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FMCG CO'S INITIATIVES HELP RISE OF FAIR SEX

Women Lead the Way, Enjoy Clear Advantage at HUL



BHARAT CHANDIA

HUL's HR Director Leena Nair (4th from left) with Colleagues

LABONITA GHOSH MUMBAI

When she counts it up, Leena Nair, executive director (HR) at Hindustan Unilever, finds she has been married to her company longer than she has to her husband of 16 years. 'I joined Hindustan Lever in 1992 as a summer trainee, and have never worked anywhere else,' says Nair, 41. In her time with HUL, Nair has done everything a woman employee typically might, and then some. She has taken time off when she had kids, juggled work and home, and still given enough to the company to become, at 37, one of the youngest to be inducted into the board of directors. Nair was also one of the first women managers to opt for a factory stint, in the industrial belt of Talaja, where she handled run-ins with the union, shared the men's toilet (because nobody had thought to put one in for women), and stayed in seedy hotels

when she travelled. 'I never complained, or made a noise about facilities that weren't available,' she says. 'Instead, I quietly suggested alternatives to people who could do something about it. For instance, I requested the company to look for 'safer' hotels in small towns for our women employees.' The question of legacy — doing something to benefit the women who would come after her — was al-

WOMEN AHEAD

ways on Leena's mind. That's probably why most of HUL's diversity initiatives today have been signed off on by Nair, and informed by her experiences. When she joined, only 2-3% of employees were women. Today, roughly 25% of the workforce — and one in every five managers — is. About 18% of women are in leadership roles, including two in the eight-member board.

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HUL Schemes Seen Working

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"It is no longer OK for us to say we don't encourage, or provide for, diversity," says Nair. "Unilever has famously said it wants to be a gender-balanced organisation, which means 50% men and 50% women employees. For the past 10 years, we at HUL have been trying to achieve this. Today, we finally have a good set of programmes that are beginning to work." Last year, HUL instituted Alchemy, a mentoring programme for high-potential employees, and Career by Choice, which aims to bring women, who have dropped off the career path, back to work. Career Break allows employees to take a two-year sabbatical split into two stints. The company is currently putting finishing touches to a programme called job sharing—a Unilever export—which allows certain jobs to be 'shared' by two employees, both working half the time. For instance, two senior executives in Germany share the role of marketing manager for the savoury division. One of them works Monday through Wednesday, then the other takes over, and both get about 60% of their pay. They operate one email ID, and move seamlessly through meetings and calls, keeping each other updated. "You have to get used to the fact that it's a different person answering your calls, but he or she's been fully briefed on the situation," says Nair. The two executives are free to spend the rest of their week as they please—something that job sharing will also enable HUL employees to do. The company has a number of other 'agile' practices: flexi timing, maternity and paternity leave and workplace facilities such as daycare.

None of these is exclusively for women, however. "We were clear that whatever we put in the work-life balance space, should be equally accessible to both men and women," says Nair. "But while these benefit our male colleagues, they help the women more. For instance, only one out of 10 men may opt for job sharing, but nine out of 10 women will certainly consider it." Dipali Prasad Chandra, project manager for customer development, is one of them. Before she joined HUL in January 2010, she was on a year's break from her previous job. "I wanted the break to relook at my professional life, and explore other options," says Chandra. HUL brought her back with Career by Choice. Now Chandra spends "four half-days" at office, and stays in touch over phone and mail the rest of the time.

"It's liberating to not have to rush to work every morning," she says. Naturally, Chandra has had to take a pay cut, and though she won't say by how much, she feels it is commensurate with the time she puts in. The figure that matters in this scenario is 1.5 million. "That's the number of skilled women who have dropped off work because of family commitments and such," says Saundarya Rajesh, head of executive search firm Avtar Career Creators. "It is imperative to bring as many of them back to address the problem of skill shortage, since they have work experience and excellent educational qualifications." By the end of the year, HUL will have roped in 20 women working part time on various projects under Career by Choice.

One of the older initiatives, Career Break, allows employees to take leave, but keeps them on their designated career path. "You return to the same grade as when you left," says HR Manager Shweta Pandey, who took two years off in 2009 to join her husband, who was posted in the US. "With Career Break, the company is telling people they shouldn't take things like pay scale and promotions for granted," says Pandey. "But it conveys to employees, who've taken the sabbatical for genuine reasons, that it will not hold that against them." This provides some comfort, perhaps even a sense of security, to employees. "Most organisations, if you asked for extended leave, would probably tell you to put in your papers," adds Pandey. It's not enough to bring back talent; you need to nurture it as well. Currently, about 160 HUL employees—including 55 women—are being mentored under Alchemy, which has roped in global leaders as well. Each employee is assigned a mentor at least two levels up. Mumbai Regional Manager Priya Nair's mentor is a senior with the customer development team in Singapore, and the two have hour-long conversations over phone at least once a month. "He's a sounding board for me, and I speak to him about everything, from career goals and ideas that I have, to challenges I face," says Priya, who has almost 400 people reporting to her, both directly and indirectly. "His diverse experience helps me get a different perspective on things, which is useful." The mentors not only listen and advise, but also allow access to their own network of contacts. "This is one area where women definitely benefit more since they tend to build deeper rather than wider networks, unlike men. But you need both in an organisation," says Leena Nair. When Priya wanted to launch a project, her mentor put her in touch with a colleague who had done something similar. Their conversations spill over to the home as well; when Priya's husband turned entrepreneur, she found considerable encouragement from her mentor, who had tried it out too. "I always feel energised after our monthly chats," says Priya. "It's great to have a senior leader rooting for you." The case for gender balance at HUL is clear. As a consumer products company, it needs to be aware that 75% of its target group, and 50% of its talent base, are women. "Empirical evidence shows that when you have at least 30% women in your organisation, other kinds of diversity also come in," says Nair. "So how can a responsible corporate house not reach out to women?"

But it needs to do so without diluting merit. Saundarya Rajesh of Avtar believes a quota does more harm than good because it undermines those who come in on merit. HUL's recruitment partners are constantly asked to look for an equal number of men and women for each vacancy. "It's common to hear that at certain levels, there just aren't enough women to hire," says Nair. "That's where a progressive and responsible organisation like ours can make a difference. Our job is not to find the women and recruit the best from among them. It is to create a steady supply of female talent." So, instead of going straight to the IITs, HUL now scours the second-rung technical and management institutes. It tries to allay apprehensions about working in factories, and has even categorised 10 of its 40 manufacturing plants (Goa, Silvassa, Kalba) as 'safe' for women. The inspiration? An all-women Unilever factory in Khanewal, Pakistan, near Karachi.

There is no dearth of talented women at the entry level or even at the five-year mark, says Nair; the company runs into a wall when it is time to start appointing women to the top teams, from among those who have worked for about 14-15 years. "At this stage, there are just not enough women around because they've fallen off the workforce," says Nair. "This is where we need to provide help, for both women and men, many of whom also feel challenged because their wives have dual careers." This is the stage where special initiatives can make a difference. "If we can help both men and women get through this phase in their work lives with our programmes, we'll have far more women at the top," says Nair.