
U&I: Nurturing Empathy for Effectiveness

Abstract

U&I is a volunteer-driven charitable organisation based in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. It provides non-formal education to underprivileged children in 25 cities around India, through a network of over 2,300 volunteers. The case study engages with the ways in which conscious design can nurture structures, spaces and processes that enable the integration of an organisation's mission and volunteer model with the leadership's core principles of empathetic care and authentic relationships. It provides an opportunity for learners to reflect on how designing for empathy can produce tangible programmatic impact, develop in-house leadership and build a self-sustaining organisational culture and volunteer ecosystem.

Keywords: Empathy Approach; Talent Management; Volunteer Model; Organisational Effectiveness

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Great Indian dreams

The story of U&I goes back to the events in the lives of two young men, Ajit Sivaram and Satish Manchikanti, at the turn of the millennium. Satish was a young professional who had been given a job posting in the United Kingdom (UK), along with a two-bedroom apartment. For Satish, this marked the completion of the “great Indian dream” which, according to him, meant finding a way out of India successfully. While in the UK, he met his future wife, and soon, they were on a flight back to India for the wedding. Four days before the wedding, Satish picked up a call from his manager, who informed him that his work permit had not come through and that he would not be able to return to the UK. Standing at the altar, the gravity of the situation suddenly struck him: he was young, about to get married, had no job or savings and no place to live. A panic attack struck as he stood at the altar. But, as his bride-to-be entered the hall to walk down the aisle, his anxiety was soon replaced by a feeling that they could achieve anything together. A month after the wedding, Satish decided to move to Bengaluru and run a human resource (HR) and training firm. He recalls,

I took that decision to move to Bangalore [Bengaluru] to change the world single-handedly. It took me about a month to realise that I was not changing anyone’s world; I was stuck in survival mode. My life revolved around client meetings, deadlines and targets. What followed was years of frustration, guilt and shame that I was not living out my calling. Each day, I started feeling that my decision was not brave. It was simply stupid. Little did I know what God had in store for me. But if there is one thing I learnt as a recruiter, it is that the story of India is not a story of Slumdog Millionaires. It is a story of slumdogs and millionaires. (LeadTalks Conference, 2019)

For Satish, the missing link in India’s development story was education. People who came to his firm for recruitment broadly fell into two categories. On the one hand, there were people with multiple job offers and the ability to speak fluent English. On the other, there were talented young people desperate for a job but with limited or no basic English language and computer literacy skills to back them up. Delving deeper into what he saw as a schooling crisis in India, Satish discovered the stark contrast between what the formal schooling system delivered and what the job market demanded. He observed:

- The poor quality of formal learning wherein young people could not read textbooks meant for grades several levels lower than them.
- A job market where English language skills were considered essential in almost all private, well-paying jobs, but young people often lacked necessary English language skills.

- That many first-generation learners had no support systems in their families or immediate circles.

The ASER report (2020) validates some of Satish's concerns. It found that 31% of public-schooled and 17.1% of private-schooled students in Standard 8 could not read text meant for Standard 2, and that 39% of Standard 1 students could not recognise English letters. Further, 22.5% of all students did not have a parent who had studied past Standard 5.

Meanwhile, U&I co-founder Ajit Sivaram recalls,

So, while Satish was living the great Indian dream, I was living, in my head at least, what I call the great Indian Christian dream. I grew up in Delhi, a good Christian family, went to St. Stephens, did history, loved it. Once I finished college, dad said, "Go get a job, son", and I said, "Okay", put on my nice corporate clothes, my best suit and said, "Bring it on, corporate world, Ajit is here". [I] went for my first job interview, went to this room. There were around 10 to 15 other young men and women like me, all waiting for the job of their dreams. I walked in, was like, "This isn't for me", and walked out. Over the next couple of months, I had conversations with my mum and dad, saying, "I think I want to go to Bible college".

Ajit spent three years at Hillsong College, Sydney, an experience that he says greatly shaped him as a person. He came away from there wanting to work with young people, transforming their lives, which he describes as, "A passion which God laid on in my heart". For Ajit and Satish, a deeply felt religion and an individual relationship with God provides direction, centring and a particular way of looking at the unfolding journey of their lives as part of a higher, divine plan. Upon his return from Hillsong College, Ajit spent five years working as a youth and worship pastor at a local church, where he also met his wife. One day, following a couple of incidents in the church, he received an email from the senior pastor while sitting in his office. The mail informed him that he was fired. Recalling the incident, Ajit shares, "I remember shutting the laptop, getting out of the office and just walking down the streets, just crying. I had no idea what to do at that point because my great Indian Christian dream was in tatters".

Following these incidents in their lives, Ajit and Satish, or as Ajit puts it, "A jobless youth pastor and a disillusioned HR professional", got together to take stock of their situation (LeadTalks Conference, 2019). Satish had an office that was empty after 6:00 p.m. They both had a burning passion for touching and transforming the lives of underprivileged youth, and a group of friends who were willing to volunteer with them. It started at one evening per week, grew to three evenings a week and soon consumed all seven evenings. Ajit, Satish and their friends started teaching children from the local slums how to read English and use computers at their offices. Word spread, and soon different communities requested Ajit's group to come and teach in their communities. Alongside, inspired by their work, grew the number of friends and associates who were putting aside time to volunteer for the initiative. Starting from about 10, the number of volunteers grew to approximately 100. They were not even a registered organisation and were still nameless. Ajit recalls,

Someone asked us, "What are you guys actually called?" And we were like, "We have no idea" and what eventually happened was that while we were thinking of names one day, Satish walked into the office and said, "Ajit, I think we should call ourselves 'You and I', for the very simple reason that

you and I are meant to be salt and light in the world, you and I are meant to be agents of change, you and I are meant to be God’s messengers of love to the people. We may not have degrees in social work or any of these things, but you and I can be that difference”.

The opportunity had presented itself to Ajit and Satish to give form to, and put into practice, a natural inner calling to reach out to others. As the founders of “You and I” (eventually named U&I), the organisation that they set out to build intended to facilitate an experience of empathy and nurture a space in which underprivileged children could equip themselves with the skills that formal learning was unable to provide. Such a space had to be designed using principles that integrate empathy with an intentional, self-conscious way of “doing”. Ajit and Satish saw it as an opportunity to enable other volunteers—who felt the same connection with the children—to contribute their time and energy in a meaningful and effective way.

