Annual Session

Mr. Vineet Agrawal, Former CEO of Wipro Consumer Care & Lighting and Former Managing Director of Wipro Enterprises

Theme: "The Long Game: Leadership Lessons from Four Decades of Leading Growth"

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Summary by Varun Prajapati

The Ashank Desai Centre for Leadership and Organisational Development (ADCLOD), IIMA, hosted its Annual Lecture on 5th August 2026. Mr. Vineet Agrawal, Former CEO of Wipro Consumer Care & Lighting and former Managing Director of Wipro Enterprises was the speaker. Mr. Agarwal's talk was titled **"The Long Game: Leadership Lessons from Four Decades of Leading Growth,"** during which Mr. Agrawal drew on more than four decades of leadership experience at Wipro to offer participants candid, experience-based insights into building enduring businesses, driving sustainable growth, leading organisational transformation, navigating mergers and acquisitions, expanding into global markets, and developing high-performing teams. Blending personal anecdotes with practical frameworks, the session provided a rare and reflective account of leadership shaped by decades of real-world decision-making.

On Leadership and Learning

Mr. Agrawal opened with a provocative observation drawn from his experience of hiring and mentoring: graduates of premier institutions such as the IIMs and IITs do not necessarily become natural leaders. Having spent much of their academic lives as toppers and high performers, many have had limited opportunities to develop the harder skill of making space for others and working with people as equals. He noted, somewhat counterintuitively, that those who were not the highest performers in the room sometimes go on to become stronger leaders precisely because they were required to learn early how to work with and through other people.

He connected this pattern to a broader change in social structures. The gradual shift from joint families towards nuclear families, he argued, has reduced opportunities for people to develop an early understanding of how to negotiate relationships across different personalities and viewpoints. *Leadership, in this framing, is therefore less a function of individual brilliance than of the capacity to adjust, listen, and sustain relationships with people who see the world differently*. These are not skills developed through achievement alone; they emerge gradually through experience, interaction, and the willingness to make space for others.

On Managing Acquisitions

On managing acquisitions, Mr. Agrawal distilled his experience into four principles: employees do not genuinely enjoy being acquired regardless of how the transaction is presented; acquired employees must be made to feel valued and welcomed rather than simply absorbed into the acquiring organisation; leaders must take the time to understand the cultural context of the organisation being acquired; and leaders must demonstrate the value they bring rather than relying on their position to establish it. Drawing on his extensive experience with mergers and acquisitions, he argued that cross-border acquisitions test leadership more rigorously than domestic acquisitions, as they require leaders to navigate not only business integration but also significant differences in culture and perception.

Yardley: Respecting the Organisation Being Acquired

Mr. Agrawal illustrated this principle through Wipro's acquisition of Yardley. He recalled that Wipro risked losing its Yardley employees if it had immediately required them to move to Wipro's Vashi office, as many employees depended on the railway network for their daily commute. Rather than imposing the relocation immediately, Wipro retained the Goregaon office for two years despite the additional cost and communicated. After two years, Wipro moved its Vashi employees to a larger office in Goregaon. The eventual move was communicated well in advance, giving employees time to prepare and make school admission decisions or other critical decisions accordingly. For Mr. Agrawal, the decision reflected an important principle of acquisition management: respect what has been acquired rather than treating the transaction as an opportunity to immediately impose the acquiring organisation's way of working.

He extended this principle beyond major structural decisions to seemingly minor aspects of integration. On observation of acquisition practices at other companies, he questioned the assumption that everything about an acquired organisation needed to change within the first few months. Even something as simple as changing employees' email addresses could unnecessarily weaken their attachment to the organisation they had built. If an employee was proud of their existing identity and email address, he saw little reason to change it simply to demonstrate that the organisation had been acquired. The purpose of integration, therefore, should not be change for its own sake, but changes that genuinely improve the business and enable all its people to perform better.

Cross-Border Acquisitions: Understanding Cultural Context

Mr. Agrawal argued that these challenges become even more pronounced in cross-border acquisitions, where leaders must navigate not only differences in organisational culture but also differences in how employees understand the acquiring company's country and society. He illustrated this through an experience in Malaysia following one of Wipro's acquisitions in the region.

During a presentation to employees in Malaysia, two employees asked Mr. Agrawal about a Hindu festival they believed was still practised in India, in which devotees pierce their cheeks and bleed. He initially assumed they were referring to Muharram, but they clarified that the festival was Hindu rather than Islamic. None of the Indian colleagues present could immediately identify it. The festival was later identified as Thaipusam, a tradition with roots in South India that had largely disappeared in India but was carried to Malaysia generations earlier by plantation labourers. Its survival in Malaysia illustrated how cultural practices can evolve differently across countries and generations.

