

Facilitating Women Prosperity with Higher Purpose at Vyomini

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Abstract

The theory of conscious capitalism is based on the idea that when business is done consciously, it promotes humanity intrinsically. This philosophy is rooted in the four tenets of higher purpose, stakeholder integration, conscious leadership and conscious culture and management as given by Mackey and Sisodia (2013). All social entrepreneurs are motivated by a higher purpose to provide sustainable solutions to neglected problems with the help of positive externalities (Santos, 2012). They have the capacity to envision, share and execute the deep-seated higher purpose (Mourkogiannis, 2006). Such a higher purpose with a social angle has been depicted in the case of Vyomini. The case is about a social entrepreneur Prachi Kaushik, the founder of Vyomini. She works for menstrual health and hygiene of unprivileged and rural women in India. Prachi's constant endeavour was to create an ecosystem for the economic and social upliftment of these women through financial inclusion and livelihood training. She understood the problem, empathized with the women and provided a simple, economical manufacturing technique using locally available, biodegradable raw materials to provide an inclusive solution. This case describes her journey in creating an innovative business model by the adoption of design thinking and implementation of higher purpose in the business.

Dilemma: For ensuring menstrual health and hygiene among less privileged rural women should the sanitary napkins of big brands be distributed at a subsidized cost or design and develop a special product suitable for this segment of the market?

Disclaimer: This case is written for classroom discussion and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation, or to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making, or endorse the views of the management. The views and opinions expressed in this case are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of *South Asian Journal of Business & Management Cases*.

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Theory: Entrepreneurial inclusive business model

Type of the case: Experience-based applied single case study

Protagonist: The owner of the firm

Options

Distribute existing brands at a subsidized cost. Develop a new product that is biodegradable, free of carcinogenic compounds and cost-effective. Get it manufactured by subcontractors. The design also a cost-effective manufacturing process and empower women of less privileged background to manufacture and sell.

Discussions and Case Questions

How can the sources of supply and manufacturing be made robust so that they can be scaled up? Should the product be offered to different segments of the market with differential pricing?

In order to expand reach, which channels should be added for a taboo product like sanitary napkins?

Keywords

Conscious capitalism, design thinking, higher purpose, menstrual health, bio-degradable, social entrepreneurship

Introduction

On reaching the Vyomini Enterprise office in Sultanpur Majra, one is greeted by a young, cheerful woman, Prachi Kaushik, a Delhi-based social entrepreneur and a master in political science. She welcomes everyone in a heart-warming manner into her office which has been decorated with mementos, awards, accolades and certificates that speak about her commendable work. She interacts regarding her work and the Entrepreneurship Development Centre that she runs outside her office at National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC), Okhla, Delhi. The display of vending machines, banners and sanitary napkins in the office creates an image of how the Green Menstrual Revolution is moving ahead. Behind the office is the manufacturing area where a group of women coordinate among themselves and work on the machines installed. They give a heart-warming welcome and demonstrate the manufacturing process of Rakshak—a biodegradable and low-cost sanitary napkin. Prachi is committed to breaking the taboo around menstruation in India by running a social enterprise ‘Vyomini’ which empowers rural and marginalized women by getting them involved in the manufacture and sale of biodegradable sanitary napkins, vending machines for napkin, incinerator, diapers and jute bags.

Before the germination of the mission of Green Menstruation in her mind, she interacted with thousands of poor women and understood that they could not afford a pack of sanitary napkins in spite of being aware of the importance of menstrual hygiene. This touching emotions and pain forced her to develop an affordable sanitary napkin which would make their life better. That was the moment when she decided to dedicate her life to the higher purpose and pursue the idea of bringing the Green Menstrual Revolution in India.