U&I

Registered in 2011, U&I started with 15 children and around ten volunteers, based out of Satish’s office space in Bengaluru. Ajit had two priorities from the start, nurturing a felt connection to the many youth suffering systemic injustices in terms of educational and job prospects from a core of empathy. It was clear to him that the organisation could not remain purely Bengaluru-centric. To help kids in orphanages and slums around the country, the organisation and its volunteer model had to be scalable. The second priority was to develop an effective working relationship with relevant government institutions, such as the Directorate of Women and Child Development (DWCD). While important to U&I’s operations (especially in the case of state-run care institutions), working with the government had to be designed as a separate endeavour from the core volunteering and tutoring programme. Besides the unique nature of collaborations that were to be built for government engagement, the programme could not have been scaled like other U&I programmes due to high agility, resource and people-based requirements.

U&I’s flagship programme, based on a volunteering model, is called “U&I Teach”. It is an afterschool learning programme where children from underprivileged backgrounds engage with courses on English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. The programme aims to develop well-rounded individuals by combining academics with career days, life skills training, activity camps and counselling.

Within two years of its inception, U&I was working with 302 children and 450 volunteers and had set up two learning centres—one each in Bengaluru and Chennai—to implement the U&I Teach programme (refer to Exhibit 6 for a video walk-through of a U&I learning centre).

Throughout U&I’s early growth and to the present day, the founders’ volunteer model has made deliberate efforts to maintain the ratio of volunteer teachers to students at least at 1:3 in order to maximise the human connection and personalised experience for its participants.

To build a certain level of quality in its classroom-level engagement with the participants and to provide formal training in classroom management practices to the volunteers, U&I partnered with Flippen Group in 2013. Flippen Group is a US-based organisation that brings together the latest practices and technologies in the fields of neuroscience, psychometrics and learning in order to consult on teacher training, organisational leadership development, culture building and organisational processes. The following year, 100% of all of U&I’s child participants passed their

English, Science, Mathematics and Social Studies exams, a feat repeated every year until 2019. The partnership with Flippen Group continues to this day, and they have conducted multiple training sessions with U&I's volunteers and leadership. It is a strategically important partnership that has shaped the way talent at U&I relates to its programme's participants. Engagement with Flippen Group has influenced the development of U&I's culture, processes and design of physical spaces (ref. Exhibit 6) from a very early and formative stage in the organisation's journey (starting just two years after founding).

U&I's spread continued over the next few years, reaching 1,000 volunteers and 21 learning centres across six cities by 2016. By 2019, this had spread to 1,670 volunteers and 49 learning centres across 20 cities. Today (December 2021), the U&I Teach programme works with 1,554 children in 56 learning centres across 25 cities¹ in India, delivered by a network of 2,381 volunteers (U&I Annual Impact Reports, 2021). The Teach programme's volunteering model design expects a nine-month commitment from a new volunteer. This programme is managed by 31 full-time staff, and the organisation currently has a full-time staff strength of 71.

U&I's other programme is called U&I Care. This programme attempts to transform institutionalised care in the country. Today, the programme works with 189 mentally challenged or special needs men and 126 abandoned toddlers and children across four state-run institutions in Bengaluru. U&I Care is run by 20 full-time staff, unlike the volunteer-driven model of U&I Teach. The programme provides medical care, physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and grooming for the residents of the care homes. U&I volunteers also spend time in the homes to provide the residents with much-needed social interaction.

From empathy to people

It is no simple feat to onboard, motivate and retain over 2,000 volunteers and sustain a volunteering model for over a decade. The very fact that the U&I Teach programme is a volunteering model means that each volunteer has made a free decision to give their time, consistently for a period of two years or more. For Ajit, empathy is a crucial part of the reasons why U&I has been able to excel at recruiting, engaging and retaining volunteers for long periods of time.

He points to three key ways in which U&I consciously seeks to build empathy across all levels of the organisation. The first is creating safe spaces for open communication. Such spaces are intentionally nurtured to foster creativity and expression among organisational talent. People are able to communicate to the organisation if they fail, make mistakes or miss deadlines, without the fear of being "screamed at". According to Ajit, work environments that do not allow people to learn from their mistakes increase stress, eventually degrading the overall performance and effectiveness of the organisation. An essential part of the leaders' job in U&I is to create and nurture these safe spaces.

¹ U&I currently has centres in Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Chennai, Cochin, Coimbatore, Darjeeling, Dehradun, Delhi, Goa, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Indore, Jaipur, Kasaragod, Kolkata, Lucknow, Madurai, Mangalore, Mysore, Mumbai, Nagpur, Patna, Puducherry, Pune, Salem, Shillong, Silchar, Srinagar, Surat, Thrissur, Tirupur, Trichy, Trivandrum, Vadodara, Vellore, Vijayawada, Vizag.

The second aspect of leadership practice at U&I is regular and in-depth check-ins with all members to know the pulse of all the teams. Finally, Ajit points to the importance of nurturing relationships with teams beyond just work,

We try to connect with the person beyond what they can offer to the organisation, actually care for the person authentically...and this is the advantage of small organisations to the point where some of the relationships people have built-in U&I have lasted years. You know a team has finally made it in life when they go on vacation together because the one time they have off, they're still choosing to spend time with each other. (Change+, 2021)

From people to talent

Talent management at U&I goes far beyond the standard Human Resources Management (HRM) function that nearly all organisations have. The practice involves combining a few different approaches related to volunteers and full-time staff. At the core of this talent management practice is an attempt to provide an overall structure, which builds on the foundation of empathetic care and authentic relationships. The design of this structure aims to empower, scaffold and support the talent to innovate and change things as they deem fit.

Across all levels of talent—the staff, volunteer leaders and volunteers—a great deal of flexibility is nurtured to enable talent to operate effectively within the structure. This conscious decision to not follow a “cookie-cutter” approach immensely helped U&I when the organisation started to scale to different cities. While the ethos is kept consistent across locations, there are significant differences in the way individual city teams are run. Within this overall scaffolding, it is not sufficient for U&I to simply state that volunteers and staff are empowered to make changes as they see fit. The organisation integrates this vision of individual empowerment through a range of in-house leadership development programmes so that their talent can use their freedom to its full potential.

