

The Endearing Manager

Mukund Menon, Director- HR and Communications, International Paper, is proud of the fact that he comes from a modest background and the humbleness and honesty are depicted in each of his responses. He shared with Human Capital the vivid aspects of his career and the relevance that every role donned by him played in shaping his career. He highlights the crucial role that the Satyam crisis effected on his career, since he chose to stay back and douse the fire rather than seeking out greener options.

- BY S. AJAY KUMAR

RAPID FIRE

Favourite Quote: 'when it rains, some feel the rain, others just get wet '

Leadership style : "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime"

Current Professional Goal : lead an organization

Favourite Book -? none in specific

Favourite Music Artist - Andrea Bocelli

Life is...? - fun

Family is...life

I strongly believe in.... Trust

Family for me... is priority

The most important thing I do on Sunday.... Spend time at home

I deal with Setbacks by....looking at the positives that it brought and think about a Plan B

3 Things I never leave home without.....? Mobile, wallet, and saying bye to everyone at home

Favorite Movie - The Godfather

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

It was an experience similar to that of a child gradually developing into an adult. It had its share of exploring, experiencing, learning, unlearning, responsibilities, accountability, etc. Fortunately, in the initial years, I had the opportunity to work in green field projects, different industry sectors, working in India and the US for more than a decade, which was a great value addition to my career. Working in a green field project early on in a career enables you to experience different functions, face real challenges and working closely with senior leaders at a young age, which I now recommend to all young aspirants to choose early in their career.

Switching over to the IT sector in 1996 was the best move made by me so far, and, it was a sunrise industry at that time. I was a part of the Y2k and the Internet revolution and the silicon valley was a world of innovation filled with entrepreneurs making for an invigorating environment, while India was slowly establishing itself as a force in global IT. Thereafter, I had a break into a business role in the year 2000, which really kicked my entrepreneurial skills, created IT delivery centres in India and Canada, later moved back in a HR role to Satyam, and was part of the exciting growth that Satyam and the IT industry saw during early and mid 2000.

One of the most challenging and overwhelming experience was when Satyam went through the crisis in 2009. At that



point, it was a personal conflict in my career. While it is easy to pick another job and move on when there is a crisis of this magnitude, and the other is to stay, help resolve and keep the flock together. I decided to stay through the crisis and help rebuild the organization, which was very humbling; it taught me how human relationships and psychological contracts help, that you built earlier, play a great part and help you when in crisis. It changed me as an individual. Never stop learning and do not kill the child in you when it comes to enthusiasm and being positive, is the learning I believe and coach the others as well.

What were some very challenging times in your career that gave you the most important lessons of life?
The reality kicks and learning comes

In brief

NAME : Mukund Menon

TITLE : Director
HR & Communications

AGE : 52 years

ORGANIZATION : International Paper

EXPERIENCE : 28 years

YEARS IN HR : 3-4 years

EDUCATION : B.Com and Post Grad in HR

in when the time gets challenging. I learnt how important it is to invest in people relationships, creating one that can be trusted, being honest and transparent. These will come through at times of crisis or challenging times and those around you will help

overcome any demanding situation.

I experienced this when I was faced with a situation in Satyam; when the existence of the company is at stake, and, the only hope is to keep the flock together until we find someone who could salvage the situation and be interested in investing in the company. The people in the company were the asset and the key to business. In this situation, you are left with no other option, apart from transparency, constant communication; keeping the employees updated at all times, lest they pay heed to grapevine at the water cooler or the corridors, and truly be humble and demonstrate our resolve to bring a positive solution. Keeping the flock together at this time is a task when the odds are against you.

UP, CLOSE AND PERSONAL SECTION

What inspired you to steer your career towards HR?

No one asked me to choose HR, I had two options, one in sales and marketing and other is HR. I found in my early days that HR was becoming more business oriented and closer to the business and playing a compelling role in the organizations. They were starting to be the closest aide to the CEO along with the CFO. I also felt that I could move into sales and marketing eventually later in my career.

How do you wish to spend your free time?

