

PERSONA

THE righteous vision

Not always is it necessary to stay in the limelight to emerge as a figure of inspiration. Dr. Sandeep Gandhi, an epitome of simplicity and humility, holds his conviction in the irony of maintaining a low profile while delivering the best of results, to lead his life...

■ BY SWATI BHASIN

RAPID FIRE

FAVORITE SPORTSPERSON:

M.S. Dhoni, for his humbleness, politeness and simplicity

LEADERSHIP STYLE:

I believe in leading from the front and apply three 'H's - Head, Heart, Hand and two 'S's-Solidarity and Sociability

IF NOT IN THE HR INDUSTRY, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN:

An entrepreneur, probably running a franchise of Sports or Art

FIRST THING YOU DO WHEN YOU BEGIN YOUR DAY AT WORK:

Reflect on the last day's work and maintain belief in the philosophy that 'past is glorified, future is bright so live for today

FAVORITE BUSINESS LEADER:

Well, I don't follow any business leader's ideologies, instead, I'm very attached to the Lord Shiva. Some say he is not social yet he is connected with all people.

Contrast, simplicity, knowledge and connectivity are what I admire in him, which is not very common these days.

Beyond the multiple HR jargons of mergers and acquisitions, strategic business partnership, talent development and talent crunch, HR analytics and performance management, lies the reason why this function must have come into existence. It was probably to build stronger bonds among the people who work together to take an organization where it aims to reach.

However, in the daily hustle-bustle of achieving business targets, resolving administrative issues, and designing mind-boggling strategies, HR professionals have a great chance of getting disillusioned and forgetting the real purpose behind their roles. However, Dr. Sandeep Gandhi, Chief Human Resource Officer, Aircel, prefers to stick to his vision and values so that he doesn't lose the greater purpose while achieving the short-term goals.

In pursuit of success...

Having worked with some of the biggest brands across sectors, such as Unilever, Sanofi, PepsiCo, Vodafone, Telenor and now Aircel, Dr. Gandhi has gradually grown as an HR professional and more so as a leader, developing a deep understanding of business and organizational values throughout his professional associations.

During his stint with different



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organizations, one of his core areas of expertise has been mergers and acquisitions. He has thoroughly enjoyed the rich experience of being a part of M&As where he has been pivotal in balancing and diffusing the multi-work culture differences in organizations such as Pepsi-Coke, Sanofi-Torrent, Hutch-Vodafone, Unitech - Telenor and Videocon. While talking of his major takeaway from these experiences, he says, "Being a part of an M&A, you learn a lot, because there are challenges and issues to be addressed, relationships to be built and business scenarios to be understood. So, having understood the concept of organizational

transformation, it has been interesting to grow with the organizations that I was a part of." Moreover, Dr. Gandhi has throughout achieved the feat of accomplishing these M&As in the shortest possible time without compromising on the professional ethical values.

In his career spanning over two decades, Dr. Gandhi has also been

involved in leadership development programs at various levels. Having set up the Assessment and Development Centre at PepsiCo, Vodafone at the national level, and also having been involved in the mapping of 300 leadership positions including 100 plus in the telecom space, Dr. Gandhi has gained deep insight of the value of true leadership that relies on 'solidarity'



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and 'sociability'.

Besides being a people's person, he has contributed immensely as a business leader during his diverse associations. He shares an interesting theory that can be universally applied for managing resources across functions. "I follow a frontline approach and I look at the organizations inverted. It is necessary to understand that for any business, the person who is going out in the market to sell the product and expand the business is the most important person," elaborates Dr. Gandhi and adds, "As a leader, it is important to know what he demands from the organization and you, as a leader. When you fulfill his needs and expectations, your organization and business directly benefits. So, for any functional head, not only HR, but even for IT, or sales & marketing, this happens to be a very important management lesson." According to him, this has been an important learning for him and this is why he has been appreciated for bringing a lot of value to the table, especially in the telecom business of which he has been a part of for the past eight-nine years.

While delving in various leadership roles, Dr. Gandhi has also closely experienced the conceptualization of the entire organization building from scratch viz. size, shape, structure, levels, geography, etc., and sourcing employees in the lowest possible time in the most economical ways at all levels. While meeting deadlines, and dealing with insurmountable challenges, Dr. Gandhi gained the realization that the soul of every Indian organization remains just the same despite differences in backgrounds and business interests of the companies. "People make culture. Probably, the values and culture that an organization tries to impart in its employees can be compared to the

In brief

NAME : Dr. Sandeep Gandhi

TITLE : Chief - HR Officer

ORGANIZATION: Aircel

AGE : 44 years

EXPERIENCE : Over two decades

EDUCATION : PhD in HR, Masters in Human Resources, Qualified Law Graduate, Certified MBTI Trainer

values parents would like to pass on to their children in every household, which happen to be just the same everywhere," he justifies his point and adds, "All organizations follow similar kind of values to nurture better and evolved leadership mindset. The difference comes in with each leader trying to implement and practice these values in the organization."

While keeping his leadership insights in tandem with his values, Dr. Gandhi has continued to move from one milestone to another throughout his career so far.

Being a 'human' resource professional

Dr. Gandhi feels blessed to have had wonderful and supportive colleagues around him who have been very fond of him always because of his approachable nature. "It feels great when my colleagues come up to me and tell me that I am a better human than an HR professional," he adds with a smile.

