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An Interview: **Aparna Sharma**, Senior HR Leader
-in conversation with Priyanka Awasthy, Co-Founder, Biz Divas & Altavis Consulting

'Authenticity, Conviction and Hard work are the keys to Success' says Aparna Sharma, author of "Reality Bytes-The Role of HR in Today's World". Aparna was Country Head- HR, Lafarge India till recently, and is a much awarded leader. Her vision is for Human Resources (HR) to be Centres of Excellence for organisations by influencing best human capital outcomes.

1. Priyanka : Can you tell me what has been the biggest influence in your early life, from being born in Ujjain to studying at TISS?

Aparna : I went to boarding school during my early school days as my father was in a transferable job. Later, I lived with my doctor Aunt for six years in Ujjain. These were my formative years and my Aunt, who was a child widow & later evolved into a strong career woman, greatly influenced me. I learnt the meaning & significance of being "independent" very early on in life. She was the first lady doctor in Rajasthan in the 1950's, Dr. M. D. Vyas. She was always there for me, encouraged me and was my guide throughout. I did well in Sports, Academics, was Captain of my school and excelled in all extracurricular activities-an All Rounder. As a tribute to her, we initiated "Udaan" 2 years ago- a scholarship in my school in Ujjain for deserving girl student/s in Class X. All applicants go through a stringent selection process & finally one or two girl students every year receive the scholarship -in a state where higher education is still not easily accessible to all the girl children. "Udaan" scholarship comprises of a Trophy, Certificate of Achievement & also their annual tuition fees of Class X.

2. I see that you are much awarded, what is the main factor that has contributed to your professional success?

My success comes from loads of hard work and conviction in my values. I listen to others , take their views into consideration, however ultimately I have always done what is right for the organisation. I will take a stand if I believe in something, even if I end up alone. I am fairly flexible in my approach and am open to different ways of doing things. In short, I'm very very different from a textbook manager. I believe in authenticity, more of substance and less of flamboyance. My success and awards acknowledge these very virtues.

3. What motivated you to write this book?

Initially, the publisher approached me and tirelessly pursued & finally persuaded me to write. I wanted to write in my capacity as a professional, not centred on where I was working. In any case, I have always wanted to write. As a young student, I lived in small city/ies and all my information about careers came from publications such as Employment News or Competition Success Review. Those days, girls in small towns did not have the various options available to those in metros, besides limited information. So they are my motivation- I want to give back to the younger generation practical knowledge & information about HR, to help them make informed decisions. Over the years, I have counselled thousands of students & continue to do so.

My website www.aparnasharma.in is a platform to connect with aspiring students & early career professionals for guidance & discussion on various thoughts & subjects.

4. *Is this book targeted at HR professionals or can Business leaders also benefit from it?*

To begin with, the book was intended for students and early career HR professionals. However, it has been found to be a practical guide for line managers and business leaders as well. Two prominent business groups in India have already bought the book in bulk for their line managers. A team leader has to understand aspects of HR to be an effective leader. Some professors & academicians have found it very useful and it is now being included as a reference book in the HR Syllabus in 2 colleges in Mumbai. Even entrepreneurs, who do not have a full fledged HR team, are finding it very helpful.

5. *Can 'Human resources' be the catalyst for change?*

Absolutely. Workplace dynamics are changing rapidly. Unprecedented economic change calls for increased productivity and a more future ready workforce. 'Human resources' has to be responsible for change management plus it has to lead transformation. But driving change cannot & is not an HR priority alone, it has to be co-led & driven by business leaders. I strongly believe, that especially in today's times, HR is a line function- not a support function as in the earlier days.

6. *How can the HR Manager build a positive perception and be effective within the organisation?*

Very good question. Every HR manager has to be authentic in thought and action. Employees need to get the support and genuine concern of their HR manager/team. I believe in **the three C's –Competence, Connect and Care**. These **3 C's** help to establish the **Credibility** of HR, however a very delicate balance has to be struck between all of them. If there is only Competence –you cannot impact culture deeply. If there is only Connect and Care, then you are only being nice and trying to network all the time by camouflaging incompetence. You may become very popular in the short term but will lack true respect.

When employees experience all 3 C's in their HR team members and find a culture of development and positive change —then you have succeeded.

7. *What is the best thing about "Reality Bytes"? Can you explain the title of the book?*

Aparna: 'Human Resources' is of course, a very vast subject. I wanted to simplify concepts & share practical knowledge without jargons for the sake of students, so I have only covered topics which are of prime relevance currently. For example Change Management, HR Analytics etc. I was given an outer limit of pages, so had to do justice to these topics and include crisp caselets as well. This book is about the ground realities -what is relevant today, the 'what' and 'why' of HR, not the 'how'. The word "Bytes" in the title creates impact. The book is my expression of useful contemporary topics of HR and is endorsed by Dr. T. V. Rao, who has written the Foreword. I have received overwhelming positive feedback from many CEO's, CHRO's, students etc. Dr Santrupt Mishra, CEO-Carbon Black &

Group Director-HR, sent a testimony saying “ **Aparna’s book “Reality Bytes” will help the newcomers in the field of HR to understand the nuances in HR and its components very easily. The illustrations and case studies are short and quite powerful. Overall, the book is a very good guide for Management of Human Resources and enhancing effective Talent Management. I wish the book & Aparna all success !**” The book was first launched on March 20,2015 & recently BMA launched the Reprint of the book at KitabKhana in Mumbai. So, I believe it is creating the right impact 😊.

8. What message would you like to give to the young women professionals in India?

I had once been asked the same question at an event, I answered it in the form of key ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ as follows:

DO’s

- Be a “Professional” first, “Woman” later! Knock out the cobwebs and doubts in your mind.
- Work hard. There is no shortcut to success for anybody- man or woman.
- Stay abreast with the latest tools, techniques and knowledge in the field. Competence is the bedrock.
- Network! It’s a good skill to develop.
- Learn to be Politically Savvy!
- Ask! Ask for your due raise/ promotion if you deserve it.

DON’Ts

- Don’t expect or pitch for concessions on grounds of gender. Do your bit to make it a level playing field.
- Don’t portray an image of being weak or vulnerable. You’re gifted.
- Don’t make gender an alibi for incompetence.
- Don’t shy away from asking for what is due to you. Assert yourself.
- Don’t be hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. You were not born perfect.
- Don’t wallow in self -pity. Each one of us is unique in more ways than one.

Priyanka : Thanks for talking to us Aparna. All the best for your book going forward, it is already a big success !



