STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

15 minutes

Jeroo Billimoria
Social Entrepreneur

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2003

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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
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Social entrepreneur

In 1996, Jeroo Billimoria launched Childline, India's first 24-hour emergency telephone service, to provide police assistance and healthcare for homeless children. Childline responded to more than a million calls last year – more than any other helpline in the world. Billimoria also led the formation of the Credibility Alliance, a consortium of nonprofits developing performance standards in India, and she founded Child Helpline International (CHI) in Amsterdam.

You managed to cross over private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and government borders, and bring partners from these different sectors into your work at Childline. For example, you have partnered with a corporation that runs your switchboards. How did you bring all these different players on board?

If you go to a corporation and ask for a check, that is charity. If you go in asking for their expertise and offer your expertise, then you have a chance to create a real partnership. I always aim to form partnerships because that gives you a chance to effect long-term change in the perspective of the corporation. Initially, the corporate partners are hesitant. You are proposing a relationship in which you will be as demanding of them as their clients, and they must first determine whether they can trust you. Do you mean business or are you just well meaning? They ask about your vision and how that will benefit them as well. With some convincing, they will know that you are serious about developing a partnership.

How do you initially approach them?

We needed someone to develop a system for handling incoming calls, so we approached TCS, India's largest computer company. We wrote them a letter and then met with them, but a chance meeting while on a flight is what clinched the deal. F.C. Kholi, who is now retired but was at the time TCS's deputy chairperson, was in business class and I was in economy, but when I saw him, I just walked up and sat down in the vacant seat next to him. I kept talking about Childline and following up with him, and he agreed to work with us.

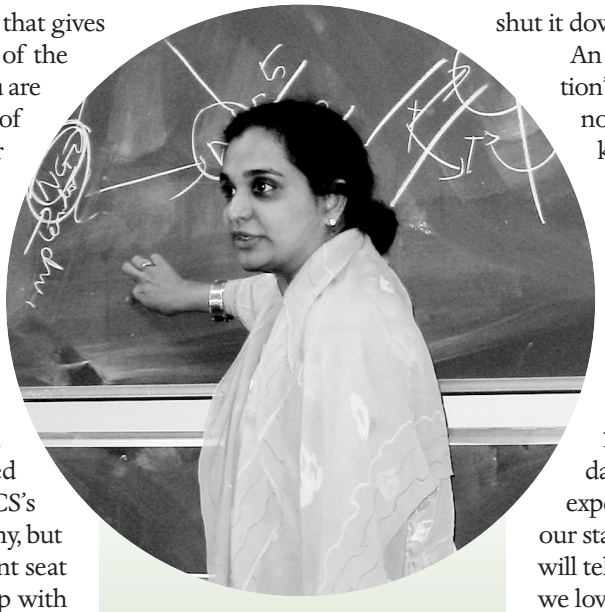
What kind of benefits or changes have you seen for your corporate partners?

Change within a company is often slow and intangible. You can't affect the whole corporation, but you can affect the people that you work with directly. When a manager we worked with at a large technology company left that company to join a new one, he brought Childline with him as a partner. Another one of our partners that manages the marketing wing asks visiting clients to also visit Childline and donate. These deeply involved individuals make it more than a token partnership.

How do you see your role as a social entrepreneur?

A social entrepreneur is someone who has harebrained ideas and is willing to take the risks to implement them. Their legacy is creating ideas that embolden and attract supporters.

If the idea catches on, sometimes it isn't necessary to have one's own organization to implement the idea. Our ego fuels the need for our own organization, and we are so tied to that organization we are afraid to shut it down.



"A social entrepreneur is someone willing to implement harebrained ideas."

An organization's staff may not be able to keep up with the constant ideas and drive that an entrepreneur may have. I am used to working 12 hours a day and I can't expect that of our staff. My team will tell me, "Jeroo, we love you but when you are here, you drive us crazy." A social entrepreneur finds it very difficult to let go. People like me also constantly have new ideas that can

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exhaust the staff trying to implement them. For instance, I have an exciting new idea for our database system that I want my staff to get started on, though they have just barely completed building the last one. I think social entrepreneurs have a high rate of energy and impatience. That impatience is also what drives the search for better solutions.

Do you think there are different types of leaders who should be engaged at different stages of an organization's life?

Yes, in each stage of an organization's life a different kind of leadership is needed. For example, someone like me is great in the innovative startup stage, but I dislike maintenance and administrative work. Knowing this drawback, I prefer to hand over at the consolidation phase. Now that I am older and wiser and know myself a bit better, I told the CHI board at the first meeting that after three years – five the maximum – I will be the wrong person to head up this organization, and that they should start grooming the next leader.

Much of the industry wrestles with the issue of accountability and performance measurement. You initiated a process of NGOs in India voluntarily adopting performance standards. Why do you believe that there needs to be a set of standards by which performance is measured?

I believe that we need performance standards because it is not our money that we spend. For businesses, it is the shareholders' money. For us, it is money for the marginalized and the poor.

At the end of the day, look at how much went toward your salary and the salaries of everyone in your organization, and ask yourself: If we directly gave that money to the child on the street, would we have done better for society? What is having more impact with that money – a meal for a child or what you are doing? We always count our work in terms of how many poor people should benefit.

It started as an ideological belief, but as the Childline India Foundation franchised, we realized that we needed these norms to maintain quality operation of our programs in different locations. We saw other nonprofits that were not using the dollar effectively, and we realized the best way for the entire sector to be more effective was to put together some minimum standards to help focus on what is important.

> **"Many nonprofits in India don't have annual reports. Some nonprofit staff get no paychecks for months on end."**

How did you decide what standards were most important?

We involved various nonprofits as well as Crisil, a credit rating agency in India (like Moody's in the United States). We organized a meeting of all the NGOs, corporate bodies, individuals, and donors interested in a similar initiative. From this, a core group worked to evolve the current set of norms. These were then discussed and debated through a consultation process (via both mail and the Internet) that involved several thousand NGOs.

We drew from the corporate sector, as there are common principles to transparency whether you are a nonprofit or a business. If you look at corporate ratings, when they rate companies they look at the board governance, the business plan, and accounting and financials. Similarly, for nonprofits, we should have norms for board ethics, business plan, and accounting.

How the principles are applied will then vary on the sector. For instance, one standard is for nonprofits to publish an annual report and disclose salaries. Many nonprofits in India don't have annual reports and, though it sounds funny, many staff members aren't paid for months on end. Sometimes it's just a form of exploitation: The head of an NGO may be earning $100,000 a year, while the staff makes $5,000.

One difference between the Credibility Alliance and other accountability initiatives is that the alliance came voluntarily from the social sector, and was not imposed by government. Is that critical?

Yes, very critical. This is because anything from the top down loses its essence and acceptance by the sector. Moreover, it is not a donor-led initiative. In fact, because we insist that donors also follow the standards, some international NGOs have resisted accepting these standards. They say they have international standards of their own organization. □