

# HLL's Leena is a people's person

Our Bureau

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FINALLY, HLL has found its own Lalitaji. Leena Nair, executive director-HR at HLL and newly-anointed member on the FMCG major's board, will have no precedence to go by. After all, she is expected to set it. And for a company that has inducted a woman on its board, it will be a whole new experience. Although a wee bit late, HLL — the company predominantly targets women for its entire product portfolio — has realised that it must have someone on its strategic decision-making platform to represent its most important buyer constituency, the women.

As soon as the news came, a thrilled Leena called her two sons — Aryan, 9 and Siddhanth, 5 — and her husband Kumar Nair, who runs his own financial services company. She says her parents and in-laws, her 'emotional anchors', encouraged her all through to 'go for it' and believe in making a career.

For Leena, HLL has been a company where one can create one's own role description. "If you have a good idea here, you can get it done," she says. One of HLL's lister, she strongly believes that a company should be willing to listen to its women employees and come up with a solution that customised to them. And HLL, which identified her as a fast-tracker early on, fits the bill. Till her child was one, her company allowed her to work out of office in the morning and from home in the afternoon. Such employee-friendly HLL helped her career retain its momentum.



Breaking new ground: Leena Nair

Leena didn't just stray into HR. She saw that coming. "I figured it early on while doing my electronic engineering that HR would be my calling. And when I joined HLL, I knew this was the place I belong to," she says. She credits many of the top brass at HLL as her "early mentors", including Prem Kamath, Gurdeep Singh and KK Dadiset, among others.

Her colleagues both within and outside HLL recall her as a 'team player' and a 'people's person', a role she falls easily into as an HR specialist. "I think all women tend to be highly conscious of being very visible and stereotyped by not networking enough. I believe that one must reach out to mentors and seek their help and under-

standing in dealing with work and issues," she adds.

She joined HLL in 1992 as a management trainee with a Bachelor's degree in Electronic Engineering and MBA in personnel management and industrial relations. A gold medallist from XLRI, Leena has been credited with a number of HR interventions, including performance management. Prof Madhukar Shukla, who taught Leena at XLRI, remembers her as an extremely stable, sincere and likeable person. "Of course, she was good in studies, but more than that she had the ability to work along with others," recalls Prof Shukla. "I have met her a few times after she joined HLL, and I found that some of these qualities had further matured in her as a person."

In March 2007, she was appointed vice-president, HR, and clearly groomed for the top job. Top officials in HLL say there is a Unilever mandate to ensure that there are more women in their 'lister' and encourage gender diversity for better work culture and performance. Currently about 16% of the company's middle management positions are occupied by women.

As a thorough HR hand which has evolved with changing business environment, Leena believes women have a big role to play in businesses. People who know her well say she has always advocated conscious attempt to increase the number of women leaders who the company could groom for the future. "The next decade will be the decade of HR. I may sound cliched, but engaging with people to perform better will get more crucial," she adds.