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CSR: Good Intentions and Wild Dreams are not Enough

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When Mariam Al Foudery graduated over a decade ago, the people recruiting aggressively on campus were from investment banking and management consulting firms. But that's changed now.

The change in the worldview of the social space is a fact reflected in Al Foudery's own background: a B.A. in International Relations from Stanford University, a M.A. degree in Media Studies and an M.Sc. in Development Management from the London School of Economics, which she attended as a Chevening scholar. "There were limited opportunities available in fields like CSR (corporate social responsibility) or social entrepreneurship then." says Al Foudery.

Although both share similarities, there are differences between CSR and the other 'field of the moment', social entrepreneurship, says Al Foudery.

"Social entrepreneurs, like all entrepreneurs, need to be willing to take a lot of risks, and need to do the fieldwork in order to be close to the client," explains Al Foudery. "CSR also requires all these traits, but also includes the need to understand organisational culture, to understand networking within the company and relationship management, and to manage not just knowledge but also organisational structures."

"We approach CSR in the same way we approach all aspects of our business - which is that we have a goal, we have a plan to get there, and we have performance indicators," the senior vice president of Marketing, Communications and CSR at Agility, told Perspectives@SMU.

She adds that while you don't get into this field if you don't have some idealism, "one of the things you realise really fast is that good intentions and wild dreams are not enough. It has to be backed with hard work, dedication, sacrifice and also real commitment to delivering to people on the ground that you are trying to reach."

One of the most valuable times in her career was the time she spent in the field. "It takes about three months to realise that actually, you are the one that is learning and you are learning more than you are giving. That's a very humbling and important lesson."

CSR challenges

Al Foudery started the CSR programme at Agility in 2006 and has played a critical role in shaping the company's responsible business culture. Today, Agility has donated logistics support in 22 natural disasters around the world, invested in over 600 community projects in 60 countries, developed a sustainability strategy for internal and customer operations, and runs a fair labour programme for its migrant workers in the Middle East.

Disaster response is one area, she says, where the company's programmes are impactful. "Disaster response work has a great deal of scale. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected and in getting supplies to these people, you are able to reach millions of people with services in a short period of time."

Challenges within the CSR space are very local and industry specific.

"Every geography has its own challenges. It's not some sort of ideal. You need to know the issues for your business." And yes there are times when her Humanitarian and Emergency Logistics Programme runs up against problems with governments. "One of the parameters of our programme is that we work on primarily natural disasters. We try to avoid a disaster with security issues attached, although we have done some work in places like Lebanon, and South Sudan."

First and foremost, adds Al Foudery, CSR should have business value but it should also generate value for the community, for employees, for the world that we live in, for the planet that we live on. And that requires a campaign for hearts and minds.

She acknowledges that it's difficult, to engage people at all levels of the organisation and at all management levels, and especially employees at the grassroots level. Yet it's something every CSR person has to figure out, she adds.

More than doing the right thing

One of the greatest challenges facing CSR practitioners is making it part of the culture of your organisation, she says. "It's not just about doing the right thing because somebody tells you to do it." When Al Foudery joined Agility it had just grown from a regional company to a major multinational, and had acquired 40 logistics companies in less than three years. "So a big part of [my tasks] was about building Agility's corporate culture." Yet her initial challenge was not so much getting the buy-in from senior leadership, as she was fortunate enough to work with the blessings of the company's senior leadership.

"The initial challenge was picking the areas that were most strategic for our business and selling it—not to top management—but middle management. This became easier, the more inclusive we became," she adds. Agility's internal programmes such as community volunteer programme were helpful and the programme was made open to employees of all levels to participate.

Especially for fresh graduates, she emphasises that getting into the corporate social responsibility space is not an 'obvious space'.

"It takes a certain amount of risk, personal risk, a certain amount of perseverance, a certain amount of luck to get involved, and you have to be up for a non-traditional and non linear career. That's the first thing. And it's not for everybody."

The second thing, she says, is that whether you are working in a non-profit space or you are working with a company, or you are a social entrepreneur, you cannot survive without strong partnerships. "Partnerships are difficult. They are hard work. They require you to create a common language. They require you to create a long-term relationship and to be able to make mistakes," says Al Foudery, "And you earn the right to make mistakes."