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XLRI Xavier School of Management — For the greater good

Xplore

A LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION & EXCELLENCE COLLECTIVE

The Long Game of AGREEMENT

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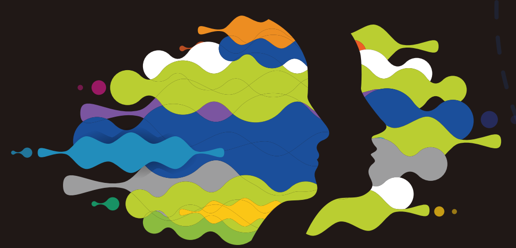

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You'll sense an appreciation for frameworks that hold people together through complexity. Technology is supporting awareness. Financial thinking is expanding to include resilience.

MOMENTUM OFTEN gathers quietly, shaped by habits that repeat until they become culture.

Across organisations, attention is turning toward how work is structured at its core. Planning cycles are being redesigned with greater clarity. Conversations are being framed with sharper intent. Teams are choosing depth over distraction and continuity over noise.

This edition reflects that recalibration. There is a visible interest in systems that sustain energy across quarters and years. Leadership appears through steady alignment. Strategy is expressed through rhythm. Progress takes form through decisions that carry context along with ambition.

You'll sense an appreciation for frameworks that hold people together through complexity. Technology is supporting awareness. Financial thinking is expanding to include resilience. Organisational design is gaining maturity through thoughtful iteration.

A recurring sign runs through these pages: coherence strengthens performance. When direction is shared and priorities are articulated clearly, execution acquires pace and purpose.

The stories gathered here capture that phase of evolution. They illustrate workplaces refining their foundations, strengthening internal logic, and building structures that invite participation.

Growth, in this frame, feels deliberate. It compounds through attention, alignment, and care.

And over time, those qualities shape institutions that endure with quiet confidence.

Kanagaraj Ayyalusamy

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Financial models are expanding to incorporate personal stability and long-term confidence. Workspaces are being reconsidered as spaces of trust and exchange.

EVERY ENVIRONMENT reflects the assumptions embedded within it.

From digital platforms to boardroom frameworks, today's systems carry an intelligence that shapes behaviour. Inputs are tracked, responses are mapped, and patterns are anticipated. Alongside this technical precision, another layer is becoming visible: a renewed interest in human judgment.

This edition explores that intersection. You will encounter organisations refining data practices with clarity and intent. Professionals are examining how decisions travel through teams and how accountability gains depth through transparency. Design is being treated as a strategic discipline, influencing culture as much as capability.

Financial models are expanding to incorporate personal stability and long-term confidence. Workspaces are being reconsidered as spaces of trust and exchange. Leadership is expressing itself through presence and composure. Across sectors and functions, there is a sense of integration. Structure and empathy are converging. Analysis and intuition are operating in tandem.

The pages ahead reflect that movement. They reveal organisations refining how they operate, how they relate, and how they grow with intention.

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INSTITUTIONS EVOLVE through the choices they repeat.

Over time, patterns harden into culture, incentives shape behaviour, and processes establish pace. This edition explores how contemporary organisations are refining those patterns to build durable strength.

A clear thread runs through these pages: responsibility is being distributed with precision. Teams are cultivating ownership across levels. Decision pathways are gaining clarity, allowing ideas to move with confidence. Leadership is guiding through articulation and consistency.

Performance is being understood as a balanced construct. Energy, recovery, and focus are treated as strategic variables. Financial stewardship is expanding beyond quarterly metrics to include personal confidence and long-range security. Governance frameworks are being revisited with an eye toward adaptability and depth.

Technology features prominently in this landscape, supporting coordination and insight. Data is informing judgment. Digital tools are strengthening collaboration across geographies. Design thinking is influencing how workflows align with human attention and motivation.

You will also encounter reflections on culture as a living system. Values are expressed through everyday practice. Trust grows through transparent communication. Learning is embedded into routine, shaping teams that respond to complexity with composure. Taken together, these explorations point toward a maturing phase of organisational development. Institutions are investing in structures that stabilise ambition. They are cultivating environments where clarity fuels creativity and alignment amplifies effort.

