

THE TALENT MAGNETS

Three dimensions of a great place to work.

By Chandrasekhar Sripada



Inside any successful business, you'll find talented people front and centre, and India is no exception. Anyone in India on the hiring side of business can see the critical difference that talent can make and regardless of where your company is operating, the importance of talent cannot be overstated.

Right now in India, talent is king. The irony is that while the country has over 1.3 billion people, it is very short on skilled talent. Given the rapid pace and scale at which Indian enterprises are growing, they are always falling short of finding the right talent. As a result, there is a lively talent war waging across India's business landscape.

Each talented person in India has many choices with the top companies, so organisations have to work hard to become a magnet for the crème de la crème. If attracting talent is key, how can all organisations do this well—in India as well as elsewhere in the world? Becoming a talent magnet requires a lot of homework, some soul searching, and a whole lot of perseverance. What's more, once it becomes a talent magnet, the organisation has to work even harder to maintain that position.

The three pillars of a talent magnet

The equation is straightforward: If your company is seen as a great place to work, you will draw bright, skilled people. Apart from drawing talent, a great workplace creates a work culture and an organisational culture that brings the best out of people. When you are able to create such a workplace, the average output and the value add of your workforce is far higher. Data shows that great places to work are also great growth companies and top market performers. So there is a strong correlation between being a great place to work and being a great business. In short, great workplaces deliver higher productivity and value add through their enabling business culture.

It follows that companies should invest in becoming great places to work. But what makes an organisation an outstanding workplace? The answer is a universal one, regardless of the industry sector, size or life stage of a firm. It comes down to three core elements: trust, pride and camaraderie.¹

A great workplace is where employees feel trusted, where they trust their managers, and where employees trust their organisation's policies to be fair and equitable. A great workplace is also where employees feel proud about what they do. Finally, a great workplace is where employees enjoy whom they work with and thus experience camaraderie at the

workplace. The question then is: How does one create this environment of trust, pride and camaraderie?

The easy part: The mechanisms

To start with, the organisation must put in place the mechanisms that will allow it to foster trust, to deliver employee empowerment and pride and to engender a sense of camaraderie. These mechanisms include policies, processes, programmes and systems.



Trust: Great workplaces ensure high governance within the organisation by setting clear transparent policies like non-retaliation policies, anti-harassment policies and non-discrimination policies. These mechanisms, when executed sincerely, reinforce trust. Some other specific organisational mechanisms include the institution of ombudsman, hotlines for grievances, anonymous surveys, employees' access to all management including the CEO, upward feedback surveys and engagement surveys where employees are able to openly share concerns and feedback with their managers.



Pride and empowerment: Pride comes from the deep significance and purpose employees see in their work and that of their organisation. Interestingly, while pride creates success, success in turn engenders pride. Therefore, business success is foundational. Employees also feel a sense of pride when they see their organisation and its leaders on the forefront of innovation and community work. Empowerment, freedom and autonomy are the hallmarks of a great

place to work. In particular, empowerment is the winning ticket when it comes to courting the millennials. The command and control style does not sit well with these young people who are now just entering the workforce. For this generation, you need to empower, not micromanage.

In a leading pharmaceutical company in India, I led the execution of an experiment with a concept called 'self-managed teams'. The result was fascinating. In factories, blue-collar workers carry out low-level jobs and are usually very supervisor-led. In our experiment, we hired young people fresh from rural society, trained them and gave them the freedom to make a lot of decisions in a range of work areas in the workplace. The youngsters often took a lot of responsibility. They reported quality violations and flagged a lot of breakdowns in the factory because they had a greater sense of ownership and were fully committed to their roles. In the end, the management was able to see that productivity goes up with self-managed teams.

These empowered youth, whose lives were transformed by the opportunity to work and learn at this leading pharmaceutical company, experienced great pride. They saw their work contributing to health promotion and cure of critical diseases and this big picture behind the mundane task of producing pills in a factory made them very proud.



