



# APARNA SHARMA, LAFARGE

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## Aparna Sharma

### Country Head, Human Resources at Lafarge India

*Interview by Ritika Moolchandani*

Felicitated with the “HR Super Achiever Award” by Star News at the 20<sup>th</sup> World HRD Congress 2012, Aparna is a passionate learner in her journey of 18 years of intense and expansive HR work. In her diverse roles, Aparna has successfully been a learning partner, mentor and coach to leaders, leadership teams and organisations to build competencies, learning abilities and nimbleness for achieving purposeful performance.

Today, at the helm of Human Resources function for Lafarge, a French multinational, Aparna persistently and passionately values freedom, authentic relationships and realization of potential of people.

After completing her post graduation in Personnel Management & Industrial Relations (PM& IR) from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, Aparna made her foray into the corporate world through Nocil and moved into different roles in HR function in organisations like Monsanto, Novartis, UCB & Deutsche Bank.

Winner of many accolades like ‘Women Leadership Award’ for BFSI (Banking, Financial Services & Insurance) Awards by Institute of Public Enterprise (IPE), Hyderabad, ‘Achiever of Excellence Award’ by Indian Society for Training & Development (ISTD, Mumbai), ‘30 Women Achievers Award’ by HRD Congress 2013, she has also featured as one of the top women HR Leaders in the country in the anniversary issue of Business Manager, July 2012 & quoted as a Thought Leader in HR.

Beyond her corporate role as an HR Leader, Aparna also dons the hat of HR contributor through her associations with Indian Society of Training & Development (ISTD), All India Management Association (AIMA), National Institute of Personnel Management (NIPM), National HRD Network, and Sumedhas, where she actively participates in disseminating her acquired knowledge and build the HR fraternity by creating future leaders. Currently, she is the Honorary Treasurer of National HRD Network, Mumbai Chapter (2012-2015) and is a member of the Executive Committee. She has also been elected as member of the National Executive Board of NHRDN for the period 2013-2015.

A wildlife enthusiast and an amateur photographer, Aparna spends most of her leisure time closer to nature. Aparna also loves travelling as it gives her an opportunity to meet new people. Books are Aparna’s favourite ally and she dedicates every day some time to read something new. An avid reader, she has a collection of some of the best books of the century.

To know more about Aparna, visit: – <http://www.aparnasharma.in>

*Given below are her thoughts and beliefs about great workplace culture and how an organization can create and sustain a great workplace.*

Q1. What, in your view, is the most interesting, comprehensive and simple way of defining a great workplace?

*A Great Workplace is a place where leaders and managers can create and reinforce the core values of trust, pride, and camaraderie with every decision, every interaction and every communication.*

*A Great Workplace is the one where employees trust the people they work with, take pride in what they do, and look forward to coming to work each day.*

*Rightly said, “Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life”.*

Q2. In a hypothetical conversation back in time, if you were to convince a Slave Owner to stop practicing slavery, and instead, create a great workplaces culture for his people, what would you tell him? What will be your elevator pitch to convince him to change his mind?

*“Slave Owner” is a remote concept and of an era which speaks about a regressive society. Let’s do that for today’s working population. Suppose you want to design the best company on earth to work for. What would it be like? I have asked this question to many executives during interviews and in seminars to describe their ideal organization. And what was amazing was the relationship between personal satisfaction and visionary leadership.*

*Many of their answers were highly specific, of course. Simply put, people will not follow a leader who they feel is not going to help them achieve their best at work. But underlying the differences of circumstances, industry, and individual ambition, there were six common imperatives which are mentioned below.*

*I call this “the organization of your dreams.” In a nutshell, a great company is where individual differences are nurtured; information is not suppressed; the company that adds value to its employees, rather than merely extracting it from them; the work itself that is intrinsically rewarding; and everyone feels that he/she is doing his/her best. These six common imperatives together describe an organization that operates at its fullest potential by allowing people to do their best work.*

Q3. In your view, at a fundamental level, what would you say makes people happy at their workplace and what makes people dissatisfied at their workplace?

