

Enabling a culture change in rural government schools: Prasanna shares Sikshana experience

Compiled by Vinay Dabholkar, Catalign Innovation Consulting, vinay@catalign.com

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V R Prasanna was one of the panellists at the “Enabling a culture change” session at the [Next Gear](#) workshop on innovation leadership I facilitated in July. Prasanna is the CEO of [Sikshana Foundation](#) which was rated among the top three in India in education intervention by [Times Social Impact Awards \(Sept 2011\)](#). Prasanna moved back from the US to India in 2007 to help scale up the organization. In this interview Prasanna shares his experience in enabling a culture change in the context of rural government schools.

Q: Can you please share a culture change story from Sikshana?

Prasanna: We work with government schools. One of the biggest issues we find there is that the teachers are very qualified and they say they are there to make an impact and help children learn. You go and talk to the children and they say that they are in school because they want to learn. Then you do any kind of assessment and you find that learning is not happening. This is the issue we looked at – How to make learning happen?

When we visited the schools this is what we found. An adult sits there and decides what is best for the children –How long it will take for the children to learn? What’s the way in which it has to be taught? Everything is decided upfront. And then they go through this process of what is called “teaching”. After all the steps are done, the teacher says, “I am done”. And in the assessment you find less than 50% of the students would have got it. So the biggest challenge is changing the mindset of the teacher. They need to believe that the children can learn.

When I first came to Sikshana, 10th standard results had just come out. 18% of students from a high school in Kanakapura had passed. A lot of noise was being made by the experts in various media. First thing they said is – education system is not relevant for rural schools. Examination system is not right. Change the system. Somebody else was saying that parents are the real culprit here.

When we looked at it, we didn’t think that way. Our experience in the first couple of years in Sikshana was very different. So we said, “Let’s see what’s the root cause.” Supplementary exam was to take place the following month. So we decided to go to an examination centre. When children came out after writing the exam, we quizzed some of them. And they were able to answer very well. We said if you knew this two months ago, you could have passed in the first attempt itself. They said they knew it two months ago. But they still failed. So we tried to probe further. So finally what emerged out of this was that they didn’t have enough time to finish the exam.

We couldn’t imagine that it takes so much of writing to score 35 marks (needed for passing). Perhaps five written pages may be needed for passing. This got us to start thinking about why they said that. Me being a techie, I realized that I can’t write more than half a page. My hand starts paining. We went to one of the adopted government schools on the way back and told students in a class to fill one sheet of paper. We got some exam sheets from the Principal and gave them. And they started writing. The fastest a child took was about 35 minutes to write one side of the paper. Even after one hour, half the students were still writing.

After realizing how slow they write, we checked their notebooks. We saw that they had written nicely in the first few pages. And then they had written two lines within one line. Then they had written on the left margin, on the top margin. And then we saw scribbling with microscopic font. Then we realized that they were trying to conserve a valuable resource. They get only one notebook. Once they finish it, they don't get another one. So they were trying to conserve it for the entire year. And in this process they lose the speed of writing, the quality of writing – everything goes for a toss.

So we asked what can we do to make these children write fast. During a brainstorm, one idea came that we give them more notebooks. But each book was a finite entity. It has a front and a back. How to make it look like infinite? So somebody said, "Why don't we tear the bind?" Then another one asked, "You mean as loose sheets?" So we said – why not? The idea of sheets was started off like that. And now it has been three years since we started this experiment. It costs us Rs. 40 per child per year. Ramnagara district which was 26th position last year, moved all the way up to 9th position. 91% of students from one taluk have passed. Teachers say that loose sheets program has made a big difference.

Q: How are the loose sheets used?

Prasanna: When we asked a teacher, he said, "This won't work. Can they write one sheet every day? They don't even do the homework we give them." We realized we are talking to the wrong person. So we went to the students directly and asked, "How much can you write?" One boy said – 5, another one said – 10, suddenly it became a competition. We told them we can give you any number of sheets you want, but you as a group need to tell us a number. We will hold you accountable. After 5 minutes, they came back and said – 5. That's how the program got started.

So we give them 5 sheets a week. They start writing every day. On Saturday they come and give it back and then get five fresh sheets for the next week. During the Dussera break teacher saw kids writing 30 sheets a week. Quality of writing improved drastically. Kids started writing a sheet of paper in less than 15 minutes.

Now what happens is – anything we tell them – it could be the stupidest of ideas – But they think there is some value in it. They are willing to try. We have seen research in education area with very good ideas. However, when they go to the field their credibility is very different. We had nothing to begin with. But after working with them for certain time, they are seeing the results three years down the road. Now, it is so much easier for us to bring about a change.

