The Eternal Learner

Shantanu Das, CHRO, Amway India, carries immense faith in the eternal belief that every experience in life; whether good or bad, is a part of one’s learning curve and feels that this has been the prime reason for the success that he has managed to achieve thus far in his career.

- BY S. AJAY KUMAR

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

If I look back, it has been a journey full of learnings, and, every experience has strengthened me as a person and helped me to do my job better. And, while life has not been only mere successes, there have been failures as well, and in hindsight, I would refer to them as learnings. Whenever I have been able to contribute meaningfully to the business, whether it is a restructuring exercise, acquiring the "right talent" to transform the business, be the catalyst to change the culture, embed new systems and processes which aids business results, all of these have really been fun as well as challenging.

One very recent experience that has proved to be truly enriching was in Amway, where HR supported and partnered in restructuring the Sales Organization, and made the structure for "Amway Next" - a structure for the future. The business understanding and appreciating the contribution of HR at all forums, is what makes it most satisfying.

What were the highly challenging times in your career that provided you the most important lessons of life?

There have been many challenging times, and, at that moment of crisis or failure, it has been daunting, and at times depressing. In retrospect, I can tell you that those moments have only strengthened me as a person, and, built my character and resilience.

Some of the lessons learnt are-
- Take time to trust a person and do not trust with ease
- When the chips are down, stay positive as far as possible.

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Favourite Quote: “And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it - Paulo Coelho.”

Leadership Style: Lead from the front and Walk the Talk

Current Professional Goal: To be the Global HR Head

Favourite Books: Freedom at Midnight (Larry Collins & Dominique Lapierre), White Mughals (William Dalrymple), Delhi (Khuswant Singh) City of Joy (Dominique Lapierre).

Favourite Movies: I am a movie buff! Benhur, Sholay & Parinda are my all-time favourites.

Favourite Music Artists: Pt. Ravi Shankar (Sitar); Ustad Zakir Hussain (Tabla); Ustad Rashid Khan (Vocal), Asha Bhosle (Vocal), Ghulam Ali (Ghazal) & Late Jagjit Singh (Ghazal).

Life is…. Once, live king-size
Family is…. Priority and do the best you can for them
I strongly believe in….building and nurturing relationships and sustaining them for long years
Family for me…. Number one priority
The most important thing I do on Sunday…. Go to my classical music classes.
I deal with Setbacks by….Patience, sincerity and staying positive
3 Things I never leave home without….. Phone, spectacles and wallet
only brings your morale further down.
• In times of crisis, the people who would surely stay with you are your own family members - your parents, spouse and children. Hence, do not discard your family at times when they need you!
• If there are upheavals on the personal front - prioritize and sort out the domestic issues, lest it start affecting your professional life as well. It does not get solved by default!
• Never ever underestimate any individual on face value! You will surely be proved wrong.

How has working across industries made your professional journey more interesting?
I do believe that the basic HR deliverables remain the same across all the industries. However, the experiences becomes different and interesting across industries, depending on the culture/values and the business phase in which the company is at that point of time. And, as mentioned earlier, with every experience you end up becoming stronger, both at the professional level and on the personal front. What is most interesting is that when you work across industries, the difference is apparent in the kind of people you come across, the skill sets and the profiles. And, when you interact with these diverse set of people, you experience expansion in your thinking and your horizon, thus making you a "richer" person. For instance, while I have worked across a section of FMCG companies thus far, and, now when I am in Amway, which is also an FMCG, but with a direct selling distribution network - it gives a whole new dimension and perspective to my experience, considering the way this business works as compared to other companies.

According to you, how different are the two experiences- setting up HR from the scratch in an organization to managing well established HR frameworks?
Honestly, I have never been in any company where I had to set up HR from the scratch, though I have been in companies wherein the processes
had to be rebuilt and strengthened. And, in such set ups, the focus has been more on getting the basics right, and, execution has been the key to success. In the case of established HR frameworks, one needs to be more strategic, and, ensure that the HR deliverables are constantly reviewed, and kept aligned with the business priorities. And, more specifically in an MNC like Amway, it must be ensured that the practices and processes are in sync and customized to the local needs and priorities.

In spite of your hectic schedule, how you would like to spend time with your family. Has someone from your family inspired your values and growth as a human being?

I abide by this golden mantra - whatever time you spend with your family, it has to be "quality" time - in other words that time should be dedicated to the family alone, and, not get divided into other priorities. And, higher the quality of time, higher is the compensation it does for the less time you spend.

There are many in my family who have inspired me - especially the women who have worked "silently" and sacrificed their own aspirations for the sake of members like me to do well in our lives. For me, they are truly the unsung heroes. My spouse has been a friend and has stood strong in times of crisis, and, I need to imbibe the virtues of "patience" and "resilience" from her.

"Best HR practices are built on a futuristic vision." What is your view on this and how have you practiced this during your stint with various organizations?

In today's complex world, the present is dependent on the future! Companies that anticipate the trends of the future and build the present organization on the basis of the future are the ones which survive in the long run. And, the same is applicable to the people domain. HR should have the ability to understand the future business needs and support in building the business accordingly. Both the hard and the soft matrices stand on equal footing when it comes to building the future organization. We need to be unrelenting in our minds, and, constantly challenge the status quo, which is "what is working today, will that work in the future as well?" If the answer is no, then we need to re- gear ourselves to make things happen and ensure that they work for the future. Often, I have noticed companies adopting HR practices merely for the sake of staying on par with the industry - in my view, this is not a well thought-out approach. The logical approach is to do what is relevant for your company, and, what will ensure that it stays relevant for.

