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Case Study: Seva Kendra Kolkata - The Work from Home Dilemma

Dr. Mourlin K
Assistant Professor, Xavier Business School, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata

Abstract: ***In March 2019, Seva Kendra Kolkata, a non-governmental organization (NGO), faced a challenging situation. The organization had received multiple emails from its donors demanding project completion reports by March 31st, with the threat of funding being revoked for the next financial year if the reports were delayed. However, due to frequent absenteeism among the project coordinators, the Director, Mr. Franklin Menezes, was concerned about completing the reports on time. At this critical juncture, the employees of Seva Kendra requested the option of working from home, citing various concerns. This case examines the dilemma faced by Seva Kendra in balancing urgent project requirements with the needs and concerns of its employees, exploring issues such as employee engagement, communication gaps, and organizational culture.***
Keywords: non-governmental organization, employee engagement, skill development, Rewards and recognition

I. INTRODUCTION

Seva Kendra Kolkata, established in 1971, has had a profound impact on the lives of marginalized communities in West Bengal. Initially founded to provide relief to refugees during the Bangladesh Liberation War, the organization's focus evolved to address a broader range of community development issues, such as healthcare, education, and livelihood support. Despite its successes, Seva Kendra has faced operational challenges, particularly in employee management, project completion, and donor relations. The situation in March 2019 highlighted these issues when project completion reports were due for submission, yet employee absenteeism and resistance to office attendance threatened the timely submission of these critical reports.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Seva Kendra's history is marked by phases of growth and expansion. Initially known as Catholic Charities, the organization played a crucial role in refugee relief operations and later expanded its services to include development projects targeting slum dwellers, marginalized women, and unemployed youth in Kolkata. Over the years, Seva Kendra became a trusted partner of several international donors and played an active role in community development and empowerment. However, as the organization grew, internal management and employee engagement became increasingly complex.

The organization's workforce, composed largely of field workers, coordinators, and administrative staff, faced challenges typical of NGOs, such as resource limitations, lack of job security, and irregular compensation practices. While employees were committed to the cause, there were concerns about the organization's management practices, particularly regarding training, promotion policies, and compensation.

III. THE DILEMMA

On March 1, 2019, Mr. Franklin Menezes, the Director of Seva Kendra Kolkata, found himself facing a crisis. Many donors had emailed the organization, requesting the timely submission of project completion reports by March 31st. If the reports were not submitted on time, Seva Kendra risked losing funding for the upcoming financial year. The urgency of the situation was compounded by the frequent absenteeism of project coordinators, who were integral to compiling the reports. At this critical juncture, the employees requested to work from home, citing various reasons, including the long commute and the pressing need to care for family matters.

Mr. Menezes was caught between the immediate need to submit reports and the requests of employees. He recognized the importance of donor relationships for the survival of the organization, but he was also acutely aware that employees were the backbone of Seva Kendra's operations. The question that arose was whether allowing employees to work from home during this critical period would affect collaboration and delay the project completion.

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IV. MEETING OF HEADS

On March 2, 2019, Mr. Menezes called an emergency meeting with the project manager, Mr. Alex, and the HR manager, Ms. Suma. Mr. Alex, the project manager, reassured Mr. Menezes that the projects were on track for completion, although field workers' inputs were still pending. However, Ms. Suma, the HR manager, highlighted some concerns about employee morale and their reluctance to come into the office. She explained that many employees were asking for the option to work from home, particularly during the crucial period of project report completion.

Ms. Suma's assessment raised significant concerns. She recognized that the lack of face-to-face collaboration could hinder the completion of the reports. Additionally, there was the potential for employees to feel isolated and disconnected from the organization, which could negatively affect their motivation and commitment. Mr. Menezes realized the need for a quick resolution but struggled with the dilemma of balancing urgent organizational needs with employee welfare.

V. PROJECT URGENCY AND EMPLOYEE RESPONSE

On March 3, 2019, Ms. Suma organized a meeting with employees to discuss the importance of completing the project reports on time. Mr. Alex outlined the urgency of the situation, explaining that timely submission was crucial for securing future funding. He emphasized that donors had a high regard for Seva Kendra's work and that the organization's ability to fulfill its commitments was directly tied to the employees' cooperation.

During the meeting, employees voiced their concerns, which were not solely related to the project's urgency but also to broader organizational issues. One employee, who had worked at Seva Kendra for over ten years, expressed frustration with the organization's treatment of its staff. He cited the lack of training opportunities, inadequate compensation, and insufficient promotional policies as major sources of dissatisfaction. Another employee pointed out the disparities in pay between senior management and field workers, which had created resentment and a sense of unfairness.

Employees also expressed concerns about the project-based nature of their work, which led to job insecurity. Some employees felt that Seva Kendra prioritized project completion over internal management, such as employee development and welfare. They argued that without addressing these underlying issues, they could not be expected to fully commit to the organization's goals.

Despite these concerns, many employees expressed a willingness to support the completion of the projects, provided that their grievances were addressed. They suggested that they could work from home if their demands for better compensation, clearer internal policies, and more support were met.

VI. EMPLOYEE CONCERNS FOR THE ORGANIZATION

As the meeting progressed, employees reiterated their commitment to Seva Kendra's mission but emphasized the need for a more supportive work environment. A field coordinator highlighted the lack of transparency regarding employee benefits, such as travel allowances, medical assistance, and other perks. Employees also voiced their frustration with the organization's communication system, which they felt hindered collaboration and created misunderstandings.

One employee mentioned the perception that working for a non-profit organization came with an expectation of lower pay and fewer benefits, which had led to feelings of being undervalued. Another employee questioned why the organization had not addressed these issues sooner, especially since many of the concerns had been raised multiple times in the past.