Ajit and Satish, alongside their commitment to U&I, continue to run their HR Training and Coaching consultancy: Change+. Satish ran this HR firm while using the office space in the after-hours to tutor disadvantaged children in U&I's early days. Change+ includes multiple Fortune 500 companies and some of the most well-known corporations in India on its client list. For Ajit, the Change+ venture has valuable synergy with learning and development (L&D) at U&I. Good practices and learnings gleaned from working with their clients are easily adapted and transferred to the L&D programmes at U&I.

Volunteer leadership

The organisation invests heavily in its volunteer leaders. A volunteer leader is someone who has volunteered with U&I for over a year and subsequently moves on to managing other volunteers. U&I has around 350 volunteer leaders at present. These volunteer leaders are inspired to embody the organisation's values and principles of leading without authority and of using empathetic and relational leadership styles.

Volunteer leaders are considered one of the organisation's "80-20s"², which means they are a group where investments can generate high-value impact. A well-trained group of volunteer leaders can take on a wide variety of roles across the organisation, including recruitment, training, and fundraising, among other roles. These individuals, who have already been through the volunteer journey for a year, possess a deep understanding of what U&I stands for and how it works. Investing in this group is thus central to U&I's talent management strategy. This investment takes the form of nurturing the talent through three leadership conferences and multiple smaller sessions and learning events throughout the year (refer to Exhibit 3 for a summary of the various programmes incubated for the leadership development, training and integration of volunteers with U&I's culture).

The leadership conferences are systematically curated, immersive experiences where volunteer leaders from all the cities are flown to Bengaluru for two days, and taught how to lead, organise and run events using key principles of servant leadership³. The event often includes outdoor team-building activities. The new batch of leaders for the upcoming year, identified in the interview processes at U&I's locations throughout the year, are flown to Bengaluru for the year's third (out of three total) conference. The conference is run for this new batch of leaders by the previous batch who have already experienced the training and conferences earlier in the year.

The volunteer leader group also serves as the best potential talent pool for hiring full-time talent at U&I. Ajit, while reflecting on the volunteer leader talent pool, shares,

That's something I don't think we anticipated back in the day, that the best place to hire for us is U&I. Because you already understand the values, it's so much easier when you actually come to work. We build so much relational capacity. Imagine having a relationship with someone for three years and then hiring them. It's such a known quantity for us and a known entity for us. The interview is so much easier. We can have an honest conversation. I've known you (the volunteer leaders) for three years, four years, whatever it is. So, for us in the hiring ecosystem, that is a win.

Volunteer leaders are also supported through structured investments in mentorship within the organisation. The full-time managers at U&I are mentors to the organisation's 350-strong volunteer leadership. This role is highly involved and is taken very seriously. Managers travel to the cities where the volunteers work, check in regularly, work with them and "cast vision" with them. Vision casting refers to the regular sharing of organisational vision with all personnel. In an organisation spread across multiple cities, regular vision casting by leadership helps volunteers understand why they do what they do, align with the organisational vision and tie back every task to the vision, no matter how insignificant.

The structure for manager mentorship is designed to enable U&I's core space of empathy. U&I uses the "two-pizza" rule to dictate the size of mentorship teams: no team should be so large that two pizzas cannot feed them. Therefore, most teams have seven members or fewer, and larger

² The 80-20 principle is an economic principle that says that 80% of all consequences (outcomes) are achieved through 20% of the causes (inputs). Also known as the "law of the vital few".

³ Servant leadership is a philosophy and style of leadership for contexts where the leader's main goal is to serve a community or a group of people. This is as opposed to traditional leadership styles in organisations where the leader's main focus is ensuring the organisation's continued performance.

teams are highly exceptional. Small team sizes encourage a sense of genuine care for team members. The responsibility to care for team members as well as to perform together lies within the teams. Ajit notes that,

We found that people sign up for this because they want to do it, right? Nobody is forcing them to do it. Very few, I mean even the ones who say, “I want this on my resume, because I’m going to apply for my Master’s”, they still are motivated to do it. The key is, how do I keep you motivated? I keep you motivated by two things. So one is, your job role needs to be clear. Set expectations, get expectations. Say, “Boss, this is what I want from you”. NGOs especially struggle with volunteers because they do not know what to do with them. [Volunteers] come, and the [NGOs] will say, “Okay, why don’t you try this, why don’t you try that?” There’s no system for them to get plugged in. So here, it’s plug-and-play. Here’s your lesson plan. Go prepare your lesson, come, teach. After you teach, you actually sit with the other ten teachers and debrief every single class. There is a lot of peer pressure because everyone is saying, “Boss, I did this right, I did this in my class, my class didn’t go well”, whatever it is...so, because we provide a strong ecosystem from an execution perspective, your performance is taken care of.

The second side is, how do I [a volunteer] survive that motivation [drop]? When my fifth class comes in, “I had this grand expectation of what teaching a child would be, but my child doesn’t seem to be learning anything”. So that comes down to the softer skills of, as a manager, mentoring them, actually finding out what’s happening. So, we’ve built learning circles where I’m part of a learning circle, and I have one person leading. If I don’t show up for a week, someone actually texts me and cares about me. It’s not just come, show, teach, go. And we talk about that from day one; as a leader, your responsibility is to care for your team, but also make sure they perform.

Nurturing communities of change

Groups of volunteers and volunteer leaders at U&I are considered communities in their own right. By virtue of having worked with U&I for a year or more, the community of volunteer leaders is able to implicitly nurture the ways of “being”, “thinking”, “doing”, and other intangible aspects that characterise the U&I experience. To build and maintain the community culture at U&I, the experience of the volunteer leaders is key, as they are the ones who pass the cultural experience onwards to the next batch. It is much easier for U&I to recruit a volunteer than to nurture, motivate and retain a leader. Thus, the retention rate of volunteer leaders is critical. For example, if enough volunteers stay longer than one year and become leaders for the next year, then that year’s recruitment cycle is “safe”, as those leaders are now ready to handle the next recruitment cycle themselves in their localities. The key for U&I is to identify the critical threshold of retention and promote structures and spaces to motivate and retain this critical mass. In turn, this builds a self-sustaining volunteer ecosystem, and thus culture, within the organisation.

Each year, the organisation plans to recruit up to 50% of the size of its volunteer group in terms of new intake, to cover for the attrition which is an inevitable component of a volunteering model. U&I receives about 15,000 applications for volunteering every year. Of these 15,000 applications, between 1,000 to 1,500 are accepted as new volunteers every year as teachers for the U&I Teach programme. Thus, on average, U&I's volunteering model, within ten years of its launch, is consistently able to attract between 10 to 15 applications for each vacant volunteering position.

