

“Being successful, whether it's in Cambodia or Laos or Kenya, is a process of a shared negotiation of meaning.”

A Conversation with Michael Chertok, Co-founder

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by introducing yourself and your role in DDD [Digital Divide Data]? When you describe DDD to someone that you meet at a party or who's not part of the space, how do you describe it?

Michael Chertok: My name is Michael Chertok, and I'm a former board member of DDD. If asked, I would say DDD is a stepping stone for young people in developing countries to become professionals with sustainable livelihoods.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How have you achieved that over the past 25 years, especially in regard to the rapidly changing tech space and the dramatic political changes in the countries you work in?

Michael Chertok: When we started DDD, we talked a lot about how many philanthropic projects got funded. They might last for three or four years, and then the funding would go away, and the projects would go away. We didn't want to do that.

In part, we established the model because the people we worked with in Cambodia said what would help them most is for us to find them work that would bring them income from outside the country. We were very intentional about starting a business model that would enable the organization to sustain over time. It has sustained for over 25 years, so we're celebrating.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You're known as one of the best fundraisers in the field. How have you drawn funders into this work, and how has that been different than other fundraising projects?

Michael Chertok: I think the secret to any kind of fundraising is being passionate and caring deeply about the cause for which you're fundraising. You also have to have the data, and you have to be able to make a clear case. That's at the root of good

fundraising. Early on, as DDD started, I had the opportunity to live and work in Cambodia. I lived in the office and was with the people who were working there every day. Talking with people and understanding the challenges that they were up against every day transformed me. I saw what DDD did for people and the difference that it made. I became such a believer in this work that fundraising came naturally.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say you saw what DDD did for people, what did you see that resonated with you?

Michael Chertok: What resonated the most for me was that when young people came to start working at DDD, they brought with them an attitude about life that was fatalistic, that whatever was meant for them was all they were going to experience. They didn't have a sense of self-efficacy or self-control in their lives.

Over the period of two, three, or four years working at DDD, I saw that they started to change their perception of themselves and realize that they could set a direction in their lives. They could decide what they wanted for themselves, whether they wanted to work in sales, be a teacher, be involved in marketing, or be a technology professional.

Then, they got to learn the necessary skills to do it. They got the education they wanted, they grew in the ways they wanted, and they created the life that they wanted. It was an enormous shift in the way people saw themselves.

DDD has the data to show that the people we work with have been able to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves, and that's the goal that we set. More than that, we help create a psychological shift that helps people feel like the driving force in their own lives.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the three biggest differences you would say between now and when you first started at DDD?

Michael Chertok: Jeremy came up with the idea, and soon after, I joined him. This was early, before we even opened the offices. I was working for a foundation at that time called Global Catalyst Foundation, and we were the first funder. I wasn't there in Phnom Penh on day one, but I was involved right from the beginning.

I would say the biggest shift has probably been in Phnom Penh and in Cambodia as a whole. The economic development that's happened in Cambodia over the last 25 years is quite remarkable. There are many more opportunities for young people there now than when we started.

In Laos, I would say that change is less pronounced. Laos has not developed in the same way. There's some development in Vientiane, where we work, but not a lot. There has definitely been development in Nairobi. We've been there for a short amount of time, but even in the years that we've been there, we've seen changes in Nairobi.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What about the changes in the program? How do you see the political changes reflected in the people who are joining the program?

Michael Chertok: At the beginning, when we were working in Phnom Penh and Vientiane, many of the young people came to us from very poor families, often from rural areas. They came to the city for opportunities, and they started to work for us.

Now, the young people who come to us are not always from the poorest families. Some who are joining our school-to-work program have already started their education. We're a place where they can work and continue to learn, and we support them on that journey. We're beginning to see that the economic gains and development in those countries have meant a different starting point for many of the people we hire.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about the next 25 years, what do you feel like DDD could improve on?

Michael Chertok: From the beginning, we've wanted to have both a successful impact and be a profitable business. It's taken us about 23 years to become profitable as a business, but we've finally reached that point. It's a small profit, but it's a turning point for us as an organization. We're more focused on our business now than we've ever been before.

