

# QA

## Leading in the 21st Century

In an interaction with All Things Talent, Aparna Sharma, Ex- CHRO Greaves Cotton Ltd. talked about the relevance of leadership within the corporate ethos.

She highlighted that Building trust, being mindful and having faith are the 3 critical success factors for any leader.

**Aparna Sharma** has to her credit 21 years of progressive experience in various HR roles. After completing her post graduation in Personnel Management & Industrial Relations (PM & IR) from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. Aparna spent 14 years in the Life sciences space serving as the Director HR of UCB India and Head HR of Novartis. Post this, she moved to the Deutsche Bank Group as Director HR for their Service Centres in Mumbai & Jaipur. In each of her jobs, she has been able to bring about key changes and also made a long-term impact on the organization.

**Q Where did you start your career and how has been the journey like?**

**A** As I reflect on my choices & experiences, I would like to share that my tryst with HR was more by default than by design. However, my twenty plus years journey in HR has been extremely challenging & enriching. There has never been a dull day & I am enjoying every moment of it!

When I first came to Mumbai to study at TISS, I was ridiculed and in some places despised as a "Small Town Girl". Today, as I look back & reminisce my journey, it's truly been a roller coaster ride. I am extremely proud of my roots, my upbringing and all the challenges that I have successfully dealt with to come this far. However, I echo what Robert Frost has said-  
*The woods are lovely, dark & deep;  
But I have promises to keep;  
And miles to go before I sleep...and miles to go before I sleep*

My first full-time job after graduating from the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences



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(TISS), Mumbai in 1996 was with NOCIL as part of the Arvind Mafatlal Group (AMG). It was truly an enlightening start. I was exposed to a wide gamut of issues be it union issues, routing of bus transportation or integration & change management focus when NOCIL (National Organic Chemical Industries Limited) & PIL ( Polyolefins Limited) were to merge. After spending two years in NOCIL, I joined Monsanto, a leading global Biotechnology organization. I was exposed to a manufacturing environment (Lonavala, Silvassa, Bellary, General Santos), R & D set up (Bangalore, St. Louis, Boston, General Santos) and Commercial Operations (All India & in the Philippines). I did pioneering work in setting up the Research & Development centre at Bangalore for Monsanto

India. My efforts continue to be remembered by those who are still a part of the organization. At Monsanto, I worked diligently & seamlessly with all parts of the organization be it in India or the Philippines. I worked hard to make a positive impact & contribution to each employees career & life overall. My biggest satisfaction is that I am best remembered for my exemplary work, simplicity & humility. I moved as an expat to the Philippines based out of Manila in 2003. In a completely alien environment, I tried to endear myself to all through my simple, focused & straightforward nature, setting up of robust systems & processes and coaching people internally for bigger roles. I made a mark in Monsanto locally & globally. My career at Monsanto was extremely enriching & rewarding from where I truly transcended geographical & cultural boundaries! It truly helped me become an all-rounded global professional. I have, in each of my jobs focussed on bringing about key changes and also making a long-term impact on the organization.

**Q You are one of the most respected HR leaders in Corporate India. What is leadership to you? Can you shed some light on how should organisations create leaders of tomorrow? How effective are the leadership development programs according to you?**

**A** Leadership to me is the ability to do, what you say by being a role model. It is about finding an objective more important than oneself and engaging with other people in a reciprocal manner, trusting that one gives all that one has – sharing knowledge & experiences. Leadership often demands to deal with uncertainty and to take decisions hoping that other people will follow. Success in leadership does not come from your role and title but from a clear purpose, passion and self-awareness. Building trust, being mindful and having faith are the 3 critical success factors for any leader. Leadership is one of the most crucial choices that can be made in life and it requires courage, awareness and flexibility as you continuously evolve as an individual. Corporate results and success will be based on the leader's ability to be authentic, to act with integrity and to

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respond to their own needs and the needs of others with vision, creativity, and the sense of unity with the people they lead.

Building leaders of tomorrow need a fresh approach to Leadership. As organizations have grown flatter and middle management thinner, decision-making has been pushed down. Drawing out and developing the leadership skills of those who would have otherwise not been given leadership responsibility has now become mission critical. In order to optimize it, organizations need to provide a compelling vision, foster a work culture where people can express their views openly without any fear, encourage career ownership and self-reliance and provide ongoing developing opportunities. I have mixed views on the effectiveness of Leadership Development programs. They are as effective as the program and the participants. I recall reading somewhere that classroom training is like a Japanese Zen garden, which is peaceful and relaxing. If you compare it to where leadership takes place, which is a much messier and chaotic environment, that is like the summer streets of Calcutta. Development initiatives should take into consideration the context of the work and be more like the leader's daily life.