Camaraderie: In great places to work, employees make friends, share common interests and work collaboratively. Effective measures that foster a sense of togetherness include the formation of cross-functional teams, assignment to special projects

so that employees anchored in one department have the opportunity to do projects in other departments, robust intranet, and access to the organisation's cross-vertical knowledge depository.

Other effective programmes include the provision of good internal job mobility so that employees can readily move between verticals, and the upskilling and cross-skilling of employees so that they can grow to understand other jobs in their organisations, and a transparent system of internal job posting. It is also key that the company circulates communication about the whole organisation to their employees and not just distribute departmental information to each department.

An examination of Intuit, a leading global financial software company, reveals why it emerged to be 2017's Number One great place to work in India, beating Google.² A key finding is their ability to build and foster several 'employee networks', all promoting great friendship and camaraderie among their diverse employees.

The hard part: Walking the talk

In my view, personal role modelling by an organisation's leaders always triumphs and takes precedence over formal organisational mechanisms. Ensuring that, however, is far more difficult than establishing organisational mechanisms. It is not possible for HR departments to compel managers, for example, to behave in trustworthy ways. And when managers act in ways that undermine trust, all the best policies that an organisation sets will not help.

Leaders of a great workplace have to win the hearts and minds of their workforce by living up to the organisation's pledges. Day in, day out. Without fail.

At the end of the day, the chief executive and other senior leaders make the biggest difference in creating a magnetic organisation. To become a great workplace, an organisation needs its chief executive and all its managers to be fully committed to the vision and to dedicate themselves to deepening trust in the workplace. Senior and middle managers must work purposefully towards creating and sustaining a great work environment. Above all, the management should embody the values and workplace culture of the organisation in all they say and do. Because everything managers say or do sends a message about how genuine the company is about valuing and respecting its employees.

Management teams that walk the talk have the following traits:

THEY BUILD TRUST BY:

Communicating consistently and often, and they are transparent in their communication

Trust is built on moments of truth between a manager and an employee. This refers to the daily interactions between them. Through his or her ordinary everyday honest and open interaction, a manager conveys respect for staff, and in this way builds trust. In great workplaces, the chief executive will stick their necks out and say things that leave them vulnerable. If the company is not doing well, they will talk about it transparently. If there is an accident, they will not brush it under the carpet. In short, they will own what needs to be owned. That is how trust grows.

Hiring and promoting people who build trust

Building a climate of trust starts from selecting authentic and trustworthy people during the hiring process to promoting people who stand by the values of the company. Good companies always make their managers accountable for building trust and reward those who build trust.

Acting firmly against behaviours that violate trust

Whether the violation is cheating, favouritism or an act that makes people question whether this company truly operates out of the principle of transparency, an organisation has to be seen to take strict action against transgressors. By taking action against managers that violate trust, you build trust.

Knowing that action speaks louder than words

A CEO in a great workplace will stand up for his or her employees in moments of crisis and will require their managers to do the same. During a natural calamity, the employees

of a pharmaceutical company witnessed the sincerity with which the top management sprang into action. They saw how the leaders of their firm supplied employees and their families with safe drinking water, food and medicine, and they saw them ferrying children. When a company does things for employees in need, the employees understand that the company does not only engage in shouting from the rooftops but is genuine in caring for its employees. In one go, the trust level for the management of that pharmaceutical firm just doubled because its people saw the management in action.

THEY EMPOWER THEIR WORKFORCE BY:

Ensuring that managers let go

At any hotel in the Taj Group, the waiter is as empowered as the general manager. This is because the waiter is given the authority to make many decisions, including financial decisions. For example, a waiter can arrange for a car to ferry an unwell customer home from the hotel. Empowerment is not



about ‘delegation of powers’ to employees; it is about letting employees find autonomy and meaning in their work and to be inspired and uplifted at work every day.

