

The Making of a dynamic woman leader

By Aparna Sharma

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As I got to down to pen this piece went into flashback mode. What experiences have made me the professional that I am today? What were the challenges faced during a fifteen year career?

I come from a conservative family where women worked but it was not actively encouraged. In the mid 1990's girls from towns like Ujjain, mostly, became homemakers after graduation. I too might have become one, were it not for the inner drive "Dare to be different"- make a mark! Drawing inspiration from my doctor aunt - the World was my canvas. In hindsight, stepping into the corporate world was an accident... The journey has helped me grow in so many ways.

My father was in a transferrable job because of which I studied in different states and travelled throughout India. Although we cribbed as kids, travelling, as I have realized, is a big education. It has enabled me to understand and relate to colleagues, who hail from different parts of the country, much better. Subconsciously, it has also kept me grounded. Living in a hostel taught me to take decisions, assume full responsibility for the results and inculcate a sense of discipline that has always helped.

After completing my graduation from TISS, I applied to a leading chemical company. During the interview, told the panel that would consider joining them only if they allowed me to work on the shop floor. The panel was aghast! Why does this young girl want to commit professional harakari by working in a highly unionized environment? I was firm and am fortunate the panel reposed faith in me. It was baptism by fire. There was a new crisis every day. Workers went on a go slow on the smallest pretext for e.g. there is less sugar in tea today. I learnt to be cool under pressure, build good relations with workers and appeal to their fatherly instincts since many of them had daughters my age.

It has been a roller coaster ride since then. I often reflect on experiences.

What is it that drives me? 'Be a Contributor'. The intent is to add value to the organization and people that I work for/with. In short 'make a difference'. Some say you have to be born with such drive others say it can be acquired. I believe it is a combination of both. A few strands.

Education is a passport to a job but your past track record is the basis for a new assignment meaning that you have to be a contributor continuously. You need an inquisitive mindset, constant hunger for knowledge and insights. Accept challenges head-on for in every solution lie rich experiences and long term rewards. It is this drive to contribute that has, mostly, enabled me to generate transformative insights which have impacted the organization in a positive and lasting way.

Sharing of knowledge has helped me evolve. By writing-speaking what you know, knowledge becomes part of your DNA. Meeting students, aspiring professionals has kept me abreast with how Gen Y is thinking, tailor HR solutions to attract such talent and provoke thought within.

Yet there have been many challenges along the journey. Some roles are traditionally performed by men. There are others which are more welcoming of women. Changing mindsets was a challenge. I was once told 'you cannot do this since this required me to work through the night'. I asked my senior for the brief and time frame. With the support of colleagues and better time management, completed the job before midnight. All I requested was a home drop for the team which the senior readily agreed to. Similarly, I spent over twenty days at a stretch with the sales team to make farmer/field visits. The farmers were impressed to see a lady work shoulder to shoulder with her male colleagues that sales surged.

If you have confidence in your abilities, are willing to learn, and honest to yourself about your limitations, no challenge is too big to accept.

When men want to discuss a problem outside of work, they can meet for a drink after office. Found that difficult to do due to home commitments. I got around it by requesting colleagues to meet earlier over coffee/chai or closer home so that travel time is reduced.

Another challenge is that of work life balance. Women, who work, continue to be homemakers, though not in the earlier sense, and are constantly struggling to excel in both the worlds. Support from the organization and spouse, smoothen the process although must admit that it gets very difficult at times. In such situations, I have sailed through with the belief that this too shall pass and given my best. I also believe that Indian women are blessed with special powers that allow them to multi-task with relative ease.

Sometimes I found women colleagues trying to pull me down and wondered whether women camaraderie ever existed? Over the years I have ceased to look at myself through the prism of being a women manager. I am a professional period. Having said that, I retain my femininity and whatever comes with it, mentor younger women at work.

I am constantly striving to excel, sometimes stumble, always ready to learn and move on.

Being a woman has been a source of strength in my journey of contributing to organizations and the society at large.