Right now, we're at about \$10 million in revenue. We've set a goal to reach \$20 million in revenue, which means that we're going to be able to employ a lot more young people. It would be very exciting if we were able to grow to that level. With greater profitability, we'll potentially be able to put some of those profits back into the kind of impact that we have as an organization.

I would say the second thing is that in addition to having an impact by directly hiring young people into our business, we're starting some other impact programs. We've started a program in Cambodia called Career Connect, and we're trying to launch that program both in Laos and Nairobi. Then, instead of impacting 300 or 400 people a year by hiring them into our business, we may be able to impact a few thousand people each year through additional impact programs.

It's a different way of creating impact. We bring the structure and training that we have in our business to that impact program, and in a relatively short amount of time, we're able to help young people on their paths find good jobs and sustainable livelihoods.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you balance the business side with the social impact side, or how do you describe the business side to people?

Michael Chertok: Our business is doing a whole set of technology services for our clients. I mentioned earlier that from the beginning, we wanted this work to be sustainable. The business enables us to achieve that sustainability. We are only as strong as we are successful as a business, and a large part of success is performing services that meet the expectations of our clients. If we're able to do that, then we're

able to hire young people in the countries where we work, we're able to give them opportunities to both work and learn, and we're able to help them advance to the next level.

One of the most fundamental pieces of the work that we do at DDD is giving young people a chance for an applied experience in the work field, particularly working with state-of-the-art technology. This is remarkable in places where people's education, and particularly higher education, is very theoretical. Traditionally, in these places, people will go to university and get theoretical knowledge in the field that they're interested in. At DDD, they get the experience of working with others and putting that knowledge into work that achieves a result. They learn how to report to a manager, how to ask questions if something's wrong, and how to problem-solve. That kind of experience is so important in their development as professionals who can go on to other jobs and be successful.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Kenya is saturated with social impact work, but you see less of it in Cambodia, even though there's as much, if not more, of a need there. What would your advice be to someone who was trying to set up work like this in Cambodia or Laos?

Michael Chertok: While I agree there's more of this in Kenya, there is a fair amount of social enterprise in Cambodia. There's very little in Laos. When we started, we had a vision, and we just pursued it. Interestingly, we started it as a nonprofit model. We were one of the first to do this kind of work. There weren't other legal forms at that time to allow us to start and run a social enterprise this way. Now, those other legal forms exist for starting and running social enterprises.

For us, it's been a strong piece to help with our fundraising and to bind us together to do this under the auspices of a US-based 501(c)(3), but it's not the only way to do it. There are people who've done it with US businesses, as well as with businesses that are incorporated in other countries. We are now a US business that owns corporate entities in other countries, and that's worked for us, but it's not the only way to do it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is there any other advice you have for people working in that region specifically?

Michael Chertok: One of the key things that we've needed to learn over time is that while it's important for us to bring in our ideas about business, our knowledge about technology, and our exposure to innovation, it's equally important to listen to people in the country about how things work there, about how we can motivate people, and about how we can run a successful business there. Being successful, whether it's in Cambodia or Laos or Kenya, is a process of a shared negotiation of meaning, of goals, and of vision, and being able to truly work together.

It's been so important from the beginning to work with our local managers, and to have representatives from different countries on our board of directors so that knowledge and understanding of those countries is represented on our board. The ability to have those

conversations, to listen to each other, and to find a way to work together is crucial. We bring some of the knowledge, values, and exposure from the West to work in countries where they may not have that, but they also have their own ways of working that can be very successful and very productive.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When most people think of 25 years, the expectation is expansion, going through Sub-Saharan Africa or expanding through South America. My question, then, is why not more countries?

Michael Chertok: At the beginning, we thought that the world was our oyster, and we might expand to many places. I was involved in helping DDD expand to Vientiane in Laos, and we also expanded to Battambang, which is a secondary city in Cambodia.

