



Why Employees Love HUL

People management: Line managers are also responsible for HR.

High performance culture: Annual performance rating, career progression and high-potential status.

Infrastructure: HQ has daycare, gym, badminton courts, grocery store, etc.



SOUMIK KAR AND PRIYAM DHAR

THUMBS UP: HUL's caring attitude wins it employee loyalty.

Hindustan Unilever

The freedom to speak their minds helps encourage and empower employees at this FMCG giant.

Ajita Shashidhar

IT WAS LUNCH AS USUAL: ON HIS RECENT VISIT TO INDIA, Unilever CEO Paul Polomon met young employees along with managing committee members for a meal and some conversation. Such events are feel-good affairs, but for Pragya Sharma, it was a can't-miss opportunity to discuss her ideas about certain strategies with top management. The Bru Coffee marketing manager's arguments were hard-hitting and unfavourable, and in a way challenged senior management's decisions.

Why would a humble marketing manager of Unilever take the management head on, especially in front of the biggest boss? Didn't she fear losing her job? "The open culture of HUL (Hindustan Unilever) is addictive. That's what has made me stick here for seven years," says Sharma. "Everyone is free to voice their opinion and the management hears out everyone. We are never hauled up for voicing contrarian opinions," she adds.

"They come down to our level and treat us like equals. The whole atmosphere is so comfortable that we never feel scared to speak our mind," concurs Nip-pun Aneja, Senior Brand Manager, Axe.

Openness and freedom to express your views is ingrained in the Unilever culture, claims HUL CEO and MD Nitin Paranjpe. "I can't imagine working in this place for so many years had I not been allowed to speak out my mind," he says.

Paranjpe recalls an interaction on a market visit with a management trainee who offered suggestions on cost-effective practices. "I was surprised that such mature ideas came from a young management trainee," he says. Paranjpe put up the trainee's thoughts on his internal blog soon after he returned to Mumbai. His post attracted comments and ideas from hundreds of other Unilever employees on various cost-efficient practices and finally some of these suggestions were actually put into practice.

Blogs are just one way HUL's management keeps in touch informally with the rank and file. There's also an intranet portal 'Your Say', where employees are encouraged to express their views. "Management may not accept all that the employees say, but we ensure that every suggestion is responded to," says Leena Nair, Executive Director, Human Resources.

Caring Employer

Ask any employee why he/ she likes to work at HUL, and the reply is: the caring attitude. "Unilever has always stood by me whenever I have needed them," says Shruti Seth (name changed on request) who works in the company's finance department. A few years ago, her father was diagnosed with cancer and HUL helped Seth to have him treated at Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital. "They got me appointments with the best oncologist in the country. I can never forget

this gesture of the company," she says.

While Seth is indebted to the company for all the help the company offered her when she needed it the most, Shobhana Mishra (name changed on request) is convinced that she could have never pursued her career after she became a mother, had it not been for the day-care facility at the company's swanky new headquarters in suburban Mumbai. The icing on the cake: she has the option of working out of home whenever she wants to.

"We make all our employees believe that they are priority and we will do everything possible for their well-being," remarks Nair. The company is also looking at a concept called 'job-sharing' so that it can help retain more women employees. "Most women employees give up jobs after motherhood, and the job-sharing concept would enable two women to share a particular task. They could work whenever convenient and do a particular task jointly," says Nair.

Creating A Purpose

HUL's management believes its ability to engage with the employees right up to the linesmen in the factories helps it make the leap from a good to a great employer. Paranjpe considers his company a good employer not so much because of its HR practices but the effort it puts in to create a sense of purpose for all its employees.

Nair is proud of the scale of the various employee engagement activities the company carries out. "All our activities are meant for all our 500,000 employees. I am sure no other company offers this kind of scale."

Paranjpe says that HUL's philosophy is to better itself everyday not only as a great consumer products company, but also as a great employer. "We are not perfect, but our goal is to continuously strive towards perfection."

Day-care facilities, 'job-sharing' and flexitime helps HUL retain more women employees.