



The Inspired Manager

Drawing inspiration from her role in the domain of leadership consulting, Geethaa Ghaneekar, CHRO - Raheja Universal, made a career switch to Human Resources and has not looked back since. In her own words, a deeply defining period of her life was when she was involved in a process of downsizing and personally ensured that each of the exiting colleagues was suitably placed.

BY S. AJAY KUMAR

How do you look back at the professional journey that you have traversed thus far? Please share a few enriching experiences that you have had.

As I look back, I feel a sense of gratitude for the kind of opportunities that came my way, and also the people I worked with. Managers and colleagues you work with early in your career shape your work ethics and values. I was fortunate to have met some exceptional people along the way, and am sharing a couple of poignant moments that has stayed with me.

In my first job as a sales executive,

I recall making a presentation to my CEO and the leadership team over the results of a particularly bad Quarter. I had stayed up all night to rehearse my lines, and everyone in the team

IN BRIEF

Name	: Geethaa Ghaneekar
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Title	: CHRO
Organisation	: Raheja Universal Pvt. Ltd.
Experience	: 26 Years
Years in HR	: 18 Years
Education	: MBA

expected the session to be really fiery since we were significantly below targets. I felt like a sacrificial lamb as I got up to present. After 20 minutes, my CEO rose and said, "The meeting is over! If the youngest member of the team can be so passionate about what we are doing, I am sure this team can turn this around in no time." It was unbelievable, and for a young career aspirant at that time, this was a huge validation. Over the years, there have been several occasions that have come and gone, but the feeling of that day has always remained special in my memory.

In another rather embarrassing incident, I was to meet a client along with the Founder of a Leadership consulting firm in which I worked. I was delayed by only 2 minutes to the pickup location, but he had already left. I managed to reach the client's office flustered, angry, and on the verge of tears. We made it to the meeting on time. After the meeting, my boss, rather straight-faced and calmly, gave me my earliest lesson on respecting time as the most valuable resource. And that has stayed with me since.

The third instance was when I had to part ways with over 200 employees as part of a downsizing exercise in an effort to bring the organisation back to health. I personally met every employee, listened to their stories, laughed and cried with them, created customised packages, set up outplacement mechanisms, and by the end of the exercise, we had everyone

placed. This for me was a truly painful but deeply defining period. It dawned on me then that the only way you can justify your role is when you do not compromise on your values and what you hold dear. What you have to do many times may not be entirely in your hands, but the HOW of it is certainly within your control. And that needs to reflect your personality and character.

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

I have worked in Manufacturing, Service, Finance, Retail, Consulting, and am now in Real Estate. Being in a different industry with every new assignment has been one of the biggest boons of my career. It makes the job so much more interesting, because HR is deeply embedded in the business of the organisation. The markets, customers, competition, talent landscape, structures, process framework, etc., differ from industry to industry. Getting on top of it within the initial six-ten months is a steep learning curve. This has ensured that there has never been a dip in my learning all through the 26-27 years of my career.

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

It certainly is different. When you inherit a team with well-established practices, then your job is tougher. You need to be able to work harder to add value and contribute without disrupting anything that is working well. It helps to use an appreciative lens when taking on a well-established set up.

When creating a new HR set up, it is a lot easier. It provides one with tremendous freedom in configuring how exactly you would want it to be. Of course, in either case, everything you do must be so after a careful understanding of the organisation, its strategy and culture, talent landscape, HR challenges, competing employers, etc.

Having been associated with the Real

Rapid Fire

Favourite Quote: "Life is a sum total of all the choices I make"

Leadership style: Inspirational

Current Professional Goal:

Create an inclusive place of work

Favourite Book: A New Earth by Eckhart Tolle

Favourite Movie: The Pursuit of Happiness

Favourite Music Artist: Michael Jackson

Life is...? A work of art in process

Family is... My safe haven

I strongly believe in.... Love and the power of thought

The most important thing I do on Sunday.... Siesta

I deal with setbacks by...

Reminding myself that it is not permanent and all-permeating. This too shall pass and there is more to my life than this one thing

3 Things I never leave home without... My self-respect, keys, and kajal

Up, Close and Personal

What inspired you to steer your career towards HR?

I started with sales. And during my stint with the Leadership consulting firm I had the opportunity to work with hundreds of leaders and decision makers in helping them break limiting beliefs. They held these both as individuals and teams, and it had significant impact on the organisation and its growth potential. This inspired me to look at a role that can make a similar impact from a vantage point inside the organisation, and when played well, HR stands out as that vantage position.

How do you like to spend your free time?

I am an avid reader and I enjoy travel

very much. I play the sitar and that always has a calming effect on me.

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

Travel opens minds like nothing else. When one is removed from a familiar environment to experience a new world, the basic human nature of curiosity is awakened. Curiosity is the very root of all our learning and growth.

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

Yes, my parents have been an inspiration on the value of hard work

and work ethics, on making my own choices, and being responsible for the consequences. Lastly, I believe that adaptability runs in my family as well.

