

Benefits of Foolishness at Work with Poonam Bir Kasturi (Transcript)

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Chris Congdon: When I went to school for my MBA, I was taught that businesses should be created to fill a market gap. Today's guest believes in the power of business as a force for good. And she says the MBA-way is not the only way. A diversity of business models is important – going so far as to call her own style a little foolish.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Rebecca, tell us about our guest today.

RC: We got connected to Poonam Bir Kasturi through our colleagues in India. Poonam is the Founder of Daily Dump. Her organization designs, makes and distributes beautiful home composting products. Daily Dump's purpose is to reduce waste and reduce the pressure on public waste management systems. She was a TED fellow at TED India. She received the Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the Schwab Foundation of the World Economic Forum and a Smart Cities India Award. And I just love talking to her.

CC: Her outlook on business really opens up a new way to think about work and the role our companies play in doing more for the wellbeing of people and our planet.

RC: We want to remind our audience – If you like this podcast, we would appreciate it if you rate and review it which helps others find it.

CC: Poonam joined us from Bangalore, India. Thank you so much for joining us today, Poonam.

Poonam Bir Kasturi: Thank you Chris for having me. It's great to be here. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

CC: I am too because I have never heard of a company like yours. Honestly, The Daily Dump is a design lead composting company and you create these beautiful composting containers and I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the beginning of Daily Dump and what was the journey that led you to start your company?

PK: I was trained as an industrial designer from one of the premier institutions in India, a design school and we were having conversations – you know, when you’re young and are on the college campus, you have all these idealistic ideas of changing the world – and we were trying to formulate our ideas of what design could mean to each of us and in that journey, after I finished school, I was always trying to answer that question for myself saying how can design intersect with the real world? It cannot be only form-giving. It cannot be only colors. It cannot be only superficial decoration. In that quest – that internal inquiry and my exposure to the small-scale industry crafts and batch production in India and the very rich culture that I come from – lots of things came together. I was also teaching sustainability. So in my mind when I taught during those years, I learned a lot and somehow those ideas kind of distill themselves and coalesced and there was with a project on waste when I suddenly realized that all that I taught all that I thought about, I could see a clear vision of a need that needed to be addressed. But there was no demand. I said “no, this I would like to work on,” and that’s how I started doing the prototype for the first home composter for the country made by craftspeople – not made in a factory.

CC: I have a business degree. Not a design degree and I always learned that you were supposed to start a business based on demand so it’s interesting to me that there wasn’t a demand for it.

PK: You should actually write a case study on Daily Dump because this is absolutely anti-business. It’s anti-MBA. Whatever you were taught in MBA school, we didn’t do any of it and so that’s why I keep telling people, you need MBA graduates because they will create businesses but you also need idiots like us because you need foolish people who will go out there and have their way, saying “We need this. We need that, and people will say no, no no, of course we don’t need that, and you still say, no, we do need that.” Then, maybe after 20 years, they realize that they actually do need it!

CC: Let’s talk a little bit about the need because I was really interested that you focused on food waste. There’s so many different forms of waste that we have to deal with on our planet. But you focused on food waste and composting versus plastics or electronics and so I’m just curious what made you go in that direction.

PK: Two things. I started eighteen years ago when plastic was still not such a big problem in India, now it is. And food waste still continues to be 60% of our waste streams and as it is I was taking on a large problem of creating demand. So within that large problem I thought okay least let me have some low hanging fruit there. Food waste can become circular much more easily than plastic can become circular. Post-consumer plastic to even actually collect right in India the amount of dispersal there is in post-consumer plastic. It’s a huge challenge. So, there are many reasons why I started with food waste. Also food waste is something where you can actually watch the process of circularity. So it becomes a great conversation starter for citizens to say “oh this is what circularity means. This is what closing the loop means. This is what being connected to the Earth means.” They can see it tangibly in their homes. So, that’s why I started with food waste. And food waste is 70% water. We shouldn’t be paying taxpayers money trucking water to a landfill and creating methane. It’s just so stupid.

CC: When I hear you talk about it I think “of course that’s ridiculous. Why do we do that?” Let’s talk about the impact of Daily Dump. In India, what is your overall impact in terms of what you’re trying to achieve?

PK: We didn't start as a business brand. We continue not to be a business brand in that sense. We have created what I would call the open conversation – we've created the pathways. We've created the movement and we've created the legitimacy of the idea of decentralized waste management. We have been at the forefront of that. And because we took the risk and because we opened up those conversations and those doors, we now find people are following that and it's become a norm where it was not. That's our contribution. That's the impact we've created.

CC: I think that's amazing.

