

Giftivism: Reclaiming the Priceless by Pavithra Mehta

Full Transcript of Video:

'Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.' - Oscar Wilde

More than a 100 years later we've put pricetags on things that Oscar even in his wildest dreams (or nightmares!) could not have seen coming. For example, today for 10 dollars your company can purchase the right to emit a metric ton of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. For \$75 hundred dollars you can hire a human being to be a guinea pig in risky drug trials. And for a quarter of a million dollars you can buy the right to shoot an endangered rhino in South Africa. We've somehow managed to put a price tag on life, death and almost everything in between. So in a world where everything has a price --- what happens to the priceless?

That's the Golden Gate bridge. One of the most beautiful and most photographed bridges in the world. It is a testament to humankind's technical ingenuity, and also to our moral failure. The Golden Gate Bridge is the second most common suicide site in the world. This is John Kevin Hines. At nineteen, suffering from intense depression he showed up here. He walked the bridge past crowds of tourists with tears streaming down his face. Longing for a moment of human connection. That's when a woman in sunglasses approached him and asked -- if he would take her picture. She didn't notice his tears or even stop to ask if he was all right. John took the picture. Gave the woman her camera, and then took three running steps and jumped. He's one of the rare people who've jumped the bridge and miraculously survived. One of the most haunting things he's shared since his rescue? That if someone, if anyone had given him a smile that day, he would not have jumped.

We live in a time where we have mastered the art of "liking" each other on Facebook but have forgotten the art of loving each other in real life. Disconnection is a growing epidemic. And it's not a problem isolated to teenagers. It's a growing problem the workplace. According to a recent study 70% of people are emotionally disconnected at work. And yes we even have a price-tag for that disconnection. It's calculated to be 300 billion dollars in lost productivity annually. So this is not just a social or spiritual problem. It's also a business problem, an economic problem.

What's the solution? Making meaningful products is worthwhile and necessary. But it's not enough. In fact another study recently showed that the majority of people worldwide wouldn't care if most of our brands disappeared tomorrow. Our purpose doesn't lie in our commodities it lies in our sense of communion. It lies not in products, but in the realm of the priceless. You can't put a price on the smile John didn't receive that day, just as you can't put a price on any of our deepest gifts. Compassion. Empathy. Generosity. Trust. So

what happens when we as leaders and thinkers bring these priceless gifts back into circulation?

That's the beginning of Giftivism: the practice of radically generous acts that transform the world. History has seen giftivists in all corners - Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and so forth. People who believed that when we change ourselves, we can fundamentally change the world. But this ability isn't restricted to social change giants. The seeds of giftivism lie in each of us. But to tap into it we have to do something all these people did. We have to upturn one of the core assumptions of economics - the assumption that people always act to maximize self-interest. The assumption that we are inherently selfish beings. Giftivism flips that idea on its head. What practices, systems and designs emerge when we believe people WANT to behave selflessly?

ServiceSpace evolved as an answer to that question. It started in Silicon Valley at the height of the dotcom boom. At a time of rampant accumulation. when a group of young friends began to build websites for non-profits free of charge. Money wasn't the focus. The intention was to practice unconditional generosity. We delivered millions of dollars worth of service, but it was all offered as a gift. And everything we did had to follow our three guiding principles. [None of these principles by the way made ANY sense to the business world :)]

Our first principle was to stay 100% volunteer-run. We have no paid staff. People looked at that said we wouldn't scale. Our second principle was don't fundraise. We wanted to serve with whatever we had. People warned us that we wouldn't sustain. And the third was to focus on small acts. No strategizing for grand outcomes. We were told we wouldn't have impact. But here's the thing -- these constraints pushed us to discover new forms of value. We sustained, scaled and blossomed into an entire ecosystem of service that now has 500,000 members across the world.

Along the way we chose to create services that are difficult to monetize. Like good news. Bad news is a lot easier to sell. That's what drives the fear narrative and sensationalism of the headlines. But that's not where the priceless lives! To counteract this we started a daily news service that shares inspiring real-life stories, then we started a site for uplifting videos. Another realm that's hard to monetize and yet crucial is kindness. So we created a portal to spread kind acts. Later we started a pay-it-forward restaurant and a whole slew of other efforts... in all our adventures we learned repeatedly that generosity is always generative -- it generates new value. And giftivism organizes that value through 4 key shifts.

The shift from Consumption to Contribution:

People in cities see roughly 5000 ads a day (most of them subconsciously). The marketplace primes us for endless consumption. But the truth is we're hard wired for contribution. That's not wishful thinking. It's actual neuroscience. When people give to good causes it can trigger the same pleasure response in the brain that doing something nice for themselves does! We don't need neuroscience to tell us this - we know from experience - giving feels good! So we decided to unleash a series of experiments in

micro-contribution. We began doing small acts of kindness. Like paying toll for the car behind you at a tollbooth, or buying coffee for a stranger at a cafe. A friend traveling first class spontaneously decided to trade his seat with an elderly woman in economy. Now imagine being on the receiving end of any of those acts. These small, counterculture gestures light up the giver and receiver. Everybody wins because generosity is NOT a zero sum game. Then we created Smile Cards. These little cards can be passed on with the kind act. They explain to the recipient that someone anonymously reached out simply to make their day, and now they can pay-it-forward by doing a kind act for someone else and passing the card along. The smile card becomes an invitation to create ripples of good everywhere. We've shipped over a million cards to people in over 90 countries and run a website that hosts tens of thousands of real life kindness stories. Imagine a world where people are continually reaching out to each other in this priceless way! Every moment becomes a gift. It's a beautiful thing because it starts to rewire your mind when you into every situation and instead of asking "What can I take" - you're constantly asking what can I give? What can I give? Soon you find that your actions begin to catalyze a rich network of ripples. And you tap into the joy of purpose.

