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**Career Prescription: The HR Fast Tracker**

Nishant Khandelwal  
Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies (SCMS),  
Symbiosis International University (SIU),  
Survey No. 231, Near Lunkad Gold Coast,  
Viman Nagar, Pune – 411014, Maharashtra State, India.

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**Abstract**

This case research article is an original account of an HR professional's behavior leading to functional outperformance. It records her professional behaviour and performances in a manufacturing company which is part of a reputed Indian MNC having businesses across various industries. After obtaining her MBA degree from a modest B School, she joined as a management trainee in this engineering company. She is now leading HR function of an important & complex business vertical, responsible for about 700+ Engineers and Managers. She has been consistently rated best in successive appraisals and has been rewarded with new and higher responsibilities every second year. She got promoted thrice in six years period. In her personal life, she got married few years back and is a mother of a baby now.

All identities of organization, individuals & events mentioned in this case research article are altered to maintain anonymity without compromising on the integrity. Any similarity would be purely coincidental.

*Keywords:* Professional behavior, Performance, Work life balance, Ownership

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\* Corresponding author: Tel.: +91 20 26634531, +91 9799292927, +91 7722073343  
*E-Mail address:* nishant.khandelwal@scmspune.ac.in, [nhkjaipur@gmail.com](mailto:nhkjaipur@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

Career is an important dimension of life and may be referred to as progress in one's work domain. Performance in one's chosen work determines the altitude one achieves in one's career. Youngsters in general, share their restless ambitions to progress at workplace. The HR professionals are not different than those in other functions of management in a business or social organization. They share the same ambitions and look for a growth path. They too yearn to fast track their career, the way they facilitate it for other professionals in their organization. They are ready to work both hard and smart to rise in their career. However, they may also need a guideline to mould their behavior and an example which inspires them to practice those identified behaviours. They may come across several behavioral and performance situations at their workplace in different roles and positions, particularly in the initial or forming years. One way to deal with them is to use a trial and error method or act only on gut feelings. While some of it would inevitably take place, one would tremendously benefit if she has an example to look upon. Since a knowledge of successfully practiced and positively demonstrated actions or behaviours in specific situations would strengthen one's confidence and somewhat mitigate the risk involved. In the following example, Garima an HR professional is demonstrating such an inspiring and disciplined behavior in a practical context.

The train was speeding towards Bangalore. The speed reminded Praveen of the progress Garima was making as an HR professional. It was such a tempting recall. Praveen couldn't sleep anymore and went into the past.

## **Performance**

Garima and Praveen worked in the same MNC in the Manufacturing sector. Praveen used to think if it is appropriate to ask one's boss for a better role just after one or two years in one's current role. However, Garima didn't think twice on that thought. That day Garima asked her boss for a challenging role. She said, "Now I can handle the complete HR role for the location." She handled everything well there and outperformed in many ways. Again after 1.5 years she asked for and got into an independent business HR role for a vertical. When inquired, she said, "There was nothing more for me to learn & do there. Now even others in the team can handle it (seeking challenges?)." Recently, she has outperformed again. (Boss Beware! Find another challenge for her now).

Once she performed effectively in a project by coordinating with several line heads. Praveen offered her a chocolate. She took it politely and said, "Thanks." Praveen wanted to see her thanks in expressions, reactions & words. It didn't happen. As if, it was natural for her to perform like that. Several years passed by. But there was hardly any complaint Praveen heard, which involved her work. She never complained of any person, situation or lack of resources. Neither any line head complained about her work. Such was her consistency in performance.

## **Boss's Right Hand**

She would accept a work forwarded by boss despite being an already packed and do that, when boss needs to unburden his shoulder. (Praveen wondered- 'Will it be possible for many to take such stress and isn't it wrong sometimes?'). One of the best things was that she loved taking work to a good stretch and then only will ask for relief or say 'No'.