PK: It's a mindset. In addition, our products are constantly copied and we see versions of them all over. I think that the interesting thing is even a competition acknowledges that. So whenever we go to conferences or meetings and they'll all come to me, "That one is very good I took a little bit of ideas from that. Is that okay? I said "Yeah, it's okay, it's okay carry on," so you see all our communication material being used. We'll see them in government places. So I think that I sometimes talk about this and I think I should make a point here saying that when you make it radically transparent and you put everything out there on the web for people to use, you don't have too much of the mindset of "Don't use it. It's mine and you cannot use it. It should not be allowed." Then people own it and the movement won't spread. In a country like us, we need good ideas to spread, otherwise how is it going to become a movement if it's owned by somebody enclosed? Those are the reasons why I started this way of course. It doesn't make money. Of course it's foolish. Of course we have to work 100 % harder. Of course we can't pay more salaries. We can't have teams that have competitive salaries. But, that is the reason why we're doing this and I feel that there have to be enough businesses like this also in the world.

CC: It's very different when you talk about your business being about starting a movement versus return on investment to the shareholders, and all the things I learned in business school. I want to talk a little bit about something also unusual that you've done, which is to tap into the heritage of potters in India because your composters are beautiful. What made you decide to go that route versus just something really functional?

PK: Because we were trying to say that this is a good thing to do, but in India, even then, even now, people say, “Well, I’m educated. I shouldn’t be working in 90 degrees. I should be working from a computer. Somebody else should handle my waste. So dignity of labor is a big issue in India and I come from a family where we can clean our toilets. There’s nothing wrong with doing your own work. So I felt if you have to build a product that is just another functional dustbin, it looks like a dustbin, then it will be placed in your mind that you’re just replacing your dustbin. We don’t want that. We want it to become a new kind of space. We want to create a new space in your mind that says this is regeneration. This is like new energy. This is a new space and so we had to give it a form and a material that was linked to some deep archetype in India and clay – there is a certain resonance that India has with clay and with pottery. And so we chose pottery because it also has batch production. We could do fast prototyping. We had potters all over the country and my hope was that it would become like an open source idea. I hope that all the potters will start making it themselves and selling it. What has happened unfortunately is that potter skills have dropped, supply chains have dropped, and skill sets have completely disappeared and the aspirations of following the west have become so high that people don’t want to work with their hands anymore. So, we still continue to work with one set of potters but it is hard now to get skills whereas Cambodia and Vietnam still have a large potter community.

CC: That’s so unique in the beauty of it because when I think about composting, I usually think about another chore, another job that I need to add to my life. I would like to ask you a little bit about that because composting really is a new behavior in many countries. I was just doing a little research before we talked and I saw that in the US one estimate is that 72% of people don’t compost. It’s something that you think about for gardeners but normal people don’t compost their food waste. I know that I’ve been a little inconsistent about it even myself because even though I have plenty of space I live in an environment where I actually do have a garden, so I can understand how to use my compost. But what are some of the things that your business has needed to try and do to have composting become a regular part of people’s lives in India?

PK: We had to design products that would work in flats – high-rise apartments – where you don’t have space. You don’t have gardens – so you could put in a balcony. We also had to do a lot of work in the education of the fact that it’s a chore. Why would I add it? It’s more work. I have a busy life. Actually this is the government’s job, why am I paying more money to do something that actually gives me nothing? So we had to address all of these so we have a “convince me” section on our website. We have 12 standard questions or responses to typical things that people will say, and then we would make skits around it. We would talk about it. We’d make films on it and we would keep reiterating that message from every forum. Our early adopters became our movement crusaders so they would take the message, not us, and that’s how it grew and that’s why it’s taken 18 years and behavior changed like you rightly put it is one of the hardest things to do and especially in a country like India it was so traditional. Our culture is traditional. And to make this shift is hard, but like I said I mean I factored in 25 years when I started I said this: “Nothing is going to move at all for 25 years so I have to sit in for the long haul and so, you find me 18 years later still sitting here.

CC: I'm just so amazed that you have had the perseverance to continue to keep trying to make this movement happen. One of the things I think is just your doggedness. I think that's a good lesson for all of us who are trying to affect a change in the world. It's not easy and you know you just need to continue to approach it doggedly to be able to actually make things happen. In talking about the Daily Dump, we've already talked about the fact that this is a business. One might think that it's a not-for-profit kind of organization that's trying to start a movement and do good things in the world. But you started it specifically as a business and that was an intentional decision. Can you talk about why you decided to go that path? .

PK: Let me ask the question slightly differently: who decided for us that business should not do good? Which management school decided that nobody did right? I don't think there's anybody anywhere out there who's written the book that said business is not supposed to do good.

Business is supposed to do harm – nobody wrote that book. Also why is it that everybody is talking about shareholders? When did that story change, who let it change, when did we slip into it. So if we continuously slip into things without thinking for ourselves, then we are confused right? Nobody told us business is not good. I feel a business's job is to do good because it's the only interaction where the transaction is equal. You have something to sell, somebody to buy equally. So why is it business is not considered to be good? That's greed. If we have to, we have to be clear. I feel greed is greed whether you're poor or rich if you are greedy you are greedy and we shouldn't be. Growing up with this idea, it confuses us and I think we confuse business with greed. It's very clear business is supposed to do good. What was always supposed to do good and I don't know when that conversation has changed. So I don't subscribe to that view.

