



EXECUTIVE ACCESS

INDIA'S LEADING GLOBAL SEARCH FIRM

TÊTE-À-TÊTE

CONVERSATION WITH LEADERS

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TÊTE-À-TÊTE is a regular series of interactions that Executive Access has with top industry leaders, CEOs, and founders of organizations. Our latest issue brings you first-hand insights from our exclusive chat with Vishal Chowla, Leader, Roundglass.

Vishal Chowla

Leader

Roundglass



Mr Vishal Chowla is the Leader for Roundglass Foundation. He is a Strategic Advisor for organisations, developing Business Strategy, supporting and mentoring Start ups, Operating Programmes, Fundraising & Investment Plans and Partnerships for Social Impact and for profit enterprises.

He entered the social impact domain with the specific intent to work closely on supporting programmes that create sustainable impact for the most marginalized and help improve their quality of life. He recognized the enormous potential through achieving impact at scale and endeavoured to bring together innovation, digital and people to drive change.

Before joining the non-profit sector, he has been a successful global leader in consumer goods and retail, running and operating businesses with leading multinational corporations like Walmart Inc., Coca-Cola Inc. and PepsiCo. aligning a diverse portfolio of work. He has led large multi-region businesses, worked on India entry strategy, set up and built greenfield operations, leading diverse teams across multiple geographies and cultures.

His breadth of experience working across different geographies and sectors has given me great insights into the challenges that need to be addressed within the industry and social sectors, specifically capacity building, as it pertains to financial sustainability, organizational health and measurement and evaluation solutions.



What if no-one ever came to collect your daily garbage?



I'd like to start by getting some more insight into your transition to the impact space from earlier being in FMCG and then having your own firm as well.

I spent the better part of a couple of decades, in the beginning of my career working in the corporate sector, I worked with a couple of FMCG companies in various roles in sales, in business and finally setting up a large organization in India -these were very gratifying roles, lot of learning and it really helped me hone my skills over a period of time. But, you know, somewhere along the way, as I started working, I did want to, start a company of my own. I also had a philanthropic bent of mind and I wanted to do something but did not know what to do. So after about 2 decades, I decided to hang up my boots in the corporate sector and started my own company. I started an HR tech company with a friend and colleague and we ran that for 3 years fairly well. In 2015, as I was exiting I had a chance call with an old colleague and friend who was running "Save the Children" and he wanted some help with his organization, I was very glad to be able to offer my assistance and very humbled that he thought I could come and help - that really was the way I entered the sector. What I started off imagining to be support for a few weeks became something that I loved so much that I just stayed on there!

Was it a very planned transition? Well, I did want to do it, but honestly, the opportunity presented itself to me and I was very lucky to have, a soft landing into the sector, at "Save the Children" I was asked to help with fundraising which was very similar to work I did in the corporate sector, in terms of sales, meeting with people and selling solutions. I was therefore able to, make a very smooth transition into the sector. I did that for a while for a couple of years and then moved into leading the organization as the Chief Operating Officer. Those five years with "Save the Children" were really a learning experience allowing me to bust the myths we all have about the sector and how it works. It provided me an opportunity to learn and segue into the sector.

After that I went off on my own, volunteering with a couple of organizations and then moved into Round Glass early last year.



What are your reflections on how you could leverage your background and work experience in leading an organization in the impact space?

All organizations working in the development sector are trying to solve a particular problem or a set of problems within their own areas of impact, or interest. But I think what the sector really needs is the ability to look at complex problems and try and break them down into very simple solutions. I think my years with the corporate sector actually helped me in my ability to be able to look at complex problems with a very simple lens and then see how that could be executed on the ground. That helped me figure out how to build models, and generate evidence from those models that were able to scale.

The ability to visualise and scale a particular program is something that helped me greatly in what I do today. I think that's a very useful input that I probably bring to into the work I do.

What would be your advice to people who are transitioning from the corporate space into the impact space? What should be their prepared for and how should they approach it?

There are a lot of myths about the social sector when one is not in the social sector, and I admit I did too. I think there is certainly a need for somebody who wants to transition, to do a deep dive as to what problems the sector is solving and be really immersed in it.

Today, there are a few organizations that have started helping in this transition. I mean ILS is one beautiful example of an organization which is transitioning corporate leaders into the social sector. There's the Nudge Foundation and Nudge Institute which are doing some path-breaking work in the same as well.



