



**“The feedback loop—with lots of feedback, brainstorming, and engagement that we have with some funders—has been helpful.”**

## **A Conversation with Kruti Bharucha of [Peepul](#)**

**Sanne Breimer**

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**Sanne Breimer:** Please introduce yourself and tell me a little bit more about your work.

**Kruti Bharucha:** I'm the Founder and CEO of Peepul. Peepul is an education nonprofit that works with government school systems in India to improve the delivery of education. We work both as practitioners, where we run our own schools in Delhi to show the excellence that's possible in a government school, where you have more budget and resource constraints.

We also work at scale. We are seeking to shift the system and improve the broader system of government. When we work as practitioners, we run direct interventions, where we have control over everything, and we are able to keep a control on the delivery of education. When we work at scale, we are working through the government, so we start losing degrees of control.

The three things we do at scale is, one, we train teachers and skill them, so that they're able to improve the practices in the classroom. Second, we coach and monitor many officials within the administration, and the system itself. We're making sure that the school teachers and the school leaders are provided the right coaching tools and the right monitoring mechanisms.

At the third level, we work on governance policy and data. We want to make sure that the senior-most officials, the political class, the ministers, understand how learning outcomes are improving in their state, and they can allocate resources accordingly. We're very much a systems change organization, where we've taken a bet with the government to say, we believe that there can be significant improvement in the government school system, and we're here as a partner to help them deliver on that change and improvement.

**Sanne Breimer: When was your venture founded and what would you say is distinctive about your approach? What is something that others would find surprising?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** We were founded in 2017. I think we are very clear about what we want to change. We want to improve student engagement in the classroom. We work both as practitioners as well as at scale through the government. That's difficult to do, because you are running your direct interventions, but you're also working towards system change. Very few organizations do both of those things. They choose one or the other.

As practitioners, we run three schools ourselves because we want to show the excellence that's possible. We hire the teachers. We create the materials. We have the school leadership. We work with the community. Everything in the school is done by us. We've kept it to three schools because we don't want to create a significant fundraising gap for those three schools. If we run 10 schools, we need so much more funding, but we feel like the three schools give us our lab, our R&D (research and development) and our ability to show what we think is possible.

We don't want to just work at scale without actually having demonstrated it ourselves. There's a lot of credibility when we can take a government stakeholder to one of our three schools and say, "This is what we want to make possible in your system."

The "aha" moment happens for them. They say, "Oh, okay, now it all makes sense." Then, our reputation and credibility also goes up, because they know that we have done it. It's not that we're just sitting around the table and giving advice. We're actually in there, having done it ourselves, demonstrated impact and evidence, and then helping them take it to scale.

**Sanne Breimer: That's helpful for funders as well?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** For funders, they get a sense of what the vision is. They get a sense of the excellence that we're trying to make happen. It's very inspiring to see that these classrooms are highly engaging, and the teachers are so committed. I think it takes the

conversation in terms of credibility and the vision to the next level when they actually see it in practice. Seeing is believing. All the "ahas" happen, and suddenly you see what we are trying to achieve, and then people feel much more strongly about backing the organization.

The third thing that makes us distinctive is that we are working with all levels of the government system, and we are working very holistically. We're not running one particular intervention. We look at what it takes to actually shift an entire system. Therefore, you work with teachers, school leaders, field level officials, bureaucrats. Again, it's rare for an organization to work at all of those levels, because it's quite hard to do.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you describe those hard parts?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** It's difficult to establish trust relationships with the senior officials, and also have deep field and on ground relationships, because it requires different skill sets. At the senior most level, you have to be a trusted advisor. At the field level, you have to have a really good ground understanding, so that you get the credibility that you need from the folks in the schools. Very different skill sets are needed. That's challenging, because it impacts how we hire people. There has to be a lot of diversity in the team as well.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work and how do you know it's working? Please also describe the approach that led to that impact?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** The ultimate metric we want to measure is student learning: whether children are learning better or not. With all of these interventions, when you're doing many things at the same time and you're working through the government, the reason we are here is for children to learn better. At the end of the day, our children are actually learning better.

We measure student level outcomes at multiple grades: grade six, grade eight, and grade three. Through our direct work on average, between our control and treatment groups, the range is between 5 times to 10 times difference in learning outcomes across English, math, and Hindi. In the interventions where we work with the state, we've seen percentage increases within just one year of somewhere between 6% to 20%.

