



# Nurturing Global Leaders

**Ratan Shah**, Group Talent Mentor (Manufacturing Professionals), Aditya Birla Group, explains why his Group is the most aspirational place for manufacturing professionals and how it is strengthening its leadership position through initiatives like the Global Manufacturing Leadership Programme (GMLP)

By Niranian Mudholkar

In fact, it is in the DNA of this Group. It believes in continuous improvement. The philosophy of this Group is that whatever establishments it has, those should be the most modern and state-of-the-art facilities as of date - irrespective of whether they were set up recently or 40 years back. It is this philosophy that allows individuals to have and present ideas that the organisation is willing to support. That's the fun to be with this organisation. It encourages you to do something new - rather than doing the routine - with

the aim of continuous improvement. It motivates its people to become better and benchmark themselves with the best in the world.

**Q** You have said,\* 'If you can dream, the organisation provides the resources to make it a reality'. Can you explain this in the context of your professional journey at the Group?

I have been with the Aditya Birla Group for 38 years and I have worked across six businesses. Based on my experience, I can say that if you have an idea backed by strong conviction and if you can position it properly then it will get funded.

Let me explain. One, Aditya Birla Group gives you the environment to have ideas. Second, it gives you the freedom and opportunity to share these ideas. And third, if you can market those ideas then it gives you the resources to fulfil those ideas. Of course, it is a rigorous and long process but what's important is that the organisation encourages you to have ideas and provides resources to fulfil the relevant ones.

**Q** Most people think that a career in manufacturing is very restricted in terms of the opportunities it offers; that it is very unilateral in its scope. Incidentally, you have personally worked across businesses, across geographies, across functions, and even across roles. So has that been an exception?

First of all, I don't know if there was anything that made me special amongst the people who had joined along with me. At that time, almost everybody came from IITs or BITS Pilani. I also came from IIT So it was not an exception. (Of course, today if you can hire an engineer from IIT, then it is an excep-

\* <https://www.abgmlp.adityabirla.com/>

tion! Very few engineers want to come to the manufacturing sector today.)

Actually, there were two things that helped me stand out in my journey at the Group. And I believe that these factors are equally applicable today as well. First, I was fully mobile; there was never a question of an opportunity given to me and my turning it down due to the location. My first job was in Thailand. Then I worked in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, and that too at plants situated in the remotest of locations. Second, I was never content with what I had in terms of professional challenges and opportunities. I was always looking for more. Well, if you get comfortable and complacent in your job then you are not growing because of your own choice. So I was ready to take up the opportunities that this organisation offered me.

Equally important is the fact that very few business groups can offer you the diverse avenues of growth that the Aditya Birla Group can. Being in the same Group, I have worked for different listed companies, in different industry sectors and across geographical locations.

In fact, if you look at people in the Group now, you will find more and more are moving around, getting varied exposures and working in diverse industries.

So in fact, the opportunities today are much more than they were when I had started. When Mr Kumar Mangalam Birla took over, we were a US\$ 2 billion Group and today we are a US\$41 billion Group. So the opportunities have grown almost 20 times more than what they were during my times.

**How is life at a manufacturing location different?**

Let me tell you from my experience that it's a different and challenging life. For the first 25 years, I was at plants. You are operating away from the typical metro life.

But the good part is that our organisation takes very good care of our people in every possible way and even at the remotest of the locations. For example, we have the best of education systems brought to the plants for our children. We have all the modern facilities available from sports clubs to swimming pools, something people may not have easy or affordable access to in cities like Mumbai. We are even building digital theatres in some of our colonies to give our people another avenue of entertainment. Life at a manufacturing location is not a city life in any way. However, it also does not have the ills of the city life such as long travel time, traffic jams, pollution, etc., and offers a good work life balance.

**There seems to be a big emphasis on training at the Aditya Birla Group...**

Yes, the learning opportunities are much larger in the Aditya Birla Group. It was always focused on training but the emphasis on training today is immensely larger than what it was about 20 years ago. We basically learnt on the job. But today, we have so many formal mechanisms and avenues for training in this organisation that a manufacturing professional joining us will

only keep growing. What I took twenty years to grow to, these people will grow in ten years time or may be even earlier. The Group has a great sense of urgency and purpose when it comes to training. Having a leadership position in manufacturing, the Group realises that it is its responsibility to train people proficiently with the aim of taking this industry to the next level not just for the Group but also for the country.

**Tell us about your role as the Chief Mentor for Manufacturing Professionals at the Aditya Birla Group. How did you get into it and how is it shaping up?**

About three years ago, we at Aditya Birla decided to work towards making this the best place to work. Since a large chunk of our profits more than 60 percent comes from manufacturing, we asked ourselves as how we could make Aditya Birla Group the most aspirational place for manufacturing professionals. So we moved from Aditya Birla Group as the best place to work to Aditya Birla Group as 'the' place for manufacturing profes-



"Our GMLP-Global Manufacturing Leadership Programme, aimed at reinforcing our technical and manufacturing strength is paying a rich dividend. The Aditya Birla Group is being increasingly viewed as the most aspirational place for manufacturing professionals in India".