Currently, trends at U&I indicate that around 50% of their yearly recruits volunteer for one year and then leave the organisation. 20% to 30% of their volunteer intake stay for between two to three years, volunteering in their first year and becoming volunteer leaders in years two and three. 5% of their volunteers go through both the volunteer and leader cycles and join U&I as full-time staff.

Designing to nurture the “right” fit

The core tenets of culture at U&I are encouragement, a growth focus (in terms of nurturing and unfolding the full potential of teams and people) and balancing the seriousness of work in the space with opportunities to enjoy the journey and build authentic relationships.

Ajit recounts that a deliberate, conscious design brings these tenets alive in practice. Established rituals and rhythms bring together the founding vision of culture and practices to craft a unique lived experience for talent at U&I. Explicitly identified behaviours are organically integrated into a “way of being” through weekly or daily rhythms and rituals across all levels of the organisation (volunteer, leader, staff and centre). For instance, the five-step ritual⁴ designed in collaboration with Flippen Group, is an integral part of U&I's ethos for lessons with children. These five steps are also reflected in the way the full-time staff interact with each other, and in spaces of structured interactions, such as staff meetings. Despite being ten years old, the organisation maintains a start-up mentality when it comes to openness in giving and receiving feedback. The feedback process is done with a willingness to pivot and discard things that are not working.

Ajit distinguishes between rituals, rhythms and traditions. At U&I, the culture must adapt and evolve to stay relevant. Rituals and rhythms must be created and owned by the most current generation at U&I, not simply be a “handed-down list of ways to behave”, which Ajit calls tradition. Every two to three years, the organisation redoes all its rhythms, rituals and social contracts with one another, refreshing and recreating to give direct ownership of organisational culture for a particular time to the generation of talent working with U&I at that time.

Social contracts are established in every team as agreements on how to treat each other and address four main questions: How do I want to be treated? How do I want to treat others? How do I want my boss to treat me? How do I want to act in a conflict? The completed contract represents a team-level cultural aspiration that each team works towards together. Revisiting and renewing these contracts at regular intervals strengthens the integration of the individual with their team and with the organisation's co-created vision of culture.

⁴ The “five-step ritual” involves greeting every child when they enter the class; starting on a positive note or a “launch story”—a story intended to inspire the children; putting in place a social contract with each class; conducting affirmations; and ending all stories and classes on a positive note.

When it comes to full-time staff, the pressure to find the right talent and the right culture fit is far more intense than with a volunteer. The recruitment process for full-time staff at U&I is elaborate and involves multiple rounds of interviews assessing skill sets, commitment and culture fit. Once the candidate has cleared all the requirements, interviews are held with the CEO and the founders. According to Ajit, over the years, U&I has learnt that the price of a bad staff hire is much higher than that of a bad volunteer. He points out that,

The price of hiring a bad volunteer [is] they won't pick up your call for two weeks. That's okay, you've still got bench strength there. But [for] staff, the price is much higher. Also, the negative of being a loving, caring, very friendly sort of organisation is that firing is tough. You have built all this relational capacity; everyone is tied to each other, so then firing also takes us a little longer, and eventually, the team gets affected.

At the end of the recruitment process, all the staff at their respective locations come together to take the final call on each new hire.

In terms of the structure for full-time staff, the grid used by U&I to look for value alignment in a new hire is much larger and more in-depth than the one used for volunteers. The grid consists of 16 separate parameters (refer to Exhibit 1 of this case). From the assessment of the application forms, right through every round of interviews, until the final one with Ajit or Satish, one or more of the 16 parameters are tested.

The founding leadership of U&I consciously works towards building a shared understanding of a good culture fit. Cognizant of the problem of implicit cultures that affect many founder-led social purpose organisations—especially when the founder exits—Ajit designed a tool for all teams at U&I to address the question “What do we see as a culture fit”? Exhibit 1 of this case shares the tool and explains how it is used in the organisation. The tool is used at U&I during the interview process and at all appraisals and check-ins. It is designed for a 360-degree view, consisting of components for self-assessment, teammate assessment and manager assessment. As explained in Exhibit 1, performance appraisal takes place along the lines of how well an individual is integrated with the organisation and its culture, across various levels: the relationships built with the self; relationships built with one's team and other individuals in the organisation; alignment with key professional parameters and values that the organisation wants to see in all its employees, regardless of job role; and achievement of targets specific to one's job role.

At U&I, performance is decoupled from compensation. Compensation is subject to a biannual hike at a flat rate for the entire organisation. This is to allow U&I to nurture the integration of its employees with the organisation and appraise performance independently of their employees' financial and psychological security. Exhibit 2, “The Manager's Mountain”, presents a framework developed by U&I to enable all of its team managers to tie together organisational culture and team performance. It provides a growth path for new managers to bring the people and performance-centric aspects of their job up to the standard expected by the organisation.

The way ahead

Two years ago, Satish and I, we were nearing this 10-year mark. So, we sort of started taking stock of what it is that we've done in the last 10 years, and what it is that we want to do going forward. One thing we realised was that

everyone came to us not for education, not for working with special needs kids or with the government, they came to us asking how we were able to leverage so many volunteers. And that was something that we were able to do well. Recruit volunteers, train them, give them a great experience and motivate them to continue contributing. And, what we found is a lot of our volunteers eventually became leaders at U&I and also came to work at U&I. I think we've hired 40 people since March 2020 and I'm sure at least half of them would be our volunteers who became leaders and have now joined the social sector as professionals.