She possesses the leadership qualities and effective communication skills required to run a visionary enterprise. She set up a manufacturing unit of biodegradable sanitary napkins targeting the unprivileged women of rural background with a very innovative business model encouraging women to start their

own manufacturing unit and market their products. She has worked with thousands of underprivileged girls and women to educate them on the issue of menstrual health and hygiene. In India, the words 'period' and 'sanitary napkins' make people squirm. But she has taken this idea to another level by starting an enterprise single-handedly in spite of its several risks and apprehensions. She also engages students in the Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) in an interesting manner and shares her journey of touching thousands of lives through Vyomini's biodegradable sanitary napkins.

Identifying the Problem

Prachi had previously worked on a project of Delhi Government named Samajik Suvidha Sangam for 5 years (2011–2015), where she was involved in carrying out awareness camps on menstrual health and hygiene for rural women. This involved the distribution of free sanitary napkins among rural women for use. They used to distribute the pads manufactured by the multinational companies, that is, the big brand names. But she realized that those were not eco-friendly and had carcinogenic materials in the form of absorbent and also costly to afford by those girls and women. Prachi was working with women who were below the poverty line. The sanitary napkins they distributed were expensive for rural women. They could not afford those expensive napkins even after understanding the health awareness campaigns. This led to the need recognition of having a cost-effective and eco-friendly sanitary napkin.

So, she left her job in 2015 and decided to start working for this cause. The idea was to provide an affordable solution to rural women for maintaining menstrual hygiene and also make them financially independent by getting them involved in the manufacturing process. She realized that the participation of women in the manufacturing sector is low, and she started the research on the manufacturing of eco-friendly biodegradable sanitary napkin. She took help from academia and engineers to develop the prototype and the machine that would be used for the manufacturing process. The research was carried out for 2 years, that is, from 2015 to 2017.

Research

The aim was to come up with a simple manufacturing technique that would also provide sanitary napkins of the best standard. In order to achieve this, she realized that the raw materials have to be localized and the manufacturing process has to be decentralized. So, she interacted with many scientists and researchers who were working on natural fibres. This led to the identification of the raw material or the natural fibres that she could use in the product. The focus was also on making a model that could easily be understood and operated by rural women and could also be scaled up effortlessly. Prachi invented and did innovations in some parts of machines to simplify the manufacturing process.

The first sanitary napkin was made by a normal process and hand pressing. She distributed the free samples to use to rural women and told them about the quality of napkins. Now, women had an option to go for low-cost napkins with natural fibres. Later, a low-cost manufacturing machine was created by using Chinese and Indian technology. Vyomini prepared its first prototype in 2017 with simple machines and tools. She was able to sell six napkins at the price of \$0.23. She then collected feedback from her customers and did many changes to the product. In this process, she was able to have a wide range of products for different segments' needs. Her model was now ready to cater to the needs of women belonging to lower class, middle class and upper class by providing a range of products, that is, from basic to premium products. She also consulted a gynaecologist and got her manufacturing process approved by ISO Standard and BIS to ensure that she is able to provide a safe and good quality product to the women.

The First Batch of Products

Finally, on 17 December 2017, the formal manufacturing of the biodegradable and low-cost sanitary napkin started. The first unit was set up in Delhi. The initial cost of the plant was \$7692.3. The funds were raised from the schemes of government for the women entrepreneurs and donations. She also sold her gold jewellery to make this higher purpose workable. Later on, the manufacturing process was scaled up.

The rural women were trained to carry out the manufacturing process and packing the product. Within a very short span of time, Prachi has been recognized by the government and the corporate world for her amazing efforts. She has been awarded many national and international awards. The business model has empowered women and stands true to the vision of Vyomini, that is, 'Women first—Prosperity for all'. They are creating an ecosystem for the socio-economic welfare of women through awareness programmes, training programmes, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship development programmes, marketing, trading and manufacturing activities.

