

Social Entrepreneurship Empowering the Hearing Impaired
Youth-A Case study on Mirakle Couriers

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Abstract

Social changes are gradual and slow in pace, but social entrepreneurs act as change agents for society by seeking opportunities where people see problems. Social entrepreneurs are “change makers” who generate "social value". This paper presents a case study of a social entrepreneur Mr. Dhruv Lakra who set up Mirakle Couriers where profit is not the primary motive but aims to ‘do good’ and not charity. It exclusively gives employment to the hearing impaired youth and empowers them to gain copious levels of confidence along with financial independence. This pioneering, innovative and extraordinary idea has led to meet the needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged people in the society. The empowerment has brought glow in the eyes of the employees, pride in their stride and hope in their hearts.

Key Words : Social entrepreneurship, social change, empowerment, hearing impaired

Literature Review

Social changes are gradual and slow in pace, but social entrepreneurs play an important role of catalysts in bringing about social changes. Social entrepreneurship has been described differently by different writers. Social enterprises have been varyingly described as ‘a private enterprise conducted in the public interest’ (OECD 1999:10), a for-profit social venture (Dees and Anderson 2003), and a social purpose enterprise (Wallace 1999). Different definitions have been quoted for social entrepreneurship by different writers. They range from broad to narrow. But common across all definitions of social entrepreneurship is the fact that the underlying drive for social entrepreneurship is to create social value, rather than personal and shareholder wealth (Zadek & Thake, 1997), and that the activity is characterized by innovation, or the creation of something new rather than simply the replication of existing enterprises or practices.

Social entrepreneurship begins due to opportunities which emerge due to market, institutional and government failures, wealth disparity among people, increase in realisation of shared responsibilities due to corporate social responsibility movement and above all due to prevalence of needs in human society. Social entrepreneurs may discover or create

opportunities (Alvarez and Barney, 2007) and launch ventures to make profits, create wealth, or balance social and economic imperatives (Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Perrini, 2006). Social entrepreneurship involves the recognition, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities that result in social value – the basic and long-standing needs of society – as opposed to personal or shareholder wealth (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006).

Any organisation requires resources to start and run the business. The different resources required by the firm include physical, financial, human, technological, social and organisational. The financial resources are the capital entered into the firm. Social entrepreneurs usually start with limited power and resources. Commercial and social entrepreneurship differ in terms of resource mobilization (Austin et al., 2006). Commercial entrepreneurs have the appeal of possible returns at their disposal which attracts financial resources. Angel investors and venture capitalists provide capital to commercial entrepreneurs with the hope that they will one day earn out of the invested capital. (For an excellent overview of angel investors and venture capitalists, see Morrissette, 2007.) In addition to financial resources, resource mobilization also involves human resources. Commercial entrepreneurs are able to hire employees based on the same factor: potential returns. When individuals decide to work for commercial entrepreneurs, they typically do so based on the premise that their effort will result in financial rewards such as wages, benefits, future windfalls (i.e., stock options), or some combination of these rewards.

Social enterprises may be structured internally within the parent organisation without sharing it's space or as a separate legal entity, either for profit or non-profit or structured as the same entity where there is no parent or host organization and exclusively operates on it's own.. Three different types of social enterprise ownership structures exist: private, public and collective.

Social innovation is a novel solution that is more effective, efficient, sustainable solution for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals. It refers new strategies, concepts, ideas and organizations that meet social needs of all kinds. Social innovation refers to new ideas that work in meeting social goals.(Geoff Mulgan 2007)

Effective Management of Social Enterprises covers various aspects like leadership in social enterprise, strategy in social enterprise, structuring social enterprises, managing human resources in social enterprise, financial viability, governance, performance measurement and management. (Effective Management of Social Enterprises, Lessons from Businesses and Civil Society Organizations in Iberoamerica- A Collaborative Research Project of the Social Enterprise Knowledge Network 2006)

Directly related to their differences in missions, commercial and social entrepreneurship differ dramatically in terms of performance measurement (Austin et al., 2006). In commercial entrepreneurship, performance is typically measured in terms of financial performance. Examples of such financial performance measures include profitability (i.e., return on assets, return on equity) and sales growth (Murphy, Trailer, & Hill, 1996.)

