

Business Know-How with Heart

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Mary Sigmond

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Literacy is power. Without it, communication and connection are impossible. Societies cannot interact and therefore, fail to thrive, plunging them into an unrelenting cycle of poverty.

Today, one out of seven people cannot read or write. Two-thirds of these individuals are female. That is 750 million people who do not have the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute and communicate in any context. Countries with a large illiterate population struggle to progress and economies collapse.

“Education is like oxygen,” says **Erin Ganju**, a YPO member from California and the Co-founder and CEO of Room to Read. “A literate population is the cornerstone for creating solutions to most of the world’s problems.”

Ganju recently spoke to members of YPO’s Helping Disadvantage Kids Network about the global education crisis.

“Literate people are an empowered people. As an example, if more Liberians were literate, they would have been better prepared and informed to deal with the Ebola crisis. Health officials could have communicated outbreaks and vital information via text messages.” And the list of such examples goes on, Ganju says.

From the early startup days of Room to Read, Ganju has been instrumental in the design and implementation of the organization’s scalable, replicable model for improving the quality of education across Asia and Africa. She oversees Room to Read’s global operations, which includes implementing programs in 10 countries; a technical assistance unit called Room to Read Accelerator; fundraising teams in North America, Europe, Australia and the Asia Pacific region; and a worldwide staff of more than 1,300 employees.

Scaling a nonprofit with business know-how

Once an executive at Goldman Sachs and later at Unilever in Vietnam, Ganju turned her interests from the private sector to focus on making a social impact during the 1990s. Her transparent, results-oriented business model has catapulted Room to Read into one of the most impactful change agents, educating more than 12.5 million children and creating 20,000 school communities across the globe. Eighty-three percent of the funds raised are applied directly to help children with 51 percent of funding coming from outside North America.

“When I worked with Unilever in Vietnam, I was part of a team that built retail product factories. Our biggest challenge was hiring because so much of the population were uneducated and didn’t even have electricity in their homes. Training a workforce was a struggle. It’s important for business leaders to understand that education is critical to our economy.”

Five years ahead of projections, Room to Read reached 10 million children in 2015 which Ganju attributes to applying a business model of scalability, evidence-based results, sustainability and cost effectiveness to every school and community project the organization decides to undertake. “Ninety percent of our employees are local nationals,” she explains. “Our staff is rooted in the local governments and social system. We take the global model and localize it so we can scale with quality.”

Room to Read’s factors to success include:

1. **Reaching children at key times.** There are two critical times for intervention during a child’s education: first and second grade, and the transition from primary to secondary school. Brain development and readiness to read happens in first and second grade. Ganju explains that if children are not introduced to reading by grade three or four, 40 percent of them will drop out before finishing their primary school education. The second critical period, especially for girls, is the transition from primary to secondary school. Many girls drop out in secondary school as it is customarily the time in many societies that they marry and begin having children.
2. **Creating a print-rich environment.** It’s key to create a habit of reading and provide libraries with age-appropriate materials. Room to Read has published 13,000 books in 18 languages to fill libraries in local schools. If children have books to read on a variety of topics, they will read more and increase their words-per-minute speed. “We look at data and we know that our Room to Read program compared to many of the government-issued literacy programs in many of the communities we work in, increases a child’s speed from 45 words per minute to 60,” says Ganju.
3. **Investing in teacher education.** Room to Read works in partnership with 10,000 schools and local governments to create literacy instruction for teachers and provide in-service professional workshops to help them develop curriculum for their students. Many teachers working in communities barely have a high school education and require additional professional development. Investing in teachers and ensuring that they have skills to support their students is key. Room to Read also creates curriculum templates for teachers that makes the material more interactive so that students will engage in their learning.

4. **Engaging the community.** When Room to Read teams enter a community, they begin to build a group of local ambassadors, training local people to help engage parents to understand the value of education. Creating active parent-teacher relationships is vital. Students whose parents attend meetings with teachers and the school regularly are 20 percent less likely to drop out.
5. **Focusing on results.** Governments need to see results, so Room to Read focuses on evidence-based data, providing benchmarks after establishing a reading program in a school. This data provides key information on the impact Room to Read is having in local communities, building trust with local governments that these programs are making a real difference.

So much further to go

Today, Room to Read programs in Africa and Asia are educating roughly 50,000 girls but there is still much work to be done in keeping girls in school through their secondary years. Approximately 62 million girls are missing from classrooms around the world.

“One in three girls in most parts of the world today are married at the age of 15,” says Ganju. “The best way to ensure a girl does not marry early and begin her family before she has the skills to be successful is education.” For every year a girl stays in school, her earning potential goes up 15 percent to 20 percent Ganju explains and “that benefits our society as a whole.”

For Ganju, the child of a university professor and a social worker who grew up with a love of books, reading is a powerful tool. “If you can change a classroom you can change a community and if you change enough communities you can change the world.”