Materials and Market

The materials used in these napkins are mostly locally available. For example, banana plants are predominantly found in South India, so banana fibres are used as the raw material in the manufacturing units of Vyomini in South India. Some other raw materials used are jute, cotton, etc. They have also used sodium polychloride as the absorbent in their sanitary napkins which is good for the health of women when compared to the superabsorbent gel that is used by well-known brands. Prachi has understood the market well and identified that about 30 per cent of women face period poverty. She distributes sanitary napkins for free among this section of women, whereas for the urban market she emphasizes that they shift from non-biodegradable napkins to biodegradable napkins. By implementing a differential pricing strategy for the different segments of customers, Vyomini is able to earn profits for all stakeholders. Vyomini now sells its products on various online platforms like Government e-Marketplace (GeM) and Amazon. They are also selling to self-help groups under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, who are reselling the products.

Current Statistics

In 2016, she started her social enterprise—Vyomini, with the help of some friends. She quit her job of Delhi Government in the middle of the year 2015 and started with the research for developing and manufacturing biodegradable and low-cost sanitary napkins. After conducting research for one and a half year, she was able to make her first product. Initially, few friends joined her, and the team began to work on the design of the napkin. They employed women from economically weaker sections for manufacturing the napkins. After 2 years of rigorous work, they finally launched—Rakshak on 17 December 2017. It is a low-cost, biodegradable sanitary napkin, with prices starting from \$0.03 per napkin.

Currently, Vyomini has established 10 manufacturing units in various places of Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi. There are around 50 full-time employees working on this higher purpose. Apart from this, there are 500 people involved in the trading of Rakshak in different parts of the country; mostly, women are involved in the whole process. Moreover, Rakshak is also being sold online through Amazon. She has a customer base of approximately 100,000 women, and the number is still growing. She has also set up sanitary napkin vending machines in schools, colleges and universities for reaching out to more girls and women.

Design Thinking and Vyomini

Prachi Kaushik has gone through the whole design thinking process as given in Figure 1, while developing the product Rakshak and setting up Vyomini. She has been able to provide an innovative solution by empathizing with the challenges of rural women and experimenting in various ways:

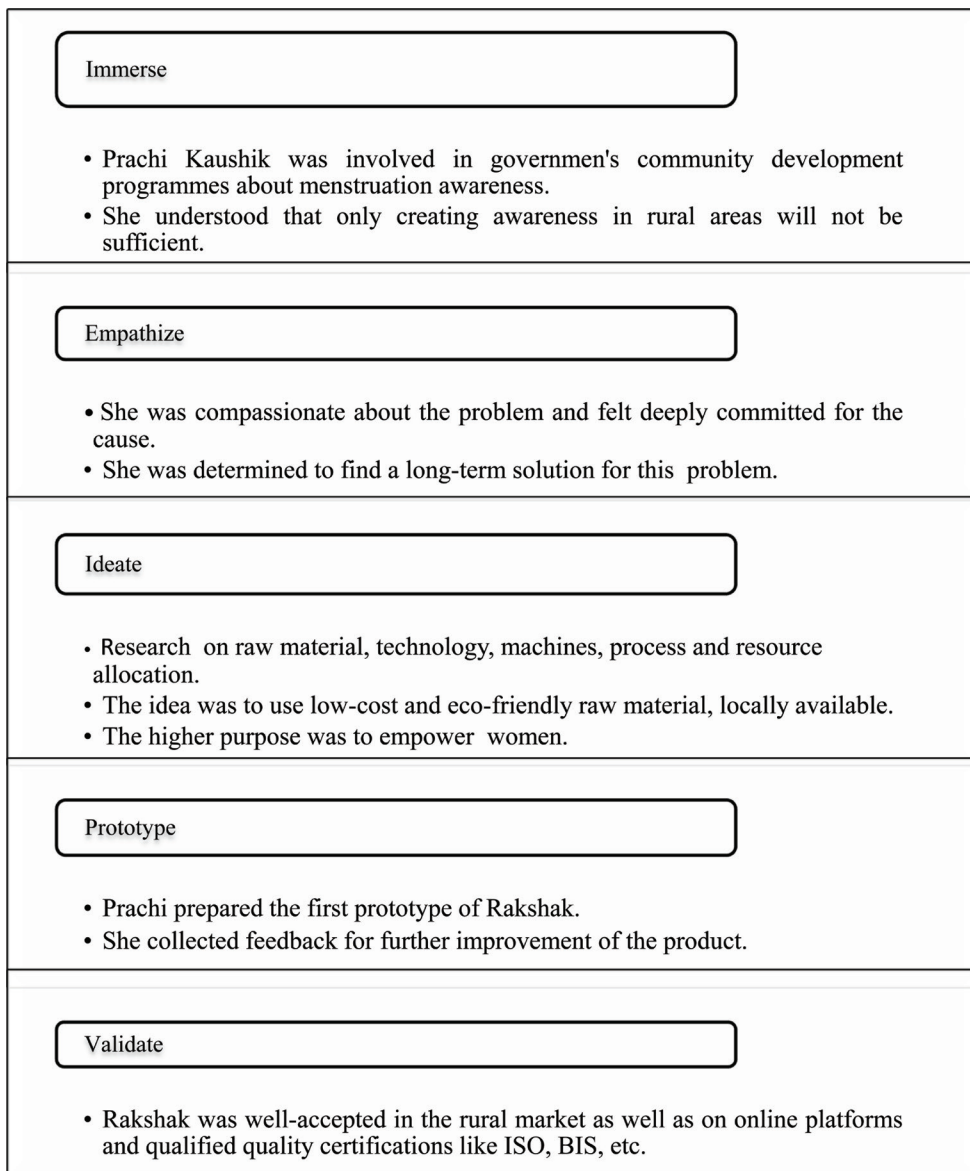


Figure 1. The Design Thinking Process of Vyomini

Source: Modified according to the case and adapted from Brown & Wyatt (2010).

The Concept of Conscious Capitalism

Conscious capitalism is an innovative way of thinking about business that goes considerably afar the traditional view of ‘maximizing profit’ that most entrepreneurs think about. In general, the enterprises are generating financial wealth at the expense of social, cultural, environmental, intellectual, physical and spiritual well-being. They extract value rather than creating value. A business that pursues conscious capitalism would experience a synergistic effect on its performance (Lokhande, Cadotte, & Agrawal, 2019). Conscious businesses spend money where it makes a positive difference for a higher sense of purpose. Eventually, these enterprises make a net positive impact on the world.

The four tenets of conscious capitalism outline the requirements of modern business, including a higher purpose, a stakeholder orientation, conscious leadership and conscious culture (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013). Each of these tenets is clearly visible in the case of Vyomini.

1. Higher purpose

While making money is indispensable for the vitality and sustainability of a business, it is not the ultimate objective of the business. Conscious businesses focus on their higher purpose beyond profit. In this process, the business focuses on its deeper purpose and engages and energizes its stakeholders. Employees, customers and other stakeholders have more affinity with organizations by having an inspiring purpose.

2. Stakeholder integration

Conscious businesses focus on their entire business ecosystem by creating and optimizing value for all their stakeholders, and by understanding that strong and engaged stakeholder leads to a healthy, sustainable and resilient business. Such businesses realize that without employees, customers, suppliers, fund providers, supportive communities and a life-sustaining ecosystem, there is no business. Conscious business is a win-win proposition, which mandates a healthy return to shareholders, not a zero-sum game.

3. Conscious leadership

Conscious leaders emphasize on ‘we’, rather than ‘me’. They constantly nurture, inspire and foster transformation and bringing out their best. The conscious leaders understand their role to serve the purpose of the organization, support the people within the organization and create value for all of the organization’s stakeholders. They recognize the fundamental role of culture and purposefully develop a conscious culture of trust and care.

