Dignity Is Not a Discount

The Price of Presence

“Your costs are high. Why are you paying such salaries?”

The obvious assumptions behind that question rankled. And that feeling stayed long after the question was asked. Not because it was unusual, but because it was so familiar. In the social sector, I hear versions of it all the time — sometimes politely, sometimes bluntly, sometimes wrapped in the sophisticated language of sustainability and efficiency. But underneath it, the message is often the same: the work should matter, but the people doing it should remain inexpensive.

The contradiction has been mostly normalised – almost. And that I find even more disturbing.

But let me set some context first.

I am not an ‘insider’. I am someone who has been called an ‘import’ – to the development sector. Over the last eight years I have been part of and have led grassroots programs and organizations working extensively with severely marginalized communities – in public health and education.

I have now founded and lead a not-for-profit organization working in public health palliative and end-of-life care. Much of this work that I am part of now is often inside government health institutions and other last-mile community spaces where suffering is visible, relentless, and deeply human, and conditions are rarely clean, calm, or convenient. These are not easy settings. They are crowded, exhausting, and emotionally charged. The team travels long distances, navigates notorious traffic, and arrives at places where pain, fear, anger, and grief are already heavily present in the room.

And yet, they show up. Every day. Because this is the purpose they signed up for.

In this purpose - what people call “cost” is often, in truth, the price of continuity, trust, and presence. It is the cost of having the same familiar face return to a family in crisis. It is the cost of building a relationship sturdy enough to hold anxiety, uncertainty, and loss. When a member of the team knows the patient’s fears, the family’s rhythms, the relationship dynamics, the small changes in mood or pain, that knowledge is not extra. It is clinical value. It is relational scaffolding.

This work requires not just technical skill, but emotional steadiness. It requires patience in the face of distress, sensitivity in moments when people are unravelling, and a kind of endurance that is difficult to explain to those who have never stood in those rooms. The work leaves a certain residue behind in the people who do it. It is carried home in their bodies, in their silence, in the hours - and sometimes days - after the visit has ended.

In palliative care especially, these things are not soft additions to the work.

They are the work.

And yet, the sector often talks about compensation as though it were a distraction from mission rather than one of its foundations. We like to use words like courage, compassion, and commitment. And we shift uncomfortably when talk about appropriate compensation enters the room.

There is a strange and persistent idea in our sector that frugality in compensation and allied practices is automatically a virtue. That if your reward philosophy is modest, the organization is disciplined. That if salaries and benefits are squeezed, the mission is somehow protected. But this logic only sounds noble until you look at what it actually produces: burnout, instability, attrition, shallow impact, and teams that are constantly expected to give more than they receive.

That view is myopic, at best. It assumes that people can be asked to carry extraordinary burden while being paid as though the strain is ordinary. It assumes that devotion should be enough to cover fatigue. It assumes that the hard jobs in driving social change that has been decades – if not centuries – in the making are somehow the ones that deserve the least financial respect.

Total Reward philosophy in the social sector should not be measured only against market averages or narrowly defined budget lines – and even where such solid comprehensive data exists, the thinking is flawed. It has to reflect the reality of the labour itself.

If we undervalue the people closest to the point of service, we weaken the very systems we claim to build. If we keep asking why compensation is “high” without asking why the work is so hard, we are asking the wrong question. And if we continue to treat care work as if it should run on gratitude alone, we will keep losing the people most capable of doing it well.

The social sector needs a more honest language around cost. If we truly believe that dignity matters for the people we intend to partner and serve, then we must extend that dignity to the people who show up for them.

And yes. My total reward practices are good - and where needed at a premium. It is by design. It is not an HR detail. It is not a budgeting inconvenience. It is a statement of what, and who, we value. That is not excess. It is responsibility.

Anything less is not frugality. It is hypocrisy.