

The Experiential Learner



Shveta Vakil, Executive Director, Setco Automotive Ltd., is an industry veteran in every count - the fact that he is 67 years, caps 46 years of industry experience, the leading organisations he has worked or the various functions that he has managed. He is humble to admit that he has managed HR for only twelve years, and believes that people management is the biggest challenge for any organisation.

BY S. AJAY KUMAR

IN BRIEF

Name	: Shveta Vakil
Age	: 67 Years
Title	: Executive Director
Organisation	: Setco Automotive Ltd.
Experience	: 46 Years
Years in HR	: 12 Years
Education	: B. Com (Hons, Advanced Management Programme, IIM Ahmedabad

How do you look back at your professional journey that you have traversed thus far? Please share some of the enriching experiences that you have come across.

The professional journey travelled by me thus far has been such that even people who have known me since long find it difficult to comprehend my journey and also my destiny. I joined Forbes Forbes Campbell & Co. Ltd. (then a part of Tatas) as a 21 year old, and went through trainings across all functions including HR (then called Personnel) and diverse businesses ranging from Office Equipment, Paints, Liquor, Edible Oils and Oleochemicals. After a rigorous training of two years, I scaled up the ladder for 12 years mainly in Sales & Marketing apart from a stint in Commodity Management. It was here that I learnt my initial lessons in HR and the experience I gained in labour management were fascinating.

Then, I chanced upon an opportunity in Hindustan Lever Ltd. (now Hindustan Unilever Ltd) and continued my career in Sales & Marketing in categories such as Foods & Beverages, Personal Care etc. Here, the learnings were completely different since I worked with a bunch of young professionals. I also managed to get a good grip on interpersonal and man management skills, besides sharpening my selling skills in distributive FMCG business. My HR skills sharpened even further since I was dealing extensively

with a highly unionised sales force. Later, my career involved managing commodities and setting up the exports business for Agro Foods for the company for more than a decade. With the experience I had thus acquired, my stint with HUL provided me with a good exposure to HR systems and processes that included some in house training programmes on the subject. Today, I can appreciate the importance of people handling skills.

Thereafter, I had a relatively short stint in an American company called Bunge India. I played a lead role in this startup, and apart from managing the business, I also learnt the ropes of HR, largely in recruitment, training, as well as hiring people for new factories. Thus, an experience of 36 years, though not primarily in HR, provided me with sufficient insights in HR when I joined Setco Automotive Ltd. in 2006. However, it was a complete contrast and a major career risk since I had very little exposure in managing the Auto Component business for a relatively small sized company, considering my previous employers. But, the decision was conscious since I felt that it provided me with a great opportunity to share my learnings of several years in a small company that held the potential of exponential growth. It was only here that I formally practised HR, initially as a COO, and later as the Executive Director. I set up a team and worked on creating HR policies and processes from scratch, and developed an employee friendly structure.

How has working across industries made your professional journey more interesting?

The experience gained in FMCG businesses, Commodities, and now in the Auto Component industry, has been absolutely fascinating. At the end of the day, I feel enriched and as a well-rounded manager. Further, the lessons learnt in one area were practised elsewhere, yielding positive results which one can only relate to if you have gone through the process.

How different have the two experiences been for you- setting up HR from the scratch in an organisation to managing well-established HR

Rapid Fire

Favourite Quote: "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." - Benjamin Franklin.

Leadership style: Authoritarian

Current Professional Goal: To make Setco the best company to work for.

Favourite Book: Books by Gopala Krishna.

Favourite Movie: The Guns of Navarone.

Favourite Music Artist: Pankaj Udhas.

Life is...? Short. Use your time judiciously to attain your goal.

Family is... Everything

I strongly believe in.... Work Life Balance

The most important thing I do on Sunday.... Have my afternoon nap!

I deal with setbacks by... Analysing my mistakes to make sure lessons are learnt and mistakes are not repeated.

3 Things I never leave home without... Blessings

Up, Close and Personal

What inspired you to steer your career towards HR?

HR as a subject is people oriented. It offers a lot of opportunities to interact, understand, and analyse people needs. Further, HR offers a platform to consciously learn something new and innovative to upgrade the human capital.

How do you like to spend your free time?

Considering the fact that I lead a high pressure and hectic life which involves a travel of more than 100 days a year, I like to spend my free time with my family and socialise with friends. The daily routine of an hour's walk in the mornings is refreshing and prepares me to face the challenges for the day.

Please share some of your experiences of travelling to different places. What have you gained from these experiences?

Travel provides you with an opportunity

to interact with people at large. Meeting and interacting with them, enables one to learn new things and shows ways in which your job is done differently to improve your efficiency. Meeting different people also widens your horizon to understand different situations and implement new learnings on the job.

What were your learnings from the B-School?

My business management training helped me significantly to work in a structured manner. It aided me to become more systems and process driven, and to my mind, this has assisted me to manage affairs more efficiently.

Has someone from your family deeply inspired your values and growth as a human being?

In the Indian context, when a large number of people grow up in joint families, the values of your parents get deeply imbibed. I was fortunate to have

acquired my values from my parents largely, and as life moved on, some rub-off effects from my wife as also my daughters influenced my values.

Who would you credit as a great influence in shaping the man that you are today?

I would say two people who really helped me shape my life as a business man were Girin Khandwala, Managing Director, Forbes Forbes Campbell & Co. Ltd. and Bipin Shah, Vice Chairman, Hindustan Unilever Ltd. They saw the potential in me and moulded my career, providing the required inputs to take me where I am today. The two leaders made me an entrepreneur in a professional environment. Of course, I would be doing injustice to Harish Sheth, Chairman & Managing Director of Setco Automotive Ltd. since he added an Indian entrepreneurial flavour and taught me the ways of running SMEs. My strong business acumen, strategic orientation and commercial bent in decision making could squarely be attributed to them.

frameworks?