I think one needs to know that work in the social sector does need, sectoral knowledge. However, that doesn't mean that somebody who's coming in with corporate credentials may not succeed. In corporates, the currency for winning is net profit or the bottom line, but in the social sector the currency for winning is impact and what are the changes that you can make in the ground and how that impacts perhaps the lives of the people you work with. Is it going to be lesser work? "No", it's not going to be less work. It's going to be much more work and much more intense work. Intense because the programs are designed to create impact which is different from a regular job in the corporate sector. Secondly, one should have an orientation of delivering results and measuring your performance. What are the metrics to measure that, how do you say that a certain program design is actually going to deliver impact? So I think one has to be very aware of that.

I think it's immensely humbling to see, how people come in and want to make an impact. The advice would be to be very aware of what you're getting into and understand what you need to impact. I would say, come in with your eyes open. There is a lot of opportunity for great people to make great results.



Technology has been of interest to you throughout your career. How are you leveraging technology here at Roundglass?

In Roundglass, we design programs within a thematic area, that we are addressing. Those programs need to have a model that can be implemented on the ground, whether it's a tech solution or a non-tech solution, and then we record evidence to create an entire cycle of a prototypical approach. Once a model has been established where we have delivered the desired impact, we can use technology to be able to amplify that and scale up.

For example, in the agriculture space, IoT can be used to solve for agricultural interventions, geospatial technology be used to determine water levels in a particular region or particular area etc. Hence, technology is going to be critically important for a social sector to scale up.

Additionally, there is a lot of, philanthropic impact investment that is going into supporting research for technology solutions or technology interventions in solving problems. Whether it's the problem of water, carbon credits and other such areas becoming the flavour of the season in terms of social impact. There are the impact investors and donors and institutions who want to know, how their investment into CSR or philanthropy is making a difference. So I think really our ability to track and measure what we do will be greatly supported by technology interventions.

We now work with a lot of universities, business schools, technology schools who are working with us on research projects to see how they can perhaps find solutions for the work that we do at Roundglass.

Technology is certainly the way to go at "Save the Children", there was an organization we worked with to look at even something as physically small as a handheld device to figure out levels of malnutrition.

Coming to Roundglass, you have spent over a year here now. It will be great to understand, what is your focus at Roundglass, and the vision that the firm carries.

I think our organization's ethos is to really bring holistic well-being to the geography and in this case, Punjab where we are currently focused. How can we impact various areas or elements of everyday life at the grassroots level? Hence, as an organization we have limited our focus to be able to solve for a particular geography. While we are a 4-and-a-half-year-old organization we are still very young and are still almost a start-up.

We work in 3 broad thematic areas - Environment & Climate, Youth & Children and Women Empowerment. Within each of these thematic areas, we have different programs at different levels of scale and maturity in terms of their impact. My vision for the organization is to scale up some of our flagship programs – ones which are now tested, gone beyond the proof of concept stages and on a growth path.

For example, one of our big programs is on tree plantation. Being an agrarian state, Punjab only has 3.5% forest cover while almost 85 - 86% of its land is under cultivation. Our effort at Roundglass is to plant 1 billion trees in Punjab. We started this program 4 years ago, started small, built around it over a period of time and now we've been able to prototype a model which can scale very, very quickly. Last year, we have touched the 1 million tree mark and we are now looking at taking it to 10 Million in the next 2 years! So that's what we have been able to do in terms of building prototypes and learning how to scale up.

I am often asked, why Punjab and why not the rest of India. Considering where we are right now, we don't want to go in and solve for issues at one program at 5 or 10 locations. We want to cover the entire state. This is because the solutions that we are talking have an omnipresent impact across the state. By the end of the year, we want to be able to really increase our footprint from currently 1500 villages to almost doubling to 3000 villages, which means we would have covered roughly 25-30% to the villages in Punjab. That's where our goal is, that's what we want to do.

Can these models be replicated outside? For sure they can be. In fact, we very openly share with other organizations, our processes our techniques etc. in terms of what we do on the ground to make an impact.

Could you share some more about the initiatives and creating the Learning Labs and the sports facilities.

Post-school, which finishes typically at 1:00 or 2:00 pm, the kids don't have much to do and therefore, we thought this would be a fabulous opportunity for them to come out and learn.