So that's something our next 10 years wants to become. We want to really focus on volunteering. Right now, we have a really good nine-month volunteering programme. But what if we could do one-day volunteering? What if we could do two-month volunteering, one-month volunteering? So, finding different projects which cater to different people, that is the next season [milestone] which we want to do. (Ajit Sivaram)

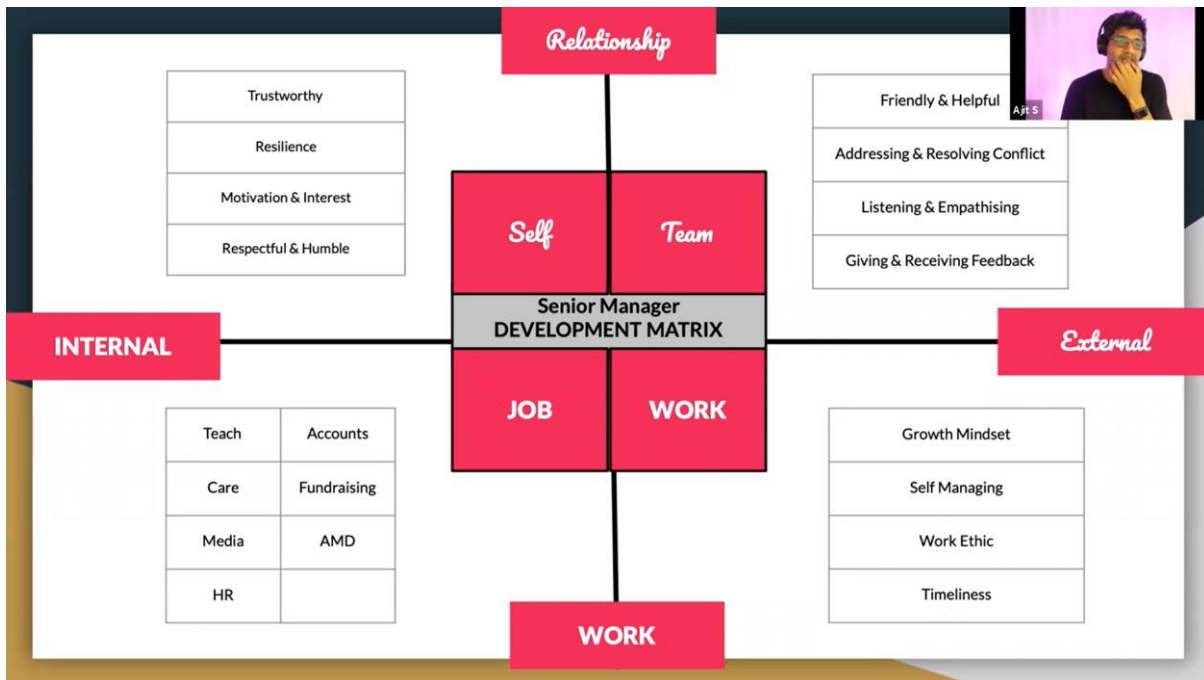
At present, U&I has successfully managed to reach its significant spread, sustaining thousands of volunteers and child participants across 25 cities. The growing prominence of the organisation and its evolving financial portfolio (Exhibit 5) point to the possibility of a model that promises to define a tangible form for abstract universal values, with an aspiration to accomplish a robust causal relationship between empathy and effectiveness for scale. The aspired result of this conscious design is an organisation that keeps its original sentiment alive, manifests empathy across multiple levels and generates tangible impact and results.

U&I's model has demonstrated the ability to consistently attract value-aligned volunteers in large numbers and nurture self-sustaining volunteer ecosystems that embody universal values. For Satish and Ajit, a question that remains is: what is the untapped potential of U&I's empathy-driven model in building communities of change for impact at scale? How can the value of such a model to society be appraised?

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: U&I's Skill Development Matrix

Figure 1: U&I's Skill Development Matrix



Source: Interview with Ajit Sivaram (2021)

Figure 1 above presents a skill development matrix used for the full-time staff at U&I. This matrix was conceptualised and designed to consider the organisation's priorities in terms of skill sets, relationships and cultural fit. It is used at all check-ins and reviews and during interview rounds for full-time staff. This matrix aims to move the responsibility of developing and maintaining organisational culture—both relational and functional—away from just the founders, nurturing ownership across all levels of the organisation.

The Y-axis (vertical) represents the relational side of a U&I job role (relationship) and the functional side (work); the X-axis (horizontal) represents the characteristics of the individual and the interactions they have during their time at U&I. Such interactions can be internal (relating to oneself) or external (relating to others in the organisation).

The top-left quadrant of the figure represents the internal relationship with the self. This quadrant considers the kind of internal dialogue that a person has on how they see themselves, whether they trust themselves, whether they are self-critical, their levels of resilience and their motivations and interests to work in a space like U&I.

The top-right quadrant represents the relationships that one has with the team. The “team” could be anyone that the person comes in contact with, be it their immediate team members, peers,

managers or people that report to them. Across the four parameters in the top-right quadrant, a further, more exhaustive list of questions (not included in this case study) is used at U&I to delve deeper into the drivers of one's relationships with the other. Ajit notes that due to the friendly culture at U&I, addressing and resolving conflict (top-right quadrant) often tends to become an area that doesn't get talked about as much as it may need to. The framework brings these hidden conflicts out and makes them explicit, challenging the individual, but from a space of encouragement.

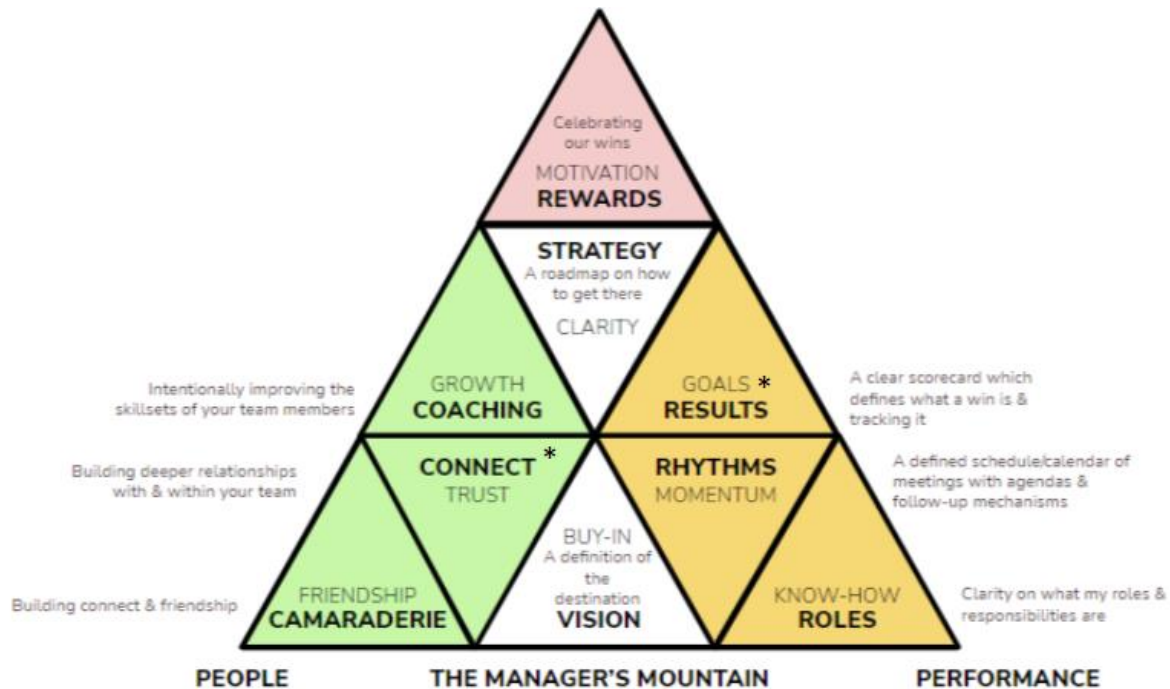
The bottom-left quadrant relates to the individual's actual job role. In the matrix above, this quadrant is populated with the seven major departments at U&I. For the review processes, each department provides the skill sets critical to them, thus identifying key parameters on which they want their team members to be assessed. Therefore, a total of seven different lists can be plugged into the matrix in this quadrant, depending on the individual's job role. The list that directly relates to a particular individual's job role is plugged into this quadrant during a review.

