and needs of the users and the community, really, that is going to be at the center of it all, and then translate that into relatable goals. You know, one of the things that I read recently, in a book that I was reading was this power of the small and I couldn't sort of help relate with it, as we have experienced working on the ground over the last decade or so. Is that, you know, you have to celebrate small wins.

Charu

Right.

Meena

You know, and by that same logic, you know, whenever you're creating a very large-scale change program, I think it's important also to calibrate and figure out, Okay, what are the smaller wins, because the smaller wins, and, smaller successes, drive communities to do more, you know, it really helps the entire ecosystem to work towards the larger goal and we've really believed in espousing that in whichever program that we have ideated.

Charu

That's like a pyramid, right? I mean, you create with pebbles, you know, you're supposed to keep celebrating the small wins till you reach the top, which is the end objective, right?

Meena

Yeah.

Charu

So, uh, you know, evaluation has always been something which our industry has always struggled with, be it a communication or be it impact evaluation, you know, which is I think, even more challenging right to measure because of the whole complex nature of our many long-term social changes, which you were just talking about as well help us understand a simple evaluation and measurement model, you would advise communicators to use well developing programs for their clients.

Meena

So, one of the things like I talked about this power of, small successes and small wins, one of the main reasons why people kind of have this overwhelming, you know, resistance, really to evaluation and just adopting evaluation and measurement processes, whichever industry sector it's been, has been that if you consider evaluation to be a report card of sorts. It is not, you know, and it should not be viewed as such, especially and I can speak that for the development sector for sure. If you start looking at evaluation processes, as a means to bring in better efficiency and better effectiveness, you will see even behaviors towards evaluation change. So that's the first first sort of change in thinking that I would like to sort of propose and wherever we've used it, it's really resulted in significant change. The second thing is where you always get this you know, group of people from the outside to do sort of like an audit at the end of a certain period to sort of look at it. Again, if you only rely on that, it's more often than not likely to fail, you know, and always would result in, you know, the organization or the program in question. consider it, as, you know, as a something of exam or an inspection of sorts, it's not. So, the second thing that we very consciously try and build in whenever we are doing an evaluation design or a process is that while there are controls placed, to validate the data that is collected, or, you know, just to make sure that it's as verifiable and as evidence oriented as possible, the data collection process needs to be embedded in the operation of the project itself. And whenever you try and build systems and processes that imbibe this, you will always find evaluation as a part of operations, and it's more often than not likely to succeed. So that's the second sort of operative word when it comes to evaluation, whichever field it might be, you know, whether it is measuring intangibles, and communications in HR, you know, around culture, around organizational behavior, or in social impact, where you're also measuring a lot of intangibles for long term change, etc. And the third thing that I would sort of, you know, very highly recommend who those who are sort of either overwhelmingly, keeping away from evaluations or you know, not not trying to sort of look at a system that kind of works for them, is that whenever you have results presented, in a way data always needs to be presented in a way that lends itself to taking business decisions, you know, often one finds evaluation reports, you know, so jargon is, and so difficult to comprehend for the average business lead, or the average sort of social entrepreneur or even a community person on the ground. If the person on the ground can't relate to whether a program is successful, or not successful, or you know, moving the needle or not, then it's likely that it's not going to have either the motivation or the ability for this person to find gaps and address those gaps at all. So, data visualization is something that we believe in a lot. And as a communicator channel, you would, you would agree that the power of storytelling, you know, and well, and good visualize data can really help take great decisions, whether it is at a business level, or whether even if it is at an operations level. So, evaluation has to lend itself to that. So we, we need to really believe in these three mantras, and any evaluation design needs to incorporate this. And if it's not

resulting in these three principles, you know, in these three sorts of directives, then an evaluation is more likely to fail than not. And evaluation needs to, you know, a culture of evaluation is what we aim to create. So that you one doesn't need to always have an external auditor or an external person to come and do this inspection at the end of six months or a year. Sure, I mean, I think it's important because a lot of donors and a lot of organizations, care a lot for these annual reports, etc. I think it's very, very important, but how the data for the annual report is collected and how it is presented. And how it is internalized, needs to be more important than the final report says.