The second shift is from Transaction to Trust

Karma Kitchen is a prime example of this. It's a restaurant we started and what makes it unusual is there are no prices on the menu. At the end of the meal guests receive a check for \$0.00 with a note explaining that their meal was a gift from someone who came before them. If they wish to keep the circle of giving going they can pay-forward for someone who comes after them. When we started we didn't know if this crazy idea would work! But six years later Karma Kitchen is still going strong. Amazing things happen when you count on people to be generous. It sparks something deep inside. One time we had a computer scientist serving tables. At the end of the meal one guest who was skeptical about the whole pay-it-forward idea handed him a \$100 bill, "You trust me to pay-it-forward," he said, "Well, I trust you to bring me back the right change." This wasn't part of the plan. Our volunteer ran through a list of options in his head. Should he split the money 50:50? Should he try and calculate the price of the meal? Suddenly the answer came to him. He handed the \$100 bill back to the guest, and then opened up his own wallet and added an extra \$20. In that moment, both waiter and guest experienced a mini transformation and "got" what Karma Kitchen is about. It wasn't about the money. But when we drop the habit of quid pro quo you enter the natural flow of giftivism. You don't know who paid for you or who will receive your contribution. But you trust in the whole cycle. Things move beyond the control of the personal ego, and every contribution becomes a profound act of trust. And trust generates a web of resilience. Today Karma Kitchen has chapters in six cities around the world.

The third shift is from Isolation to Community

The mindset of me-me-me is isolating and has limited power. But what happens when you move from me-to-we? That's our friend Pancho, one of the most fearless giftivists I know. He lives by choice in East Oakland-- a neighborhood full of gang violence and poverty where there are more liquor stores than grocery stores. But the doors of Pancho's house are never locked. There's a garden in the back where they grow fruit and vegetables. They run outdoor yoga classes and a weekly meditation gathering. Anyone can join. And every week Pancho and his friends collect all the unharvested fruit from the neighborhood and organize a fruit stand that offers local, organic produce to the community for free. They have created a context for people to share their gifts with each other. Now people

clean the streets together, they water each other's plants, and take care of each other's children. They used to hide under their beds when they heard gunshots. Now they come out onto the street to see if anyone needs help. When you move from isolation to community you tap into the power of synergy. The sum is always greater than the parts.

The fourth shift is from Scarcity to Abundance

Scarcity is a mindset. Gandhi once said there's enough in this world for every man's need but not every man's greed. When you move away from a mindset of scarcity to a mindset of "we have enough" you unlock new forms of capital. Social capital, trust capital, synergistic capital...you discover breakthrough models of abundance. Like the one this man created. This is Dr. V -- my granduncle. In 1976 he, and his five brothers and sisters started an 11-bed eye hospital in India called Aravind. At Aravind no one who needs care is turned away. They do 60% of their surgeries for free. They don't do any fundraising or accept donations. And yet it is a fully self-sustaining enterprise. How does it work? Patients can choose if they want to pay or not. The revenue from paying patients goes towards covering costs for the others. The quality of care whether you pay or do not is worldclass. It's a brilliant, elegant and breathtakingly compassionate system that REALLY works. Today Aravind is the largest provider of eye care on the planet. Over 38 million patients seen. More than 5 million surgeries performed. It has redefined the impossible. Harvard Business School has been studying it for years trying to understand how a place that breaks all the rules of business still succeeds. The thing is Aravind doesn't succeed in spite of the fact that it breaks these rules. It succeeds because of it.

Giftivism isn't a utopian vision for the distant future. It's part of our priceless inheritance in this very moment. The rewards are built-in. As we shift from consumption to contribution we discover into the joy of purpose. As we move from transaction to trust we build social resilience. As we move from isolation to community we tap into the power of synergy and as we replace the scarcity mindset with one of abundance, we identify radically new possibilities.

I began this talk with the story of one desperate teenager. I'd like to close with the story of another. Julio Diaz was coming home from work one night when he was stopped by a teenager with a knife. "Give me your wallet," the boy said. Julio pulled out his wallet and handed it over. As the boy turned to run Julio said, "wait you forgot something." The boy looked back. "You forgot to take my coat," said Julio. "It's cold. And if you're going to be robbing people all night you'll need this." The boy is now utterly confused, but he takes the coat. Then Julio says, "It's pretty late, why don't you join me for dinner. There's a restaurant I like around the corner." Incredibly, the boy joins him. So there's Julio dining at a restaurant with his robber. Treating him with nothing but compassion. At the end of the meal, Julio says to his new friend, "Look I'd love to buy you dinner but --you have my wallet." Sheepishly the boy hands the wallet back to him. Then Julio leans forward and says quietly, "I need to ask you for one more thing...can I have your knife too?" Without a word, the boy slides his knife across the table.

What we will do for love will always be far more powerful than what we will do for money. What we can do together will always be far greater than what we can do alone. And when we cultivate the heart of giftivism within ourselves, our companies and our communities, we begin to unleash our true prosperity.

We begin to move from being a market economy to being part of a gift ecology.

It begins with small steps. I invite each one of you to think about what your small step will

be. What is YOUR giftivist resolution?

May we each take that step. May we change ourselves, may we change the world.