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Convincing companies to make a difference
Master in Charity, Arts or Culture

Shalini Mahtani's passion has always been to serve the community - which led her to forego a lucrative banking job and set up a non-profit group with the aim to lead, inspire and support businesses in Hong Kong and the region to have a positive impact on others.

'People work every day. If you treat them well in the world of work, imagine what a difference you can make to the majority of people in your community,' says Mahtani, founder and adviser to the board of Community Business. 'I wanted to make a difference to thought leaders in the private sector.'

Founded in 2004, the group works with companies on issues such as diversity and inclusion, work-life balance and helps with their corporate social responsibility strategies and community investment initiatives. Mahtani and her colleagues produce research and conduct training.

There were many difficulties at the start. 'I was knocking on doors and asking companies to become members. There was almost no baseline understanding of responsible business,' says Mahtani, who succeeded in convincing companies that being responsible makes business sense. Corporations that treat their employees well are able to retain and attract talent, she says, while responsible businesses have better relationships with their broader stakeholders such as customers that are increasingly educated and questioning. 'We help businesses become more profitable and sustainable over time,' she says.

Mahtani recalls that at the beginning almost everyone she met said they didn't have a problem with diversity in the workplace. 'It really used to get on my nerves because I had worked in multinationals and felt discriminated against.'

Instead of trying to make a point that diversity was an issue, she would talk about a subject that the companies felt was a problem, which for many at that time was about community investment. 'If you speak [their] language they will listen to you,' Mahtani says. 'If you do a good job they will come back for more.'

Working with companies already engaged in the diversity dialogue also raised awareness. 'There were one or two companies working on diversity in 2004. Now it represents more than 60 per cent of our work. I became very close to [them] because they were going to help put diversity on the map for multinationals in Asia, and they did.'

Mahtani's childhood experience of discrimination in colonial Hong Kong and her exposure to abject poverty when she visited India shaped her world view. She also draws inspiration from her grandfather, a philanthropist in Hong Kong. 'He always said to me: 'You can be smart, you can be well-educated, you can be rich, but none of that really counts at the end of the day.' We have a role to play in society, as simple as that.'

Mahtani stepped down as CEO after the unexpected death of her young son two years ago. The brevity of life made her realise the need to help. 'Zubin's death has taken me right to the core of what it is to breathe, to live and die, to suffer. [If] I am to get meaning again in my life it has to be to help people who

are suffering because I know what it is like to feel pain.'

She has plans to set up a foundation in memory of her son.

'It would be to advocate on behalf of people who are really suffering - ethnic minorities of Hong Kong, people with special needs, people who have no voice,' she says.

What the judges say

Coming from an Indian background in Hong Kong, Shalini has dedicated her life to equal opportunities, diversity and corporate social responsibility. She quit her corporate career with the ambition of making Hong Kong a better place. The non-profit group she founded has transformed from a home-based operation with no external funding in 2003 to an organisation that works with more than 100 companies across Asia and a budget in excess of HK\$6.5 million today. Her perseverance in awakening society on areas of diversity and inclusion, work-life balance and community investment is admirable. She has made her organisation one to last; financially sound, with a vision, a clear structural setup, professional management and independent from her personally. Shalini has also impressed the judges by the variety of contributions to the community, ranging from volunteering and building schools to providing financial advice to victims of domestic violence.