



Interview with Sonali Khan (Sesame Workshop India)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by introducing yourself and talking about the problem you're addressing with Sesame Workshop? What is your approach to addressing it?

Sonali Khan: My name is Sonali Khan, and I am the managing director of Sesame Workshop. For the last 50 years, we have been working on early childhood development for the ages of three to eight. The idea behind this germinated with the growing brain science and the knowledge that most childhood brain development happens by 5 years old. If, at that age, we give adequate stimulation and adequate support, then we are laying the base for growth. That was one of the strong points behind Sesame's creation, and it still holds. At that time, the founders of Sesame started by looking at television because inner-city kids were consuming a lot of media, and there was no way they were accessing quality [educational content] within their own community's schooling systems. The idea was to get them this through television, and that proved to be a success even 50 years ago.

Now, there has been an explosion in video content consumption. Digital has taken on a whole new dimension with YouTube, and with AI now coming into the fray. While Sesame's initial strategy continues, it has gathered complexity along with new opportunities and new possibilities. In the last 10 years, and especially the last five years, I have seen humongous shifts and innovations. When I started my journey, I was looking at communication, and looking at ways in which we can foster behavior change. We were trying to unlearn and teach new things. When we looked at gender transformative behavior, we were talking about issues around violence against women and very complex social realities, which, over time, have endured because of behavior, among other reasons.

Now, with Sesame, I navigate how you build behaviors. This focus on creating behavior has been exciting. How do you create sustainable behaviors in an ecosystem where there are huge influences from adults? Children are like sponges, they're always learning, so how can you create



an enabling environment that gives them a strong foundation? Throughout my career, as we've tackled issues of violence, we would keep saying, "We need to start early. We need to start early." Lo and behold, I'm now working with kids, and we are taking up these issues around how we can include a gender dimension in these conversations. That has become critical for me. How do you look at the environment, how do you look at sanitation, how do you look at education? It's a cross-cutting theme, and for me, it's been a great journey.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Most people know Sesame for much larger, longer-length works, so I'd love for you to take me through an example of what you're speaking about right now. Do you have an example that might illustrate that?

Sonali Khan: Let's look at climate, for example, because I think that's top of mind for so many of us. Sesame has been venturing into this area much more recently, and in India, we are doing work around *My Planet, My Home*, or *Mera Planet, Mera Ghar*, on creating responsible behavior in children. This project is now nearly in its third year, and when we started, the first thing we asked was, "Do these children really understand?" We've seen young adults who are 15 and 16 years old getting involved in the climate debate, but we are working with much younger children. When we started our project, we did a study with nearly 10,000 kids around Delhi NCR [North Capital Region], and we were pleasantly surprised that the children had a vocabulary around the environment, and they were concerned about it. They were already soaking in the conversations that adults were having around them.

Of course, we are talking about climate anxiety, which children are also exhibiting. But when we saw this, it raised the question: How, as Sesame, can we come in? **We look at empowering children, and we also look at giving children tools.** We created this program, *Mera Planet, Mera Ghar*, which is about building their knowledge through a STEM-based curriculum, and at the same time, giving them tools to do something about it. For instance, we taught them how to read an AQI meter, and they put up little cutouts in their community to show whether it was a good day or a bad day. Can you imagine that in a city like Delhi NCR? We also taught them about small things like growing an herbal garden and practicing best from waste.

One of our biggest campaigns was "How do you look at waste segregation?" Interestingly, when we did the research, children pointed out that burning garbage was one of the biggest reasons for pollution because that's what they were seeing around them. While climate becomes such a large issue, and we are talking about the temperature of the globe rising, the polar ice cap melting, or the ocean becoming polluted, a small child puts their arms around this very large issue and makes it personal. That might help them feel that they're not completely disempowered, and it might help them avoid a sense of hopelessness. Remember, a little child can only do so much. With this understanding of children and the way children learn, we crafted *Mera Planet, Mera Ghar*.