Learn Labs is our program where we work on the ground with children. By allowing them access to tools and technology, to be able to dream about what they would want to do, to make them dreamers and then doers through a self-operated learning approach. One of the big areas that we focus on is spoken English. We have an innovative program within this called Learn Pals where we have got volunteers from across the world who come in and speak to the children in English. Typically, through storytelling or discussing a certain topic or research etc. It's very engaging and the children are very interested in this. We have our assessment processes around all of this and we have seen that this program has helped in moving the learning levels of children around the Learn labs.

Other than spoken English, we also have an array of 40-45 minutes' sessions on problem-solving where the children are put into groups to solve problems for themselves. They get access to the computer and the Internet, they share a problem situation and they solve it themselves within their group without help from the supervisor. Hence, we call it a self-operated learning environment. Finally, we have Learn Challenges where the child is presented a local problem that they might encounter. This encourages them to think, dream and imagine that they know how to solve it, and therefore go out and solve it for themselves in the future.

Our idea behind the sports centres, of which we have about 110, was to bring the joy of playing back. Being an agrarian economy most of the population lives in villages, and therefore a large number of children do so as well. We want them to learn discipline, and interdependency through sport.

So we started this program at village playgrounds and now we are also getting into the schools, where we come in and set up a play area for kids. This also encourages girls to come out and play because we had seen that in the sports centres that we had outside of school, the participation of girls was very limited because there is an inherent fear that parents had to send girls out to the playground, which might be a little away from the main village. We also get the school's PE teacher to be a sports volunteer who actually manages the play, while we provide footballs and kits. We also have some our staff trained by the AIFF, so they send in their coaches, to come in and train the coordinators to become e-licensed coaches.

By the second half of this year, we will also be launching Volleyball and Kabaddi as well as these too are very popular sports in Punjab.

Could you share some more about the initiatives and creating the Learning Labs and the sports facilities.

Sustain, is our program where we look at environmental issues and sustainability. we have 3 programs here. The first program is the Tree plantation program which I have spoken about. The second program that has now got a lot of legs and traction in terms of alignment with the government is on solid waste management at the villages. Our third and the youngest program which is probably going to be our most important program in the time to come is on regenerative agriculture.

All our programs are run in conjunction with the village administration, so we typically approach the sarpanch or the block officer or the district officer. We want to do this only with the sign off from the local communities because we don't want to be there forever. We want to build the program, run it for a while, train the stakeholders, make sure technical expertise is transferred and then allow the communities to take responsibility and ownership of running these.

Coming back to how the waste management program is run, in every village, we saw that garbage was strewn around outside the house, on the street and at street corners. We created a model, where we bring in our own investment and we use that as a catalyst to enable government expenditure to come in and jointly create a waste management system.



We typically do 10 days of engagement and communication within the village. We address any resistance by explaining why it's important for them and bring our own machinery to clean up all the garbage dump sites in the village and of course, small garbage strewn around. We then provide the households with a blue dustbin and a green dustbin to segregate wet waste and dry waste. We then spread the word through a cycle rickshaw with a speaker, with somebody just speaking the message. Next we nominate a waste collector, buy the tricycle, make sure that it's segregated, get them the right equipment etc. and ensure sustainability, we go out and speak to the households to say, we want you to pay ₹40 or ₹50 per month to the waste collector so that they can come in and earn a livelihood there. In a small village, a waste collector can get about ₹7,000 - ₹10,000 a month plus there's a dry waste that comes in, from which they get another ₹1500- ₹2000. In the 130 villages that we have started this in, 99% or more have been able to meet standards kept for themselves.

What is also now working very well is that when we collect wet waste, through the MNREGA scheme where we leverage government investment to create a composting pit or a set of pits within the village where this wet waste is converted into organic compost. It takes about 45 to 60 days to be converted into compost that the villagers can use in their farms. With the work we've done, we've been invited by various district administrations to come in and take clusters of villages together and work with them in conjunction to set up these centres, in a block of 50 -80 villages.

Over the last many years with the need for increased output in yield from the farming community has put a lot of stress on the soil. There has been rampant misuse of chemicals, such as fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides etc. Being 85% agrarian, the land, and the fertility of the soil in Punjab today is perhaps at its lowest. Water tables have also got depleted and there are areas which are not near the rivers where water tables are as low as 500-700 feet. So I think if this issue of addressing agriculture is not looked at today in the medium term, there could be very serious ramifications for Punjab and for the country as Punjab is certainly one of the larger contributors to the food security of India. This is where our third our program is really being built. We are showcasing the opportunity of producing crops by regenerating the soil.

