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Cos send staff to villages to learn life lessons

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Chennai: When Ayush Bhalotia's company sent him to live in a village in West Bengal for a month in 2016 he was rather apprehensive.

The city-bred professional decided to spend his time there as a tutor for the village children. "Within a week, almost every family sent their kids to me. We would study, play cricket and chat. The villagers invited me to a local wedding. The trust they had in me was overwhelming," he said. The lesson he took back to his job at Piramal Enterprises, where the 29-year-old is now area business manager, West Bengal for consumer products, was transparency. "The villagers were so open about everything and relationships were based on trust," he says. Bhalotia manages a team of 60 people across locations and his team-built

ing efforts are focussed on bonding and transparency. "During the time I spent at the village, I built strong bonds with the villagers. Even though

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I was a stranger from a city, I was accepted as part of their family. This is what I remember when I work with my team at Piramal," he said.

Corporates like Piramal, IBM and HUL send employees to spend time in villages and live with the locals to get a pulse of the consumer, understand how their products can be of value and what life in rural India is like. "Over 50% of India's population lives in the hinterland, and around 60% of HUL consumers reside here. The rural stint is a four-week assign-

ment as part of the Unilever Future Leaders Programme, designed to get our employees closer to markets and consumers in 'real India'," said an HUL spokesperson.

HUL sends employees to Dehna, Vanjulshet and Karchond in Maharashtra. From learning to milk cows to setting up projects on financial literacy, health and hygiene, HUL employees are expected to participate in life in rural India. Anisha Todi, manager, HR business partner, consumer products division at Piramal Enterprises, spent about a month in a village near Duggad in Rajasthan in 2016. "We had to find our accommodation by convincing families how we could add value by living with them. It was a refreshing experience," she said. The highlight of her stay was daily meal preparation. "Women from adja-

cent houses came together and worked in one kitchen. If one house grew carrots, the other had brinjals. They would take what they needed and cook together," said Todi. Given that Todi's area of work involves people management, she says her appreciation of cultural differences and being sensitive to individual needs has grown immensely after her rural stint.

At Piramal, the focus is on employee transformation. "Most of our employees come from metros and tier-1 cities, and don't have an understanding of real India. They come back as changed people with greater understanding of themselves and of managing people. Without internet or a mobile phone, they get time to introspect and think," said Kedar Rajadnye, president & COO, consumer products, Piramal Enterprises.