We're very child-led, and that's where we began with our whole garbage-burning campaign; children had identified it. Then we could do our best from waste, dry waste, and wet waste campaigns. We were able to tell them about it. That's how we're creating the experience of learning behavior, learning sustainable behavior, learning responsible behavior. If you think about it, everybody's talking about the circular economy, and young people have become more and more active about choosing products that have been made without damaging the ecosystem. That's how it all stacks up.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Behavior change is very hard to measure, and beyond that, doing things with media, which we all know is extremely influential, is also really hard to measure. How specifically are you measuring your success?

Sonali Khan: That's always been a tough question. I'm not saying it gets any easier, but the mediums get more interesting. One of the largest campaigns I ever ran, [with Breakthrough], was against domestic violence. Bell Bajao. At that point, which was back when I was just starting out, we did it only on television.

In the early days of Bell Bajao, we would create the campaign, and then we would do everything: marketing, sales, video distribution, television distribution, fundraising. We were jacks of all trades; that's how NGOs work. I used to set up meetings, and they would always run over. I would set up half an hour or one hour, and we would end up spending two hours at these meetings because people wanted to talk. They told their personal stories or stories about someone in their family. It would often start to feel like counseling sessions, and I wasn't an expert, I'm not a counselor, but suddenly we had become experts. We had to become experts because if we didn't speak to them, they didn't know who else to talk to. Whether I was talking to rich women in a drawing room because we were trying to fundraise, or to young boys when we visited colleges and schools, there were questions.

Now, people often want to know, "Where is the data? Where are the statistics? Has it worked? Give me those macro figures." With YouTube, I can tell you how many views, where those views are coming from, and I can identify the people who are revisiting my site. We have all of those figures, so we can do targeted marketing. There's so much that can be done. But when someone tells me a story of how a campaign has impacted their life, that's a special moment for me. As someone who works using media, using communication, whenever people share how any of these narratives have impacted their life, I think, "That's my impact."

I have met so many people who have told me stories around Bell Bajao, and I wish I could have documented those stories of impact in some way, but in those days, there was no easy way of documenting it. We used to get really small grants, and everything would go into the program.



But coming back to your point, I did some really big, high-stakes things at Breakthrough. I ran two randomized control trials to show evidence, and one of them was with J-PAL [The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab], which became quite interesting because they were running a randomized control on a gender program. Now, of course, they've done many such trials, but back then, more than six years ago, [it was a big deal] and I got a lot of flak for it. In a good way, but still, a lot of women's rights activists, and much for them, would say, "You can't do this. You can't run a randomized control trial on a gender program."

I was caught in this argument where we would go for funds and people would demand, "Where's the evidence?" And we would say, "Give us money to build the evidence." A women's rights organization would never get the money. We were caught between this dilemma that on the one hand, they were asking for proof, but on the other hand, they were not giving money for us to create that evidence. The third challenge was figuring out the right methodology. What would do justice to such a difficult issue?

With J-PAL, we ran a randomized control trial on a Skoll program. It was a program that is very dear to my heart called, Taaron ki Toli, which is a program looking at gender transformation [in and through education.] The results have been great. I'm not with Breakthrough anymore, but they've really taken it to scale. The Punjab Government and the Odisha Government have adopted it, so more power to the leadership there. The journey was very, very hard, and probably not well-liked during that period because when you run a randomized control, it really shifts gears for an organization. These organizations are not used to being so results-driven, and in these trials, everything has to zero in. The community frontline team, the research team, the program team - we were always at war because monitoring data would come in, and we had to be at the table to re-strategize and course correct. It was quite a journey.

It was a huge learning curve, both as someone who respects research and as a leader running an organization. The risk was very high. If it had gone wrong, there would've been a lot at stake, but we were able to deliver on that randomized control trial. It's now being adopted in many ways, including supporting policy briefs. I think to your point, research is required, but you don't need research every time. If there is data to show it has worked, irrespective of where that research has been done, whether it's been done in X organization or Y, then we as the development sector should take it up and work with it. We don't need to keep proving the same thing again and again.