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

The credit goes not to a single person, but to several. My parents and my children because they made everything I did worthwhile, some exceptional leaders I worked with, and most importantly, the challenges I have had to face, since struggles and difficulties do not change you - they reveal you.

Estate sector thus far, 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 have moved into the Real Estate sector only recently. Like all capital-intensive industries, the criticality of People as a valuable resource takes time to emerge, unlike the Knowledge

sectors like Consulting, Technology, or the service industries like Retail and Hospitality. So, the Real Estate sector has been a slow mover in contemporising its HR Practices. The industry did not feel the need until the recent past, since the sector is small, and is fairly guarded from any real war for talent. A majority of the talent start and end their careers with one company, and they are well taken care of. There is generally a long rope and a tolerant approach during patches of dip in performance, and the employees in turn understand the cyclical nature of the business, making it unpredictable during turfs. But the environment operates on trust more than stringent HR Practices, and that has severed them very well all along.

However, with recent changes in the regulatory environment, subtle but definite shifts in customer preferences and demographics, and economic volatility being experienced by the industry, there is an urgent need for a relook. As the industry is consolidating, several buyouts and joint ventures are taking place, and talent is being displaced and hired with equal intensity. So, it is ironic that while there is no dearth of talent availability, there is always a huge demand for good talent and niche skills, and this dynamic has just gotten more intense. So, establishing an Employer brand has

HR Perspectives

Some gaps that HR Organisations need to bridge

HR organisations now need to consist of skill sets and competencies other than core HR - like Marketing, Analytics, Technology, Design experts, etc. Gone are the days when the team consisted only of qualified HR professionals.

Common errors companies commit while designing engagement practices

The belief that engagement is something that the company needs to closely manage and influence is by itself flawed. I believe engagement is intrinsic to the individual. There are highly engaged employees in teams that have very low engagement scores and vice versa. Also, the effort

in creating extrinsic engagement in the form of team events, fun activities, beautifully designed workspaces, etc., all serve in the short term, but fail to impact sustained engagement where the employee is enthused to put in discretionary effort. So, I believe in the 3 basic tenets that have worked better on creating and sustaining high engagement: -

- Engaging People Managers who are trained to manage their teams holistically
- Design the job in manner that the individual can see how he/ she is making a difference
- Make engagement an active measure for the Employee rather than passive i.e. Do not ask what the Organisation can do, ask what you can do to better your own engagement

Learning Points

- Learning never stops, so be curious and hungry always. One can reinvent oneself at any point in life.
- You do not have to be a man to win in a man's world. You can nurture my individuality and revel in your identity and still do well.
- Humility is a trait that is not admired or acknowledged in leaders easily but one that is the most powerful tool for influence.
- Knowing when to fade out is almost as important as knowing when to take centre stage.
- Failures teach you more than your successes so sharing more of your failures is as important as sharing your success.

become a priority for the first time in the real sense. Many of the big players in this sector have already begun the journey and have set themselves apart in many ways. However, I would say that these are still early days. The awesome part of being here NOW is that it is an opportunity to lead the journey and leap frog.

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

There have been scores of people who

have inspired me in different ways, and many of them were not necessarily highly placed and super successful. Some are younger professionals who come with an exceptional ability to think creatively or boldly question the status quo and push you to re-examine yourself. Many of them are leaders who selflessly invest in their team members to coach, develop, and relentlessly motivate, pushing them to discover more of themselves. Some achieve this due to their sheer brilliance, some owing to their ability to laugh at themselves and take themselves so very lightly, and others for their ability to stay calm in the face of extreme turbulence and difficulty. Each of these men and women has been a source of inspiration to me, and I have learned and grown because of my association with them. On walking the talk, I would only say that nothing beats authenticity.

"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?

HR practices are unconditionally long term. There are very few aspects of HR that can be quick and easy. Hence, the ability to envision the future is a critical aspect of building a sustainable HR practice that serves the business as it evolves and grows. In fact, I believe the HR Head needs to be someone who is able to look at the organisation outside in, and also hold a telescope to see what is likely to change in the markets, economy, customer, talent space, etc. Else, you will always be playing catch up, putting your organisation in tremendous risk of losing relevance.

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

The Real Estate sector is going through challenging times. It will be our effort to use this period to build capability in key areas by investing in some of our best talent, and also in building robust processes, systems, and technology support. 

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?"

Let's fund research to create a medical cure for Tech addiction!

What's the one thing you are deeply proud of but would never put on your resume?

My ability to build and nurture winning teams and mentoring young women.

What's the one dream that you've tucked away for the moment?

Starting an NGO for the economic empowerment of women.

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

The most common area that many women ask my advice on is how to stay focused on your career while moving through life stages. Another area is on how to recognise potential in people early on.

When was the last time you astonished yourself?

Last year when I decided to go frugal and adopt minimalism.

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

Free Time, recognition, and money, in that order.

Are you living your life purpose or still searching?

Still searching.