

HUMAN RESOURCE

The making of a dynamic woman leader

Aparna Sharma shares her experiences as a woman professional and says that 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.

AS I got down to pen this piece, I just went into a flashback mode. What were the experiences that made me the professional I am today? What were the challenges overcome during a 15-year career? Scenes from my life once again played out before me.

I come from a conservative family where women were not allowed to work. However, the idea was not actively encouraged. In the mid-1990s, girls from small towns like Ujjain mostly settled as homemakers after graduation. I, too, might have been one, were it not for my inner drive and dare-to-be-different approach to life. Drawing inspiration from my aunt, a doctor herself, the entire world gradually became my canvas. The journey from a gritty girl to a strong corporate woman has been truly heroic and has helped me grow in various ways.

My father was in a transferable job because of which I studied in different states and travelled throughout India. Although as kids, we cribbed thinking about travel, it is now that I realise that travel makes for a big educative experience. It has really enabled me to understand and relate to colleagues hailing from different parts of the country in a better way. Further, living in a hostel taught me to take decisions, assume full responsibility for the results and instill a sense of discipline that has always helped.

After completing my graduation from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), I applied to a leading chemical company. During the interview, I told the panel that I would consider joining them only if they allowed me to work on the shop floor. The panel was aghast at the idea! Why does this young girl want to commit professional hara-kiri by working in a highly unionized environment? I was firm and consider myself fortunate that the panel reposed faith in me. It was baptism by fire! A new crisis greeted me every day. Workers used to give up work or

go slow upon the smallest pretext say, there was less sugar in the tea, on any day. I learned to keep my cool under pressure, build good relations with workers and on occasions, appeal to their fatherly instincts as many of them had daughters my age.

It has been a big roller coaster ride since then. I often reflect on these experiences with amusement.

The urge to make a difference

What is it that drives me and lets me contribute in my organisation? It seems that there is a distinct intent to add value to the organisation and the people I work with. It can be described as the urge to make a difference. Some say you have to be born with such a drive, while others say it can be acquired. I believe it is a combination of both.

Education is merely a permit to do a job but your past track record, as a professional, forms the basis for any new assignment meaning that you have to contribute continuously. Besides, you need an inquisitive mindset and a constant hunger for knowledge and insights. Accept challenges head-on for every situation offers rich experiences and long-term rewards. I feel it is this drive to contribute that has mostly enabled me to generate transformative insights, which have impacted the organisation in a positive and lasting way.

Sharing of knowledge has also helped me evolve and reinvent myself as an individual. Meeting students and young professionals and sharing my insights with them has helped me understand how Generation Y thinks and values itself. This in turn has helped me tailor effective HR solutions to attract and retain Gen Y talent.

Changing mindsets

However, the journey of my life as a corporate leader has been rife with various challenges. Some roles are

traditionally performed by men. There are others which are more welcoming to women. Changing mindsets was a real challenge. I was once told you cannot do a particular task since it required me to work through the night. I approached my senior for a brief and needed timeframe. With active support of colleagues and better time management, I completed the job before midnight. All I requested in trade-off was a home-drop for the team, to which the senior readily agreed. Similarly, I spent over twenty days at a stretch with the sales team on field trips meeting farmers. The farmers were impressed to see a lady work shoulder-to-shoulder with her male colleagues and it boosted the overall sales in a big way.

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

Achieving work-life balance

Another challenge I met was that of work-life balance. Women, who work, often find themselves also managing the home turf and are constantly struggling to excel in both the worlds.

Support from the organisation and spouse, doubtless, smoothen the process, although I must admit that it gets

very difficult at times. In such situations, I managed to sail through with the belief that this too shall pass and always gave 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 camaraderie ever existed between women at work? Over the years, I have ceased to look at myself through the prism of being a 'woman' manager. I am a professional. Period. Having said that, I retain my femininity and whatever comes with it, and actively mentor younger women at work.

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

Being a woman has been a source of strength in my journey of contributing to organisations and society at large. I am proud to be a woman and a professional but more than I am proud to belong to a very special tribe – the tribe of professional women who are changing the face of the Indian workplace today.

The writer is Director-HR at DBOI Global Services, Deutsche Bank Group. She was conferred the "HR Super Achiever Award" by Star News at the 20th World HRD Congress 2012, Mumbai as part of the "HR & Leadership Awards" and the "Women Leadership Award" for BFSI (Banking, Financial Services & Insurance) Awards conferred in 2012 by the Institute Of Public Enterprise (IPE), Hyderabad.



Aparna is an avid reader, poetess, intrepid traveller, nature and wildlife enthusiast, amateur photographer, has a passion for gardening and a keen people collector.