



# A shoulder to lean on

As part of their corporate sustainability initiatives, employees at Voltas selflessly volunteer a helping hand to the underprivileged

**S**aritabai, an inmate of the Shepherd Widows Home in Byculla, Mumbai, is usually lonely and depressed. However, this afternoon, she sportingly dances to the beat of a popular Jim Reeves number at the Christmas party. Other members, all over 65 years old, enjoy themselves, joining in the merriment. Thanks to Voltas employees who volunteer to organise such events, these destitute women have something to look forward to in their otherwise bleak lives. More than the lunch, games and dancing, it is companionship and the physical comfort of a hug or a pat that these women crave for and cherish.

Volunteers have been regularly visiting the home since 2001 as part of Voltas's corporate sustainability (CS) initiatives, bringing cheer to those who have no family or friends to take care of them. They have donated geysers, bed linen, sewing machines, a water purifier, medicines and an oxygen cylinder. The international operations business group donated money to renovate 14 rooms at the home to make the women comfortable; they are currently in the process of renovating the bathrooms.

Many other organisations receive help and support from the company. These include Our Lady's Home, ANZA Special School and Ma Niketan. Voltas also has a registered public charitable trust, Voltas Organisation of Women (VOW), managed exclusively by women employees, and spouses of male employees. They help the needy in areas of health, education, career and vocational guidance, and support training programmes for tribal women.

A 1,200 strong group of Voltas volunteers spare time during and after work hours. Voltas identifies institutions or non-government organisations (NGOs) close to their operations making it practical for employees to spare a few hours for CS activities.

Institutionalising individual volunteering is an important focus of the company's CS initiatives. There is no better way to teach than by setting an example. Voltas's senior management cadre including the managing director Ashok Soni, the cross-functional team headed by Anil Gole, VP, corporate human resources and corporate head – social responsibility and a number of senior managers and others acting through the company community facilitator Margaret D'Souza, strongly support, and are themselves actively involved in volunteering activities.

Appreciating the employees, Mr Soni says, "It gives me immense pleasure to note the initiative Voltas-ites have taken. It is a pleasant indication that they are more than efficient executives; they are human beings to be proud of. Their mature outlook reflects the spirit of social uplift inculcated in all Voltas-ites, very much in keeping with the company philosophy."

Another organisation that Voltas supports is Akanksha, an NGO working to improve the lives of underprivileged children through non-formal education. They help inculcate a sense of self-esteem and values, while making learning an enjoyable and fun activity.

Voltas has provided office space to Akanksha at its Chinchpokli, Mumbai premises and Voltas volunteers have been mentoring a few children since 2002. Ms D'Souza explains, "It is difficult since volunteers (mentors) need to be there once a week from 5.30 to 7.30 pm. I think we are the only corporate working uninterruptedly with Akanksha for the last six years."

Khurshid Avasia, a mentor since 2004, shares her experiences: "We found that personal interaction works best with these children who are more comfortable sharing their problems with one person rather than with a larger group. Each child has a mentor whom he / she meets once a week. The children call us *bhaiya* or *didi* which develops a strong bond."

Adds Kishore Pradhan, another committed volunteer who has been involved with the project from the beginning, "Initially the programme focused on teaching academics to a few children, later, we started helping them with general knowledge and personality development. We are also there if they want to talk about difficulties at school or in their personal lives." A manual prepared by Akanksha gives guidelines for the mentoring programme which includes psychological guidance, outings, educational visits or even an occasional movie.

The children look forward to their Monday evening interactions with their Voltas mentors. Often Ms Avasia reads them stories, in both Hindi and English, and the children confidently reply to her questions in English. Later the children enjoy some snacks provided by Voltas.

### Keeping them motivated

While volunteering is ingrained in some employees, it takes motivation and dedication to sustain these projects on a long-term basis. Mr Pradhan appreciates the encouragement and support from Voltas's senior



All smiles: Akanksha kids during their Monday evening interaction at Voltas

management. "Volunteering activities have become more organised in the last 8-10 years. Ms D'Souza ensures that all activities are communicated across the company."

Ms D'Souza adds, "We monitor all volunteering activities. The hours put in by the volunteers are recorded and reflected in an online system designed by Voltas. The bosses are informed when an employee is away on a project. This ensures transparency and accountability."

Managing volunteers and keeping their morale high is a task in itself. It is a challenge to encourage more employees to give their time and energy for the various projects that Voltas supports. "I believe in the importance of nurturing; that no man is an island and that if I grow, others must develop with me. When I receive, I should be able to give. As the company community facilitator, these are qualities I would like to spread to others as well," says Ms D'Souza.

She acknowledges employee efforts through letters of appreciation on completion of a project and maintains regular contact with them. Volunteers are recognised at the annual Reward Recognition Programme at the company's Tata Business Excellence Model function. This encourages the good samaritans who selflessly spare their time to help the underprivileged.

### Impacting lives

Voltas's CS programmes are reviewed regularly to assess their impact. In 2007, Voltas commissioned Metric Consultants to do an impact analysis of their core competency CS initiative — the six-month air-conditioning and refrigeration training course at the Joseph Cardijn Technical Institute in Mumbai. Metric was also asked to report employee feedback regarding Voltas's CS programmes, and how it has affected them as well as the beneficiaries.

Stakeholders felt that the CS programmes at Voltas were worthwhile and helped improve employee morale. They also helped increase their respect for the company. The NGOs were also extremely pleased with the efforts of the volunteers and appreciative of their support. Metric's report also stated that voluntary participation and the spirit of service were visible in the efforts of all employees across the organisation.

Supported by its senior leaders, Voltas has undoubtedly succeeded in creating a large group of caring employees through its focus on well-organised programmes, open communication channels, and a high degree of transparency. ●

Jai Wadia