I think culture change takes time – sometimes it is easy – like we saw with the writing sheet example. But the one change that is taking us a long time is for teachers to start believing in the fact that they can make a difference. That is a challenge for us.

Q: Why is change difficult?

Prasanna: It is the fear of the unknown. When it is a programmer or a teacher they are into a zone where things are pretty stable – so many defects per release or 60% passing percentage etc. And it is everybody not just the teacher – all the way up to the commissioner – everybody is in the comfort zone. That works until someone comes and shakes things up. The threat, I feel, they see is that they may not even be relevant. Collectively I would call it "fear".

Q: How do you sustain ownership in change initiatives?

Prasanna: The success of Sikshana so far – anything we do – any idea we get – even the writing sheet idea, we make it appear as though it is a teacher’s idea. I have seen interventions with the best of intentions, best plan fail miserably due to lack of ownership the minute the interveners leave the field. Ownership is the most crucial thing.

Let me give a quick example. Teachers require training, right? Everybody knows that including the teachers. But they say that they don’t need any training. Then how do you get them ready to be trained? I go to them with assessment letter and ask them “Do you have any ideas?” They might say, “If I can somehow get this kind of skill then ...” Then I ask, “Do you know somebody who can do this?” And go on like that – so it reaches, “Do you think if I get this person then it can be done?” Then we say, “Why don’t you make a call, you set up an appointment, you fix the rate and I will take care of the cost.” Basically we have gone to a level where nothing is done by Sikshana. We are just 30 people managing nearly 2.5 lakh children, 5000+ teachers. And they do most of the work. We don’t want to do anything.

Sometimes just the name can make a difference. If you call it “Government *shale* (school)” everybody including the parents feel it is “their” responsibility. Instead, you call it “*Nammura shale* (My village school)” and you create ownership. Ownership plays the most important role in sustaining change initiatives. We have some great minds in the government and somebody in the system actually came up with this idea of naming schools “Nammura shale”

Q: What roles rewards play in change initiatives?

Prasanna: In our case, we found that the easiest way to motivate a teacher is a pat on the back. They work in a system where nobody cares about them. One of our initial experiences was with a teacher in a remote school – with 12+ years of service. When we asked him , “Sir, how are you doing?” The teacher almost had tears in his eyes. When we asked, “Did we say something wrong?” He said, “First time in 12 years in this school, somebody has asked me how I am doing” That is the simplest form of reward. On the other end, we send teachers to the US. Someone who might not have seen Bangalore goes to the US and spends four weeks there.

We find rewards play a similar role for a child to change. In rural setting, when children go back from school, they dump their bag and immediately run out. Because there is nobody at home to share their school experience. To sustain the change, something needs to happen outside the school environment. How do we do this? We can’t become parents? But the child has to be rewarded at some basic level. So we introduced something called a “spot prize” in classrooms.

Every teacher is equipped with nominal amount with which they buy something and give it away. This is one of our most successful programs. We don’t spend more than Rs. 30 per child in the whole year. We have introduced stars which they can wear on their uniform. And once they collect ten stars they redeem it for something – crayons or pencil set or they can hold on till the next ten stars and get a geometry box.

This idea (of stars) came from a teacher. I had gone to a school near Hubli. We had given spot prizes to be awarded in the school. This teacher had written some names and some numbers next to it. I asked, “What are these numbers?” The teacher said, “I liked your idea. But I run out of prizes very quickly. Attendance is a huge issue. So I have to give them more. So whenever a student asks a good question or a correct answer I start writing points. This becomes more like a game and it is getting everyone to participate actively in the class.” The next question was, “How can we do this at a systemic level?” and the star system evolved.

So I feel rewards play a huge role in sustaining a change at least in our space.

Q: We can see that till Sikshana supports a school, it improves. What happens after Sikshana stops the support?

Prasanna: We have an exit strategy in place. For example, five years ago we used to fund schools for conducting annual school day. It is something all private schools have but government schools don't have. We don't fund the annual school days any more. Does it mean that the annual day function has stopped? No. Every village we have under our system conducts an annual day program. How? The whole village community funds them. What about the new schools where we haven't even gone? We say, "See this is something that has worked Kanakpura schools. Why don't you try?" Very soon they realize that all you have to do is to find a person from the village who has moved to a nearby town, put him on stage and garland him. He is happy and he sponsors the whole function. School doesn't have to spend anything.

Sustaining happens in multiple ways. One is the financial aspect – which I think is easy. We spend only Rs. 300 per child per year. Government spends close Rs. 10,000 to 17,000 per child per year. They can always put another 300 more per child. However, mindset change, establishing ownership etc are the difficult part.