4. Conscious culture and management

Culture is the embodiment of values, principles and practices underlying the social fabric of a business. It permeates in actions and connects the stakeholders to each other and to the company’s purpose, people and processes. A conscious culture nurtures love, care and inclusiveness and builds trust among the company’s team members. The stakeholder’s conscious culture amalgamates into an energizing and unifying force that truly brings the higher purpose of conscious business to life.

Alignment of Social Entrepreneurship and Higher Purpose at Vyomini Enterprise

All the major professions worldwide have a higher purpose as its reason for being such as medicine, teaching, national security and legal. Each of the professions then encapsulates making a profit and

earning a living. When any profession becomes majorly about making money, the true identity of the business is lost. Such professions then diverge from the greater good for the society. The espousal of profit-making in business undermines the synergistic power of higher purpose in business (Pless, 2012). When the businesses focus mainly on a higher purpose, then the profits fall inline automatically.

A Positive Theory of Social Entrepreneurship given by Santos (2012) explains its distinctive role in the economic system while pointing to the specifics of the social entrepreneurship approach as opposed to traditional forms of entrepreneurship. No capitalist company or government involves itself in solving such problems which have high-value creation prospect and low-value capture (such as eradication diseases or malnutrition in developing nations) prospect. These situations of simultaneous market and government failure remain the domain of social entrepreneurs. In the case of Vyomini, Delhi Government has been running the awareness programmes for the menstrual health of females but was unable to provide a complete solution. On the other hand, multinational companies have the products to address the problem, but they are not concerned about the social impacts or limitations. They are concentrated on those segments of the market from which they can extract profit. Economically weaker section of the society remains excluded.

Prachi, who dreamt of starting a revolutionary approach for 'Green Menstruation', is working on all aspects of problems from start to finish. Her target is to remove the menstrual poverty from India and other developing nations. Only making females aware of this problem does not solve the problem. The right way to solve the problem is by designing a solution that is sustainable and long-lasting. A business with such purpose is a conscious business. When a bigger problem is being addressed and all the stakeholders are being taken care of, the business starts adding value for all. The value creation of businesses with higher purpose leads to a path-breaking revolution.

In the case of Vyomini, the higher purpose was to create an ecosystem where rural women would become economically independent. The economic independence of women will be possible only when they are healthy and start working on their own. Vyomini takes care of the health and hygiene of women and helps them to become economically self-dependent. The aim of Vyomini was not only to ensure the availability of an affordable sanitary napkin but also to make them independent.

One can relate the concept of higher purpose with Vyomini with the help of Figure 2.

The various activities that are carried out by Vyomini to empower women are shown in Figure 2. They start with creating awareness about menstrual hygiene and cleanliness, then introduce rural women to Rakshak by distributing free samples. She also encourages them to use sanitary napkins in the future. Vyomini teaches the women who face period poverty, how to make sanitary napkins with simple cotton cloths and maintain hygiene during menstruation. In order to maintain the regular supply of biodegradable and cost-effective sanitary napkins in the remote parts of the country, they encourage women to get involved in trading or manufacturing of Rakshak. Once women have economic strength and capability, they can maintain hygiene and health for the rest of their life. If some women are interested in manufacturing or trading, Vyomini helps them to get trained on the same. Prachi has started conducting Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) with the Technical Services Centre of NSIC for aspiring entrepreneurs from various cities. Vyomini has trained two batches of 20 people each in 2019.

The training consists of setting up a manufacturing unit, training to repair and handle the small technical problems. It also provides them adequate support to get finance under various government funding schemes, policies or financial institutions for setting up the manufacturing unit. Sometimes, a few women come together and opt for micro-financing in the form of a self-help group. When few women create a self-help group, they complement each other's skills. Once the products get manufactured, then it has to be sold in the market. In this regard, Prachi and her team members take special measures to ensure that the product is marketed properly with high-quality standards. They encourage them to develop the local market and provide support for the first 6 months by purchasing the products from

