

From Founder to Successor: Managing Organizational Change at Sanman

Lila Andrea Chaudhuri

Academy of HRD, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

Kalpana Sahoo

School of HRM, XIM University, Bhubaneswar, India

Sanjay Bhattacharya¹

School of HRM, XIM University, Bhubaneswar, India

Abstract. Neelima Jain had established a non-governmental organization (NGO) named “Sanman” (meaning “Respect” in Hindi) in 1995 to fight for the cause of prevention of violence against women and their empowerment. After 27 years, Neelima led the way for Anita Banerjee to be appointed as the Executive Director of Sanman. Anita had been associated with Sanman for close to a decade. She understood and deeply empathized with the cause of Sanman. Her commitment towards making Sanman a bigger and a more organized entity drove her to bring in a team of consultants to streamline the organization. However, Anita was having her own challenges running the organization as she was still not able to win the trust of her employees as well as that of her board of directors. At the same time, she also wanted to bring about drastic changes in Sanman’s way of functioning. Adding to the milieu was Neelima Jain’s involvement in various official matters even after relinquishing her authority. Sanman was in a state of turmoil as the leadership transition and the ensuing episode of change management seems to have taken a turn for worse. The case would reflect upon the aspect of organizational change brought about by a leadership transition. Viewing it in the light of John Kotter’s change management framework and French & Raven’s theory of social power.

Keywords: organizational change, performance management system (PMS), structural approach, employee accountability, resistance to change.

1. Introduction

The non-governmental organization (NGO) sector has played a crucial role in addressing various societal challenges, ranging from alleviating poverty to advocating for human rights. Over the past two decades or more, NGOs have been pivotal in driving progress in India, effectively bridging the gaps left by

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1. The names of individuals in this case study have been altered to preserve confidentiality. This document is intended solely for academic purposes within the field of leadership studies.

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government programs that fell short of implementing the necessary changes for advancing social awareness. The NGO sector in India has been a significant platform for feminist leadership, providing women with opportunities to break stereotypes and challenge patriarchal norms (Abichandani & Babu 2018)². NGOs especially those led by women have emerged as key agents for change in this landscape. They have been able to bring perspectives and community focused strategies to emphasize on inclusion and grassroots movements. Women leaders within these NGOs have been instrumental in advocating gender concerns such as abuse, menstrual health, and equal opportunities in education and employment. Their approach focuses on community involvement and empathy, which has been successful in promoting support and influencing policies.

Nonetheless, many of these organizations were established by passionate founders whose dedication and vision shaped the organization's mission and activities. Women leaders who founded these NGOs often infused their work with personal passion rooted in their socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences. This dedication is a driving force behind the organization's values and mission. However, when successors take over, they face the challenge of aligning with the founder's vision while introducing their own leadership style and values. This transition can lead to variations in strategic priorities, management practices, and organizational culture.

Studies reveal that transitioning leadership from a founder can be a major challenge for social enterprises, endangering both the organization's continuation and its ability to fulfill its social mission. This is due to the founder's vision and values being deeply woven into the organization's mission, which complicates the process of shifting to new leadership. Such leadership transition in NGOs, particularly from a founder-led woman leader to a woman successor, is crucial for the sustainability and growth of the organization as it involves navigating complex socio-cultural and organizational dynamics. (Abichandani & Babu 2018).

2. The Impending Storm

As Neelima Jain, the founder, the heart and the brains behind "Sanman" entered the parking lot of her office building in the bustling business district of Central Kolkata (the capital city of the state of West Bengal, India) she felt torn from within. She had poured in every bit of her energy and passion in building Sanman and elevating it to the pedestal where it lied right now. She always believed in the cause for which her NGO stood firm. Her passion got channelized into her employees, who equally felt for the cause and jumped right in; no questions asked. This was what had held sway as far as Sanman's journey in the last two

2. Abichandani, Y. & Babu, V. (2018), "Indian Women Leaders in the NGO Sector", *Indian Women in Leadership*, 211-234.