We have set up a model farm in Mohali, Punjab which showcases the manner in which agriculture should be done. We extensively capture data on a daily basis on every step of the way what we are doing. We also now recruiting cohorts of farmers to become ambassadors for us. To come and see what we are doing, figure out the economics, the input and output costs and see whether it makes sense for them. Because of the nature of the farming if there is anything new that's going to happen in terms of how they till their land, there has to be a demonstrated model which is what we believe we are putting together and that's where I say it's a very young program for us. It started in June last year and as of now we've been through one and a half cycles with a long way to go before we were able to document enough information and data to showcase meaningful change for the farming community.

Vishal, it will be great to understand how you are measuring the impact of the organization? Have you set up protocols or a matrix, how do you measure impact?

There are a few factors that we can look at, one could be really quantitative. Real numbers that speak for themselves -the number of trees planted, number of waste management units setup, number of self-help groups set up etc. We have a very strong and well-defined mechanism for capturing all this information and we hold ourselves very strongly accountable for that and have internal processes of reviewing and revising them. For instance, last year, we did not meet our goals for waste management, in terms of the number of units we wanted to put up, but we also realised, they were largely influenced by certain external factors which we had no control over. While the units were ready, in some locations, they did not start for reasons we could not control.

The other indicator would be the external indicators. At one point in time, we were going out to communities to talk about our work and ask them to experiment or use some of the solutions we have. Today, we find that we are getting calls every day from different, remote locations, etc. from different government agencies to partner with. The fact that we are getting recognised by our external stakeholders is the commentary that we are proud of. Having said that, it also brings a lot of responsibility on us, once there is an expectation or on something that we have to bring to the table, we have to be able to honour it.

As an organisation, Roundglass has got a very strong well-being part to it. How important do you think is holistic wellbeing in the larger welfare of society?

As an organization, we define well-being within a few pillars. It could be societal well-being, financial well-being, environmental well-being, political well-being or social well-being. Our programs as they're designed, really do address a lot of air. Within our Sustain program, we address the environment – earth, water and soil. Also, within our programs, we address various fundamental issues. When you have children engaged and they come and play for 2-3 hours in the evening, they go back tired and can't really think of other stuff. It's no longer an idle mind. Therefore, we are addressing issues with children, issues of learning, and issues of the environment.

We are also addressing issues of women, and there is enough data now globally, available in that show that wherever you run programs to include women, there is a significant change in the living of that community -whether it is financial inclusion for women, empowerment for women, women in the villages being aware of their rights etc. That's a program we've just started and it manifests itself into economic independence and also overall wellbeing on the entire household.

Finally, we also have a program on yoga that we have in the villages. We are going to take to this to about 100 villages by the end of the year.

All of our programs necessarily employ local youth. Our Learn Labs program has employed, as we speak right now, about 35 young girls from their local villages to become Changemakers and they get a stipend because they work twice or thrice a week for 2 to 3 hours on those 2-3 days. So we are providing employment there, the plantation program we've done so far over the last 4 and half years has given employment to 5000 indirect labourers through MNREGA. That was about half a million man-days this year and because of the scale we are going to reach 1 million man-days of work this year. So if you multiply that by ₹280 a day that is so much money going directly into the economy through our efforts. Our work is for the community, with the community and ensuring that there is ownership and pull. Therefore, we are addressing economic issues, environmental issues, people issues and youth issues. That is the glue about holistic well-being and how we bring it to the table.



Interviewer's Profile

Neha Sharma, Partner - Social Impact



Neha has been with Executive Access since 2009 currently as a Partner in the sustainable development and financial services domains. She has over 12 years of experience in Human Resources and revenue driven roles across business domains including private equity, consulting, sustainable development, investment banking, corporate banking, project financing and analytics space amongst others

Prior to joining Executive Access she was working with GE Capital, GE Commercial finance and Genpact India for around 5 years where she was predominantly managing leadership development, leadership hiring and operations. She was on GE's national leadership talent assessment panel. Neha is a key resource of the team involved in client acquisition and has led the execution of over 100 searches across domains.

She has been a guest faculty for Organisation development at a leading business school in Delhi. Her keen interest in sustainable development helped her to get selected for the TATA Jagriti Yatra 2012 which is an all India journey to understand the social enterprise fabric in India.

Neha is a Management Graduate and has also completed her advanced Strategic HR management program from IIM Ahmedabad

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