Social value has little to do with profits but instead involves the fulfilment of primary needs such as providing food, water, shelter, education, and medical services to those members of society who are in need. Social entrepreneurs have an acute understanding of social needs, and then fulfil these needs through creative organization. Social entrepreneurs, in particular, have become the pioneers of this worldwide transformation by launching new organizations serving a multitude of social needs, thereby improving the quality of life and enhancing human development around the globe (Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Lasprogata and Cotton, 2003; Leadbeater, 1997; Mair and Noboa, 2003; Martin and Osberg, 2007).

Social entrepreneurs use their innovative thinking, enthusiasm and persuasion to reach their goals. Social entrepreneurs are visionaries who see beyond the usual. Social entrepreneurs use innovative tools and market-driven mechanisms to solve key social problems, making a positive impact on society as a whole. As social ventures create jobs and develop the institutions and infrastructures needed for development, they can be the engine of economic and social development. Social entrepreneurship is a construct that bridges an important gap between business and benevolence; it is the application of entrepreneurship in the social sphere. (Dave Roberts and Christine Woods)

This study was undertaken to understand the social change brought about by the social entrepreneur, the various aspects of administration and management of a social enterprise and to understand the social impact of empowerment on the hearing impaired youth.

Method

The methodology used is exploratory in nature, and is based on information collected from primary source by observation, qualitative depth interview and visit to the organisation as well as secondary sources.

This study provides an analysis of a case study of social entrepreneurship that empowers the hearing impaired youth. It is a known fact that approximately 6% of Indian population suffers from some kind of hearing loss and four out of 1,000 children in India are born deaf. To serve these physically challenged youth, Mr. Dhruv Lakra initiated and set up Mirakle Couriers in January 2009. It is a company which provides customised courier services in Mumbai (local), to major metropolitan cities (domestic) and shipments to international destinations in over 160 countries of the world (with tie up with Aramex Pvt. Ltd). It exclusively gives employment to the deaf. Currently it employs 47 deaf employees of which 8 are female.

Participants

Various questions relating to the social entrepreneur, opportunity recognition, resource acquisition, organisation structure, social innovation, management of Mirakle Couriers, human resource management, performance measures and social impact were asked to Mr. Nimesh Pawar, who is the operations manager at Churchgate Branch. Observation of the working of the employees was undertaken. The female staff members sorted out the shipments based on pincodes. Further sorting was carried out by each field agent who was responsible for a designated area of delivery where he had mastered the narrow lanes and unmarked buildings. Once sorted each document was given a tracking code and entered into the system. This system enabled to track and maintain transparency as to who was responsible for which shipment. Proof of Delivery (POD) or a digital delivery status report was then returned to the clients the day after delivery. For faulty or changed addresses the operation manager called the client or the consignee to confirm a new address.

Results

After working with an NGO named Dasra for two years and undertaking various projects like helping people in Tsunami hit areas, womens' organisations, HIV Aids, children and the disabled, Mr. Dhruv Lakra developed a strong background in the social and finance sectors. It was from here where he got a scholarship of 45,000 pounds from Skoll foundation to study at the SAID School of Business at Oxford University. Mr Dhruv Lakra started this venture by recognizing the target niche –deaf youth who are not given as much attention by society like mentally challenged or visually impaired children and youth. It is estimated that there are around eight million deaf adults in India and only 67% of them find employment. The employment they get in the informal sector where they are poorly paid, only seasonally or temporarily hired and treated badly for being deaf. Society in which we all live has always

been very harsh to them and many a times they are not understood and are treated as sub-human. This makes many of them live a life feeling oppressed, helpless and incapable of being a part of the society