I rarely get free time and if I do, I spend time at home, watch movies, run, meet friends, sometimes go to a golf course, eat out or even go to a club. I like to do different things.

Please share some of your experiences of travelling to different places, and what you learnt from these experiences?

Love to travel a lot. Not as a tourist, but as a traveler. I normally choose a specific interest, historical importance or event. I have travelled across the US a lot, a few spots in Europe and even in Asia. I have also covered India fairly, yet a lot more to cover. I am also inclined towards sports events irrespective of them being big or small. I have a bucket list and have already covered some of them, like the US open, FIFA in South Africa, and, the

next thing on my list are the Olympics and Wimbledon. Travel normally includes an activity like trekking, running, white water rafting, etc. It is very rarely a sightseeing trip. The one thing that still remains on the list is to take the Trans Siberian Rail Road- I am done with the planning, but need to get the time aligned with two of my good friends to make it happen.

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

One are my parents, who taught me values in life. One such thing I have been taught while growing up is that greed is the enemy of peace, and not to try to get anything in short cuts, it does not stick, fear nothing but the truth in what you do. They lead a simple life and I wish to do as well.

The other person who inspired me is my uncle who reached the position of the Chairman of Indian Bank. He was truly a self made individual, who grew up from a humble beginning and built his career step by step to reach the pinnacle. He has helped several people grow and prosper in their life in his own way. The qualities of leadership, ethics, candor and capabilities were an inspiration to me in my early years.

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

Beyond doubt it will be my parents.

To be successful and to gain respect, it is highly important to learn the business and be relevant. Your credibility is defined on the basis of your perception of the business and other functions. I had been a part of a few M&A and acquisitions, and in such cases, the stakes are high with a lot of investment in play. You are therefore expected to possess the ability to manage change, and, help the organization go through change. The variables are different in a situation of transformation, and it is required to be innovative, nimble and flexible during these times.

How did working across industries make your professional journey more interesting?

It was hybrid and very fulfilling. The culture, structure,

BUZZER ROUND

A mysterious benefactor wrote you a check for Rs 100, 0000 and said, "Help me solve a problem! What would you say?" - will ask for the problem and seek the fees accordingly!

What's one thing you're deeply proud of but would never put on your resume? - That I informally coach

What's one dream that you've tucked away, for the moment? - to be in the entertainment industry

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

When was the last time you astonished yourself? - When I could outpace a few young men in a sprint

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

Are you living your life purpose - or still searching? - The best is yet to come

challenges, location were different. A chemical industry is completely different from textiles, and, the IT segment is different from all the others. The communities around these industries are different. For instance, chemical, paper etc are very capital intensive and have a long ROI, while IT is instant and some FMCG products are pretty quick and instant. Further, there are many differences between services, manufacturing and FMCG lines of business. The people and the skills are different and the cost structure is differently managed. First of all, it makes you become flexible and agile. If you do not want to be one, you will perish. I started my career as a part of the SPIC Group in a petrochemical plant, which was a green field. It allowed me to learn a lot of functions, which is typical to that of a start up. Then I went into DSQ, which was a flagship software enterprise

HR PERSPECTIVES

Some gaps that HR Organizations need to bridge

HR organizations focus more on routine operational issues, which are time consuming and get some short wins. The key is to partner with the business. Understand the business and be a good partner in resolving their issues related to talent, succession, skill development, team working, training, managing conflicts and maintaining a good industrial climate. Nowadays, most of the HR departments are busy doing employee engagement activities with a view of making an engaged work place. This is good and it is an issue of hygiene. But, the key is future building, creating leaders, aspects that promote self development from mere training programmes, competency and skill development, creating opportunities for young leaders, supporting organizations in moving people across functions.

Some of focus areas could be:

1. Create development programme at three levels - young leaders, mid level who are potential successors and senior level to be multifunctional from a 360 degree perspective
2. Centre of Excellence for functions like - talent

management, compensation & benefits, training & development and labour relations.

3. Service delivery - most of the mature organizations have already done this. This should become a norm in HR that all routine and repeatable are centralized and use an IT platform to deliver.