Here is another way we discovered of sustaining the initiative even after our involvement stops. We send a person called a mentor who goes and mentors the school. One of the first things we do during exit is stop sending these mentors. So we chose 36 of our top performing schools in Kanakapura rural district. We said, "You guys are doing extremely good. So we pull out our staff. They will bring the monthly money. But other than that you are on your own." We did this for a whole year. And then we checked their performance. These schools were in the top 50 before the year. And they remained in the top fifty. However, when I visited I saw that the teachers were very upset. They asked, "Why did you abandon us? What wrong have we done?" We tried to say, "You have done everything right." But they wouldn't listen. Then we asked, "Why do you need this person?" They said, "Nobody asks us how things are going on. At least this person would come once in a week. We had somebody to exchange something and now have taken the person away."

Then we asked ourselves, "What else can we do?" Then we came up a concept called community mentor. Somebody from the village who goes once in a week to the school, spends half a day, interacts with them and comes out. For that we pay Rs. 100. As of last year, we have 200 villages where schools are supported by community mentors. Now, we have realized that community mentors can do things we could not have imagined. Here is an example.

We have a school colour coding. Red school is very difficult to work with. I always encourage one red school for every staff. This particular school was red for three consecutive years (2007-2010). It was red because the Headmaster was difficult to work with. He wanted Sikshana to fail. That was his whole mission. Last year when I visited I saw the school had turned green. I became curious. What happened here?

I first checked whether the data is correct. Then we checked if the HM is transferred somewhere else. No. Then we asked who the community mentor was in the school. It turned out to be a small girl who had done 2nd PUC (12th standard). We asked her, "What did you do for the HM to turn around?" She said, "I was his student. I know what to tell him to get things done." Then suddenly we realized that the locals can make the biggest impact. Their prestige goes up. Everybody talks about them. Now, this community mentor idea is spreading to other schools like crazy.

Q: Do you train the community mentors?

Prasanna: Yes we do. However, we are not big into training. We have some basic structure in place. They go through a one day orientation and after that they spend a week with our regular mentors and watch them in schools and learn from them. After that they are allotted a few schools and they start working and learn in the process. We have a weekly meeting for all of them in a taluk which helps them share their experience and learn from their peers.

Q: How does Sikshana get teachers to experiment?

Prasanna: This has not been easy. But let me share a couple of stories where this has happened.

In case of spot prizes, we not only give the money but also help with the necessary essential stationary. These people come from an environment where you can't buy a pencil. So we give them hints about what to buy otherwise they wouldn't know what to do with the money. So we had given them a list containing items like pencils, erasers, crayons etc. But everything in the list was a stationary item. This is what we could think of.

Things were going fine until in one meeting of 120 Headmasters, one HM gave us this feedback. He said, "I have violated your guidelines. So is it ok to share?" So I said, "That's fantastic. Please share." Then he continued, "I realized that kids are coming to school without brushing. So I started giving toothpaste and toothbrushes. A girl to whom I had given the toothbrush won a prize again within a couple of months. So I gave her a long pencil with a flashing light on top. But she said she wanted a toothbrush. Then I asked her why she needed another toothbrush. She should be using the first one for at least six months. Then she said it's not for her, it is for her mother. She wanted her mother to brush her teeth."

The next year was completely different in terms of what was being distributed as spot prizes in our schools. You see teachers giving soaps for body, soaps for uniform etc.

Another teacher working in a tribal area shared following story. All children in that school used to come unkempt to the class. The teacher just couldn't teach in that setting. So he along with the lady staff started a combing ritual before beginning the class. They bought combs and coconut oil from the money we gave and started combing hair for each child. After observing their kids for a week the parents came to school and asked why we were doing this to their children. So the teacher told them that he can't teach if the kids come dishevelled. Then they said, "We are sorry, we are ashamed. We will do it ourselves." And then they asked the teacher to show how to do it. The teacher showed them and that changed the situation. This initiative came completely from the teacher.

Q: How do we manage fear of failure during experimentation?

Prasanna: In our monthly meeting, everybody has to share one failure. If there is no failure, I see it as a problem. For example, we scaled from 150 schools to 250 schools in one year. I had 8 new hires. I knew this was a big shift. There was no formal training program. I called them after 3 months. They said, "It's going great. There is no problem". I told them this is a problem for me as I expected with such a rapid growth there had to be issues. Upon further analysis it so turned out that there was indeed no problem. But I expect everybody to talk about problems.

In every meeting, I start with my own failures. What did I mess up and what I learnt from it. That encourages others. In our (Indian) culture, we fear failure so the best thing is to start from ourselves.