



Stanford eCorner

Hunting for the Right Cause

Larry Brilliant, *Google.org*

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In addition to dollars, Google.org harnesses the company's engineering talent to try to make the world fairer, more just, and safer, says the corporate non-profit's Executive Director Larry Brilliant. The company made a decision to dedicate one percent of its profits to global causes. It took 18 months to find that unique short list of problems that Google could uniquely solve, at the right scale, with sustainable results. Brilliant also explains his philosophy of Ghandi's talisman which helped him find the right focus.



Transcript

So when I got to Google, Larry and Sergei had created this organization called Google.org. They tried to do something new. Instead of making a 501(c)(3), a regular foundation that used tax advantage money, instead, they made a pledge to shareholders that they would put 1% of Google's equity, 1% of Google's profits, and a large percentage of Google's talented engineering and other staff to work for things that wouldn't benefit shareholders but would benefit the world. And that became Google.org. When I came there about two and a half years ago, the real question was, "How do you choose from all the awful things in the world, the thing that we could do uniquely," or said in another way, "How do you take the engineering and the skills, not the money, but the idea of Google, and use those resources for making the world a little bit better, a little bit fairer, a little bit more just, a little bit safer?" I think I had only been at Google for about a month when I had received almost 10,000 letters, emails, packages at my doorstep, phone calls from people who had very good ideas on how that money could be used. These were good people. They were very noble people with great projects. Sorting through them was the hardest task that we had. It took us a year and a half, which seems like an awful long time. It took us a year and a half to take those 10,000 good ideas and come up with five that we thought we could add unique benefit to.

In doing it, we first started off by saying, "What's the single most important criteria?" There's a lot of criteria. One of them is, "Can Google add anything different than the Red Cross or another organization?" Another criteria is, "Is it big enough?" Is the idea big enough? Will it scale? Will what you're doing scale? Another is, "Is it sustainable?" Just like questions you'd ask if you're looking at a business plan. But I started off with something called Gandhi's Talisman. This is an answer that Gandhi gave when he was leading the resistance movement against the British, and people would come to him and say, "Mahatma, how do I know if what I'm doing is good?" What is the summum bonum? What is the ultimate test of whether what I'm doing is good or not? He said, "I will give you a talisman. I will give you an amulet, a charm that will protect you from ever making a mistake." That talisman was this. He said, "Before you act, consider the face of the poorest and most destitute person that you have ever chance to meet. Remember that person and his life and his circumstances, and then ask yourself if that which you are about to do will benefit that person. And if it will, you're doing the right thing. You're safe. You're protected from making a mistake.

And if it won't, think again."