Albeit, Dr. Gandhi has to be credited for never maintaining a status quo which helps him connect with the employees across hierarchies and generations. At Aircel, Dr. Gandhi's team mates often take the onus of helping him de-stress by pulling him out of his

hectic schedules for a cup of coffee or lunch together.

"Although, I would like to add here that over the years, I have started appreciating life more and have realized the value of building stronger bonds, more so after having seen two very horrifying calamities quite closely. Memories of the Gujarat earthquake in 2001, and the Mumbai floods in 2005 are still very clear in my mind," confides Dr. Gandhi.

In 2001, he simply cannot forget the unfortunate day when an earthquake of 7.8 Richter scale shook Gujarat, while he was working with PepsiCo in Ahmedabad. "We could feel the tremors and were fortunate enough to

come down from the 9th floor of the building alive, though I lost my own house," he recalls. However, gaining his resilience pretty soon, he took an initiative to bring the city back to the state of normalcy. "I remember moving around the city with colleagues where we came across dead bodies and took the initiative to bury them which could have otherwise got decomposed like that. The sights were gory and miserable."

While many think CSR initiatives in the corporate world are just a strategy to strengthen the brand reputation, Dr. Gandhi has worked intently for PepsiCo's CSR initiative to re-establish 30 villages when the state was dealing with the aftermath of calamity. "I was later rewarded by the Global CEO of Pepsi for the efforts put in, however, the memories and satisfaction of having helped somebody definitely forms one of the most treasured experiences of life," Dr. Gandhi reminisces.

Later in 2005, Dr. Gandhi witnessed the ire of nature yet again during the Mumbai floods. The experience of realizing the helplessness as a mortal just made him more humble and thankful. "I had to wade through chest level flood water and it took five hours to

weasel across having travelled approximately 18 kms at 12 o'clock midnight. Had it not been for a stranger who supported me to clamber out of a manhole, I would have drowned in a pit while wading. This happened twice and spurt the degree of my misery and wretchedness."

Words fall short while describing such memories, however, Dr. Gandhi has become more optimistic and a better person, as he perceives, after these incidents. Probably, surviving such calamities has further worked in his advantage of understanding the fears and insecurities of a human mind better and the experiences have helped him add more attributes to his professional personality as a people's person. Most importantly, he learned the most important lesson early on in life, which we all need to learn- the art of survival!

Myriad shades of his personality

Apart from being a business leader, a people's person, occasionally a philanthropist, and a survivor, Dr. Gandhi also happens to be a sportsperson, a car-racer and an enthusiastic art collector. Talking about his diverse interests he jokes, "I think life is too short to follow the kind of passions that I pursue. It varies from one hobby to another and work just happens in between."

Interestingly, Dr. Gandhi was a national level hockey player when he was still a student. "I have been fortunate enough to be on the bench of 16 National level players and the Indian Hockey team probable's. I have played hockey alongside Dhanraj Pillai," he shares. However, after having met with a serious accident and having fractured his leg, Dr. Gandhi was advised by the doctor to take a break. He then developed a liking for Table Tennis while he was away from hockey. "I realized Table Tennis also requires equal share of

agility, magnitude, sharpness and eye-hand co-ordination. I have enjoyed a couple of games post work hours all this while, which happen to be great stress-busters," he confesses.

So apart from nurturing his passion for hockey and Table Tennis, Dr. Gandhi has had a soft corner for

spiritual side reflects in his art collection. "I am not just another art collector," he claims, "I am an art collector by attachment of a connoisseur. Anything I collect has to have a tinge of mythological value attached to it. So any art that I pick up is related to the Lord Shiva, because I firmly believe in him."

Whatever time he is able to save from his hectic schedules, apart from the time invested in his hobbies, Dr. Gandhi likes to enjoy some peaceful and happy moments with his daughter and wife.

Going with the flow

Exploring new creative energies through his diverse personal interests ever so often, Dr. Gandhi delivers great value in his current role at Aircel where he closely works with the leadership team to foster a culture of growth and innovation in the organization.


Albeit, Dr. Gandhi might have often been a part of ever so complex businesses and HR engagements such as designing and managing complicated expatriate compensation policies to attract and retain overseas talent and leading the brainstorming branding exercise at Vodafone and Telenor, apart from crafting brilliant strategies for campus recruitments, conceptualizing and creating talent acquisition and talent engagement organizational manuals pertaining to business needs.

Yet, despite exhibiting time-tested strategic abilities, Dr. Gandhi likes to rely on the virtue of simplicity.

'Going with the flow' is his mantra. So, trying to delve into his future plans is a futile attempt. "I don't believe in planning for the future. It is an intrinsic belief that limelight is not equity and therefore, I make sure I stay away from the limelight and make an impact to people's life," he concludes. **(HC)**

VIEWPOINT

"The most important words in all languages are the smallest words- Yes, Love, God."



Being an HR leader, I aspire to play a solitary role that no one has chosen for me. Like a child, who remains in touch with God through his innocence, bewilderment, relentless energy and joy; a leader can trust other people when he trusts himself.

Further, when a leader who is forced to perform the same task over and over again, he transforms work into prayer and lets God open the door. So one's everyday work may start seeming monotonous, but that does not happen to a true leader who transforms the same work into a prayer.

cars too. "The experience of car rallying gives me an adrenaline rush. I have been both a racer and a navigator, and have realized why being a navigator is more difficult because you're responsible for the one in the driver's seat," he says. He has been on numerous expeditions to South India, and he is keenly planning a Leh -Srinagar drive soon.

Further, Dr. Gandhi is an ardent follower of Lord Shiva and his