That's quite significant when you think about how much change you're able to make happen in just one year. It's also significant because this is not something we're doing ourselves, we're doing it through others. This is a final outcome metric that we look at, but there are many intermediate metrics because when you're also driving systems

change, it takes time to get to better learning, so we also pick other leading indicators in the meantime.

We look at improvement in teacher skills pre and post our training. We conduct classroom observations to understand whether the teachers are using more effective techniques in the classroom to teach differently. We look at engagement with regard to peer learning communities. We measure and track the use of data by the system to inform classroom strategies. Many of these, we classify as intermediate outcomes, because until we get to improvements in student learning, we also need to make sure that we capture all of these shifts.

**Sanne Breimer: Where do you get your funding from at the moment?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** It's a mix of international global foundations and India corporate social responsibility funds. Rippleworks has been a supporter and this year funded a talent grant for us. Then, we have other organizations like Mulago, Dovetail, LGTV, who are funders. In India, domestic corporate responsibility also funds some of our programs. In India, there is a law that requires companies to spend 2% of their net profits on corporate social responsibility. They can identify projects, they can select projects, and they have to deploy that money towards projects. Thirty five percent of our funding comes from CSR, and 65% comes from foundations with most of those being foreign foundations.

**Sanne Breimer: Thinking about the support that you received, what's something that turned out to be very helpful to scale your business?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** The level of partnership and collaborative thinking that many of the international foundations provide has been hugely helpful. Receiving feedback on our model, the clarity of our model, getting nudges and an understanding of what we could do differently as we scale, getting some ideas and frameworks of what our scale journey could look like. Those fall under thought partnership and guidance that we get from foundations, which has been great for us as an organization.

It's been good for me to learn from other organizations, and the social entrepreneurs that foundations have access to, and that they fund as well. It's helped me push my thinking. It's helped our team develop and become stronger. Working with international foundations, I didn't know what to expect, and I think I've just been really happy that we've been able to forge some really strong partnerships with all of our funders.

**Sanne Breimer: So it's the relational component and the feedback loop helps you scale?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** It's definitely the feedback loop. I think there is something that is very valuable in knowing that a funder is really there to support you. They're in your corner. That mental support that you receive as an entrepreneur, or as a founder to say, "Okay, they are really invested in my success. They really want to help me," is often what you need.

You need a group of people who are going to be around you cheering you on. While it's more touchy feely, I think the significant piece of input and support that we get from all of our funding partners [is helpful]. That's the relational part. The feedback loop—with lots of feedback, brainstorming, and engagement that we have with some funders—has been helpful.

If we were to get it from all our funders, it would be too much for us, but it's helpful to receive from some folks who we can then reach out to. The other thing is that our funders are always there. They're a call away and if we reach out to them, we know that we'll hear back from them quickly and help us. That's also helpful.

**Sanne Breimer: What evidence do you look at to know that the funder support helped to scale your business?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Feedback from my senior team in terms of whether they feel challenged and pushed. Are they feeling that it's valuable to them? I don't think we look at evidence necessarily because it's not a direct relation that somebody said something and that translated into a change in the program.

It's more the goodwill that we have in the system and are more people hearing about our work? Is a good word being spread about us? Getting funder feedback, or feedback from prospective funders even if they don't want to fund us immediately, [is evidence]. Just for them to say, "Yes, we heard about you from X, Y, and Z. We want to consider you, and think about you as part of our pipeline."

**Sanne Breimer: Do new funders then reach out to you also or do you always need to do that?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** We've had some funders reach out to us or some of our existing funders say, "Oh, this one is potentially interested. Why don't you reach out and speak with them?" Then, we'll do that.

**Sanne Breimer: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders? How can a funder cultivate trust?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Trust is everything. It's really the foundation for any partnership or relationship. When you have a lot of trust, then you're able to be really honest and

transparent. Therefore, when we are honest and transparent, it helps our funder/partner realize that we are being authentic and genuine, and we're not projecting something that we are doing just to portray a strong image, so that's helpful.

I think that's been helpful to cement that trust and it plays a huge role. One can't emphasize enough. Trust is ultimately everything because if you feel the trust is breaking down you already realize that the funding relationship might be in danger. If you feel that the trust is not quite there, when you have somebody else who's joined the team, for example, on the funder side, you have to rebuild the trust with that person, or you have to build it from scratch.