On the other hand, I would like to point out that you just can't cut and paste a methodology. You need to validate it, and you need to contextualize it. Sesame has done an amazing job of that. Sesame is in 150 countries, India being one of them. It's amazing to see the sensitivity with which Sesame contextualizes. It's not just about being age-appropriate, or whether something is for a 5-year-old or a 6-year-old, and it's beyond the dynamics of early childhood development; it's also



cultural sensitivities. That's been an amazing learning. At the end of the day, the world is really diverse, but there are also a lot of similarities and a lot of cross-cutting themes.

We have become more and more global, where children sitting in remote villages are getting information from anywhere in the world. Similarly, information from India is going out to all parts of the world. We export a lot of our culture. How, then, do we build a narrative for the child that helps them make sense of the world, and of its very complex, fast-changing, and sometimes difficult situations? How do we help the child make sense of them, build their own resilience and capacity, their foundation, so they can grow into adults who are confident and capable? It's about more than just making the best of opportunities. I think Sesame has done all that amazingly well, and that's what makes Sesame what it is.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you relay any lessons that you've learned in terms of things that haven't worked? Were there any programs or other lessons where you felt, "This just did not go well," or, "This is not a hit?" Did you learn any lessons from that?

Sonali Khan: That's always a good topic, failure. We are always talking about successes, but where are the failures? Where are the struggles? Let's break it up into two parts. One is internal, within the leadership, within the women's rights, within the sector per se. How do you look at failure? What are the challenges within? Before we come to the external failures, what are the challenges in leadership? What are the challenges in collaboration? What are the challenges in aligning? It's not just, "If I'm working with children, I only work with children." What about children and women? Within women, there is a high level of fragmentation. We are not taking a lot of those issues head-on, so then what does that accomplish?

When I started working on media and communication, I was a short-format person, and I would look at campaigning very seriously, as aligning with community work. So at Breakthrough, and even now at Sesame, it's a combination of media and community. Now, in this digital age, that linkage is much stronger because digital allows us to bring the media and the community much closer. It's added an opportunity for us that was never there before. For example, people used to call me a "campaign wallah." Whatever that meant. So there was a sense of being [at the center], but still an outsider because you weren't providing the services on the frontline. You were talking about behavior change, you were talking about social change.

When we began, we were just a handful of 10 or 12 people who were talking about social change and behavior change. We would talk to the media about this. We were a handful of people looking at long format, short format. Today, if you look at the community, it's huge. But that journey took almost ten years. Now, so many more people have voices that we are not struggling for resources. We used to ask donors for money, and everything used to go for training and capacity



building. We used to get 2% of the money to do media, and that's how it was. It's been a long journey.

I won't say it failed because I wouldn't be here having this conversation if our strategies and methodologies had failed. It's been a long and hard struggle because to build that conviction I needed a Bell Bajao. If I hadn't had a Bell Bajao, I don't think that huge shift in my donor's mindset would have happened. That was a watershed moment. Before that, we were doing campaigns, we were doing a number of other things, but I couldn't cut through. When Bell Bajao happened, the government supported it. It was the talk of the town. We were like a poster girl for every major conference. We were presenting at the UN. That was a big milestone. I think that's when money for media started coming in. Many people look at us and say, "Well, you got 100 out of 100." But nobody sees the struggle to that point, the criticism and dismissal. "Oh, you are campaign people, you just do the frills, you just look good, but don't do deep work."