Praveen never saw her showing a desperate emotion or reaction. Her loudness was not in pitch or volume of her voice but in her choice of words. She asked for a tough role and performed greatly thrice and then again asked for a tough role and then again performed greatly (Aladdin's ghost or what?). Boss was happy and relieved but also burdened as to what better role can she be given. (Praveen reflected- 'Will it not be moving faster than one's organization? What, if one reaches a 'no road ahead' situation?'). She almost became a subordinate who keeps her boss on his toe although at a reasonable interval (Isn't it also leading your own boss?). In the meeting, Praveen saw her taking lead without being an appointed leader. She always talked sense without compromising on human touch and to the point. She was seen using the words like "What we have discussed till now is that...", "Adding further to what Praveen said", "What Latika means is that...", "We are facing this difficulty...." etc. She helped everyone in the meeting arrive at proper and common understanding. She frequently brought the crux of the matter in front of everyone. No wonder, there was hardly any time Praveen could recall, when a heated or emotional argument was put against her or after her statement. Nor was there ever an argument in which she spoke in a loud voice and reactions. It used to be rather reverse that the emotions calmed down and arguments jumped out of conference room, once she was on the mike.

### **Handling Complaints & Grievances**

Once, a vendor complained about delay in payment which she wasn't aware. She responded within 2 hours, "I express my sincere regret in the delay that has occurred for reimbursing the amount from the various responsible parties. I will be updating the status to you by Friday. Request you to kindly cooperate till then. Thanks." Praveen remembered those words of hers, so vividly. Once, Praveen told her for expediting decision for a work which boss had entrusted her to take care. She informed, "I already sent mail and also spoke to him. He asked me to wait." Upon further insistence that why doesn't she remind boss again, Garima replied with subtle critique but in a soft voice, "Why don't you go and talk to the boss yourself, if it is so important for you?" Praveen then kept quiet (Pinch without hurting?). Recently, she handled 2 indiscipline cases so well. The report reflected major facts which she had collected swiftly from the concerned employees, within just 3-4 days. It was her firsts and was closed fastest without much intervention required by superior except that of approval.

### **Acting 'J' of MBTI**

Once there was a pending payment of her business. His junior was looking into it. When Praveen came to know he requested Garima to close this quickly. Within 2 hours she acted and within next 3 days she could close on this complex case. Praveen remember that out of 10 tasks in a month, he doesn't remember a single one which is kept pending and not closed and required follow ups. If she has taken it, then she has worked on it promptly. Praveen used to tell to Prerna and Sharmila, "Have you given it to her?" "Then forget worries and enjoy your life (dependability?)."

### **Team Worker and Leader**

Whenever Praveen used to see her along with her junior, she looked like as one of the team member, although of course in command. One cannot find any status symbol. The 'Pakad' (control) she had on her junior was super. A lot of times Praveen saw that her juniors are empowered, deciding and working like her. Besides, she will not have any regrets of saying 'No'. She frequently refused to others for immediate attention for their work. (Living example of EQ?). But can there be any body who can say she is not cooperating or working as a good team member? She made it a point to say 'sorry' when she was not able to accommodate others' requests. (How many managers would be able to check on their egos? What if one's natural orientation is opposite?). In fact, sometimes Garima's refusal looked better than acceptance by others. Once, Praveen heard Sheila asking her for help in doing something important. She paused and agreed to help. Then she stayed late twice for helping her in the coming days. (Sacrificing for colleague?). There were several instances in which she agreed to help colleagues & team. She did that by stretching her efforts and cutting her personal time. (Praveen exclaimed in his mind- 'Hope that some youngsters are able to hold on to their temptation of indulging into personal time for a long term relationship! What an interesting dichotomy- A long term orientation for fast track career!')

### **Equanimity, Unmoved, Neutral**

Many times her actions & behaviour would be like clean flowing river water. Not getting affected by the events around, while still taking the shape as per the situation. This included the mind boggling incidents like dearest junior going out of team, coming & going of new superiors, change of office, restructuring of the team etc. Once Praveen remarked, "Boss is changing." She replied, "Yes, I know." Praveen waited for further questions for a tempting discussion. However, she started focusing on her work again. She went through several changes during two years. But Praveen didn't hear any cribbing from her (Equanimity?). That day her close colleague & friend Harsha came and informed her, "I have resigned." She replied, "Ok." (Isn't it super cool?). After a troubling pause, and sensing that Harsha is getting almost an ache in the stomach to talk further, she only said, "So are you joining somewhere?" In a case, where others get shocks and immediately reacts, she kept calm like deep blue sea. (Isn't it what they call as EQ?). Praveen couldn't decide whether to give credit to Garima's conscious effort or to her genes. Was she born like that? ('B' type personality?). In several pressure situations, like scheduled meeting with Business head after an hour, she will still be doing her work in hand at ease. Sometimes, it was difficult for Praveen to judge whether it was her silence as wisdom or it was her wisdom to be silent.

