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PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCE SERIES

HARNESSING CULTURE IN A TECH POWERHOUSE

Lenovo, a global tech titan with a quarter of the worldwide PC market, owes much of its success to a robust HR strategy. **Gao Lan**, CHRO at Lenovo, has sought to cultivate a unique company culture that fosters innovation and talent development. She shares her insights with Criticaleye, Senior Editor, **Bridgette Hall**, into Lenovo's HR philosophy and vision for the future





Lenovo stands out as a powerhouse. With a presence in over 180 markets worldwide, the business is one of the world's largest PC vendors, boasting more than 70,000 employees and generating US\$57 billion in revenue in its most recent fiscal year. Founded in 1984 in a Beijing 'mail room' and going on to list ten years later on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, the multinational giant is renowned not only for its innovation in personal computing and smart devices but also for its strategic acquisitions, including the iconic IBM PC division and Motorola Mobility.

A key driver of this success is its robust human resources strategy, steered by Senior Vice President (SVP) and CHRO, **Gao Lan**. With a career spanning over two decades in HR across various industries, including pharmaceuticals and energy, **Gao** brings a wealth of experience to her role. Before joining Lenovo, she held pivotal HR roles at multinational corporations like Novartis and BP, where she honed her expertise in leadership development, talent management and HR strategy. She also served as HR VP for Asia Pacific at Thomson during the acquisition period with Technicolour.

Since becoming Lenovo's CHRO in 2016, **Gao** has been instrumental in shaping the company's global HR strategy. Her focus on integrating culture, talent development and organisational transformation has not only supported Lenovo's strategic objectives but also fostered a unifying company culture called 'We are Lenovo'. This culture aspires to blend global consistency with respect for local differences and

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ensure that employees, no matter where they are based, are aligned with the company's mission and values.

In this interview with Criticaleye, **Gao** shares insights into what being a 'Lenovian' means, the challenges of managing HR for a global tech leader and her vision for the future of Lenovo's people strategy.

BH: How do you spend your time as a CHRO? Could you describe some of the key areas of focus for HR to support the company's business goals?

GL: Lenovo is a unique global company. We have executive committee members

based all over the world: in Asia, Europe, North America and Latin America. A big chunk of my time is working with my peers in the company to hear about the challenges in different markets. I also spend a lot of time with my CEO, discussing the company's top leadership and whether we need to give them any support, make a change, or offer more development, as well as origination issues; for example, structure change and decision-making responsibilities. Then, I work with my HR leadership team to decide what critical areas HR should contribute to the company. We divide those into organisation, talent and culture. Those are the three anchors for HR programmes and practices to support the business.

We spend a lot of time working on the organisation, including its structure, efficiency, development and leadership. Talent is about our talent metrics, capability, development, engagement and performance management. Lenovo also has a very strong company culture, and I've worked with our team to see what we need to drive for cultural behaviours in the company to execute the company strategy.

BH: What is your role in shaping and driving Lenovo's company culture?

GL: First of all, I worked with my team to clearly define the company culture. We call it 'We are Lenovo.' It's one unified Lenovo culture based on our value proposition. However, culture is a journey that evolves alongside the business. 15 years ago, when I joined the company, the focus >



was a commitment and execution culture. This year is the company's 40th anniversary, and we are driving 'Smarter AI for All'. So, we are focusing on innovation and entrepreneurship under the 'We are Lenovo' culture.

Secondly, I asked my HR team to be the culture catalyser to foster the culture in the company. Building company culture includes role-modelling from top management, embedding culture in day-to-day processes, recognising and rewarding the right cultural behaviours and, more importantly, telling culture stories.

BH: How do you create a unified culture in an organisation with Lenovo's size and scope?

Gao Lan

Full Career Breakdown

- **Apr 1998 - Feb 2004**
Country HR Head, Novartis
- **Feb 2004 - Oct 2006**
HR VP Gas Asia, BP
- **Nov 2006 - Dec 2009**
HR VP Asia Pacific, Technicolor
- **Aug 2009 - Mar 2013**
HR VP Emerging Market Group, Lenovo
- **Apr 2013 - Jan 2015**
HR VP, People & Organisation Capability, Lenovo
- **Jan 2015 - Mar 2016**
HR VP Strategy and Operations, Lenovo
- **Apr 2016 - Oct 2016**
HR VP Data Center Group, Lenovo
- **Nov 2016 - Present**
SVP HR, Lenovo

“Yes, there are a lot of challenges, but as a leader, you’ve got to find a way to deal with challenges and deliver performance”

GL: Firstly, you are a Lenovo employee, and no matter what country you operate in, you're expected to deliver by the Lenovo way.

For example, at Lenovo, 'We do what we say, we own what we do'. When there is a business gap in other companies, people might start with, 'Well, the market is dropping, the economy is not right, or the products are not right.' However, at Lenovo, those are not excuses for being unable to achieve targets. As a manager, once you commit to the target, you must deliver it. Yes, there are a lot of challenges, but as a leader, you've got to find a way to deal with challenges and deliver performance. So that's the Lenovo way, no matter where you are from.

However, we also respect the cultures of different local countries and the differences in how we operate. Some cultures are better at working through precise details, and others are more flexible. Some cultures encourage innovation more, while others are stronger at execution. At Lenovo, we believe in 'global/local', meaning that there is a unified ethos, but we also respect those local differences and perspectives so that they can contribute to the overall culture of the business.

BH: What qualities or skills do you believe are most important for effective leadership?

GL: Persistence and resilience are crucial, as leaders need to be able to handle ups and downs and stay engaged despite challenges. The other important skill is critical thinking. Leaders must be able to deeply analyse situations, gain insights, understand what is happening around them and use their judgment to make sound decisions. This ability helps determine what aspects of a strategy or process should be maintained and what should be adjusted. Additionally, leaders must be flexible in their approaches and ready to adapt to changing circumstances while keeping focused on their core objectives.

BH: What does a high-performing HR function look like?

GL: A high-performing HR function is deeply integrated with the business, not just as a partner but as a co-driver of the company's strategy and results. It actively aligns people and organisational culture with the company's strategic goals. >



This means understanding the business inside and out, contributing to the business agenda from an HR perspective and playing a key role in forming and executing the strategy.

Agility is also crucial in a high-performing HR function. It must be adaptable and responsive to emerging technologies, such as AI, and the uncertainties these innovations bring to the workplace. In today's world, HR should plan not only for human workforce needs but also consider how AI can be adopted to maximise individuals' potential and productivity. High-performing HR functions help the organisation maintain focus amid constant changes

and challenges. They also recognise the importance of the company's ESG responsibility where they operate.

BH: What advice do you have for being successful as a CHRO?

GL: To be a successful CHRO, you need to shift your focus from the HR expertise you excel at into a broader, more strategic view of the job. One key skill is to look beyond day-to-day HR functions and understand the overall business context. This was the key difference I experienced when I became CHRO at Lenovo. Whether in a large or small company, it's the same: you must be prepared to view the organisation from a holistic standpoint.

Another essential skill for a successful CHRO is working effectively with the Board. You need to understand their perspectives, communicate HR strategies in a way that stakeholders can understand and be open to their advice.

As a CHRO, one of the key responsibilities is to contribute to decision-making at the highest level. To do this effectively, you should try to put yourself in the CEO's or your peers' shoes. This will help you see the bigger picture and position HR strategy with the overall company direction, which is crucial for the success of a CHRO. ■

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