Then Bell Bajao happened, which I consider a watershed moment. When we started working with adolescents, again, the struggle was huge because many people asked us, "How do you identify such trends? How do you always get onto a gravy train where you're getting a lot of money?" I didn't know how to answer these questions. When Breakthrough was working on domestic violence, we started asking ourselves, as an organization, "Is Breakthrough only domestic violence?" We had started with Mann Ke Manjeere and now moved to Bell Bajao, which had a very different take. If you look at Mann Ke Manjeere, and then look at Bell Bajao, you can see it's a very different way of looking at the roles of men and women, their alliance, and they have very different approaches. We were still focusing on domestic violence on the journey from Mann Ke Manjeere to Bell Bajao, it was still the same domain, but we were looking at male engagement. It's a very distinct way of engagement.

It was a huge learning, organizationally and personally, as a communications expert, looking at behavior change. It changed a lot about how I was thinking. At the same time, when we started running Bell Bajao and took it to communities, one of the biggest things we were hearing was that underage girls who were getting married early were facing enormous amounts of domestic violence, and they were completely invisible. Our team members were taking the training and the capacity building to young people, to villages, but no one knew that behind the media campaign, there was a huge on-ground initiative. Based on that, we started digging into data, trying to understand [the issue], and we found that the rate of early and child marriage was humongous. We started working with adolescent girls. We didn't just say, "Okay, let's stop child marriage." We said, "Let's figure out how to empower young girls." That began the journey of our work with adolescent girls.



At that time, we did not want to call it child marriage; we wanted to call it early marriage. I cannot tell you how much flak I received for that. People were asking why, saying it would harm the movement. All kinds of things. We replied, "Because then it becomes bifurcated. There are the needs of the 10- to 12-year-olds, but there are also the needs of the 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds." How can you put everybody into the same box, and call everybody a child? That was the biggest problem. You are a child and then you're an adult. What about those people in the middle? Their needs are different, and our culture never recognized that intermediary age, which is so significant.

When you say what is behind all of it? It's a huge struggle. You have to take on all this criticism, you have to take on flak. People don't necessarily agree with you all the time. I don't know what people said behind my back, but there was enough said to my face at that time. This was a big journey, and it was not easy by any stretch. Your question brings a lot of that back to my mind. Sometimes you're just silent. It's not always that you're going to be beating your chest and making a point of it. Sometimes, you just put your head down and keep working at it. That's always been my mantra: You may not get it right. Not everything has worked out, and there have been more than enough lessons that I could probably write a book on failures. The learning has been significantly rich.

There have been a lot of failures that have helped me correct myself, but I think somewhere the vision stood its ground. In 2011, apart from Breakthrough, there were just a handful of organizations that were working with adolescents in India on the topic of early and child marriage. The coining of that word, I don't like to take credit in any big way, but I can say that I was probably one of the few people who started to put that thought out there. No group should be invisible, or silent, or lack a safety net. We need to differentiate within the category of children because the law in India says, "Everybody under 18 is a child." But there are complexities within that.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you see yourself as a systems-change orchestrator? You said one of the things that Sesame does so well, which I think all of us see, is their ability to scale while being incredibly culturally specific. Usually, those two things don't go together. There's only so much scale you can do at that speed if you're being that specific, so I was wondering, how does Sesame do that?

Sonali Khan: When you say system, and playing at that level, I can give you some insights that have informed the way I would like to design and think. Once you say social change, or you say behavior change, it cannot exist in abstraction, and that was clear very early on. You can't talk about social and behavior change and just expect it to happen when the social structures, whether marriage, bureaucracy, or the system that delivers you the policies, remain regressive.



There is no way that can happen, and I think that's very clear. Often, more progressive laws come into place and then social change follows.

I must remind you that Bell Bajao rode on the back of The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence. We rode on the back of that progressive law and that was why that campaign was so successful. It was not like that campaign happened in abstraction. There were the women who were fighting to transform the law, and that law was enacted, and we launched Bell Bajao. So when you say, "Are you a systems player?" I would like to reiterate my "Yes." Even while I'm thinking about campaigns, or thinking about and working on specific kinds of social change or behavior change, essentially we are systems-change makers. If you cannot connect that, I think nothing will work.