Content and context are very critical in successful Leadership development programs. When one is working on developing future leaders, one has to find ways of bringing that capability and context together.

**Q How can organizations break the traditional career paths to make them more relevant to the new age workers?**

**A** The career sequence traditionally has been predictable. For most of the twentieth century, the defining feature was stability. An employee could work in the same industry throughout his entire adult life, often in the same company and sometimes even in the same department. There were recognizable milestones on the course toward retirement. From cubicle to corner office to executive suite, employees moved along a simple continuum of experience and rewards. Everyone advanced as far as they could along the same path, or up the same ladder—but the direction to the gold watch was always a straight line.

Well, so much for stability. Fresh entrants to the workforce now expect a winding, unpredictable progression of jobs in a variety of separate fields. Organizations and their employees are entering an age of work atomization, one in which jobs become more numerous and more distinct, even within the same company. Managing this adjustment effectively is proving

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an enormous boon to employee retention and organizational performance.

The nature of work and social contract is changing. Career, job mobility and a portfolio of experience are what the millennials are looking for. The components of a career portfolio are formal education, on-the-job experience, and networks, and each can be meticulously enhanced during an employee's time with the company. Organizations are defining career support and growth as a journey and not as a ladder or staircase.

**Q What steps do you take to ensure that the HR department's objectives are aligned with strategic business goals?**

**A** In my view, alignment of HR objectives to the strategic business goals is the only way to partner with business in its true sense. Also, it is not a one-off activity. It is a constant process of understanding the needs of the different stakeholders in business and engaging with them on an ongoing basis.

In fact, the HR strategy or People Agenda must dovetail into the Strategic goals & objectives of the organisation for achieving the organization's mission.

The HR function intersects and affects all the business functions in the following areas of Talent Acquisition, Performance Management, Training and Development, Employee Retention and Engagement, Employee Relations, Statutory Compliances (Labour & Establishment related) Compensation and Benefits, Safety and Security.

Alignment is the connection between strategy and execution through communication. Aligning strategies requires HR to:

Understand the business strategy

Assess current conditions

Plan and implement the HR strategy; and Measure and evaluate results and adjust as needed.

Communication within the HR department and with leaders of the other business functions is key to accomplishing the following steps. 1. Define what Success would look like 2. Set HR goals 3. Formulate specific actions to achieve those goals with timelines 4. Get buy-in from business leaders 5. Measure

**Q There has been a lot of buzz around Diversity. Under the D&I umbrella the key focus for organisations is the gender diversity metrics. Do you feel that other diversity aspects such as Minority inclusion, Language diversity inclusion, Differently abled people in the workforce are not looked upon as much gender diversity?**

**A** Yes, there are so many dimensions of Workplace Diversity-. However, the most talked about is Gender Diversity. Organisations are coming alive to other aspects such as Multi-generations (age-related), Race & Ethnicity, Differently abled (disability), Sexual orientation, Religion, Socioeconomic status, Education, Personality Types, Language, Life experiences etc. However, there is a long way to go to integrate all these dimensions to build a competitive workforce.

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Also, organisations need to steer clear from undertaking diversity initiatives for the sake of it. The efforts and initiatives are successful when coupled with true inclusion in letter and spirit. I strongly agree with Verna Myers, a noted diversity advocate who says, “ Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.” In my view, Diversity and Inclusion have to go hand in hand with sustainable results.

**Q What are your views on the impact of Data Analytics on HR function. How important is it for organisations. Do you think people analytics can help companies improve the employee experience**

**A** In today’s data-driven world, HR analytics are helping to guide talent, management, and hiring decisions for organizations of all sizes and in all industries. Many organizations use metrics in HR to influence how they recruit,

retain, and compensate employees. This is beneficial because it allows companies to capture and analyze data that can both increase revenues by better understanding and more accurately targeting customers and cut costs through improved business processes. HR analytics aims to provide insight into how

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best to manage employees and reach business goals. Because so much data is available, it is important for HR teams to first identify which data is most relevant, along with how to use it for maximum ROI.

In order to successfully leverage HR analytics, businesses should gather data and then use it for decision-making and process improvements. Now that more businesses realize that data helps them hire and retain the right talent, companies are investing in HR analytics tools, along with trained professionals who understand how to apply them.

HR Analytics can help businesses make smarter decisions in areas such as Turnover, Retention, Risk, Talent, Futurecasting etc. . Data analysis can help define retention and hiring plans as well. In general, predictive analytics can identify common factors and important patterns. HR professionals can then make informed recommendations in terms of policies and decisions that may affect company culture.