### **Mind One's Own Business, Time Management, Focus**

It was usual for Praveen & other colleagues to call her for some work or share some information. Many times they used to receive, 'no response' and then later, "Sorry, I was in a meeting" or "I was busy in some important work." Garima made it a point to don't allow anyone to distract her focus from the work in hand. This of course didn't affect her

relationships. No way. Praveen found her to be one of the few colleagues whom he could call as close friends who understand better than others. There were others in the company who also felt the same about Garima. The intranet will frequently show her status as, 'Busy' or 'Do not disturb'. She seemed to be taking this as a very normal thing which should not be offending to anyone. (Being in charge of one's life? Doing work with full focus and attention?).

### **Purpose Driven, Burning 'Yes' Inside**

Boldness in its most subtle and silent form was her natural behavior. Once, a senior person asked Garima to take his pet project as her KRA. She politely refused, "I am sorry. I cannot take this up. I have different goals for my career." Later, she explained to Praveen- "I refused that work to boss. I am clear in what way I have to go. And I will not allow anyone to disturb that." Praveen wondered why he was spared for that clarity.

### **Personal Leadership**

The most surprising thing for the colleagues was to see her working stretched hours and at ease, despite the facts that she just got married and later as a mother of just born baby. No wonder, if a mother can do that than what else she cannot not do? Praveen said to himself, "Salute to the women in you." "Salute to the professional in you." Another most surprising thing to Praveen was when he saw Garima telling so lightly that often she reaches home by 9 PM as she had to travel from one corner of the city to another. Then do household work before going to sleep at 11. Many times she worked till 12 PM or 1 AM. However, she looked so calm and at ease next day. She must be getting tempted to chat and gossip. But she seemed to have that emotional control. Praveen recalls few instances where informal chat with her was more meaningful than some of the official discussions.

### **Work Life Balance**

When she decides to give time to her family, 'Mazal kisi ki jo use disturb kar sake' (Dare anyone who can disturb her?). Her mobile would be switched off in such times. In fact, Praveen finds her utilising available gadgets so beautifully without disturbing the work life balance. One will often get a carefully drafted sms and email messages when she is not available on phone calls or emails. Praveen recalls an incident when she received a call from his friend, while she was in a meeting. She didn't pick up. After that she had some important work lined up and then she needed to visit a vendor. Despite several attempts by his friend, she didn't pick up the call. An automatic text reply was sent to his friend that she will call later. In the late evening, while returning from the vendor's company she called from her taxi while it was on the way to her home. She first apologised for not taking the call and then said, "Now we can speak, as I am in a car and not driving it and am free for 15 minutes." She then had good chat with the friend who wanted some important discussion related to her career. She often appeared to be master of her life by choosing her choices in every area. Sometimes, seemingly defying God's will. In fact, God must be curious to see her ways of leading life.

### **Professionalism, Maturity**

Once her friend Geeta wanted to know as to which senior person is joining? She courteously denied sharing information (Holding info back even from friends if it is professionally required?). She was always empathising but still calling a spade, a spade. In an HR review meeting, she started telling her colleague and friend, “There is a lot of pull from the line for this HR intervention. The way you have scaled it to this level is really commendable, more so since we have gone through several changes in the structure, recently. The division wise plan & summary is in line with our requirement. But the annual plan simply doesn’t make any sense. The data is incomplete and we cannot execute based on this plan. Hence, I agree with others to switch to a quarterly plan. And in that we should give complete details including dates.” No wonder, she was twice nominated for top level professional development interventions. (An obvious choice?)