The bottom-right quadrant includes professional parameters that U&I wants all of its staff, regardless of their job profiles, to be good at: are they developing and growing in their roles? Are they self-managing? What is their work ethic like? How timely and punctual are they?

Based on these assessments, right from the start of a new relationship, an individual team manager can decide whether a new recruit will fit with the organisation's culture and their team's function. Most of the time, the CEO (Ajit or Satish) confirms the manager's choice of the recruit based on their assessment using this framework, with no further questions asked. Thus, a structure is provided, and the management is empowered to make their own calls within this structure based on the specific needs of their teams.

Exhibit 2: The Manager's Mountain

Figure 2: The Manager's Mountain



Source: Interview with Ajit Sivaram (2021)

The “Manager's Mountain” is a framework created to help employees who have been promoted to managerial positions. It equips new managers with an understanding of their primary responsibilities, based on nine areas of expectation identified by the organisation’s leadership. It builds on U&I's approach of taking intangible but important parameters and bringing them out in an explicit structure to provide staff with clarity and focus when it comes to these hard-to-define areas.

A manager's role usually operates in the tension that exists between people-related factors and performance against organisational or team targets. This framework is intended to provide them with a basis for thriving in this tension, with the idea that if this space is understood, a lot of good work can come out of this tension.

The framework begins from the left-hand side with the “People” pole, the cornerstone of which is “Camaraderie”. This is the first thing a manager must consider when taking over a new team. According to Ajit, building camaraderie and relaxing the space to enable a “bit of banter” and “trash talk” is seen as the first step in building long-term relationships within a team. Following sequentially from camaraderie, the next green triangles are “Connect” and “Coaching”. The former refers to strengthening relationships beyond camaraderie, to a place of trust, both personally and professionally. “Coaching” is the long-term evolution of the “Connect” element, where the team trusts the manager enough to be coached by them. U&I wants their managers to ultimately grow to

the level of a “Coach” in the teams they manage, a sign that their ability to manage the people's side of the job is at the expected level.

On the right side of the figure is the pole of “Performance”, which details the sequential steps a manager follows in unfolding the team's ultimate performance. It starts with a clear understanding of the job “Roles” within a team and how the manager relates to each one of those roles. “Rhythms”, the next stage, addresses the working culture with the team. In collaboration with the team, the manager sets up a pattern of calls, deadlines and check-ins, giving each team a unique rhythm of how work gets done. The final stage, “Results”, requires that managers have a clear understanding of how the organisation and the team define good results and that they have a tracking mechanism to monitor progress against these targets.

In the middle of the triangle is the organisation's “Vision”. As discussed in the main text of the case study, the practice of vision casting is an important part of a manager's job at U&I: reminding employees why they are doing what they are doing, creating a vision for the team and generating buy-in from the team to work towards this vision. Thus, the manager aims to tie the demands and tasks of the “People” and “Performance” poles to the organisation's wider vision.

Complementary to the “Vision” element is “Strategy”. This is generally an area in which new managers struggle due to the technical understanding required to develop and execute a strategy. U&I's learning and development programmes build the managers' ability to develop strategies and roadmaps to obtain their OKRs (Objective-linked Key Result areas).

Finally, the “Reward” element is where the manager decides how their team will be rewarded for their work. The manager creates a system for constant recognition of good work and motivation for future results.

Within the Manager's Mountain, Ajit specifically emphasises the elements of “Connect” on the people side, and “Results” on the side of performance (marked with asterisks) to indicate that of the nine areas, these two are non-negotiable in a manager's role at U&I. Building authentic connections between people and producing good results are two things that every leader or manager in the organisation must ensure.

Exhibit 3: Volunteer training programmes at U&I

The main text of the case study discusses the three annual leadership conferences which are the pillars of U&I’s investment in volunteer training and leadership development. The figure below provides an overview of the other smaller events held over the year for the same purpose.