Discussion

Mirakle Couriers is a brainchild of a very young social entrepreneur Mr. Dhruv Lakra (born in 1980) who came up with a very pioneering idea to make a difference in the lives of deaf youth. Negative reinforcement, unemployability from big businesses and lack of support from government institutions are the three major reasons why Mr. Dhruv Lakra chose to set up a conventional, scalable business which does not require any verbal communication. Mirakle Couriers started its business with a capital of 200 pounds(money left over from the Skoll scholarship).Initially the company was generating little cash and working capital started becoming in short supply. Friends and family also helped in to invest some money when it was required to pay the salaries of the deaf employees. Some investor who came as an angel for Mirakle Couriers put in lakhs of rupees which helped the company to survive and progress. Mr.Dhruv did not want any investment to come from Venture Capitalists as they put in tremendous pressures to give financial returns. Finally he applied for the prestigious

Echoing Green Fellowship and was chosen as the Echoing Green fellow for the year 2009. Thus he was able to get funding of approximately \$60,000. Then the business needed the physical resources as in this case the location of the office, building infrastructure and operations systems. Mirakle Couriers is today operating from a place provided by Aditya Birla Group in Industry House, Churchgate. The other branch is at Andheri. Getting human resources was also quite challenging as deaf people do not trust others easily, and it was

necessary to win their confidence and even sometimes talk to their parents. Recruitment in Mirakle Couriers takes place through references by employees working there and also from Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped. The company uses a tracking system which gives a ‘beep’ sound every time the barcode is scanned. It requires the one which gives visual signal but as it is expensive, the plan is yet to be executed. Mirakle Couriers is a Private Ltd. Company structured as the same entity organisation structure which is profit oriented.

Mirakle Couriers represents the employment model of social enterprise which is embedded and provides employment opportunities and job training to its target populations or “clients” i.e to the disabled, the deaf. The organization operates as an enterprise employing its clients, and sells its services in the open market.

It can be depicted as under:

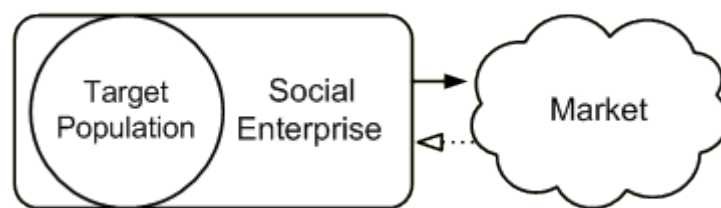


Fig 1: Employment model of social enterprise

The Organisation Structure of Mirakle Couriers is as follows:

Mr. Dhruv Lakra is the founder of Mirakle Couriers and is the CEO of the company and undertakes functions like meeting new clients, looking after the finances and leading the company forward. Mr. Nimesh Pawar, is the operations manager at Churchgate Branch. He

has many years of experience in various courier agencies and other operations posts and brings order and efficiency to the Churchgate Team.

Mr. Sameer Bhosale, is the operations manager at Andheri Branch. He has had many years of experience in courier companies such as Blue Dart, Velocity Couriers and Elbee Express. He commands the team that works in the difficult area of Mumbai's industrial suburbs.

It can be diagrammatically represented as under:

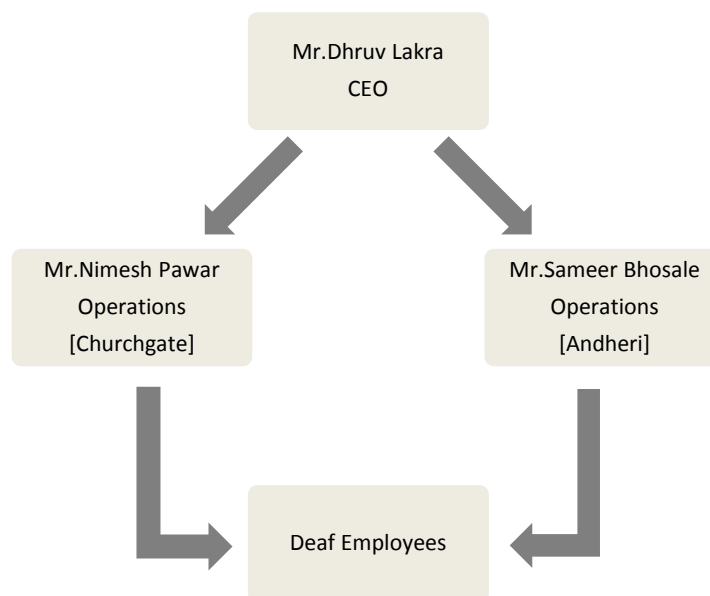


Fig 2: Organisation structure of Mirakle Couriers

The social innovation adopted by Mr. Dhruv Lakra is to create meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities for low-income deaf youth thereby increasing their standard of living and making them economically independent.

Proper planning is done at Mirakle Couriers for everything from pick-up to delivery at their branches in sign language. The field agents receive instructions via sms of a client's address and a time for when documents need to be picked up. Upon arriving at the client's office the shipments are counted and a count confirmation sms is sent back to the branch supervisor. Organisation, Direction, Controlling and Co-ordination is done very systematically by

following a standard procedure. Once the packages arrive at the branch they are sorted, processed and prepared for delivery.

While recruiting the employees, after getting a resume of a prospective employee Mr. Dhruv Lakra conducts a thorough background check on the candidate's family background and the places he has worked before. Once the background is checked into, an interview is conducted. As the job demands good attention is given to the candidate's appearance and confidence his personality exudes. Training is an ongoing process at Mirakle Couriers and not restricted to annual programmes like at other companies. Training for proper body language, using the right walking shoes, coming back with delivery reports, wearing clean clothes is an everyday matter with the company. Keeping nails short and fingers clean is also an important must with the company. After all it is the fingers and nails of a courier boy that one notices first when a delivery is made or when he hands you over a pen to sign on the delivery report. The courier boys are also trained to close and open lifts fully since they are unable to hear lift chimes and may spend precious minutes just waiting for a lift to start. Since competition is tough, speed is also an issue that the company works very hard to keep up with. The employees are paid minimum wages. Increments are given on the basis of performance appraisal where parameters like speed, delivery reports, number of packages delivered in a time-frame are checked. Employees have a Salary Account with SBI, provident fund facility and recurring accounts attached to salary account to encourage some saving. They are insured under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation Scheme.

As Mirakle Couriers is not a charity but a social business, with the social element embedded in the commercial operation, it's performance measures are in terms of number of deliveries made and subsequent profits earned by the company. The company delivers around 30000 couriers in a month. Around 40 corporate clients including Mahindra & Mahindra, The Aditya Birla Group, Victory Art Foundation, JSW Group, Indian Hotels Company, Godrej & Boyce and Essel Propack, have shown their trust in their business and their cause and regularly avail their services.

Mirakle Couriers believes in empowering their employees, and showing the world what they are capable of. They help deaf youth to help themselves. They believe in bringing out their

inner potential by employing them in the highly competitive and professionally demanding courier business, where they can be encouraged to ascend in their lives. By getting employment and working with Mirakle Couriers, they gain abundant levels of confidence and also gain financial independence. The result is that many of them are able to support their families rather than having to be helplessly dependent on them.

Conclusion

Mr. Dhruv Lakra is a reformer and a revolutionary whose vision is audacious. He disseminates a new approach and has advanced sustainable solution to marginalized and disadvantaged people in the society. The Employment- Empowerment model for the hearing impaired initiated by him is operating locally but it definitely has the potential to be replicable and stimulate global improvements in the chosen arena.

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DECLARATION: This paper is purely first hand which is so far not been published in any of the research journals.