



# SAMVAD

*Igniting Thoughts of Tomorrow*

## Featured Article

Zero Defect, Zero Effect (ZED)  
Maturity Model

## WeChat



Ms. Aparna Sharma  
Former Country Head HR  
at Lafarge India














# MANUFACTURING SECTOR

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## An Interview with Ms. Aparna Sharma

By: Team Samvad

( Former Country Head (HR) at Lafarge India )

1. Can you please take us through your professional journey right from the start of your career?

I passed out of TISS in 1996 and got the day one job on campus which was the highest paying job that day. It was a shop floor job to begin with. As a Management Trainee, I worked as an understudy to the Plant IR manager. It was a very interesting and challenging experience as one understood the reasons for discontent among blue collared employees. It made me realize the importance of establishing a personal connect with employees at all levels.

The next year involved a lot of change management work as there was a merger and a demerger. I also got to work with Dr. T.V. Rao who was re-designing the performance appraisal system for about a thousand employees which involved very intense work. I would volunteer for as many opportunities that came my way and was approached by Monsanto, a leading Biotech company. I joined them as the HR Manager for their field staff which included the sales team.

We set up a research centre in Bangalore on the lines that they have in the US. For a 24\*7 lab, we had to hire fifty highly competent scientists in less than sixty days from 13500 applicants. To find the right candidates was a humongous task. We tried to attract Indians who wanted to come back from abroad and we completed the task in record time. I then moved on to head the commercial part of the organization which



included mainly the business operations part. I then got an opportunity to go to the Philippines where I stayed for two and a half years before returning to India and taking over charge of South East Asian Region, Learning and OB role.

I was then approached by Novartis to set up & expand their Global services in India which I took up. We set up the whole thing from scratch in Mumbai and then had to relocate it to Hyderabad. I moved as I has just got married. I then joined UCB India, a Biopharma company. We acquired a Clinical Research Organization (CRO), consolidated & expanded lines of business , set up IT services centre in Bangalore etc. I then moved to the Deutsche Bank Group as Head of Mumbai and Jaipur centers. Mumbai was scaled up to 2800 people and Jaipur was built from scratch to 1500 employees. As they relocated to Pune , I moved to Lafarge, a Building Materials Company and worked with them for 33 months . As I look back, these 18 years of professional life have been very enriching, full of challenges , diverse and I feel fortunate to have had all these opportunities.



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**2. You've seen a plethora of sectors from Chemicals to Banks. What features stand out with regard to employee bonding amongst the blue collared and the white collared employees?**

The manufacturing sector is a more conventional sector as compared to the banking or insurance sectors. The years of experience, seniority, age matter much more in the traditional sectors whereas the modern sectors are more intellectual and as long as you are competent not much else matters. However, I see a lot of genuine care, connect and personal relationships in the manufacturing sector like a big family. It requires a great deal of adaptability on the part of the HR manager to handle this switch.

**3. How do people respond to changes in the organization in both these sectors?**

In my experience, in the manufacturing sector it takes longer to drive change. You have to have the support of the seniors in the organization whereas in the banking sector people would adapt comparatively quicker. You find the balance between emotion and reason at an individual level to make people see your point. I try to use a personalized touch to win over differences which has helped me in the long run to create goodwill across, irrespective of the sector.

**4. Your HR vision says "Centre of Organizational Excellence". What is the inspiration behind this and what is the path forward?**

I think today is an era of specialization. It's important that folks in HR have done a variety of roles before taking on a leadership role.

Whether C&B or Talent Acquisition or Training role, if you've walked the path then you'll be able to guide those under you and set realistic deadlines.

The business partnership role is what everybody talks about and then there is the specialist role or the centre of excellence role that I am a strong believer of. Thus, the vision promotes the need for a HR professional to go through at least two or three niche roles before settling into a general management role. Adaptability and the willingness to gain different experiences have become extremely important in HR.

**5. With our generation switching jobs at the drop of the hat, how difficult is it for you to retain talent?**

It is a challenge to retain the current generation because of the options available to them. Also, many people are not clear about what they want exactly and often come back to the job they've quit. What helps organizations retain people is a good brand, working environment, culture of the organization, ethics and values and finally good business leadership which act as anchors. It is important for the organizations to reinforce the big picture through communication and employee engagement so that people don't lose focus.

**6. What HR practices that you see being followed these days do you approve of and which ones according to you should be shown the door?**

In a lot of manufacturing set ups, there are no flexi work or work from home policies. What is required is a review of brilliant existing policies just to bring them in line with the contemporary. There is a lot of work cut out for the HR folks in terms of aligning these policies

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without disrupting the business. In my mind, the best way to go about this in the manufacturing sector is to be going back and asking the employees and making their voice count. They come up with very practical and constructive solutions which can be implemented without batting an eyelid. Some progressive practices like educational assistance and paternity leave could be thought of.

**7. Do you see the manufacturing sector growing, in the light of Modi's "Make in India" campaign?**

I see it as a very promising campaign. I see a lot of companies wanting to set up manufacturing hubs in India. While the concept and spirit is right, it needs everyone to act in unison and enhance productivity. The reason for "Made in China" to be the way it is, can be credited to the productivity level. We, on the other hand spend too much energy debating, ideating and discussing, dealing with red tape-ism rather than doing and delivering. We also need to shed some stereotypes on gender, colour, age and educational background. We need to empower the younger generation and rewire the DNA existing in the corporate world. We need more private-public partnerships to focus on "Make in India" as a joint effort.

**8. Any experience at the work place that you would like to highlight related to the gender issue.**

Issues are many, but the point is what is it that we are doing about it? It becomes our responsibility to create a more gender neutral work place. In my opinion, while a lot of people will put you down and tell you that you cannot do a certain job because you are a female, you have to ask yourself and be convinced before taking the decision to go ahead with it or

otherwise. You also have to be conscious of & take care of your personal safety at all times.

While sometimes we look for concessions as women, there are other times we talk of equality. For eg. the men asked me why we celebrated Women's day in isolation. So the next year, we included the men and their families, by sending out gifts to the wives or ladies at home which worked very well for both.

Also, when companies call asking for a diversity candidate, then that goes against the concept of equality. The idea should be to let your actions speak louder than words to have the right impact on people- man or woman. Every woman needs to figure out in what way she can contribute with her skill sets in the best interests of the organization.

**9. What is the one piece of advice that you would like to give HR Managers who would pass out from here?**

No job is big or small. Be focused and know what you want. There is no shortcut to success. Be keen to learn, be resilient and patient. Give the organization a chance to understand what you can do for the organization and what the organization can do for you. It should always be two sided.

Today, careers are not very conventional. The lateral movement is just as important as a vertical movement to make a career lattice rather than a career ladder always. Don't go by what worked in the past. Try to change the rules of the game and stick to what you believe in. Each one of us is very gifted and unique. We need to be realistic, so as to not get disheartened. The transition from "Campus to Corporate" takes a while- so go with the flow.

