

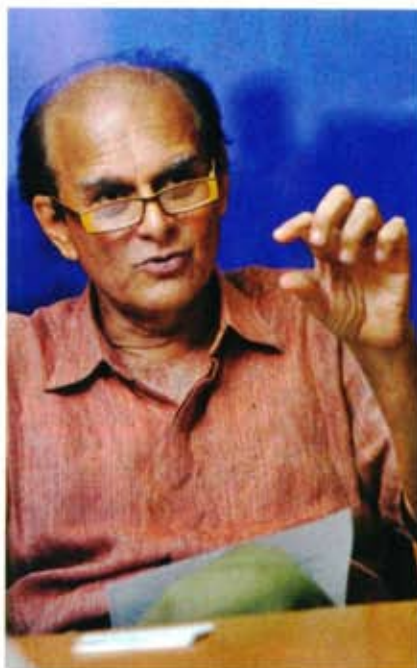
Companies in ASCENT

Collective wisdom can yield better results

Personal Social Responsibility (PSR), as opposed to the normal corporate social responsibility is something Harsh Mariwala, CMD, Marico, takes seriously. Having grown his small enterprise with a turnover of ₹40 lakh in the 1970s to a robust ₹4,000 crore FMCG company, Mariwala felt a need to go beyond normal CSR activities. The Harsh Mariwala Foundation, recently launched a new initiative – ASCENT – an acronym for accelerating the scaling up of enterprises by empowering entrepreneurs.

Launched on 15 August, the initiative is an attempt to help enterprises scale up to the next level of growth. This is done through the collective sharing of experiences in small trust groups, or common interest groups (CIG) comprising 8-10 promoters selected from non-competing sectors. The rationale being that the power of collective wisdom of a common interest group is more effective than formal mentoring or lectures by successful entrepreneurs. "ASCENT is not about mentoring entrepreneurs but rather facilitating a group of entrepreneurs in an enabling environment to share their experiences and learning from the same," explains Mariwala. He himself had mentored a few entrepreneurs earlier in his individual capacity. However he felt that this had limited impact and ASCENT could help a wide selection of entrepreneurs.

Besides learning, networking and collective sharing of experiences provides insights, ideas and solutions resulting in emotional bonding within the group. Mariwala says that it is lonely at the top. And forming collective groups can benefit many more. Individuals in the trust group could also share common resources and get help from venture capitalists, mentors, coaches and trainers, if they so desire. "It is like a *satsang* for entrepreneurs," says Milind Sarwate,



Mariwala: taking them to the next level

group CFO, Marico and chief enabler, ASCENT, pointing out that the aim is to create a self-sustaining system "which could operate on its own in the future". ASCENT, he emphasises, will restrict itself to playing an enabling or catalytic role.

The CIG is key

Ten such trust groups have already been formed and over a period of a few months, these groups would meet regularly at a pre-determined time, at least once a month. Initially each group would have a facilitator to set the ball rolling. One or two facilitators for the next trust groups would be selected from the current group. The groups also have the freedom to select outside speakers and thought leaders. An annual convention and power sessions for all the trust groups have also been planned, as have interactions with financial institutions and investors on a periodic basis.

"Selection and the formation of the CIG is a key element," says

Manan Singh, chief evangelist, who in his earlier capacity as executive director of TiE, Mumbai, had been instrumental in helping the growth of private enterprises. The initial screening was done on the basis of applications received from entrepreneurs with a proven/successful business model. The minimum turnover criterion was ₹2.5 crore for a manufacturing business and ₹50 lakh for a services business. Three groups for each segment were further formed. Group A of companies with a turnover ranging between ₹2.5 crore and ₹25 crore for the manufacturing sector, Group B with a turnover ranging from ₹25 crore to ₹50 crore and Group C with a turnover above ₹50 crore. A similar segmentation was done in the services sector; albeit in a lower range. After direct interaction with each of the applicants, common interest groups were formed. The combined turnover of the selected 100 members was ₹3,150 crore with a total workforce of 13,000. The age of the entrepreneurs which included 10 women entrepreneurs and 30 family-owned businesses ranged from 24-55 years; from 39 diverse sectors. This included traditional businesses like electrical equipment, construction, chemicals, healthcare, IT, ITeS and machine tools, besides newer ones like e-commerce, education, F&B, diamond jewellery and catering. The mix between manufacturing and services is also even at 51:49.

For the first year no fees have been charged from any of the trust groups. But to ensure that ASCENT becomes self-sustaining in the future a nominal fee would be considered at a later date. Empowering entrepreneurs is one thing. However it will be some time before one could really see the success of ASCENT. Even if five entrepreneurs are able to scale up to the level of the Marico, it will be worth the efforts of the Marico Foundation. As of now there is no dearth of aspirants. In less than a month since its inception, ASCENT has received nearly 20 applications through its Website for the next trust groups already.

• DAKSESH PARIKH