In response to these concerns, Mr. Alex and Ms. Suma assured the employees that their grievances would be communicated to the Director, Mr. Menezes, and that steps would be taken to address these issues. However, employees made it clear that they would not return to the office unless their concerns were prioritized and resolved.

VII. FINAL CALL

Ms. Suma and Mr. Alex met with Mr. Menezes to brief him about the employees' concerns. Ms. Suma conveyed that the employees were not only requesting work-from-home arrangements but also demanding improvements in compensation, internal policies, and employee welfare. She urged Mr. Menezes to engage in open and honest communication with the employees about the organization's financial constraints and efforts to improve their benefits.

The meeting ended with no immediate resolution, leaving the Director uncertain about how to move forward. Mr. Menezes reflected on the situation and remarked that the employees' dissatisfaction, if not addressed, could harm Seva Kendra's reputation and long-term sustainability.

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VIII. CONCLUSION

Seva Kendra Kolkata, despite being a pioneering NGO in community development, faced significant internal challenges related to employee engagement, compensation, and communication. The work-from-home dilemma underscored deeper issues within the organization, such as poor internal policies, lack of employee support, and resistance to change.

While the employees remained committed to the organization's mission, their growing dissatisfaction could potentially affect project completion and future donor relationships. The case highlights the importance of maintaining open communication, addressing employee grievances, and ensuring a supportive work environment to sustain long-term organizational success. The need for a balanced approach, where both donor relations and employee welfare are prioritized, became evident in this scenario.

This case serves as a reminder to NGOs and similar organizations about the importance of fostering a positive work culture, providing opportunities for employee growth, and maintaining clear, transparent communication to avoid dissatisfaction and ensure the smooth execution of projects.

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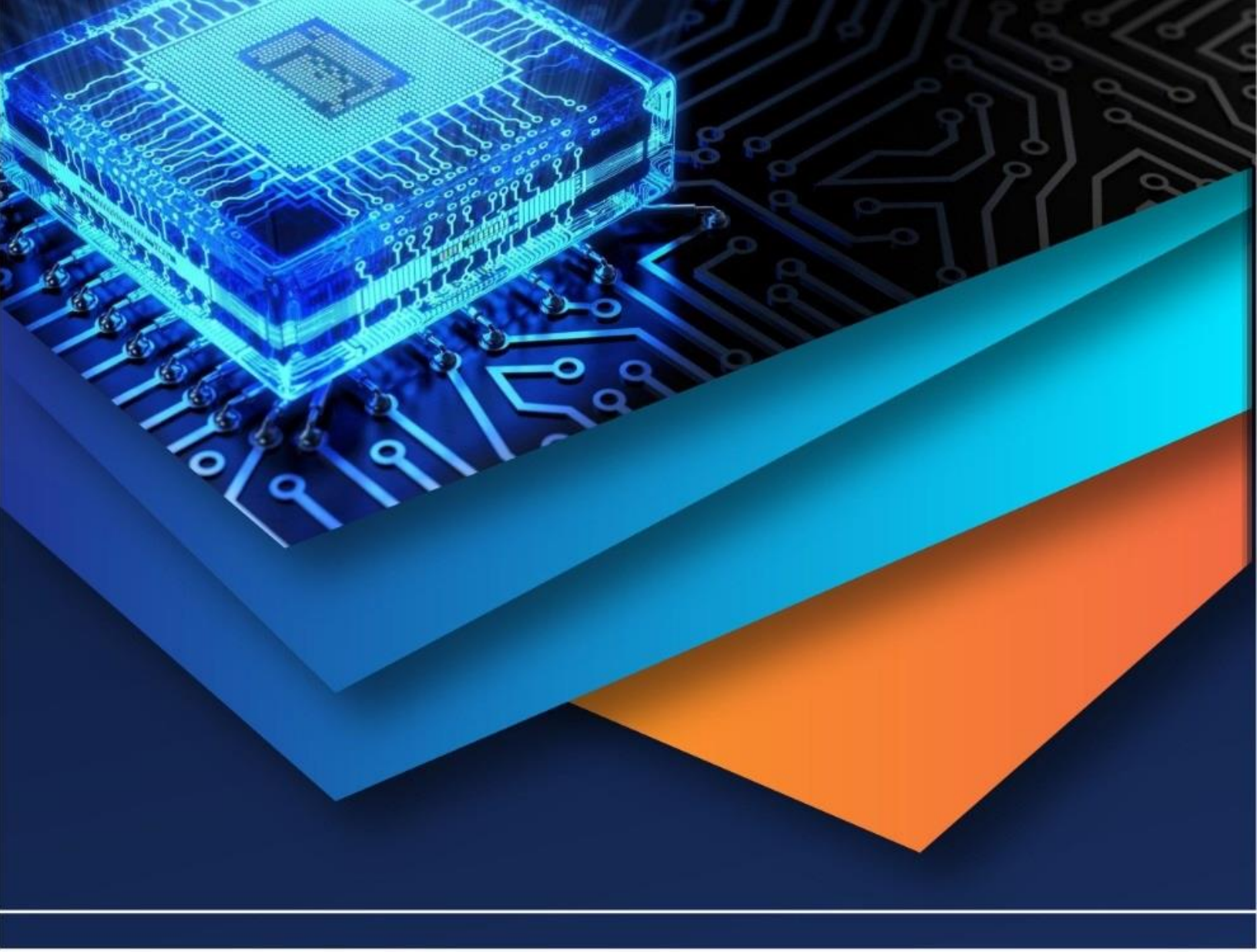

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