

INNOVATION SERIES: AN EYE FOR PEOPLE CARE - PRODUCTIVITY, QUALITY AND INNOVATION

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Institutions are what they are because of its people. This is especially true of organizations that are service oriented. A sterling example of what a team of dedicated and driven employees can do is the Aravind Eye Care System.

Established in 1976 by Dr. Venkataswamy, as a modest 20-bed hospital, Aravind Eye Hospital has grown to enormous proportions. Today the Aravind Eye Care System encompasses five hospitals, three managed eye hospitals, a manufacturing center for ophthalmic products, an international research foundation and a resource and training center that is revolutionizing hundreds of eye care programs across the developing world. During April 2008 to March 2009, the total number of outpatients seen in Aravind Eye Hospitals was 27, 48,216 and the number of total surgeries were 3, 09,015.

Aravind Eye Hospitals is said to be one of the finest eye care institutions in India and known across the world. Countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal China and some African countries have sought guidance from Aravind, in terms of hospital management and leadership training.

Aravind's founder's mission was to eliminate needless blindness from his country. The challenge was enormous, especially with so many poor people who could ill afford to pay the market rates. He realized that this could not be accomplished through the traditional business model, so he set about his mission to mass market eye care by developing an innovative business model

By his ingenious business model, only 30% of customers pay local market rates. For the other 70%, who are poor and find it difficult to pay, it is highly subsidized. The key to the model is apparent in its high productivity and quality of service. Aravind is the largest and most productive eye care facility in the world. It now has staff strength of over 3000.

Taking its compassionate services to the doorstep of rural India, Aravind's stunningly effective strategies vaulted barriers of distance, poverty and ignorance to create a self-sustaining system. A surgeon at Aravind performs more than 2000 cataract surgeries a year which is five times the number performed by an average ophthalmologist in India.

So what makes a surgeon at Aravind five times more productive than any average ophthalmologist? Dr. Govindappa Natchiar, Vice Chairman and Director, Human Resource, at Aravind Eye Hospital, attributes the higher productivity rate of surgeons to a team of well-trained Mid Level Ophthalmic Personnel or MLOP at the hospital.

“Productivity is not related to just the surgeon's capacity but by creating an atmosphere of support, streamlined structures and processes, and empowered employees”, Dr Natchiar reveals.

“The most significant reason is our mid-level ophthalmic nurses, who are very strong in all aspects

of equipment handling and surgical preparations,” she says, “Everybody works optimally so that the doctor can work efficiently.”

Early on, Aravind recognized the need to develop human resources. Several training programs have been designed to develop ophthalmic manpower. Catering to all levels of ophthalmic teaching and training, these are intended not only for ophthalmologists but also for ophthalmic technicians, opticians, clinical assistants, outreach coordinators and health care managers. Apart from these, a highly relevant six-week training course in the maintenance of ophthalmic surgical instruments and other equipment for technicians is also offered.

“With a view to increase the ophthalmic human resource, we have established a Virtual Academy that teaches and trains ophthalmologists in medical and surgical procedures of various diseases through tele-education system”, informs Dr Natchiar, who is also one of the co-founders of Aravind Eyecare hospitals.

“At present, in its initial stage, the Virtual Academy covers nearby locations such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, Theni, Coimbatore, and Puducherry, where classes for ophthalmologists are held. “This system would be extended to other hospitals in India and abroad in due course,” she says. The future goals of Aravind include increasing the number of surgeries from the current level of about 300,000 to 1 million per annum. It also plans to establish a national and global university of ophthalmic sciences.

As is the case always, Aravind is banks on its people to realize its vision.

Some HR guidelines at the time of selection and induction for its employees are as follows:

- 1. Attitude over Qualification:** More weightage is attributed to attitude and common sense than just education qualification at the time of interviewing candidates. For Mid-Level Ophthalmic Personnel (MLOP) job, which makes up 80% of the jobs, it is not the best but the ‘right’ students from rural areas who make it. The eye hospital has deliberately steered clear of stars because they are less likely to stay with the organization. Even while interviewing a senior doctor, a lot of time is spent in understanding the attitude of the candidate.
- 2. Values and Family Values:** Doctors who have studied at Aravind Eye Care Hospital are preferred over others. The belief behind this is that, they are already entrenched in the vision and values of the organization, which an outsider would take time to understand and imbibe. While interviewing prospective MLOP, parents of candidates are also spoken with, to understand family values.
- 3. Empowering Women:** To empower women in the locality, women candidates stand a higher chance of being selected.

- 4. Young and Youthful:** The young and the youthful are encouraged as the underlying theme is “Catch them young. It is easier to mould younger people.”
- 5. The ‘Aravind’ Orientation:** All MLOP have to undergo a one-month orientation program; whereas two weeks of orientation program is conducted for doctors and post graduate para-medical employees. This orientation program includes close interaction with the senior management. The orientation is conducted with the objective of knowing and understanding the hospital with all its uniqueness in its values and functioning.
- 6. Skill Training:** Apart from the orientation program, MLOP have to undergo intensive technical training in their function.

Some of the other good practices at Aravind are as follows:

- 1. Looking Outside, Beyond its Windows:** It benchmarks itself holistically in its business environment in terms of quality of surgery, service, costs and other parameters.
- 2. Adapting to Change:** Quality of service is of topmost priority and Aravind adapts to recent technologies as early as they are introduced in the world.
- 3. Looking Within:** All Aravind hospitals are audited thrice a year by auditors of other Aravind hospitals.
- 4. Encouraging Creativity and Innovation:** A week on innovation called ‘AURO UTSAV’ is organized where ideas on how to decrease waiting time, optimizing resources and other ways to increase efficiency and quality in service are discussed.
- 5. Teaming and Learning from Each Other:** Events such as Welfare Week, Women’s Week are organized for employees to get together, network, share experiences and learn from one another. These are very simple processes which are practiced at Aravind. Yet the organization is world renowned. The uniqueness is in its simplicity and the spirit with which it is executed. To understand the success story at Aravind, it is imperative to understand that behind these processes, there are people and within the people there is a spirit. If one understands, the dedication, drive and love with which the people work they will know how the human factor with its processes, has propelled Aravind in being an organization in its own league.

HR consultant Kisholoy Gupta also contributed to the article. Rajeshwari Sharma is Editor, SHRM India.