I remember going with Tim Keller, one of our other early expat co-founders, to a city in Cambodia called Banteay Meanchey. We found a place where young people were learning how to use computers in a thatched hut that was elevated on stilts. Tim said, We could have DDD here. It would be the thatched hut dream. I looked at Tim and I said, This would be the thatched hut nightmare, because it was just too complex to be able to run in so many different locations.

We found over time that coordinating a business across three different offices, in Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Vientiane, all of which were at a distance from our office in the US, was complicated. We decided that it made sense to consolidate the office in Battambang with Phnom Penh.

When we were asked by The Rockefeller Foundation to consider working in Africa, we spent a lot of time thinking about whether we could stretch again to operate in a new place. Ultimately, after consulting with our teams in Cambodia and in Laos, we decided that we could, and that Kenya was the right place, so we made plans to open the office in Nairobi.

I would say for a business of our size, it's challenging to operate in three locations. We are currently considering opportunities that might arise from operating in new locations, but we're more looking more at opportunities of working in secondary cities within the countries where we already exist, and expanding that way, rather than operating in new countries— although we are looking at the possibility of new countries. It's part of the reflection that we're doing as we've reached this stage of 25 years.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What has been your biggest cultural challenge across the work that you're doing, particularly in your position of CEO? What's the hardest thing to align on?

Michael Chertok: The central challenge that we wrestle with all the time at DDD is how to balance our desire to have social impact with our commitment to running a successful, profitable business. It plays out in so many different ways.

For instance, in choosing a new location, there are different considerations. Would we go to a new location because there are lower operating costs? Would we go to a new

location because there's a greater need to help the people there? Would we go to a new location because there's an opportunity for new kinds of business there?

Something we thought a lot about as we opened up in Kenya is what opportunities for incremental new business we would find by operating in Nairobi that we weren't able to find in Cambodia and Laos. We were able to find some business that was Africa-centric, and that's been part of our business there. We've also seen that the higher-level English skills people generally have in Kenya give us the ability to do work that we are not able to do in Cambodia and Laos.

That's the business imperative of how we think about new locations. What's the talent that's there, and what is the opportunity for work in a particular location? We also think about what the workforce there is like, what needs the people have, and what our impact would look like in that new place.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: If I wanted to do what you're doing, and start an employment venture in a few countries, what would be your three biggest pieces of advice?

Michael Chertok: One is to spend time listening carefully to the local people and talking with them about what they need, what it would be like to employ people there, and what it would be like to be successful as a company and as a social enterprise there. If they haven't been exposed to the concept of social enterprise, and what that means in terms of making choices, help them understand.

Two is to think a lot about how you're being capitalized. Are you running this as a for-profit business, and are you looking at raising money that way, or are you looking to do this as a non-profit? If you're a non-profit, who are the people who would be interested in supporting the work?

Finally, think about your vision. What is it that you want to accomplish? Do you want to accomplish great things for the people that you employ? Do you want to accomplish great things by exposing people to new food and new cuisine? Where do you want to go with your business? What's your vision? I think that if you keep those things in mind and have a strong vision, you're going to be successful.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have a DDD success story you can share?

Michael Chertok: When I think about success, I think about the young people who've been successful in the organization. I remember getting to know a young woman named Sopheap when she was an associated data entry operator in Battambang. She first became a manager of a group of people there, then she eventually started managing that office. We realized that she had the potential to continue to grow, and we found the opportunity for her to come and study in the United States.

There were other people. The first manager in Battambang, Kunthy Kann, was someone we identified in Phnom Penh as having great potential. He helped us open the office in Battambang, and then he eventually came back to Phnom Penh to be a

manager and oversee the operations there. He did this for some time, and then became the CEO of a rice company.

It's remarkable to see how people have grown and developed, gained leadership skills, and gone on to be successful. Many people have stayed in technology, as we embed people with a lot of technology skills at DDD. But many others have gone on to so many different fields, becoming teachers, doctors, nurses, bankers. The knowledge of technology is fundamental to the DNA of so many different jobs and careers that once people have those underlying skills, they're able to succeed in many different careers and professions.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you for your time and insights.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*