If they're more skeptical, you may have to make sure that you overinvest in that relationship so that they also feel like they're getting enough visibility and communication.

**Sanne Breimer: What bold shifts do you think are needed in the supporting landscape to truly center the voices of those closest to the problem?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Multi-year partnerships are critical so that there is security around how much funding there might be and that it's there for the long term. It's not just a one-off, because then, otherwise, every year you have to go through that process. I think clarity on funding amount and process is also very helpful. These are probably not bold things.

One bold thing would be really large, meaningful multi-year partnerships. Another bold thing would be creation of funding collectives where four or five funders get together and say, "We're going to invest in this organization for the long term." So there's one clear set of goals that they can collectively set for the organization.

I am probably not in favor of things like big audacious goals or big audacious amounts because I feel like if you get \$30 million then you're generally in spend mode as opposed to impact mode. For us, because we work with the government, the amount that we have as annual income or budget is not a measure of success because what we are trying to do is get the government to spend more.

For us, the bigger we grow, the more unsustainable it is. So over time our budgets come down if we are doing our job well. I feel like it's not sustainable to say, "Oh, we're going to get together and give you \$30 million." Instead it is for funding collectives to provide larger amounts for a longer period of time.

**Sanne Breimer: So you're saying it would be helpful if funders would collaborate more amongst each other, instead of acting as individual entities? And could you also clarify the amount and the process you're describing.**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Yes [on funders acting collaboratively. On funding and process], it's when you have a conversation with a funder, you want to get a sense of what the grants are: is it \$50,000 or is it \$500,000 because you want to be able to manage budgets and cash flow accordingly. It's also important to understand the process. How many stages does the application go through? Who's the final decision maker? What information is needed from us as an organization? Having that visibility and clarity early on is helpful. I think a lot of funders are actually doing that, but I think it's also something that people could perhaps do more of.

**Sanne Breimer: The multi-year partnership: is that something that you have already, or not yet?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** We do have multi-year partnerships. In fact, with most of our funders, we have multi-year partnerships, which is great.

**Sanne Breimer: How does Rippleworks' process of deciding what capacity building support to provide, differ from what you experienced, and how did this impact your work?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Rippleworks does a very good job of explaining the portfolio of services available to any organization. Rippleworks was very clear from the beginning that an organization can have access to Leaders Studio, but then also projects, and then office hours, and potentially, talent and capital as well. That was a big shift I noticed early on, because the first time we had a conversation it was only Leaders Studio that they had offered. But soon after, it became a portfolio of services that Rippleworks offers and they want organizations to dip into everything.

Once we have [access to the portfolio], it gives us visibility and we can take on different opportunities as we see fit in terms of timing. We've done a couple of projects with Rippleworks. In our earlier stages, it was helpful to build the capacity of the team on identifying the right question, finding the right answer, and going through a more detailed process with somebody who was identified as a project expert.

We did our first project two or three years ago and I think if we did a project today that project would look quite different from what we did then because the capacity of the team also has been strengthened. The team has a clearer idea of what we are looking for. We are a more mature organization. In our organization's journey, when we do a project now, it may be much more specific and detailed than one we had done earlier.

With the project, it's helpful to set a step one, step two, step three for an organization. We can say, "Right now, we think the organization is at level one in terms of team bandwidth, or team capacity," and when they're more mature, they might be at level



three. Therefore, the project success from a Rippleworks perspective can also be seen in that light.

For example, the first project we did with Rippleworks was to help with a particular HR process. Now, when we do it, we can get much deeper into something such as an employee value proposition and flesh that out. It moves from more generic to more specific as the organization matures and has more dedicated functional teams.

**Sanne Breimer: So you build on the previous experiences. What are the gaps in this model?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** There could be more local in-country resources and experts because with the projects, we've always had somebody that's based in the US. That becomes a bit challenging, because time zones become an issue. That's difficult. Also they may or may not have the in-country context or benchmarking with other nonprofits in the country.

India is so large, there are many organizations to learn from and many experiences from for-profit and in-country context that an in-country expert might have. One of the gaps, or one of the things that we could work on, is having more in-country experts identified.