What inspired you to steer your career towards HR?

Though at times, I did feel the move to Sales, however continued in HR because of the sheer dynamism that this function has. Meeting varied kinds of people with diverse thinking & different perspectives makes it truly an interesting function. Also being in HR, you are actually driving the "live wire" of the organization.

Please share some of your experiences of your travels to different places. What were your gains from these experiences?

I have travelled to 13 countries for business and had the privilege of interacting with a diverse set of people. This has only broadened my perspective to look at things differently. Also, one tends to learn from various cultures that one gets exposed to. I have built a network across many sections of people across all these countries and this makes it a truly enriching experience.

Could you please share some of your memories from your years of growing up with us?

I was brought up in a joint family, and have very sweet memories of my years growing up, especially with so many family members around all the time. My school days in Jamshedpur have been an extremely pleasant experience - some of the teachers have left the impression of a lifetime on me, and, I am in touch with them even today. Innumerable acts of mischief intended to 'pull peoples' legs' are what that sum up a large part of my fond memories!

What was your learning experience from the B-School?

Graduating from an ordinary college and then getting into a premier B-School was initially a little overwhelming. However, in the two years, the grind that we had to go through, made us start our career on a strong wicket! And, there was a lot of value addition as far as knowledge is concerned. I still refer to many of the handouts/notes from XLRI days while taking training sessions for the employees.

Whom would you credit in your life as a great influence in shaping the man that you are today?

There has been not been a single person who has influenced me, since there are several! Parents, spouse, siblings, teachers, some of my superiors, some of my peers and colleagues have all contributed to whatever little I have attained today. I am also thankful to God for enabling me in my achievements thus far. I also believe luck and destiny matter to any individual and the same is applicable for me as well!
there are many who have worked with me, and presently are either heading HR or doing very well in their careers and they attribute me as one of the reasons for their career growth. This makes me feel truly satisfied as a professional.

"I should practice what I preach". Any leader should possess this strength. I have this simple rule for myself - in any interaction that I have with anyone, I should do at least one value addition from my end to the other person/persons in some form. And, I have been consciously practicing this, and, it has truly worked for me in building my reputation as a leader.

Again, in my leadership style, I truly believe in empowerment and delegation. However, at some point, I also keep control of things through formal as well as informal mechanisms. I strongly believe that execution is the key to success and this reflects in my leadership style as well.

How do you like to spend your life beyond work? What are your hobbies? How do you find time to still enjoy them?

The one career that I could not pursue, but had always aspired for - was to become a professional Indian classical musician! However, I have been an amateur musician for far too long! I have pursued music for several decades, and, over the years have learnt from many eminent musicians and continue to do so. I play classical guitar (Hawaiian guitar adapted to Indian classical music). In the time that I have "for myself" - most of it either goes to my practice or listening to music.

Please share interesting incidents and anecdotes from your experience that have added interesting facets to your professional journey. What aspect in HR inspires you?

What inspires me and makes me ticking is the very dynamism of the HR function. You deal with people of multiple shades and perspectives, and, there does not seem to be one answer to the same problem. HR, as a function has taken far too long as compared to the other functions to emerge as a business partner, however better late than never! And,
with such a dynamic function and being a part of the journey to make an impact to grow and build the business is what keeps me ticking.

There have been quite a few incidents which have transformed me as a professional -

As I have mentioned earlier, Amway is in direct selling, and, when I interact with the Amway Business Owners (ABOs), who are entrepreneurs in their own right, how HR can contribute to the success of the ABOs is truly an interesting facet in my professional journey at this juncture. There have been several interesting experiences in my previous assignments as well, especially when driving systems and processes, which bring a change to the status quo - from the initial resistance to alignment of the key stakeholders, is an enriching experience for any HR professional.

In one of my previous companies, I had just about one and a half years of work experience and was entrusted to drive VRS along with my superior, there were a large section of employees who came and checked with me on what they should do, and what is better for them. In some cases, I recall the employees insisting that I visit their homes and convince their families. This was an overwhelming experience considering the fact that they had this huge trust in me that I will not misguide them. And, I did realize that a HR professional has to build trust and faith amongst employees, and, this went on to become a guiding principle for me throughout my career.

Similarly, in another company, galvanizing the entire workforce to "one team, one dream" and make all employees (including the indirect workforce) to work in unison and make the company achieve the vision ahead of the timeframe was an overwhelming experience for me, considering the success of this initiative.

In one of my previous stints, amidst various differing opinions, I had floated the idea of hiring class 12 pass-outs as shop floor associates, and provide them with the training to run the shop floors. And, we actually implemented this and these associates went on to run the shop floors on their own without any supervision. It was indeed a very satisfying experience.

Having been a part of diverse sectors, how did you manage to constantly up-skill yourself to meet the professional demands?

I have been majorly in the FMCG sector and the basic principle of business remains the same across the industry, barring a few specific nuances that every business brings to the table.

And, as I said earlier, the basic pillars of the HR function do not alter - for instance every company will certainly have a performance management system, though there could be a little variation in the formats. The same is the case for the other pillars as well. What is important for an HR professional though, is to constantly upgrade himself/herself on the latest trends and imbibe them with the desired customization. There are many ways through which one can stay abreast- self reading, attending conferences, and, in my view, the most important way is through peer learning among your network.