

From wanting to fly planes to becoming a people's person



Shefali Suri

group CHRO, Greaves Cotton

Shefali Suri, group CHRO, Greaves Cotton, considered many professions before choosing to work in human resources

Radhika Sharma

While academics were essential, Shefali Suri's true passion lay in extracurricular activities. An avid debater, she actively participated in various debate competitions, public-speaking events, dramatic performances and theatre. At one point, she also thought of pursuing a career in a field related to these interests, but that didn't materialise.

Being a military brat, adaptability and flexibility came naturally to her. With her army officer father relocating every two years, Suri got to travel a lot and live in different places, including Pune, Assam, West Bengal, Kashmir and Ladakh. Suri saw these postings as an "opportunity to explore new locations and immerse ourselves in various cultures".

All that travelling, thanks to her father's army career, gave her early exposure to diversity. It helped her appreciate the variety in terms of the cuisines and traditions in each state. Understanding and embracing individuals from different states became second nature to her. In doing so, she even picked up a bit of the regional languages.

During her schooling, earlier at Kendriya Vidyalaya and later from Army Public School, Delhi, her aspirations changed quite often. At one point, she dreamt of becoming a pilot, but couldn't pursue the same because of her weak eyesight. She then wanted to follow in her father's footsteps and become an army officer. Somewhere down the line she also aspired to be a teacher in an army school, just like her mother. Influenced by her mother, she considered teaching to be a "highly rewarding field that allows one to contribute to society."

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In the end, however, she chose a different professional path, going on to pursue higher studies in Economics. She had a keen interest in the stock market and how it operated. Although she wasn't particularly into stock picking, the manner in which the dynamics within companies and their operations could change as their stock prices fluctuated began to intrigue her.

After graduation, she started preparing for the Civil Services entrance. It's when she also researched different degrees and what they entailed. During these explorations she realised her aptitude and interest in HR, and decided to pursue HR. In her own words, "I'm glad I did because it's something I'm genuinely passionate about and it has become a part of me."

When Suri expressed her desire to pursue a career path away from the armed forces, her parents were extremely supportive. "My areas of interest evolved over time. My career choices were driven by my own inspiration and interests, rather than parental influence. My parents didn't pressure me to conform to societal expectations, as was often the case during our time. Instead, they encouraged me to follow my passions and excel in what interestes me," shares Suri.

Suri recalls her first stint at Hero Honda Motors back in 1998, where she joined as a management trainee. "On entering the corporate world, one quickly realises that managing people is fundamentally different from managing inanimate objects. Unlike lifeless objects, they are individuals who require care and can appreciate the care they receive. One can't approach working with people as if it were a process written in a manual," she observes.

While she started off living with a relative due to her parents' insistence and concern for her safety, she soon moved into a paying guest accommodation in Delhi. She remembers the challenges of travelling to Gurgaon by a bus every day around 5:30 a.m. because she had to clock in at the factory by 8:30 a.m.

She had to fend for herself relying on her minimal cooking skills. She used to concoct odd meals just to fill her stomach. "In those harsh Delhi winters, having to cook for oneself and not even being sure of what one had cooked was quite an experience. It wasn't great, but I take pride in the fact that I can look back and say, 'I did it. I gave it my best shot'," says Suri.

Initially, she was part of a team of three women at the factory, managing a workforce of 3,000 men. The environment was quite challenging for all of them. She recalled how intimidating it was being a woman manager in a factory full of men.

"In HR, it's essential that people accept one's role and believe that one's can contribute value and provide valuable insights. The most significant challenge was making people realise that I was a serious player, who is truly committed to building a career in HR," points out Suri. She made sure that people took her seriously and understood that she could bring value to the field of HR. Her first job also taught her that each person is unique, and as a manager, one needs to be astute enough to develop

strategies that work effectively for most individuals.

Every day presented a new challenge. Fortunately, throughout her career, she was required to mainly report to business leaders, which helped her dive into the business side of HR. For instance, in SBI Mutual Fund, Suri reported to Pratip Chaudhari,

chief investment officer, who later became the chairman of SBI. "An exceptionally intelligent individual who understood the intricate connection between people's policies and business, he was a tremendous influence on me," says Suri. He taught her a critical lesson - 'Being a great HR professional with a degree from a prestigious institution is not enough if one is not creating people policies and fostering relationships that add value to the business.'

That's when she developed a deep interest in understanding the business side of every company that she worked in. Whether it was a mutual fund or an asset-management firm, she made sure to grasp the business and the numbers.

A passionate cook now, who also loves to paint, she advises young professionals who wish to be in HR - "It's crucial to maintain the human element in one's approach. Treating people with respect is fundamental within an organisation. People don't necessarily need complex policies or extravagant perks; they primarily need to be treated with respect." She also mentions that it's essential for leaders to exemplify the values they advocate.

"Ultimately, HR is not rocket science; it's about comprehending what individuals want and providing it in a manner that aligns with the business objectives. It's about staying observant, being attuned to the people around one, and cultivating sensitivity to their needs," she explains. [H](#)