When I come to my present work, for example, it is so interesting that we, as Sesame, are working with the Meghalaya State Government. We are their technical experts for crafting and creating an ECD [early childhood development] framework for ages zero to eight. That means that we are creating material for early stimulation, we are creating material for three to six, and six to eight, and training and learning material for the classroom. We are going to create the training material for the Anganwadi workers, teachers, and ASHA [accredited social health activist] workers to deliver. This means bringing Sesame's knowledge and core competency to align with the needs of the state. It's as specific as that.

We have an amazing channel on YouTube, the Sesame Hindi channel, with 1 million plus subscribers and growing. While it gives you a whole range of amazing Sesame videos on several themes for children, the biggest consumption on that channel is social-emotional well-being and life skills, over and above literacy and numeracy. Today, the government wants content on social-emotional learning. Sesame is at the table providing curriculum modules, video content, and manipulatives. We are also providing training material for teachers, so we can bring that space together. We use WhatsApp Nudges. As we speak, we are creating a wraparound app for children for our YouTube channel, which again, is completely aligned with the new education policy, the NIPUN Mission of India, such that while children are viewing what they see as fun and learning, it's absolutely in sync with the education framework.

In a way, when COVID hit us, we were already tackling huge amounts of educational fallback; we called it learning poverty. This was pre-COVID, so you can imagine when COVID hit and children weren't able to go to pre-schools—even those who had the means, and many children couldn't access such support anyway—children were falling behind. Even now, the new ASER [Annual Status of Education Report] data has come out, and some of it is a stark reminder that we really need to invest in children's education.



One of the biggest challenges we are facing in India is scale. How do you provide a solution at scale? We have so many institutions and so many teachers. How do you provide the kind of quality that is needed, not just for those who can come to school, but beyond that? It is significant. How can technology play a role? Sesame is stepping into that space and saying, "Yes, we are looking at the need, and we are understanding the curriculum framework. Now, how can we align with the government? Because that's the only way we can work. How can we support at scale, but also through that, look at transformation?" Technology is big. If you look at any state in India, everybody's racing to understand how they can use technology to bridge the gap. We are playing in that domain, rapidly transforming ourselves to cope with it, but also making sure that we are delivering on our mission. We firmly believe that, as of today, the Sesame mission is even more relevant than ever before.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you see your work evolving in the next five years?

Sonali Khan: Right from the Bell Bajao days, it was always looking at systems, looking at behavior, and trying to connect the two. Now, we look at whether the connection is possible and whether it is strong. Is it very dependent on context? [Now, more than ever, if a linkage does not seem possible,] we have to make it possible because otherwise, we will not see the impact we want to see. That is where the concern is. If you want to sustain, you have to make these linkages happen, otherwise, you can have an impact, but it will not sustain; it will be very short-lived.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say linkages, what linkages are you referring to, specifically? Do you mean with the government, or with the community?

Sonali Khan: I'm looking at several linkages here because our YouTube and our other media allow us to reach the community directly, but we also link with the government, and through the government, with the institution. How do you institutionalize? That is the question. How do you institutionalize in a way that then becomes transformative?

We would like to look at transforming how children learn, because it's not just about what they learn, but how they learn, and that is significant to Sesame's mission. There is play-based learning, building executive functions, building creative thinking –what we call 21st-century skills. But there is also play-based experiential learning, doing it yourself, moving away from rote-based learning, and that is where Sesame is focusing. While we do all the systems work and partner with the government, we are focused on how to bring the joy back into learning, and that is often through how children learn. That's the space where I think Sesame really would like to stay: exploring the how of learning and transforming how children learn.

