



Hong Kong Social Entrepreneurship Forum

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Social Entrepreneurs Newsletter

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The Magic of Darkness – Sharing a Dream, Sharing Success

Readers of this Newsletter would recall that in Issue No.36, dated September 12, 2008, we reported on the founding of a new social enterprise, DiD HK Ltd, the mission of which was to bring the Dialogue in the Dark programs to Hong Kong and China.

Specifically, the WHY of the company was summarized as follows:

"First, we would like to use this program to effect major changes in people's perception and attitude towards the blind and other disadvantaged groups in society;

Second, we would like to create a successful social enterprise that could achieve the dual objectives of creating social impact and attaining financial success at the same time;

Third, we would like to prove that a successful social enterprise may not need to have any financial support from the government;

Fourth, we would like to be the first social enterprise in Hong Kong to have an EPO (Ethical Public Offering, i.e. the public can buy the shares of our company when they are impressed by our social mission and financial performance)

Finally, we would like to bring Dialogue in the Dark to mainland China and become a role model on social entrepreneurship."

In the same issue, we also reported on the three major steps to be taken:

"First, we will build a temporary exhibition in Hong Kong within the next few months to test the market and refine our product.

Second, we will open the first permanent site in Hong Kong within a year.

Third, we will start planning to bring the program to mainland China cities."

Five months have now passed and all of the above has remained intact except one of the major steps. Instead of hosting a temporary exhibition, DiD HK Ltd. had decided to organize a series of workshops to test the market. The result was a series of 21 Dialogue in the Dark Executive Workshops held between January 5 and 16, 2009.

The Inimitable Magic of Darkness

The Workshops have been a spectacular success, exceeding even the expectations of the organizers. Four things are particularly noteworthy:

1. The original plan was to offer twenty workshops with 24 participants each. In the end, twenty one workshops were conducted with over 85% having 24 or more participants, and the remaining workshops having between 16 and 20 participants. The admission fee for the workshop is HK\$950 per participant, which is relatively high. It is an impressive achievement to have sold so many workshops in the midst of financial tsunami. Overall, there was a modest deficit running these workshops mainly because of the cost of flying out three experts from Germany to help facilitate the workshops and train our local trainers.
2. Perhaps the most significant outcome has been the positive feedback by the participants of the workshops. It has been proven beyond doubt that there is a market for the Dialogue in the Dark workshop. We are particularly encouraged by the response from the human resources and training professionals who attended the workshops. They see the value and uniqueness of using darkness as a medium for leadership and team development.
3. Equally if not more important is the fact participants were impressed by the blind trainers and assistants who helped facilitated the workshops during the two hours in the dark. This is a very significant breakthrough: sighted people are helped by blind people to learn important lessons about leadership and team building, which was totally unheard of and unimaginable in the past. Herein rests the greatest power and uniqueness of this social enterprise. Most social enterprises are set up to look after or support disadvantaged groups; but with Dialogue in the Dark, it is the blind people who are enabling sighted people to learn. (We would like to challenge the reader: could you think of any social enterprise that can achieve such a result?)
4. The Workshops have been attended by a variety of people, including corporate executives, professionals, NGO leaders and managers, social entrepreneurs and social enterprise practitioners, civil servants, academics and students. After the workshop, many participants enquired about the company behind Dialogue in the Dark. It was a great opportunity for them to learn about the nature and meaning of social enterprise. Many felt that an unexpected result of the workshop is learning about social entrepreneurship. This has turned out to be a great benefit in its own right.

What does 'inimitable' mean? Literally it means something that cannot be copied. This is the magic of Dialogue in the Dark – difficult, if not impossible, to replicate. Indeed, it is hard to design a program that has so much power.

A Social Enterprise in the Making

During and right after the Workshops, DiD (HK) Ltd. has received many requests for additional workshops. It has now been decided that another series of workshops will be organized by the end of April this year.

At the same time, the search has been started to find a suitable site for the permanent Dialogue in the Dark exhibition, which requires over 5,000 square feet and will be a year-round exhibition catering to an even wider audience.

Patrick Cheung, founder and main driver of the project, is optimistic about the market and future of Dialogue in the Dark in Hong Kong and ultimately mainland China. But he would like to share his dream and success with more people. Now that the Workshops have tested the market, he would like to invite more people to join him to realize the dream.

There are three areas that Patrick would like to have specific support:

First is to find a suitable venue for the permanent exhibition. The ideal place should be somewhere close to MTR stations with at least 5,000 square feet.

The second area is to solicit commercial partnership or sponsorship for the HK\$ 1.5 million budget to set up the interior decoration for the permanent exhibition.

The last area is to prepare the long term business plan for DiD to deliver all the objectives outlined above. This involves developing the whole business plan with financial details and profitability forecast and operation plans. Base on this plan, we will launch a new round of roadshow to recruit new shareholders. Hopefully the recruitment of new shareholders and board of directors not only gives us the capital we need to develop the business but also the bonding of different talents to help build DiD's vision.

If you are interested in sharing the dream and success of Dialogue in the Dark, please write to Patrick direct at patrick.s.l.cheung@gmail.com