Barring a short stint in HUL, I truly was not exposed to managing HR. I had shifted to Delhi with the clear objective of restructuring the sales and distribution system. It was only when I began working that I realised that it essentially meant downsizing the sales force, and unless this milestone was

achieved, the other activities could not be initiated. Dealing with the CPM union was an experience in itself. Thereafter, moving on to actually setting up the HR function in Setco was an experience of a lifetime. And, I felt I was transferring my knowledge, which over the years enriched and transformed the company as well as the employees.

HR Perspectives

Some gaps that HR Organisations need to bridge

- Apart from inducting fresh blood, there is a need to sharpen the skillsets, particularly in the areas of IR/ER.
- Additional focus on providing training inputs to the existing HR team to enable them to counter challenges without any difficulties.
- Comparing individual competencies and evolving a plan to bridge the gap.
- Reviewing organisation structure and flattening the same to be more efficient.

- Continuous focus on Change Management
- Conscious efforts to sensitise the operations team to support HR to meet its priorities.

Common errors companies commit while designing engagement practices

Typically, engagement practices should be customised. Most companies replicate what they experience elsewhere assuming that this will work here as well. Further, it is also important to get feedback that can help the management to improve in the future.

Since you have been long associated with the Automobile sector, what is your understanding of the business, and how big a role does HR play in this sector? Were there any sector specific challenges and opportunities experienced by you?

I initially worked as the COO and HR was added to my role subsequently. Thus, I was personally responsible to not only operate the business, but also work on HR. I therefore developed a deep sense of how HR could make or break a business. I see HR play an integrated role in an auto component company like Setco, and to a large extent, a driving force that shall not only make us the largest Clutch manufacturer in the MHCV sector in India, but amongst the top 5 at the

Buzzer Round

- **A mysterious benefactor wrote you a check for 1,00,00, 000 and said, "Help me solve a problem!" What would you say?**

Trash

- **What's the one thing you are deeply proud of but would never put it in your resume?**

Principles

- **What's the one dream that you have tucked away for the moment?**

After so many years in the business, I have lived and grown on my dreams, nothing really tucked away as of now.

- **Is there something that people consistently ask for your advice on? What is it?**

Internal Conflict management resolution, Career progression, Resolution of job related issues, apart from personal issues that are required to be bounced in confidence.

- **When was the last time you astonished yourself?**

When I look back, I am truly surprised that I could do something that stood the weather for a significant amount of time.

- **What do you value most: free time, recognition, or money?**

Free time

- **Are you living your life purpose or still searching?**

Have identified life purpose, but waiting to live.

Sheth tweaked my thinking and provided me with a new dimension. He hands out a lot of support in each of the company's decisions. These, according to me are the people who have played a vital role in my career.

"Best HR practices are built on a futuristic vision." What are your views on the same and how have you practiced this during your stint with various organisations?

Men, money, and machinery are the three key pillars upon which the vision of an organisation stands. While the required amount of money and the desired machinery can always be made available, you do not need just the men, you need men with the right skills and competencies who can fit into your culture and work environment. HR plays a key role in moulding men into men who fit your needs. They need to be recruited from

global level. The credit for such an exponential growth must be attributed to HR, since we countered initial challenges in terms of talent attraction. Also, owing to employee-friendly practices that were in force right from the point of inception, we had no problems with talent retention. The fact that Setco is the first employer for more than 70% of our employees speaks volumes over the focus on HR from the promoters. The other challenge that was successfully managed by us was bringing forth Change Management and blending cultures along with the inflow of new employees. The growth opportunities presented to the work force motivating them to grow along with the company were well-leveraged by us.

Who have been your figures of inspiration during the professional journey? What according to you are some of the values and ideologies leaders should definitely walk the talk to win stakeholder confidence?

I would say that I learnt a lot from my seniors and I was fortunate to be associated closely with Managing Directors, Vice Presidents, and Chairmen. Bipin Shah from HUL helped me understand the commodities business, without speculating on the decisions over buying and selling commodities. Of course, my current chairman, Harish

Awards and Accolades

HR Leadership Award -Asia Pacific
HRM Congress 2014.

the relevant background, must fit into the culture, and have the requisite skills and competencies. If there is a deviation in any of these, then it needs to be developed through appropriate training. Once this is done, a major battle is won, but we need to ensure that the talent acquired is retained, and functions with the motivation to deliver as per their KRAs. Without the support of HR, it is impossible to achieve the organisational vision. And, this is what I experienced at Setco, and built this into my practice, thus achieving the corporate vision.

As part of the Setco family, what will be your focus for 2019? What are the organisational goals that have been set by you?

Considering the fact that Setco is on a fast growth trajectory, and keeping in mind its vision, HR needs to prepare itself for the requirements for 2020 in terms of numbers, skill building, review structure, compensation review as well as continued focus on Change Management to prepare the organisation for the challenges and build a strong result-oriented leadership team. 

Learning Points

Looking at my career progression, I believe it is the learnings through experience which has taken me to where I am. This could be in the area of crisis management, leadership, negotiation, travelling through uncharted territory, people management, interpersonal relationship, in-depth functional knowledge such as Finance, HR etc. where I have no formal professional training etc. Experience gained by handling varied stints such as Sales & Marketing, Commodities Management, International Business, New Business Development, Projects & Infra, Auto Components Business, and of course, functional exposure to HR explains my flexibility of managing diverse roles. This has resulted in me being groomed into a well-rounded, successful manager.