*The happiness quotients for different people are different and the factors that affect it also are different. Firstly, allow employees to do tasks that make them feel that they are doing a meaningful job. Secondly, the most important part of work is feedback. No matter if it is positive or negative; feedback represents a very important instrument for measuring the quality of work. And a complete feedback that has only the best intentions can transform the day into a very productive and cheerful one. Thirdly, employees need to be challenged and able to grow. For many people, learning new things and developing in their jobs is at the top of their satisfaction list. That means getting regular honest feedback, being given new tasks, and exposing them to new experiences is what drives their satisfaction engine.*

*Few things, according to me, that make employees dissatisfied are also diverse. However, some cardinal pain points do exist and addressing the same, helps a great deal in making the organization better. The moment an employee feels that he/she is not being recognized for his/her efforts, he/she is bound to feel unhappy. Recognition breeds feelings of value and loyalty.*

*Secondly, many employees end up feeling stuck when there is no chance of advancing within their company. This often leads to job hopping.*

*Thirdly and most importantly, is passion in doing ones job. There is a huge difference between living to work and working to live. Also, between a “mere job” and a “career”.*

*Lastly, poor management can ruin even the most passionate and well-paid employees’ love for their job. Don’t let management and leadership skills ruin the drive of your workforce.*

*Do you micromanage and criticize? Are you a bad communicator? If you have unhappy employees, the first thing you should look at is your management habits. The next thing to do is actually talk to your employees to get to the bottom of the problem.*

Q4. If you could do just one thing to make someone happy with his or her workplace, what would you do and why?

*The only thing that I could do would be to **let people be themselves**. When companies try to accommodate differences, they often confine themselves to traditional diversity categories—gender,*

race, age, ethnicity, etc. These efforts are laudable, but the employees want something far more subtle—differences in perspectives, habits of mind, and core assumptions. Very few organizations look into these parameters of diversity and enable employees to share their perspectives freely, allow them to accommodate behavioral patterns and work from their individual styles; keeping in mind the larger organizational good.

Q5. If you were to interview and hire various people for an organization using just one question, what would that question be? What are the most important things to assess while hiring someone for an organization?

*My magic question will be, "If you were reborn as yourself, what would you do differently in order to change your past?" There is no right or wrong answer to this question. But while answering this question, you certainly are able to gauge the attitude of the person. Many a times, we are impressed by experience on a resume but have doubts post interviewing the candidate especially whether he/she will "culturally fit" within your organization. Great skills when mixed with bad attitude can spread among your current team faster than a virus, and severely affect your customers. A grumpy veteran waiter is still grumpy. Skills can be taught. What cannot be taught is how someone feels about their job, their role, their motivation for putting out quality work, feeling the pride of being on a successful team, etc.*

Q6. What, in your view, makes someone want to do something? What makes people feel inspired towards a goal? If you had to inspire someone to do something, what will you do?

*One of the biggest challenges in meeting any goal, whether it is related to productivity, waking up early, changing a habit, exercising, or just becoming happier, is finding the motivation to stick with it. If you can stick with a goal for long enough, you'll almost always get there eventually. It takes patience and persistence. Motivation is the key, but it's not always easy, day in and day out, to find that motivation.*

Q7. What are some of your best lessons on communicating with others – on getting a message across?

*I follow simple ground rules for communicating in day to day life:-*

- *Do a Self-Assessment*
- *Ask for feedback*
- *Know when to get involved*
- *Seek to understand before you seek to be understood*
- *Be courteous and respectful*
- *Restate before proceeding*
- *Ask for clarification*
- *Use "I" rather than "You"*
- *Be specific and avoid absolutes like "never" and "always"*
- *Avoid making assumptions: Instead, be committed to getting the facts.*
- *Choose an appropriate time and place*
- *Respond. Don't react. Be patient*
- *Don't express an opinion as a fact*
- *Compliment another's idea*

Q8. If you could meet someone who works at your organization just once in a year and ask him or her just one question, what would that question be?

*Surely, there are people in the organization who I probably get to meet only once in a year or sometimes even less than that. Honestly, I feel one question will not justify the purpose of a conversation. It will look like I am asking something for the sake of asking. Since I am meeting the person only once a year, I will certainly build context by drawing his/her attention to our last conversation and then lead the conversation to the current context. And all this certainly cannot be done by asking one question.*

Q9. If you could teach just one thing to all the people at your organization, what would that be and what in your view is the best way to teach it?

*One thing that I would like to teach all the people in my organization is "How to work upon and leverage your strengths".*

Q10. If you were to distribute a specific sum of profits earned by your organization between a bunch of people who contributed in different ways towards earning it, on what basis would you divide?

*One of the biggest problems with a profit sharing plan is that people don't know how their con*

*One of the biggest problems with a profit sharing plan is that people don't know how they can individually influence the overall profit of their company. If you have a highly profitable year, everyone gets to participate in the profit sharing program, but nobody learns anything about the company or what they did to influence that profit. To make your plan successful, educating your employees is crucial.*

*This can even be as basic as making sure they understand the principles behind profits, and how they work. Front-line employees in administration or accounting may not control many factors that lead to profitability, such as marketing and pricing of products and services. But it is part of the implementation of the profit sharing plan that should seek to educate them of their role, beyond their job description.*