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HUL

ALL ABOUT PURPOSE

Hindustan Unilever's focus on being purposeful and accountable makes it a great place to work

BY AJITA SHASHIDHAR
PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHIT GOSWAMI

OVERALL RANK

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he past few quarters haven't been good for the country's biggest FMCG company, Hindustan Unilever. The economic slowdown has resulted in the slowest volume growth in a decade for the ₹38,224 crore consumer goods company, and its Chairman and MD, Sanjiv Mehta, has even expressed his concern about this despite all their aggression in the market place. However, at its plush



headquarters in Mumbai, the mood is far from somber. The Bru Café at the HUL headquarters, a popular hangout of its younger employees, is bustling with activity. Ask any of the millennials over there if slow growth rates was coming in the way of their individual growth, the instant response is that they are lucky to be part of the Unilever network. Sikta Sampark Patnaik, Brand Manager and Digital Leader, Hair Care, instead of being worried about the muted volume growth, is excited about the phenomenal opportunity of reaching out to 250 million households in India. "We recently took our advertising (Clinic Plus) to our consumers in villages in Punjab and came back with a narrative of a 16-year-old girl who welled up when she watched the campaign and revealed to us about her mother's desire to have her daughter finish her education. This made me reflect on the impact I can make through a brand that strives to inspire women to raise strong daughters."

Patnaik's comment is a reflection of Unilever's three-pillar compass: Companies with purpose last, brands with purpose grow and people with purpose thrive. Unilever's motto of linking its business goals with the well-being of the society is well known. Anuradha Razdan, Executive Director, Human Resources, HUL, says that at a time when the going is slow, it's back to basics. "We are focusing on fundamentals of growth, making sure that our teams are closest to the consumer and the markets they serve, and as employers and leaders, we stay close to our employees. That is most important. As a culture, we believe that we are human, purposeful and accountable. Our focus during these times is to be even more so. Human is all about engagement, development and communication with our employees, purposeful is the way we do business and accountable is about a culture of feedback."

Razdan proudly says that the company's engagement scores were as high as 90 cent in a year in which business growth was muted. "When we asked our employees whether they believed we have the right strategy to grow, there were more than 90 per cent favourable responses." Be it communication from the leadership or team communication, there is a consistent and continuous set of messages shared about the company regularly. "We have open and honest dialogue. We are mindful that we need to continuously build people's resilience and well-being," says Razdan.

Driving Purpose

Though Razdan claims that the company's hiring has not slowed down, independent HR professionals confirm that fresh re-

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HUL

cruitments in HUL have been need-based in the last one year. Instead of hiring aggressively, in the past year, the company has focussed on enhancing the involvement of its employees in the business.

Last year, it ran a programme called Talent First, which focussed on the top 100 leaders of the company to be purpose-led and future-fit. It started with each leader going through an assessment, which included external and internal inputs, and then they were told where they stood as individuals in terms of functional capabilities and leadership profiles. At the end of it came an exhaus-



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tive and comprehensive report for each leader. "It translated into curated development plans, and specific coaching interventions for employees. For someone, it could mean an external immersion, or support with how they lead their team. The belief is to help leaders focus on their inner game, and as you drive more self-mastery in your leaders, they will be more effective in their outer game, which is how they run the business," explains Razdan.

For the rest of the organisation, the company ran a programme called 'Discover Your Purpose'. "As a business, we have a purpose, which is to make sustainable living commonplace but we want to help and enable each of our employees to have their own leadership purpose. It's about what their passion is and the legacy they want to

leave behind. That has nothing to do with their current job; it's to inculcate longer-term thinking," Razdan further explains. Brand Manager Patnaik's purpose, for instance, is to serve under-privileged girls, who she is trying to reach out to through the hair-care category she manages. Razdan firmly believes that it is Patnaik's larger purpose that will translate into higher growth for the category itself.

An integral part of the company's purpose agenda is also to make the workplace inclusive. This means not just having more women in the workforce, but also including the third gender and also people with disabilities.

The Unilever CHRO, Leena Nair, recently declared that women form 50 per cent of Unilever's workforce globally. In India, in 2010, this was only 18 per cent but today, it is 40 per cent. "We are committed to being gender-balanced in the next few years. We want to drive this balance across all levels of the organisation," says Razdan, citing the example of the company's colour cosmetics manufacturing unit in Haridwar that is run entirely by women.

Apart from communicating with employees and helping them find their purpose and integrating it with their long-term career growth, in the last one year, the company has also focussed on driving accountability. It has started a culture of two-way feedback between leaders and reportees. "We call it compassionate and direct feedback for growth. Over 50 of our leaders have opened themselves to feedback because, often, leaders focus on their bosses but do we really think about what our employees think of us. I sent out a survey to all my team members and asked them about the kind of impact I was having on their energy and motivation, and that's direct feedback," says Razdan.

Career Growth

HUL is known for the career growth opportunities it offers to employees, which has also reflected in the Business Today-PeopleStrong Best Companies to Work For study. The company has now taken its career growth strategy beyond its 18,000 employees. Last year, it partnered with Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, to offer a programme for its stockists. It was a week-long programme that taught them skills to manage business effectively, and look at financial elements as well as people management. "We have over four lakh employees who belong to our 'outer core' - this includes people employed by our distributors and third parties. We firmly believe we need to invest time and effort on this group as well. Our distributor salespersons are our frontline who sell our products in the market every day. This population had over 40 per cent attrition. We have brought this down to 12-13 per cent voluntary attrition by looking at their capability, career and care initiatives for their family like education scholarships for their children and medical assistance," says Razdan.

@AjitaShashidhar