The other thing that has become significantly big for us is building resilience. When, for example, you're looking at a crisis or conflict, and we are talking about a poly crisis now, all kinds of issues



are emerging. How do you give children the tools that can help them cope, but at the same time give them hope, give them strength, and give them tools [to create change], whether you're doing social-emotional wellbeing, or health and hygiene? How do these all come together in a very significant way, looking at problem-solving and bringing those tools to support a child? That's where the vision is.

Today, at Sesame, we are focusing on some critical issues, whether social and emotional well-being, health and hygiene, or education. In education, it's not simply looking at foundational literacy and numeracy, but building children's skills and capacities and supporting them. That's the vision we are running with so that both children and adults can be upstanders.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What advice would you give to someone else who is trying to do what you're doing?

Sonali Khan: Jump in. You can only learn when you're there. All I can say is there will be struggles, but every time someone tells you a story about how you have impacted a life, however small, it gives you the courage to forge ahead. There will be disappointments, there will be challenges. Not everything works in your favor. If we are talking about development, and playing an equal role in nurturing society for the future by linking with governments, corporates, and other institutions, I think there is much merit in younger people joining in. There is a system in this madness, there is hope in this madness, and there is a lot of comradery in this madness. I wouldn't be doing anything else.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's very heartening to know that because you've accomplished a lot and you've also been through a lot of challenges and seen a lot of changes in the sector. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Sonali Khan: I'd like to address running an organization. While I have worked extensively, I've also built an organization. When I took over as managing director of Breakthrough, there were hardly five people. It was a successful campaign, yes, but I had to grow it. There were a lot of journey lessons in that. I also joined Sesame to reboot it. Sesame had a clear model. Everything was run on the back of a show because of *Gali Gali Sim Sim*, *Sesame Street*. But the world is changing, and we don't have a show in India anymore. *Gali Gali Sim Sim* stopped when I joined. I was given the task of rebooting Sesame and figuring out how we could best sustain the mission for India.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Did it stop because of audience numbers, or because of cost?

Sonali Khan: Some of it was because of donors shifting vision and mission philanthropy. Driving projects of this kind becomes its own journey because you need money to produce shows and Sesame is, at the end of the day, a nonprofit, whether in the US or in India. We are a 501(c)(3) in



the US, and here we are a trust, so you need philanthropy, and money, to drive it. How do you drive a mission for children, which has such a strong media arm? There were a number of challenges when I started here, despite Sesame being very successfully run. It was a question of: How do we build from there? I had inherited Breakthrough at a point where part of the journey was to get it to Bell Bajao and have that success, but again, how do you take it from that point? What's the vision from there?

I think while you are growing a mission, at the heart of it is building an organization. This is something that I want to share with you because many times we do great work, but we do not necessarily think about building organizations. If you want to sustain good work, you need a unit to hold it together. It has to go beyond the founder. I was at Breakthrough for 13 years, and it was creating the systems, establishing the processes to build the evaluation framework ensuring that we were generating impact evidence and building the network that positioned Breakthrough as a serious organization. Whether it was at the UN level, doing research, monitoring and evaluation, or the work that we were doing, or the issues that we were addressing, or moving from budgets to systems to structures—it all required a lot of grit. You had to just throw yourself in.

I was put into a leadership position, and I could have just run from campaign to campaign, do one campaign, raise the money, do another campaign. I don't know what bee got into my bonnet, but instead, I said, "No, no. Let's build an organization and make it grow, make it significant." I think when Skoll came along, that's what they really understood. When you say social entrepreneurship, it's not just running campaigns or running highly visible programs; it's also putting energy into building out the engine needed to run everything. At the end of the day, it can't just be Sonali Khan doing this work. There has to be a set of people coming together to drive all aspects of this work. That is something I'd like to talk to you about because that took a lot of energy and effort.

When I was leaving Breakthrough, there were nearly 130 people. People used to ask, "What keeps you up at night?" I used to respond, "How will we sustain the salaries of these guys?" Campaigns are successful, but we are purely dependent on philanthropy. Where are the processes? You can't be everywhere creating teams. First, we had a small group of like-minded people. Then, we had people from different backgrounds walking in looking for jobs, so suddenly, we were talking about organizational culture, leadership, and the second rung. I was dealing with organization building, which was very new to me.