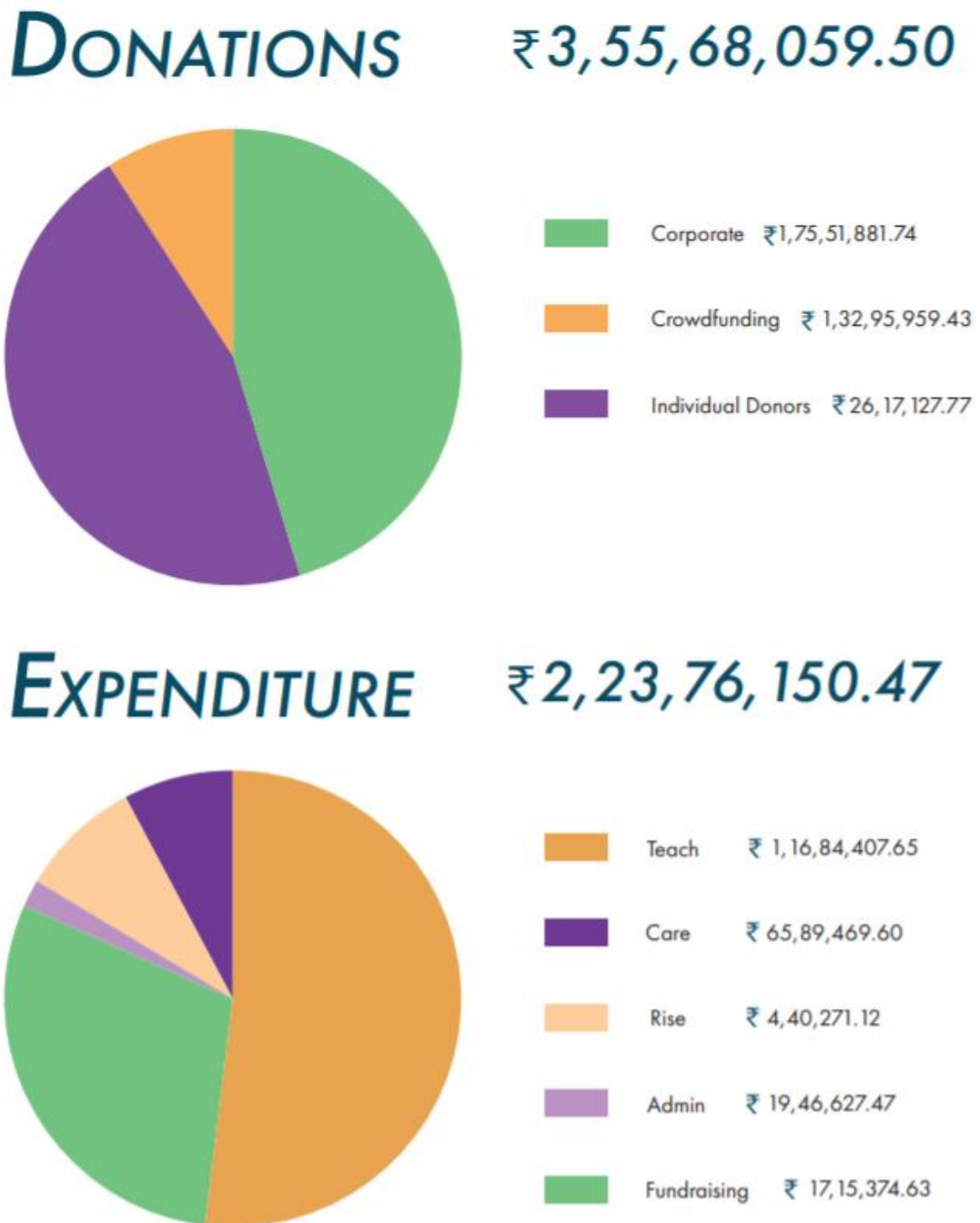
Figure 3: Volunteer training programmes at U&I



Source: U&I Annual Report, 2020

Exhibit 4: Sources of funding and expenditures

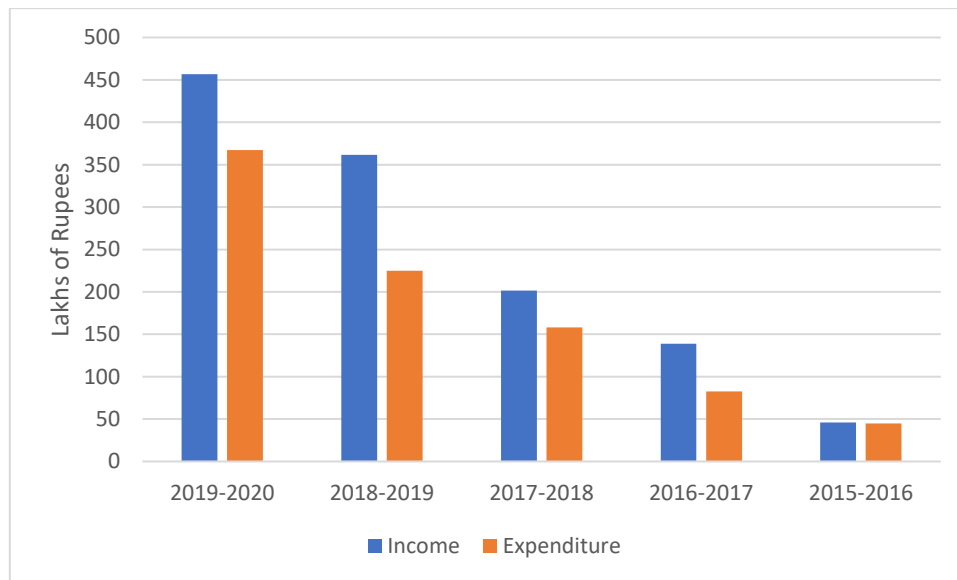
Figure 4: U&I's sources of funding and expenditure summary (2018-2019)



Source: U&I Impact Report (2018-2019)

Exhibit 5: Financial status of U&I

Figure 5: U&I's financial results (2015 – 2020)



Source: U&I Audited Financial Statements, 2015-2020

Exhibit 6: Video tour of the U&I learning centre

The link below showcases a video tour of a U&I learning centre and training hub, conducted by Ajit Sivaram.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNMnjR2dLk&t=438s&ab_channel=AjitSivaram

Video Transcript

Ajit: Okay, hi, so I quickly want to take you through a quick tour of U&I's new learning centre and training hub. So, here's our front door, it says, "Hello," it greets you, like all good things at U&I, a good Flippen greeting. We've got some lovely signs on the steps that tell you "Through these doors walk the greatest change makers that ever lived." We've got a fun doorbell sign, and let me quickly take you in. For many years people asked us what the vision of U&I was, and we never really told many people. So, we decided to put it right out in front. Our vision is building communities of change. Whether it's college students, or like Divya who was one of our first volunteers, Suchi who was our first staff member, and Ranjat who was one of the first kids we ever worked with, we are really passionate about building communities of change. We've got a front foyer-ish-type area, we've got a space where people can wait, chit-chat, all those other lovely things, and all of this centre was really made possible by Ranjana who sort of donated and dedicated this centre to her brother Sandeep, my cousin, who tragically passed away in the early 90's. So, this centre is dedicated to the memory of Sandeep Rao, and we're really, really grateful to Ranjana for making this happen. It's absolutely incredible, it's beyond our wildest dreams, and we're really grateful and I think just having a centre dedicated to Sandeep really is something special for us as a family also; and also, just the fact that kids get to learn and live and carry on his legacy is a beautiful thing.

