*Competent Communicator 3: Get to the point*

**Turning a blind eye**

May I request all of you to close your eyes and keep it closed for half a minute?

Imagine waking up with your eyes closed. Imagine going through the day's actions, including commuting from home for this meeting with your eyes closed. Imagine a life wherein you can only see what you can see now, with your eyes closed.

5 seconds pause

Thank you, fellow Toast Masters and welcome guests. Let us open our eyes now and feel grateful.

Good morning,

If we were to assemble all the visually challenged people of the world and ask how many of them live in India, over a quarter of them will raise their hands. Not flattering, but the fact is India has the largest population of blind people in the world.

The entire Chennai and Hyderabad cities are not sufficient to house all of them! There are over 12 million of them. One in every 11 Indians is blind - not counting those who turn a blind eye to this reality.

Around 9.6 million of them, need not have lost their eye sight, if they had received timely treatment?

Hope we realise the price a visually challenged person pays through his or her life, through dependence, through not being able to be productive, not being able to fully play the joyful familial role as child, sibling, spouse and parent. How fair is it that for no apparent fault of theirs, 12 million Indians will not see rainbow, flowers, colours, and the faces their spouses and children! Then there is the cold economic price they pay as also the national loss through their limited productivity.

Is it a case of an angry God punishing people for sins – but then whose sins? Can we realistically reduce blindness?

Cataract, refractive errors and corneal blindness account for 80% of blindness. The next major contribution is from childhood blindness, mainly caused by corneal scarring, caused chiefly by Vitamin A deficiency. Childhood blindness occurs mostly before the age of five – a phase when 75 per cent of learning is through sight. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that each year, up to 500,000 children go blind and half of them die within twelve months of going blind. Poverty has no space for the unproductive!

Now the good news: Solutions are fairly simple. For instance, a cataract operation takes just 20 minutes. Most refractive errors can be corrected with spectacles. Corneal blindness can be treated with corneal transplant, after a donor’s death. As for childhood blindness, breast milk in infancy and later, twice-yearly supplements of vitamin A can prevent it and save young lives. Simply put: as little as one rupee a week, child blindness can be confined to history!

Imagine the miracle we can achieve in the lives of millions!

Visualise the wonderment and the excitement of a congenitally blind child, on seeing the world around her for the first time, on restoration of her vision. And her new-found attraction for studies, on seeing the alphabet, the numerals, the pictures and text that he felt only through the Braille patterns. Or visualise the indescribable joy of a once blind father, on seeing his child for the first time.

You can imagine what it will do to their self image and their resolve to do well in life. Also consider what an additional 1% of India’s population can contribute to national production, income and wealth!

Friends, contrast the enormity of the tragedy with the prospective ecstasy for millions. Also consider with relief and shame, the simple intervention denied by turning a blind eye! That only compounds the callous crime of insensitivity and passivity on the part of the medical profession, the Governments, you and I, against 9.6 million Indians!

Friends, how can we turn a blind eye to this criminal neglect?

I would like to leave you with five suggestions.

Firstly, raise your voice for increasing the funding, the research efforts and treatment coverage. Imagine, the country’s GDP can be boosted by 1%, by investing only a fraction of that. The RoI prospects should open the eyes of the budget makers.

Second, persuade your profitable company to earmark a good share of the 2% CSR fund to fight blindness in partnership with a competent NGO.

Third, take the responsibility to reach the awareness, to the families of your driver, the maid and all those who make your life easier.

Fourth, start a vegetable and fruit garden, if circumstances permit. And increase the children’s intake of the produce.

Lastly, pledge your vital organs including your eyes when you cease to need them. I will be doing so shortly.

Over to you, TMoD!