As we are looking at external-facing journeys, of engaging and bringing about systems change and impacting really big, difficult problems, from gender-based violence to access to rights to our current programs working with children and their learning needs, there has to be significant effort put into holding up an institution, and in many cases, building one.



Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What were some of the most helpful learnings or insights you've gained throughout all of your work?

Sonali Khan: When you start on a journey you see this much, and then when you climb on top of the mountain, you look, and you suddenly say, "Oh my God, that's the world." That's what we can do if we are both transforming internally and responding to the external environment. I have gained a great respect for people who think in systems and structure, which was not my DNA. I was more action and big ideas that would keep growing bigger and bigger. I was often running amok and saying, "Let's do it." I have developed this huge amount of respect for folks who say, "No, let's buckle down and figure out the system structures. Let's dot all the I's and cross all the T's." I deeply respect them and I value their advice.

I have also learned to slow down. Now, I understand how to take people along. You need to communicate because not everybody is making those logical jumps in their mind. I was often stopped and asked, "What are you thinking? Where are you looking? You've made this jump from here to there; what's happening in the middle?" I learned a lot in terms of the need to communicate, explain things out, and explain them multiple times if need be because you need to take people along. You can't be the captain of a ship where people are throwing up over the sides. They all have to feel the breeze blowing through their hair. They have to be looking cool, not puking and having a bad time.

Those are some of the lessons I learned along the way. Leaders come with their own personalities, people come with their own personalities. Some are very much systems thinkers, and are very focused on structures and some, like me, learned to appreciate that and build those out. Even if we are doing innovative work, we still need the girding of a system and structure. However disruptive you want to be, if you need to go crazy, you still need some girding. That's really important.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I knew this was going to be phenomenal, but honestly, I feel like I just sat through a TED Talk. I really appreciate all the insights. Thank you for taking the time today to speak with me. It's been such a warmth in my heart, so thank you so much.

Sonali Khan: I want to leave you with this thought: I wanted to learn not from the development sector, but from everyone else, everyone but the development sector. There were such amazing things happening elsewhere, couldn't I just learn from there and bring it here? I continue to do that. I believe you can learn from the most unexpected places, the most diverse situations, and adapt that learning to your needs. I think that's where learning is the richest. My brain was going completely crazy when I was meeting people, listening to folks, and thinking, "How can I make that happen?"



I've met several trailblazers, A-listers, and celebrities, but one story is coming back to my mind: hearing Atul Gawande speak. He has written extensively on improving the health delivery system, and he said that he learned from Boeing. He explained that he learned the SOPs [standard operating procedures] for creating the Boeing aircraft, and he applied them to the prevention of maternal mortality. He said there were a certain number of things that you need to do, I can't remember exactly, so let's say 60. If you do all 60 of them, he said, you will surely prevent child death at the birthing stage. They did a study, and he said that out of those 60 odd things, hardly 10% were being done. Even if they were able to increase it to 30% to 40%, the lives of so many more pregnant women, and their children, could be saved. Subsequently, everybody was saying, "Don't focus on the product, focus on the process. The product doesn't matter."

That was so significant for me because I came away and said, "Boss, I am not just going to think about the product. I'm going to see, in creating a campaign, if I can have a completely different process. Because if innovation is the process, not the product, what should I do differently?" My whole approach to work changed. It was not about creating another set of SOPs for another campaign, but how was I going to work? Did I have faith in the process? Could I create a process that was far more powerful than the product? Those dynamics started impacting me. Skoll has been, for me, a fantastic journey. I'm grateful for that. From a perspective of learning, it has been quite phenomenal.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a beautiful place to end. Thank you so much again for taking the time to speak to me.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*