**Mr. Kumar Mangalam Birla,**

Chairman, Aditya Birla Group, (excerpted from the Chairman's letter to shareholders, Hindalco - Annual Report 2014-15)

sionals. Around this time, I had also started looking at what I could do different within the Group. I had a discussion and there was a lot of enthusiasm in utilising my experience for mentoring senior leaders in manufacturing. My huge experience with the Group also means that I understand the Group's values and vision quite well, which may not be the case if an outsider becomes a mentor.

We set a couple of objectives: First is of course sharing my experience about how I could become a business head starting from being a shift engineer. It is about how I can guide other professionals to evolve similarly.

Second, when you have a mentor then people start sharing real time problems. So I share my relevant experiences related to those scenarios saying that this is what worked for me and may be you can also try the same. Mentoring is a lot about sharing experiences. Also, since I have worked for a long time in the Group, I know a lot of people with whom I can directly

put in a word to solve a given problem. Of course, this happens quite rarely.

We have started this on an experimental basis and so far the response has been positive. It is likely that the Group may call in for some more mentors. One reason why this mechanism is working is also because of its independent nature. While I have worked across different companies, roles and functions, in my current role, I am not directly affiliated with any one of these divisions. This brings objectivity, credibility, confidentiality and trustworthiness to my role as a mentor. It helps people in approaching me fearlessly without worrying about the chain of command or protocol.

**Tell us about the 'Global Manufacturing Leadership Programme' (GMLP).**

Talent is one of our biggest focus areas for the future. When we talk of aspirations and growth, the biggest question that we ask ourselves is whether we will have enough talent not only to maintain the current levels of growth but also to build on them. Of course, we already have a large number of initiatives operating within the Group. But periodically, we have found that we are not able to fill in the gaps internally. For example, if I need ten people for a project, I may have eight within the Group but I still have a shortage of two. At the same time, we also wanted to look at talent from other business sectors other than the ones in which we are operating.

Second, we at this Group believe that we need to continuously reinvent ourselves. For doing that besides getting people who know the business, we also need to get people who come from a different business sector as they would bring a fresh perspective. So for GMLP, we are not looking at people who will maintain status quo but at people who will challenge the status quo with new ideas.

Third, people selected through GMLP come with 10 to 20 years of experience. They will be earmarked for leadership roles in the Group based on their experience, performance and potential. The careers of GMLP are monitored and facilitated by Group Human Resources.

From the first batch of GMLP, two are already at the Plant Head level while the others are at senior, functional head roles for large units. In terms of designation, they were all taken at the AVP or VP positions and have grown in the organisation.

**What are the key qualities required to excel at GMLP?**

We are looking at people who are not afraid to move across different business sectors that we operate in. They need to be open to move to different businesses and different locations. We provide them with the training as well as the opportunities to grow as long as they are willing to move around.

We are not looking at domain specialists per se. Yes, the fundamentals of manufacturing and business have to be good

but equally important is the ability to bring new ideas and the flexibility to work across sectors.

People shortlisted by us are the people who are already successful in whatever they are doing. So they have grown faster in the businesses that they are. That's a key parameter. We look at how they have grown and what is the width of their experience.

Foremost, we look for their passion to do something new and to improve it. We are not interested in people who are looking for just a career growth. GMLP is much more than that. We are scouting for game changing manufacturing leaders. Equally important is the attitude to learn. We want people who consciously want to learn at every moment of their professional journey.

**What makes GMLP 'Global'?**

When you talk about the word global, the first and direct implication is geographical. Obviously since it offers opportunities to work outside India, it is global in that sense.

The current batch of GMLP is undergoing a four-month training schedule where they are required to undertake two projects each in two different businesses. And all of them in their second stint are working outside India in countries like Spain, Germany, Korea and Hungary.

Global means you get to work with people from different cultures and work practices. The mindset of people working in India is more or less similar. However, it is quite different in other countries. So the successful GMLP candidates get exposed to these different mindsets at the global level.

The word Global is also used in the sense of global markets. Many of our businesses have global markets. For example, we are the world's largest producer of Carbon Black, Rolled Aluminium, and Viscose Staple fibre, and also have the single location world's largest copper smelter. Our market for all these products is the World.

When I was heading the acrylic fibre business, we had one plant in Egypt, another plant in Thailand, and the market was the whole world. While I had to coordinate with two manufacturing locations with completely different cultures, I also had to travel the world over to meet with my customers. That is one example. In fact, all our manufacturing businesses have global footprints.

Second, as a Group, we benchmark ourselves against global standards. Our people travel all over the world to visit and study some of the best manufacturing plants run by other companies. They also attend conferences and seminars to understand global best practices. In fact, even people working at our Indian locations get the opportunity to travel abroad on a regular basis. So we are global in every sense of the term. 

