

‘HUL is a co with the soul of middle-class India’

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- **Mumbai:** It's rare to come back from a meeting with Harish Manwani and not feel energised. Unleashing energy is one of the principles by which the outgoing chairman of Hindustan Unilever (HUL) lived by throughout his career of 42 years — three as the COO of parent Unilever.
- Manwani, who begins his second innings in June this year, is not one to sit back and lead a staid retired life. The 64-year-old leader has ensured he is preoccupied with doing what he knows best: learning, and seeing organisations grow
- Manwani, who is the global executive adviser at Blackstone and a director on the boards of Qualcomm

and Gilead Sciences, says he doesn't have a predetermined agenda. "I get 100% immersed in what I do. Tomorrow, there may be another calling. If there is, I take it," says Manwani, in an exclusive interview to TOI.

While some leaders become coaches after retirement, and others mentor entrepreneurs, Manwani has a different take. "I sit on boards of companies because I like to see what makes companies tick. It gives me great joy," he says. The danger, he adds, is when one thinks the first phase of life was about inputting and the second phase is about outputting and that all one gets to do in retirement is advise. "I want to continue learning. I am with Blackstone because I like the idea that I can work with CE-

SET FOR A STRONG SECOND INNINGS

- The 64-year-old HUL chairman Harish Manwani will retire in June
- He started at the FMCG giant as a management trainee in 1976, and was COO of parent Unilever too for 3 years
- Manwani remains a director on boards of several cos, including Qualcomm & Gilead Sciences
- He is also global executive adviser at Blackstone
- Manwani plans to continue with his assignment of teaching leadership at Harvard



HARISH MANWANI
CHAIRMAN, HUL

“ Vision is not about targets. Vision is about changing behaviours. If you don't get a little knot in your stomach, frankly you don't have a challenge. “Oh my God! Am I going to get there or not?” If you don't have that feeling, you are in a mode of what I call satisfactory under-performance

Os and take a company that is at X today to 2X tomorrow,” says Manwani.

While Blackstone is satiating his appetite of entrepreneurship, teaching leadership at Harvard is ensuring Manwani puts his learning and oratory skills to

good use. He can envisage himself working in the area of education to create an impact. With amonth left to his retirement, Manwani — who started with the company as a management trainee in 1976 — feels “a tinge of emotion” and a sense of pri-

de in the current team led by Sanjiv Mehta.

Describing HUL, now a Rs 36,000-crore organisation, as a company “with a soul of middle-class India”, Manwani says it is here he felt comfortable on the dusty roads of rural India as he did when he walked the corridors of Unilever House in London. “This company made me feel rooted. Meritocracy and values are important to us. These are very middle-class values.”

Challenges that shaped his leadership

As a young branch manager in the 80s when he was posted in Calcutta, a big region for the maker of Lifebuoy soap and Taj Mahal tea, the go-getter Manwani was all set to conquer his targets. But his ambitions were hit by the gro-

und reality of poor sales and stockist infrastructure, something he had to fix before meeting sales targets. “There were only four branch managers in those days. I had to take a tough call and say we are not going to meet our targets — first time in my life I had to say that. Not meeting your target is a bad deal at HUL,” recalls Manwani.

With a rallying cry of “back to basics”, he then energised the entire sales force to fix the infrastructure on the ground rather than just push sales. “It was a very humbling experience for a young manager. At the national conference, the only branch which could not come up and receive the felicitation was our branch,” he says.

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An audacious move in '90s

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Challenges were galore, but some chiselled Manwani's thought leadership sharply. He learnt why making choices is important when he took on his first big leadership role outside India as head of Unilever's Latin America business. The company was facing one of its fiercest attacks on its citadel — the detergents business.

"We were facing a competitive onslaught from our renowned competitor. It's a battle we could not lose. It would mean redeploying resources across other countries into countries where we had been attacked and from other categories into

the detergent category. It was a big decision, but I was very clear that we had to have unblinking defence," says Manwani, known for taking big, hairy, audacious goals (BHAG).



BHAG is demonstrated as an audacious move by Manwani in the mid-90s, to give a vision to HUL's smallest business — oral care — where the company took on established leader Colgate. "Vision is not about targets. Vision is about changing behaviours," says Manwani. He empowered Hemant Bakshi, then a young marketing manager, to head a team of a few seniors, including Manwani himself. "We told him to decide the agenda and we will provide the resources. We knew it was a big battle

and we could win by geography," he recalls. Pepsodent's '102% better than ordinary toothpaste' campaign helped the brand create a dissonance. "It unleashed energy and changed behaviours. It rubbed off on other categories as well," says Manwani.

Bakshi today heads Unilever's Indonesia business. Building leaders comes naturally to Manwani whose philosophy is simple, yet powerful. "If you don't get a little knot in your stomach, frankly you don't have a challenge. 'Oh my God! Am I going to get there or not?' If you don't have that feeling, you are in a mode of what I call satisfactory under-performance," he says. "No one succeeded without stepping out on the edge."