### **Ownership**

In one case, she was to take decision from superior and act thereon. But the superior couldn’t give any decision despite personal and mail reminders and asked to wait due to changing complexity. Later, when there was business difficulty due to the indecision, she handled it herself although there were 2 more colleagues involved. But there wasn’t a single mail circulated by her involving others or sharing blame with others. She herself communicated with seniors without involving anyone else and closed the hot & difficult matter.

The above case highlights several key observations and learning for HR fraternity for successful career and professional outperformance (Exhibit I).

It’s been 7 years since she is working. Despite being from a modest B School, she has consistently been climbing vertically by moving horizontally. Today, she is already leading HR for a business vertical. Praveen is unable to resist the temptation of seeing her role in future. He whispers, “Garima, You are an ED HR in Making!” Amen.

### **End Note**

If one takes an aerial view of the above exhibit, it seems so idealistic as if not achievable or only possible for some chosen sons of God. However, when Praveen looks back, he finds it happened in front of his eyes over a period of several years. It didn’t happen on a day. It didn’t happen without a choice made first hand. It did happen when one trained oneself through various means. It was one at a time in a week or a fortnight. Some of it, probably comes easily to a person while some requires a tough choice being made enduring some pain. Individuals vary in their orientation and personalities. However, isn’t everyone still having a potential free will to realize one’s dream? Do we recognize that? Can we dare to exercise that? Are we really aspiring to fast track our career or it’s just a wishful thinking?

### **Conclusion**

To simply put it, the case demonstrates that outperformance can be chosen. Fast tracking once career in HR and otherwise is a potential choice one can make. What one requires is to list down the required behaviors and actions and practice the same consistently. Some

people may do it earlier than others. It's a potential to be explored consciously. The comprehensive list of behaviors identified in the above exhibit can be used as a framework for that purpose. The idea is to help young managers utilize this framework to get onto an accelerated career path, which many aspire for. It's comparatively easier to start practicing the above behaviors as they are verbalized and are demonstrated in an actual work context. Several of the above behavioral competencies are suggested by learned authors and researchers like Emotional Intelligence by Goleman (1995) and being Purpose Driven by Covey (2008). HR Compass by National HRD Network (2014) also suggests some of the above behavioral competencies for HR professionals, albeit in different words. Interested researchers may further explore the topic of fast tracking in HR and other functions by studying the successful fast trackers in various service and IT companies, besides the manufacturing sector.

## Annexure

*Exhibit I: Career Dimensions and Behavioral highlights*

<b>The Career Dimensions</b>	<b>Behavioral highlights from the Case</b>
<b>Personal Leadership</b>	
A. Emotional Intelligence	Neutral & unmoved when required
	Thick skinned
	Asserting, with seniors and superiors too
	The silent empathy- Feeling what others do
	Talking tough without raising one's voice
	Managing Self without complaining
B. Spiritual Intelligence	Equanimity
	Fearless, courage of conviction
	Living in present
	Not only keeping promises, but making good ones too
<b>Out Performance</b>	Bringing meaning to meeting
	Getting delight in stretching
	Risk taker
	Keeping superior on his toe to create a challenging role
	Handling complaint without letting it go upward
	Being known for consistency in high performance
<b>Relationship Management</b>	Positive critique- Pinching without hurting
	Committed to relationships through actions
	Family Management- Managing one's relations & responsibilities at home
	Boss's first colleague- Immediately saying yes to work, Accepting trivial works refused by others to relieve boss
	Be cautious yet unhurting to friends
	Seeking and responding to help
<b>Organization Savvy</b>	Responsibility- Proactively seeking it
	Ownership of one's work & role
	Leading one's own boss by performance & dependability
	Can I swim in politics without getting into the pool?
	Use performance to make honest demand
<b>Team Working and Leading</b>	Really leading when one gets that role, Owning failures
	Empowering- Identifying, enabling and allowing juniors
	Sacrifice personal comfort for the team
<b>Professionalism in Practice</b>	Minding own business
	Saying 'No' to time wasters
	Matured in holding & sharing information
<b>Purpose Driven</b>	Absolute focus in the current role
	Having mind boggling clarity of one's purpose
	Burning 'yes' inside to refuse distractions
	Choosing one's choices
<b>Proficiency Development</b>	Building proficiency, Accepting role change, job rotations
	Attending to learning interventions