CC: So I'm so inspired by everything you're saying right now because I certainly didn't go to business school thinking I'm going to go out and be a bad person today and I'm going to ruin the environment and ruin people's lives. But that's not the motivation that anybody wakes up with in the morning. But yet it does feel like sometimes there's a tension between the motivations of returning a profit to the shareholder and doing good in the World. So I Love the way that you're thinking about it in terms of that that really is your imperative to do something that's of value to people and to the world – to weigh that more equally. Perhaps it's a balance issue.

PK: This is a business. We have to pay salaries, we have to make ends meet. We have to take loans. We have to pay back Interest. We are not able to pay salaries that the Wall Street guys are able to pay. We don't have those margins and I think it's that somebody somewhere has figured out the margins are what they want more of. Why do they want more of it? Why do they want to hold more margins again? That's greed and in a country like ours when we have so many people and all of them need some basic livelihood. If we all start holding margins, you will have what all Oxfam reports say - 1% of the population of the world has most of the wealth. Then why are you surprised if everybody subscribes to the notion of not doing anything foolish? Then you can't complain and then you live by it. Or, you do this hard fight that we are doing. We don't pay enough salaries. We do with less. We are more frugal. It's not a virtue. We just can't afford anything more and that I think is the thing that people don't want to have, which is fair enough, I mean when you see the world having lots more, you also want to have more. I understand that. But that conundrum, I don't know how to solve because I'm not trained in business or I'm not trained in economic theory.

CC: I think you have an insight and a wisdom that perhaps a lot of those 1% businesses could learn from! I want to ask you a different question because of your background actually in manufacturing. I know you have a design background but you've also worked in manufacturing and I'm just curious what it was like for you as a woman in manufacturing in India because at least in our manufacturing facility what we learned is that women aren't participating in manufacturing to a really high degree.

PK: I was trained as an industrial designer so we had to work on machines even in college and my dad had a small scale industry which had us making machine tools. So my dad was a very progressive father at that time even for India. We lived off the shop floor. All 3 of us siblings would go every summer holiday and do filing and late work and ah so for us it was not something new. It was like the norm for us. But yes, even at that time women on a shop floor was a strange thing and especially women in a shop floor and a leadership position. It was fun, but I think I really learned a lot working with workers with the machine oil and grease. Because it's a small skill industry, it's got a different flavor in India. It's almost like partly we're tribal and partly we're a new age. So interesting. It's not like the high tech factories that you guys have.

CC: How is the work that you're doing now impacting the lives of women even within your organization? Or as the movement kind of takes hold? Do you see it affecting a change?

PK: I think the composting movement across the country is led by women. Absolutely I mean the women are driving this. I don't know, I think women have more wisdom. Women can think ahead for 15 years.

CC: Why is that?

PK: They know that the short term is stupid. I don't know. It's the inherent wisdom of women.

CC: Well I tell my husband all the time that I have more wisdom but I'm not sure that he believes me. Poonam, as we draw to a close are there any final thoughts that you would like to share? We have listeners around the world - any last thoughts or ideas or pieces of wisdom.

PK: I think diversity in the business model is an absolutely important thing to have. You can't have only one definition of business. And all kinds of businesses are important and all kinds of foolishness are very important. I think in today's world more foolishness is needed.

CC: I love that in today's world more foolishness is needed in business. That's a great thought.

PK: Everybody takes themselves so seriously. When you look at a picture of a business or a boardroom – oh my, everything is so stuffy.

CC: I know! Who started the rule that you had to wear a suit and a tie? I have a final question for you that we're asking everybody. Who is a guest this season on work better and we're wondering about a story about you or about someone you know, ah somebody you've worked with that's made a positive impact on people or the planet can you tell us.

PK: I get inspired by lots of people in India who are ordinary foolish people who are doing work in their local regions. I know of a guy who has actually cleaned up a huge length of river in Punjab and another man in Pakistan who taught an entire set of villages how to do water harvesting and got water back into those villages. Work like that just touches me very deeply and because it's working with nature, working to see the wisdom and harnessing it, understanding it, being respectful of it and then making sure that the skills are passed on to the next generation – I think that's so important for us.

CC: Thank you so much for sharing those stories. I think we could talk for a really long time about these. But. I just want to express to you how grateful I am that you joined us today on Work Better and I know on my behalf and behalf of our listeners I think we're really excited and supportive of the work that you're doing and just really in awe. I'm grateful for your time with us today.

PK: Thank you Chris for your time. I'm grateful for this opportunity to talk about the Daily Dumb story and if anybody has not done composting I would urge them to try!

CC: Thank you for being here with us. Rebecca, who is our guest next week?

RC: Next week, Sheri Hickok joins us. She is CEO of Climate Impact Partners. They work with organizations around the world to support projects that slow climate change and deliver social impact. Things like clean power, solar water heating, and forest preservation. You asked her questions that a lot of people are asking – does this work really make a difference? Why should organizations support projects like this instead of going all in on reducing their own carbon emissions? It's an important conversation and I learned a lot.

If you enjoyed this conversation – share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

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