Let me quickly take you around the place. As you can see, as you saw, our front door said, "Hello," right, so if you look down the corridor here, we've got three doors, and all three doors say something. Okay, I'm going to try and capture this on camera for you if we can. This one says, "Brave," this one over here says, "Curious": not sure how much of that you can see, and this one over here says, "Minds." So, it all forms a sentence. It says: "Hello, brave curious minds," which is what we're telling our kids, right? Hello, brave curious minds, be curious, have a good mind, all of those things, it's exciting! All of these, the entire ground floor is a learning centre. You've got space for kids to come and learn and space for training and office stuff, it's beautiful. Let me quickly take you through these rooms.

Here, in "Brave", it's a great classroom, it's a lot of space for kids to have a class, or people to do work, or pretend to do work. And then over on this side, you've got a beautiful sign for what was U&I's tagline all the time. It was "Be the change," and it is "Be the change," [sic] and it is who we are. So let me quickly take you to the next room, to the learning centre, "Minds," or "Curious," sorry. Let's head on to "Curious."

This is where all the learning happens, but before I take you there let me show you a bit of the foyer. This waiting area is sort of, this is probably what, a huge, a huge part of what we did with, of why we do what we do. Suchi, actually the first person who worked with U&I, wrote this and designed it, and it's absolutely spectacular. And essentially it says why we do what we do. We do it essentially because we believe in the investment that these kids should have in their lives, and deserve to have, and that's the main reason why we do it.

One of the biggest problems with our old office was the loos, they were tiny, they were suffocating, and so we want to show you what a good loo this is. These new loos are fancy and done up, they're well lit, they've got some cool signage here, the toilet paper roll says "That's how I roll," and the toilet actually says, "Put a lid on it," witty and funny and all those things and okay and finally you "Wash away your worries" at the tap.

Okay, moving right along, I'm sure the toilet is the most exciting thing you've seen all day.

Here you've got the values of U&I. We are insanely passionate, we live to impact people, and we always, always, always have fun, enjoy the journey, and really, know that it's a lot about the journey, not just about the destination. Let's quickly take you to "Curious" and let you have a quick look at what's happening in Curious. This is our main learning centre and training hub, you've got, people can learn and really absorb, and all those wonderful things. This is where the kids will come and learn. We've got a whiteboard, a projector, all of those lovely things. Back here, this actually is a blackboard, so if kids come, they can write on it, and all those absolutely lovely things. Like all good things, we've got a great quote here that says, "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel," by the one and only Socrates.

Moving right along guys, so we've done Brave, we've done, Curious, going to quickly take you to, Minds. Here we've got people doing actual work.

Satish: Hi, Anjana.

Ajit: That's Satish, that's Nitya: Nitya handles all our media, made this room look pretty also. This room is where there's another classroom, and also where all the volunteer interviews happen. We do about 400-500 volunteer interviews every year here. So, "Making today matter" is all about the volunteer actually making today matter, and the staff who comes in for a job, you know, really making today matter. Yeah, that's another classroom, so we've got a small classroom, a big classroom and the big learning centre. Let me take you downstairs to the basement.

This building is about 30 years old, and it used to be a bank back in the day, the good old days, so the basement actually used to be where the lockers were. We've kept a small signage as an ode to the basement. It says, "State Bank of Travancore." The basement, because it used to be a locker, doesn't have any ventilation, so it's a great place to keep a fun games area. So, people can have fun, enjoy themselves, because after ten minutes you start getting claustrophobic, and you eventually faint.

Player on left: That's true. Think we need air.

Ajit: This also comes with a big storage area, we've got incredible, finally got storage. These are all actually our old workstations which we, which the carpenters beautifully converted into great storage. All this used to fit in our old office kitchen, so now actually people know what's there and can use it. Beautiful. Okay, moving back up, these are some of the signage from our old office. Those of you who've ever been there you'd recognise some of these beautiful sayings. We thought we'd keep a bit of it just to sort of pay ode to the old office.

Like all spaces, we've got signage everywhere. If there's space, we put some signage up. This one basically tells people that "Hey, adventure is up there," as much fun as carroms or board games you want to play down here, the adventure is up there, where we're heading right now. Okay, moving right along. Up these steps, we got the signage from Pinterest, I'll be completely honest, we

put some lovely sayings of who we really are: “We chase dreams, we give hugs, we share laughter, we make a lot of mistakes, we say sorry, we forgive, we show respect, and finally, we love.” So, that was the ground floor of the learning centre, up here is the workspace for the staff, and so quickly I want to take you to some of the other rooms, and then we get to the workspace, okay?

We’ve got a beautiful pantry kitchen, with always some great signage: “What’s shakin’”; “be grateful.” We get fruit twice a day, it’s an amazing thing and yeah, more loos. We obviously take our toilets very seriously, if you know me. The toilet is just about a sacred place. We’ve got some great signage here which I think you should see, fairly funny things. Nice, okay, let’s go man. The next room is both a TT (table tennis) room and a lunch room: it says “Lettuce celebrate.” And so you can play TT, like these, I don’t know how they’re in every single room that we get to but yeah, they’re magically transported to every room. People play TT or sit down and have lunch, it’s where we have “Good vibes only,” only positive vibes. Okay, moving right along. That’s our microwave guys, in case you were wondering. Okay, let me show you the workspace, but before that, we thought, to be a cool office you must have a bean bag in, right? And this is that bean bag space. They’re sharing a notebook which is great. This is the grand workspace, do you want to sort of go that way, and show us, yes, which has a great sign for people that every day, “Work is love made visible.” It’s beautiful, it’s heart touching, and we love staring at it for countless hours every day.

The old office came to a point where there was no place for people to sit, we were literally sitting on each other’s laps without becoming awkward over here. But now, there’s space for a whole bunch of people, we’ve got about ten interns in the office along with the staff, and nobody’s sitting on any laps. Look around the office, and yeah, we put up some posters, signage, awards that we’ve won, all of that stuff. So yes, this is where all the magic happens, and this is where the entire workspace is.

Let me quickly show you the last thing here. There’s no good NGO office in India or charity office where you can’t have the map of India, so we said we must have the map of India, but more than that, U&I is now in ten cities, we’ve got 21 centres, and it’s incredible how quickly and fast they are growing. What we are going to do is we’re going to get selfies from every city and put them up on this lovely string, show and have a place to say that “This is one large community, this is one large family, making change wherever they are, in whatever way they can.”

Thank you for supporting U&I, you’re being a huge part of this, we love you guys, and we are so, so grateful to have this place, and I want to thank you, Ranjana again for making this possible. We love you. Bye!

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