Charu

Right now, very well explained. And I think you've really broken it down into like, clearly showing that how culture of evaluation can really make or break your entire program. And if it's, all decided, and and and you know, put in place before the program starts, then you really know where you are headed and how you need to go about it. Right. So, if someone is interested in finding their calling in the development sector or in the social impact sector, how should they go about it? any guidance on that front?

Meena

Okay, I think this is by far the toughest question Charu, I'll tell you actually, let me answer this by giving you a couple of examples of types of people who have reached out to me because I can only speak from experience over a period of time. You know, I teach at a number of universities and I mentor a number of young people and in the last many years This has also been a trend so I'll share with you interesting aspects of you know, different types of people and what I've advised them at different points in time perhaps that'll give us (Charu: fair enough) an idea so longest answer to a short question, but this is not an easy question to answer. So, one group of people are, you know, is often, you know, sort of mid-level managers, you know, who have some specialist skill, either in HR or supply chain, or marketing or business strategy or whatever, you know, very mainstream corporate type guys, we're saying, Okay, now we really need to contribute. And we need to sort of apply would love to apply what we know, to the social sector, whether it is as a mainstream career or something that they want to do on the side. So, the advice to those types of people would be, be prepared to unlearn. You know, and don't just assume that everything that applies in the corporate sector can be just cut, paste copy, in the social sector, it cannot. So be prepared to unlearn Be humble, you know, know that there is another way of thinking, I do think structured way of thinking, and a lot of the corporate type expertise is very, very useful in the development sector, but it's not always a good thing to be too structured. I've personally had to unlearn a lot in the last 12 odd years that I've had to when you know, when I've made the switch, so I'm speaking from experience here, to this second type of people, which is actually the largest chunk, I would say, students, you know, who are wanting to either intern in the development sector or you know, are still idealistic and utopian in their new world and saying, okay, you know, I can change the world, and I can change the Earth, whatever, I think, great, you know, that there is a thinking and, more often than not, it's usually, you know, people want to have some experience in the social sector, because it carries a lot of weight, especially when you're applying to universities abroad. But why not, I mean, I think it's a win win for both the student and the said, social sector organizations the like, there I would advise to be responsible, you know, if an organization or a social sector, you know, practice is giving you the opportunity to intern to let you learn, and not worrying about your lack of experience, or maturity come in the way of your passion, and your ability to contribute, reciprocate,

by making sure that you are giving it your all. So, one of the things that I often find in very young people, and unfortunately, especially true of Indian students, in particular, is this lack of ownership and responsibility. Again, I can't speak for all, but it's, I've seen it a lot, hence, I feel the need to sort of share it through this forum, is that one has to sort of reciprocated by, you know, giving you giving one giving back the agency through ownership and through responsibility. So that's the second category of people that I would like to sort of talk about. And then there is also this third category, people who are very experienced people who have, you know, who are sort of, at the far end of a very, very active, you know, corporate career or academic career, sometimes who are now wanting to switch to the social space and contribute. These people can actually contribute a lot, you know, in in an advisory capacity in a capacity to sort of share their knowledge and their experience and their expertise. There the advice would be is, please don't look down upon I don't know, systems that are suboptimal, or thinking that his grounds up and you know, and not very articulate in their communication, etc. etc. But yeah, I mean, I think the bottom line, and the more important thing is I think there is an opportunity for all to contribute to change. And I think it'd be wonderful if everyone out there young, small, experienced, inexperienced, would contribute in their own way, not as a contribution, but being sort of engaged involved. So, the short answer to your question is be engaged, don't contribute. If you're engaged and are actively engaged, I think the What one needs to do to be really, someone who can change and actively sort of participate in this process will become fairly evident.

Charu

Who said transformation is easy, but it certainly can be satisfying, right? I mean, and that's a lot of meaningful advice for listeners. Thank you Meena for making the time to talk to us on Mrigashira.

Meena

Thank you so much Charu.