Letting their employees take charge of their own careers

Employers of choice are transparent when it comes to career development. Managers at great workplaces take active interest in the careers of their people and periodically engage their employees in discussions about their career development. However, this is not about handing out promotions or the next job title. Great places to work tend to their people’s career development by shaping the ability and capability of their people. These organisations build a climate of career self-reliance. They tell their employees: You take charge of your career. It is about helping employees understand what their career trajectory is, how careers grow and what competencies are required to hold certain positions. The organisation’s role is to empower their employees to take charge of their careers by providing the resources, the coaching and the guidance.

Building camaraderie

Of the three pillars of a great workplace, building camaraderie and collaboration is the toughest to crack. Competition is something that is innately human; we all naturally tend to work in silos and we all love our turfs. Given a chance,

every three or five people will gravitate to one team and they won’t like to work in any other team. For most organisations, building up camaraderie will require the most intervention from the top leaders.

It requires leaders who don’t let boundaries get in their way and who don’t create turfs. Often, the top teams set the collaborative climate at a workplace based on how they behave when interacting with other teams. When you have internal power struggles among the top teams, the discord travels all the way down. People will begin to follow their leaders and will not cooperate. But if the top teams discourage that, the subordinates will cooperate.

When I first joined a leading IT services giant in India, the finance function and the HR function always fought because the two heads did not get along. As the new HR head, I felt that there was no need for me to be at loggerheads with the finance head. So I took the lead to go often to his cabin to request for appointments and to chat. I also called him to address the HR team. As soon as I did this, he reciprocated. He started coming to my cabin and inviting me to his staff meetings. Initially my team thought that I was ‘surrendering’ to the might of finance. But when they saw that the finance head was starting to show empathy for HR matters—he arranged for extra budget for training—they realised that collaboration works better than fighting. And this

was achieved not through any organisational process; all it took was two leaders coming together for things to change.

The hardest part: Retaining the best talent

As the well known business coach Marshall Goldsmith says: What got you here may not take you there. Becoming a great place to work is not easy but staying there for long is even harder. Initially, a great workplace displays great consistency between the announced policies and real actions by its managers. But as companies grow, that consistency is not sustained. New people join and managers move on to other matters. Staff relax. With no checks and balances, the company drifts backwards. By this point in time, the organisation’s value proposition is making promises that it is no longer keeping. Meanwhile the organisation’s reputation as a great place to work has created such huge expectations among new recruits that even a slight difference between what was expected and what exists in reality causes disappointment.

Great talent in the best places to work expect more. They expect complete congruence between the promise and the fulfilment of that promise. For example, if an organisation says it is an empowered workplace but in reality, its managers micromanage their staff, its so-called value proposition is more a statement of intent, not actually how people are experiencing the company.

When I was with Dr Reddy’s Laboratories, there was a big discussion on whether our value proposition should be what we intend to be, or what we already are. We eventually decided that we would not write up a value proposition as decided by the top management or HR department. Instead we asked hundreds of employees about what they are experiencing as the company’s real value proposition. We asked our employees: What do you see as the value of working in this company? We formed focus groups, collected all the data, and eventually created a statement that the employees really resonated with. This is the way a company should convey its brand and value proposition because only then are they authentic and sustainable.

Reimagining the New Age organisation

We have now entered the new world of massive digital disruption. In the new workplace, we will see many changes. Machines and people will work together. More and more people will choose to be free agents. Lots of routine and even some intelligent work will be taken over by machines

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through the new capacities now available due to artificial intelligence and machine learning. Organisations may not be built to last—in fact some of them are already being built to be sold! Employees will not look for a long-term career in one company. They will be happy with several short-term stints as long as each boosts their employability and skills. Much of what we have discussed may require reimagination in New Age companies. Yet, in all such situations, the fundamentals of trust, pride and camaraderie will prevail. Machines can be reliable but trust is different. Technology cannot replace the need for purpose, meaning and pride. Lonelier in an increasingly virtual world, the future workforce will crave even greater camaraderie and emotional bonding. Great workplaces will continue to count on these three pillars of trust and pride and camaraderie to attract the best people.



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References

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- ² “India’s Best Companies to Work For 2017”, Great Place to Work Institute.