Common HR Errors that organizations do

HR organizations are still focusing in transactional heroism and looking for those small wins and satisfaction of the masses. The new trend is the creation of an event management function under the garb of employee engagement. There are several fancy names and titles to the function and individual, which do not translate or mean in reality.

Getting management 'buy in' is the big task and at times failure for most of HR organizations. One of the big issue is they report on what happened, and, are unable to use analytics and use predictable ways and look for trends. Number orientation is Greek and Latin, and, they struggle to connect with business costs. They never took interest in the business and process, and complain for not getting a seat in the table.

and had acquired companies in biotech, textiles, granites, trading, FMCG etc. Initially, I was handling HR for all the companies of the group apart from software. It was like a roller coaster handling each of them, since the group had created all these companies in a matter of three years. I ultimately moved in to software full time in 1996 and stayed there until 2012. I am now back in manufacturing, and, I realized that though the practices have changed, the laws remain the same. The government is revamping the laws now, which will be relevant and helpful.

In light of your present association with the manufacturing 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?

Progressive companies have changed the stripes of the workforce; their engagement etc. post their learning experience from MNC's and global Indian entities. But, several gaps still prevail in areas of diversity and inclusion, are not ready yet to manage millennials, low technology adoption, and slow pace of talent development. There is lot of scope for HR to play in those areas, especially in skill building and creating good leadership bench for the future. Growing young talent and allowing them to fast track is still in a nascent stage.

In the manufacturing sector, the statutory obligations and the law has not gone through any significant changes, especially in the bargaining category. In my opinion, it is outdated and does not support productivity and growth. It is still in an old fashioned and a protectionist intent. The current government is striving hard to make necessary changes. Skill development and building leadership development programmes can be made a lot better. As a country, we are in a good position and have sufficient

LEARNING POINTS

- If I have to jog back the years and restart my HR career, I would certainly start again in a green field project or a start up. Have one stint in business function and one in a technical or manufacturing function. In my opinion, there is no substitute to this.
- I will not take a role that demands too much travelling and keeps me away from family. I realized that you lose those precious moments with children when they are growing up. Sometimes we end up getting caught in the rat race.
- Thank God, I continued with my fitness and running regimes that kept me going in shape and being active.
- I would still love to travel different cities and countries that help in making me more cosmopolitan and accepting with different cultures
- It is time to send the elevator down and help folks to grow and reach the top floor

talent in the market. There is a great opportunity to build the right talent in the company and as well help the community to build the talent.

Who have been your figures of inspiration during this professional journey? What are the values and ideologies with regard to which you think leaders should definitely

Awards and Accolades

- Co Convenor in the CII Skill Development Panel
- Named as one of the Top 100 Global HR Professionals

walk the talk to win the confidence of the stakeholders?

There are few that I have met and worked with, and a few that I have not, who have inspired me. Of course, Gandhi is an all time inspiration. Few great leaders like

Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln inspired how a true leader should be in his or her social life, while their personal life and personalities are different, the manner in which they managed their social and political life, their ability to fight the odds and adversaries, building their vision to the benefit of all, is all awe inspiring. In the corporate realm, Jack Welch, Ratan Tata, etc created an institution that is different, sustainable and brought more leaders into the fore in a consistent fashion. In the companies that I worked, I was inspired by A C Muthiah and Anand Mahindra, who stand for their ethics, culture, quality and who believe in their leaders and leadership.

"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 organizations?

The amount with which HR supports the business and the organization is the key for the HR practices to be successful and sustainable. The value that it provides to the corporation decides a seat in the table. I have consistently tried to do the following three buckets I had - Strategy, Specialization and Operational Excellence. In line with these three buckets, move all the repeatable, that can be delivered virtually to service delivery model and bring in operational excellence in that, which basically builds the foundation for employee experience. Specialization or centre of excellence in functions within HR such as, talent development, compensation and benefits, learning and development, talent acquisition etc to constantly make sure that we are up to date and competitive in our offerings. The strategy is to engage with business constantly and help them in their plans, initiatives, change management, culture, business growth etc. One of my areas of passion is to develop leaders in the organization- more so young and future leaders.

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