**Sanne Breimer: Did you have any in-country experts?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** No. We had one person who was familiar with India who understood and had worked with other nonprofits, but was not based in India, so was probably not as familiar. They were of course extremely knowledgeable and had expertise.

The other thing that might be helpful to consider is to have a Rippleworks in-country team. It may not be something that Rippleworks wants to invest in right now, but might be something for the longer term depending on the size of the portfolio in a particular country. Maybe to have an individual actually based in that country who can provide more continuous support to the nonprofit.

**Sanne Breimer: What do you think funders don't understand about capacity building that would be very useful?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Capacity building takes time. Capacity building also needs to be led by strong in-organization leadership as opposed to somebody coming in from the outside and saying, "We'll help build your capacity." Ultimately, the ownership has to come from within the organization. Then there has to be senior leadership that can have the bandwidth to invest in that capacity building when they receive the support.



It also depends on strong organizational leadership. When we are looking at capacity building projects, it's important to identify leaders within the organization to see if they have the bandwidth and ownership to be able to drive forward capacity building initiatives. The other is learning and sharing resources that other organizations have created.

For example, if somebody's created a great learning and development plan for all their staff members, it makes sense to share it with us rather than for us to develop it from scratch. If somebody has done compensation benchmarking, that's super helpful, or if someone's deployed a finance ERP (enterprise resource planning) solution, learning from that and sharing it back [is helpful].

Capacity building can happen organically, but sharing of best practices is a way for it to happen inorganically and to speed up the capacity building because you don't have to develop all that expertise in-house. You can avoid reinventing the wheel.

**Sanne Breimer: Would that be like a role for a funder to bring these people together?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** Perhaps Rippleworks could document and codify learnings that come out of projects, to say, "This was an L&D (learning and development) project we did for someone else. This is the output that came out of it." When Peepul does an L&D project, Rippleworks could act as a mediator, and connector to say, "Oh, we did this project for them, why don't you speak with them and get some insights?" Of course, they would get permission to do this. But that's something that could be a huge value and not a huge level of additional investment by Rippleworks.

**Sanne Breimer: Regarding the talent grants, did Rippleworks help you develop skills in your staff? If so, what was the impacts?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** The great thing about the talent grant is that they gave us a lot of flexibility around recognizing that we want to invest in talent. There are three different categories, but within those there is flexibility. Flexibility is incredible because it allows us to focus on things that the organization needs, as opposed to things that a funder wants to support.

We were able to start from the basics. Let's think about three different areas of talent: attracting talent, retaining talent, engaging talent. What do we really need in each of those three aspects? Is it that we need more staff? Is it that we need a tool? Is it that we need more frequent team sessions?" Then, put down within each of those categories what we need.

That was then taken to their internal committee and approved after some discussion. We set some milestones, but it was incredible for us to say, "This is what we need to be able to build the capacity and attract, engage, and retain all of our talent," and start with a clean slate to ask for things, to not have too much of a structure such as, "We can only fund these five elements." That level of flexibility is something I haven't seen with many funders.

**Sanne Breimer: What have you learned through the talent grants?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** The talent grant just started. We've been able to hire strong people through the talent grant. The talent grant allowed us to invest in our people. We spent time diagnosing what it is that we need to invest in our talent.

One learning was to start from first principles to understand what the organization needs, diagnose it, and then to ask for it, as opposed to just pitching for what the funder can actually provide. It's a huge learning and that's something that we can then take to other donors that might be interested in supporting people. We can say, "We know that you will support this, but what we really need is this, so do you think you have some flexibility to shift some of your funding?"

Another learning is the ability to engage in that type of dialogue with the funder. For the funder to be open and flexible, and for us to have that brainstorming and engagement with them was also very helpful.

**Sanne Breimer: Let's talk about Office Hours. Can you share an example of something that you were able to take from the experience that was immediately useful to you?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** The Expert Office Hours have been more mixed because it depends on the expert and whether that person has context. Sometimes, in the Expert Office Hours, it takes a while to explain the problem to that individual. It's not like you can get a direct answer. I'm not sure how Expert Office Hours can have worked with other organizations. I think that is one place where we haven't quite been able to figure out how to use it in a way that's helpful for us.

