

# The healing touch



Human resource departments now have to deal with employees' personal problems and ensure their productivity is not hampered, says **Proyashi Barua**

**T**he roles of human resource managers have evolved beyond extending offer letters, structuring pay packages and managing exit formalities. In the words of Rituparna De, a senior consultant with Covenant India, a leading human resource consulting firm, "Facilitating performance and resolving work-related issues of employees no longer define the boundaries of the human resource mandate. Corporate India as a whole is increasingly beginning to acknowledge the fact that employees simultaneously contend with work and personal pressures and sometimes a personal crisis can become a serious impediment in terms of professional focus. To tide over such crises employees require more than just a congenial work environment. They need someone who can objectively listen, empathise and if required suggest remedial action. This need translates to the new additional role of human resource departments."

According to De, more than three-fourths of corporate India's existing pool of human resource professionals does not have any formal degree or diploma in human psychology. "But despite this reality there is sufficient reason to cheer: Human resource professionals across organisa-

tions are beginning to address personal issues of employees in a manner and scale that has frankly been unprecedented," she adds.

Several organisations have in place formal platforms for people to discuss and seek help for personal issues. But what's more heartening is the fact that in organisations that do not have these formal channels, people from human resource departments are reaching out to employees in their individual capacity in times of personal distress and making a positive difference. Talking about her experience, Simran Tyagi, who works with Peoples Book House, says, "I was severely depressed three years ago after my sister died in a road accident. I had just about started my career and my salary could support only me and my mother. Though I could not afford the expensive sessions by a professional counsellor, I was fortunate to have a human resource manager who more than took care of this need. She reworked my targets in order to substantially reduce my workload. More importantly, almost every alternate day she used to devote a good half-an-hour to talk to me. I could tell her everything without fear of being judged. Before I knew it I was starting to heal and gradually took charge of my life."

Shikha Mahajan (name changed to protect identity), who works in a media house, has a similar story. "I can well understand the fact that HR departments are sympathetic towards and supportive of people who are bereaved or are suffering from some chronic or life-threatening illness. But my case was fairly unusual. A few months back I had a painful break-up and lost all trust in relationships. I had problems coping with my daily routine and lost interest in all the things I loved doing. My reporting manager and human resource manager were not just understanding and patient with this phase of non-performance, they assisted me in my recovery by giving me love and encouragement. This constant and unconditional support at the workplace healed me. Today I love my work more than what I did before my personal mishap."

According to De, retention levels are high in organisations that have supportive human resource departments. "In most cases employees, after recovery, become better performers as they feel a psychological obligation to return the kindness and support. Organisations that do not take cognizance of personal issues have high attrition levels," she adds.