For Mr. Agrawal, however, the significance of the encounter extended beyond the festival itself. It revealed that the Malaysian employees' understanding of India was shaped by a historical and cultural image of the country that differed significantly from the contemporary India represented by Wipro. Across Wipro's acquisitions in Southeast Asia and China, involving thousands of employees, very few had ever visited India. The challenge for Wipro, therefore, was not simply to introduce itself as the new parent company. Before employees could develop confidence in Wipro, the company first had to establish a credible and contemporary understanding of the India from which Wipro came.

The experience demonstrated why cross-border acquisitions require a greater degree of cultural sensitivity than domestic acquisitions. In a domestic acquisition, employees may already have a broadly shared understanding of the acquiring company's social and cultural context. In a cross-border acquisition, however, employees may hold very different assumptions about the acquiring organisation, its country of origin, and the changes it intends to introduce. Leaders therefore need to understand these perceptions before attempting to build trust or integrate the organisations. The example also illustrates a broader principle in global leadership: *value creation begins with empathy and cultural understanding* before it moves to process, integration, or product.

Together, the Yardley and Malaysia experiences illustrate Mr. Agrawal's broader approach to acquisition leadership: *the acquirer must first understand what it has acquired before deciding what needs to change*. At Yardley, this meant respecting employees' circumstances and preserving elements of the organisation that did not need to be changed. In Malaysia, it meant recognising that cultural assumptions could shape how employees perceived Wipro itself.

Adding Value and Continuous Self-Renewal

A recurring theme throughout the session was Mr. Agrawal's *emphasis on value creation and continuous self-renewal as two central responsibilities of leadership*. He encouraged participants to continually examine what value their presence and work adds to the organisation, cautioning against leadership that derives its legitimacy primarily from position rather than substantive contribution. At the same time, he emphasised the need for continual self-upgradation, noting that the skills, instincts, and frameworks that enable a leader to succeed at one stage of their career are rarely sufficient for the next. Leadership therefore requires an ongoing willingness to learn, adapt, and develop; when leaders stop doing so, the capabilities that once enabled their success can gradually become constraints on the organisations they lead.

Building High-Performing Teams

Mr. Agrawal structured his approach to building high-performing teams around three interlinked areas. On assembling the right team, he emphasised the *importance of hiring for diversity, deliberately bringing in people who are better than oneself, building on individual strengths rather than attempting to correct weaknesses, and resisting the tendency to compete with one's own reportees*. On the discipline of being firm and fair, he cautioned against being “goody-goody” simply to remain popular. Instead, he advocated giving negative feedback constructively, focusing on how performance could improve rather than only identifying what went wrong, establishing clear expectations from the outset, and visibly standing by one's team during periods of crisis.

Lessons from His Own Mistakes

Demonstrating his quest to be a life long learner, Mr. Agrawal reflected on two leadership mistakes from his own career. The first involved a hiring decision for a brand manager position in Bangalore. A strong internal candidate based in Pune was prevented from moving by his regional manager, who cited instability in the Pune market and recommended a candidate from Bombay instead. Not only did the Bombay candidate underperform, the Pune candidate, whom the organisation had initially wanted for the role, resigned within two months seeing that there was no growth for him. Mr. Agrawal attributed the outcome directly to failing to support the stronger candidate when the decision was being made.

His second reflection was broader: the recurring cost throughout his career of not making decisions quickly enough. He identified performance management as the clearest example. When an employee is underperforming, the instinct is often to give them more time, typically three to four quarters, before concluding that they need to leave. In hindsight, however, he felt that the decision could almost always have been made two to three quarters earlier. The delay rarely served anyone well. It prolonged uncertainty for the employee, created drag on the wider team, and postponed an outcome that was, in most cases, ultimately better for the individual as well. Leaving often gave the employee the opportunity to find a role better suited to their strengths, where they could be more comfortable and more successful. For Mr. Agrawal, this became a broader leadership lesson: slow decisions are rarely kind decisions. The cost of hesitation tends to compound quietly over time, whether the decision concerns a person, a business transaction, or a strategic choice.

Concluding Reflections

The session concluded with a broader message about the nature of enduring leadership: built on humility, adaptability, and a willingness to continue learning from both success and failure and not on individual brilliance or organisational hierarchy. Mr. Agrawal's reflections on the limits of academic pedigree as a predictor of leadership, the cultural sensitivity required to lead across markets, the discipline involved in building high-performing teams, and the willingness to acknowledge one's own mistakes together offered participants a grounded, experience-tested perspective on what it takes to lead effectively over the long term.