**Sanne Breimer: What would have made a session with the expert more useful?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** I think it would be more helpful to have somebody who has in-country experience and somebody who has an understanding of the context. Also, having less structure and being able to have an open Q&A. There is quite a bit of structure and what we need is just a conversation. It's like when you meet someone at a conference and they're working on a similar issue. You have a 45-minute discussion with them to

understand how they're tackling that issue. It's an unstructured conversation for a problem that you're tackling.

You can still do something like the feedback form, highlighting if it was helpful etcetera. But again perhaps there is a way with office hours, because it's just a very limited amount of time, to have it be a bit more unstructured. With projects, I think it makes sense to have the right level of structure, to have it scoped out well, to have clarity of role. All of that makes sense. But with office hours it just becomes a conversation.

**Sanne Breimer: Regarding the Leaders Studio, what can you say about that?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** One is just the timing of the sessions. They were all U.S. Pacific times, which for India is ten o'clock at night. Many members of the team signed up for them, but after a long day and you are at home doing a session from 10:00 to 12:00 at night, your level of enthusiasm and energy will be much lower. It's very hard to engage. The other thing is to do a diagnosis of what is the current level of the team member before they participate. In one of the Leaders Studio sessions, some of the team members found it a bit basic. They felt that some of the things that were talked about were already things that they were practicing.

Do a needs assessment of the individual. What is it that they need and where are they on the topic? If they're already at a mature or advanced level, maybe that's not the right session for them, and we have to pick different leaders.

The third is to have more in-country folks, so that you can stay in contact with people and you build networks through the Leaders Studio. When you have a lot of global folks on the call, it's incredibly positive and helpful to have those global networks.

But you won't sustain those conversations after the Leaders Studio. You'll have breakout groups, you'll speak with folks, but the engagement with those individuals just stops at that set of breakout sessions, because you don't actually interact with them. You don't come across them in the work that you do regularly.

**Sanne Breimer: What have been the biggest challenges in the support you've received?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** There haven't been that many huge challenges. Rippleworks has been a very supportive funder and I always get the sense that there's a lot of openness to feedback. All of the things that I've shared with you today, for example, I've shared with the Rippleworks team, and they've been very open, and welcoming of any thoughts and suggestions on how to make things more helpful. That's amazing.

I think we feel very respected and valued as an organization by Rippleworks constantly. It's wonderful to hear that your time is valuable and we want to make sure the best use of your time is made. You feel very respected and valued. It's also about the power dynamic when a funder is giving you money, you also want to feel respected, because the work that we do is also challenging. You don't want to feel it's an unequal power dynamic.

A challenge sometimes for us has been how to communicate the complexity of our work in a simple manner. As we look at further funding from Rippleworks, making sure that we are able to communicate that very clearly, so that at Rippleworks, the grant and capital team is able to understand how we are measuring our success.

What are the key indicators that we're using? How are we communicating our model? What does systems change look like? Sometimes we can talk about it so much that it can sound very complicated and it's not clear what we're actually measuring. I think, for us to be able to communicate clearly is very important. Then, for Rippleworks to also absorb that systems change work takes time.

There are different measures within the ecosystem of what success looks like. [We have to] pressure test to see whether the metric we're using is consistent across other organizations and whether it's leading to significant improvement. From a learning perspective, [I would want] the Rippleworks capital team to be open to different types of metrics that are used, because this is also an emerging space around systems change. It's having that ability for both sides to reflect, and see how together we can shape the development of metrics.

**Sanne Breimer: What would be the top three things for you to unlock the ability to scale and sustain?**

**Kruti Bharucha:** At this time, we need a significant set of committed donors who are with us for a multi-year period and committed to our success. For me to then be able to feel great about scaling and to say, "Yes, these are the folks that are committed, and are giving significant grants to us, so that I can worry less about fundraising, and really focus on the programs."

Another thing is for organizations to open up networks for us because there is a lot of learning that happens in a scaling journey. When we are scaling, there is so much that we can learn from other organizations. Opening up networks of experts, other practitioners, nonprofits who have done this successfully, so that we can get inspired, motivated, and challenged to be able to continue down the scaling path in the right way, and with the right set of pathways.

Finally, I would say organizing convenings or events, where organizations can come together that are working on a similar set of problems, maybe globally, and think about how to solve them together through collective action.

**Sanne Breimer: Thank you for talking with me today.**

*Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*