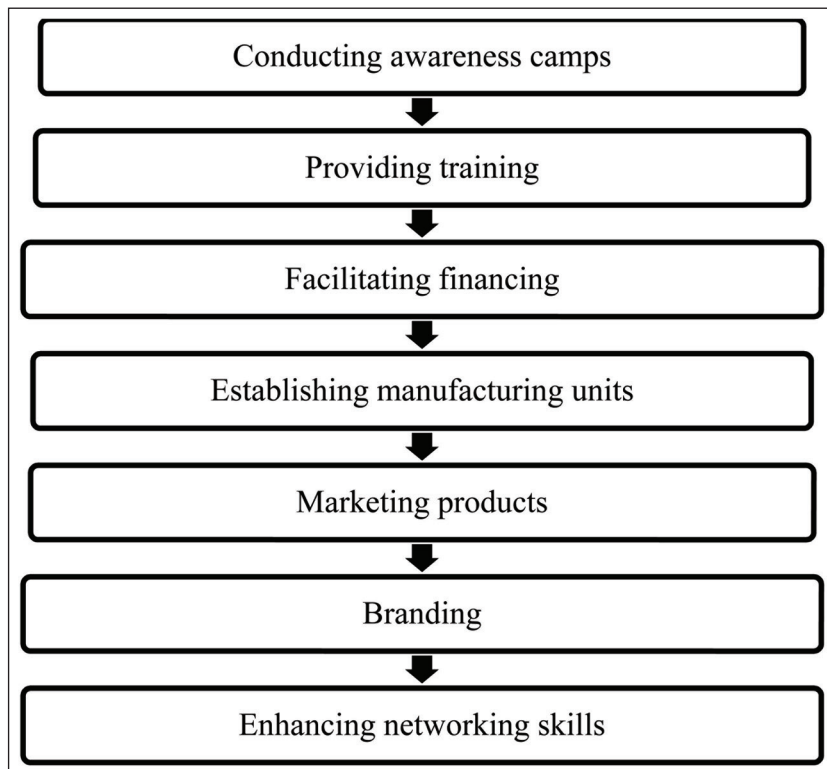


Figure 2. Model for Empowering the Rural and Underprivileged Women

Source: Model developed by the authors.

those manufacturing units. The women entrepreneurs have the choice to sell their manufactured products to Vyomini to be sold under the Rakshak brand after quality standard tests or they can sell it under their own brand in the open market. The branding of the product is done by Vyomini for the new units, and then a network of customers is created who will buy the product. Vyomini charges in instalments from the newly established unit for their consultancy role. This wonderful model of empowering the rural and underprivileged women has been developed based on the concept of empathy and Design Thinking.

Higher Purpose Indicators at Vyomini Enterprise

The mission of Vyomini Enterprise is to facilitate the economic and social empowerment of women. As a result of working on a comprehensive mission, Vyomini has been able to create value by

- creating women entrepreneurs,
- providing sustainable sanitary health across rural and urban India and other nations,
- generating widespread awareness about menstrual sanitation and
- reducing carbon footprints.

The above-mentioned milestones lead to value creation and attainment of the higher purpose of Vyomini. The goal is not only to increase the awareness about menstrual hygiene, manufacture low-cost sanitary napkins but also leads to women empowerment through entrepreneurship. Thus, it can be observed that the higher purpose of Vyomini Enterprise is reflected in its mission as well as vision. Figure 3 shows the sync between higher purpose and Vyomini (Sisodia, 2017).

Vyomini Enterprise, since its inception, has done business with a higher purpose in mind. It identified a solution for the deep-seated needs of women's menstrual health and hygiene. Prachi developed a revolutionary business model for the manufacturing and production of products, which became indispensable for the underprivileged women. She constantly endeavoured to find locally available raw materials and low-cost tools and techniques, which were always aligned to the higher purpose. Prachi has a clear vision to make underprivileged women free from health disorders. Even the employees working in Vyomini derive intrinsic satisfaction by working for the greater good and cause and higher purpose.

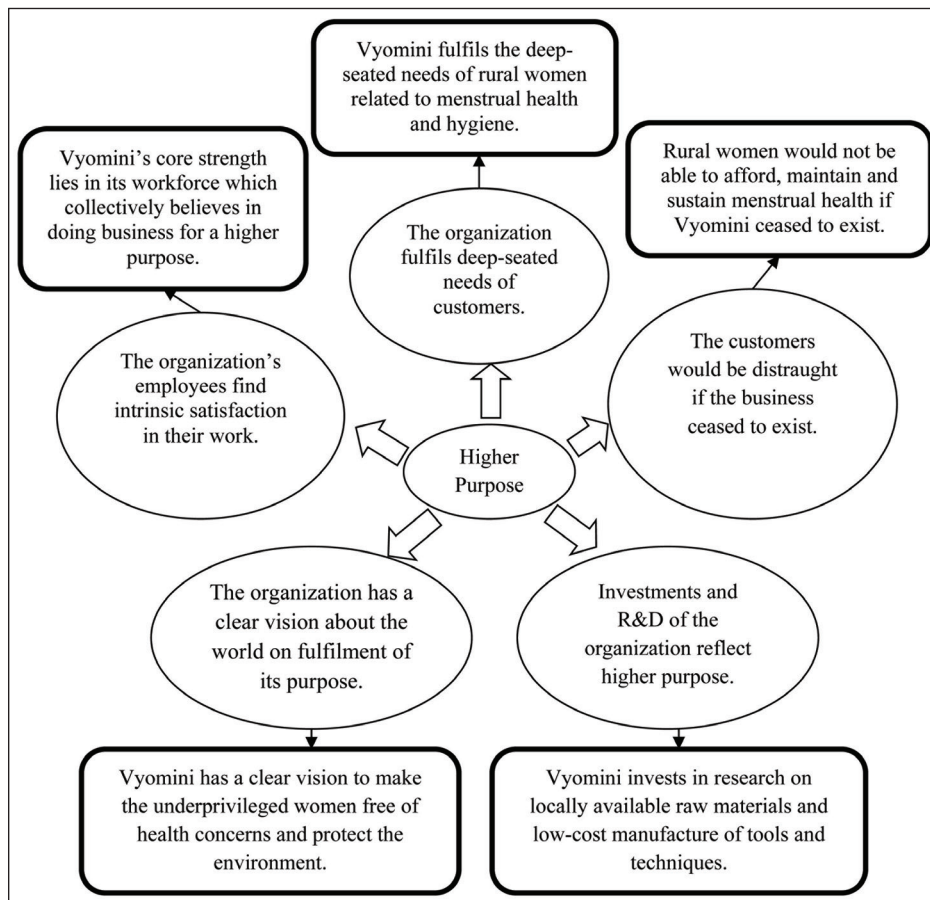


Figure 3. Higher Purpose Indicators and Vyomini

Source: Model developed by the authors.

Conclusion

By empathizing and understanding the problem of rural women with regard to menstrual health and hygiene, Prachi Kaushik created a solution that was affordable to them. She addressed a neglected problem and provided a sustainable solution with a higher purpose in mind. While working for the social cause, she is unknowingly moving towards achieving a higher purpose as stated by the theory of conscious capitalism. It includes providing the solution to menstrual health, making rural women economically independent and protecting the environment through Vyomini. The solution to menstrual health in rural India comprises of awareness campaigns, the know-how of using Rakshak and ensuring its availability at an affordable cost. She involves rural women in the trading of Rakshak and establishes small manufacturing units to ensure widespread availability in an area. She encourages women to start their own business to become economically independent and supports them through training, making self-help groups, facilitating financial help, branding and sales. She emphasizes on Green Menstruation by using biodegradable material. Prachi now plans to expand her business model to African countries where menstrual poverty exists.

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