Hari Govind Nair

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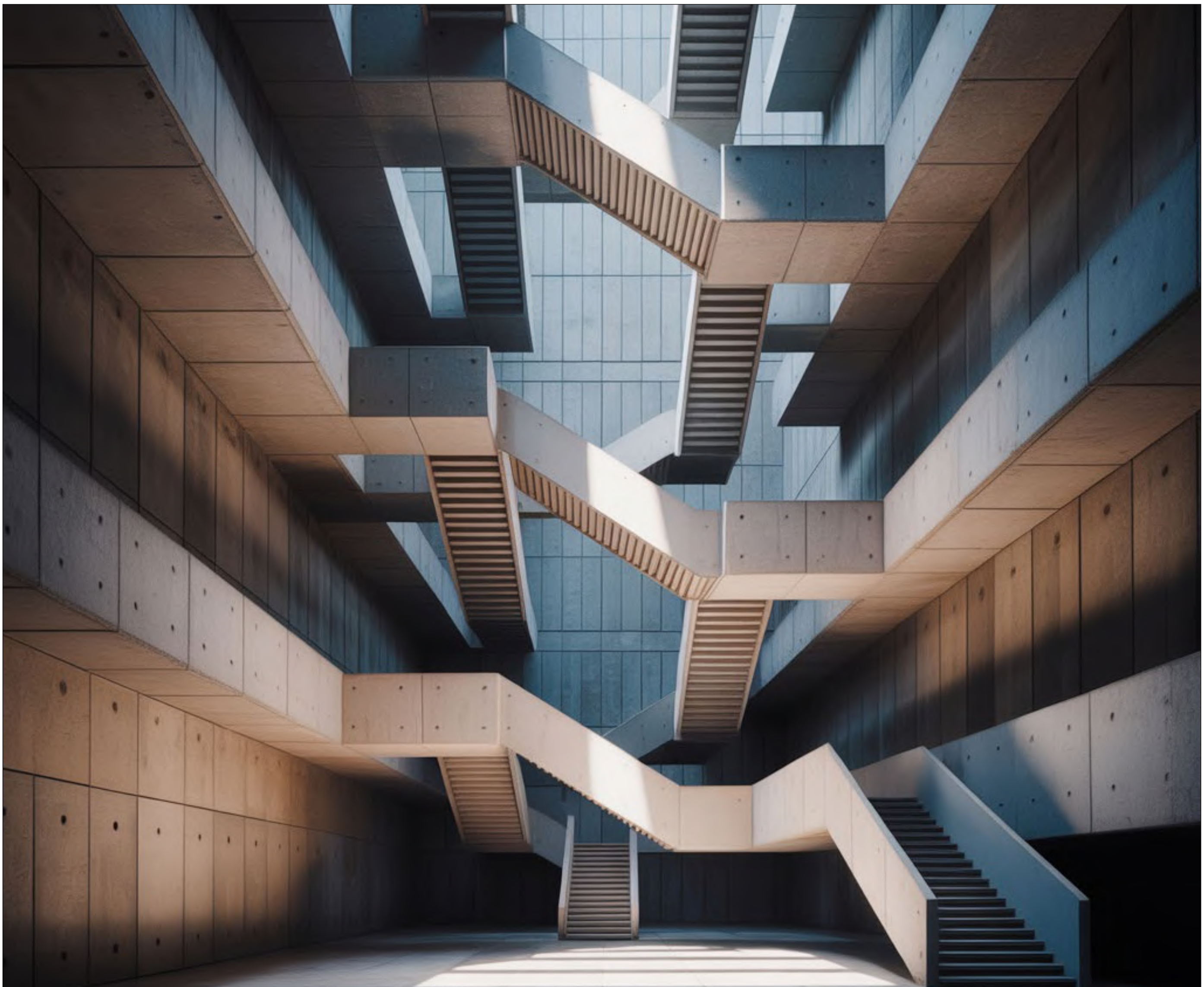
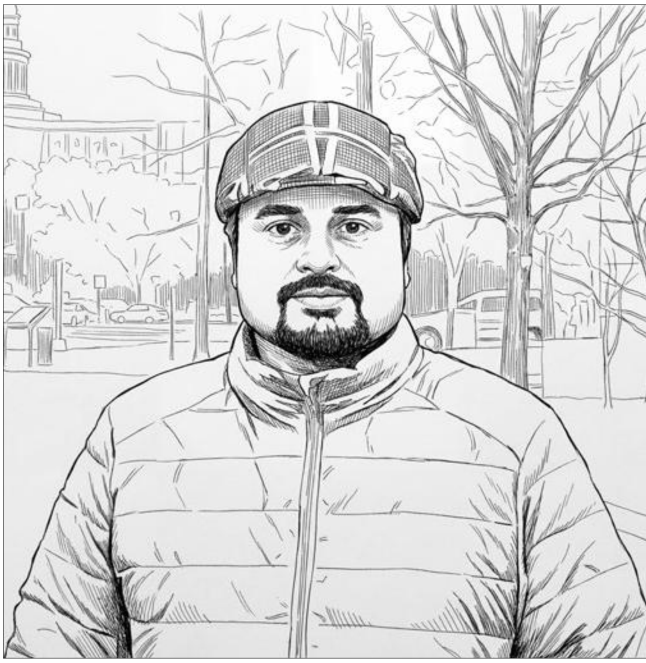



MANAGEMENT
PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT



WHAT'S Inside


MANAGEMENT
PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT

When the Rulebook Runs Out

Is management merely a science of frameworks? Or does its true essence emerge in ambiguity — where judgement, culture and courage quietly transform leadership into art?

by Sannidhya Ranade

'Management is an art, not a science.'

I remember reading this in a chapter of my undergraduate Principles of Management course. As someone thoroughly fascinated by the non-technical, social and creative aspects of management, this resonated with me. However, as the course progressed, I saw that we restricted all our discussions to a framework, or a template. Each idea had a blueprint, or a method of execution. That led me to wonder: "So is there no freedom? Is there no creativity? Is there no art in management?"

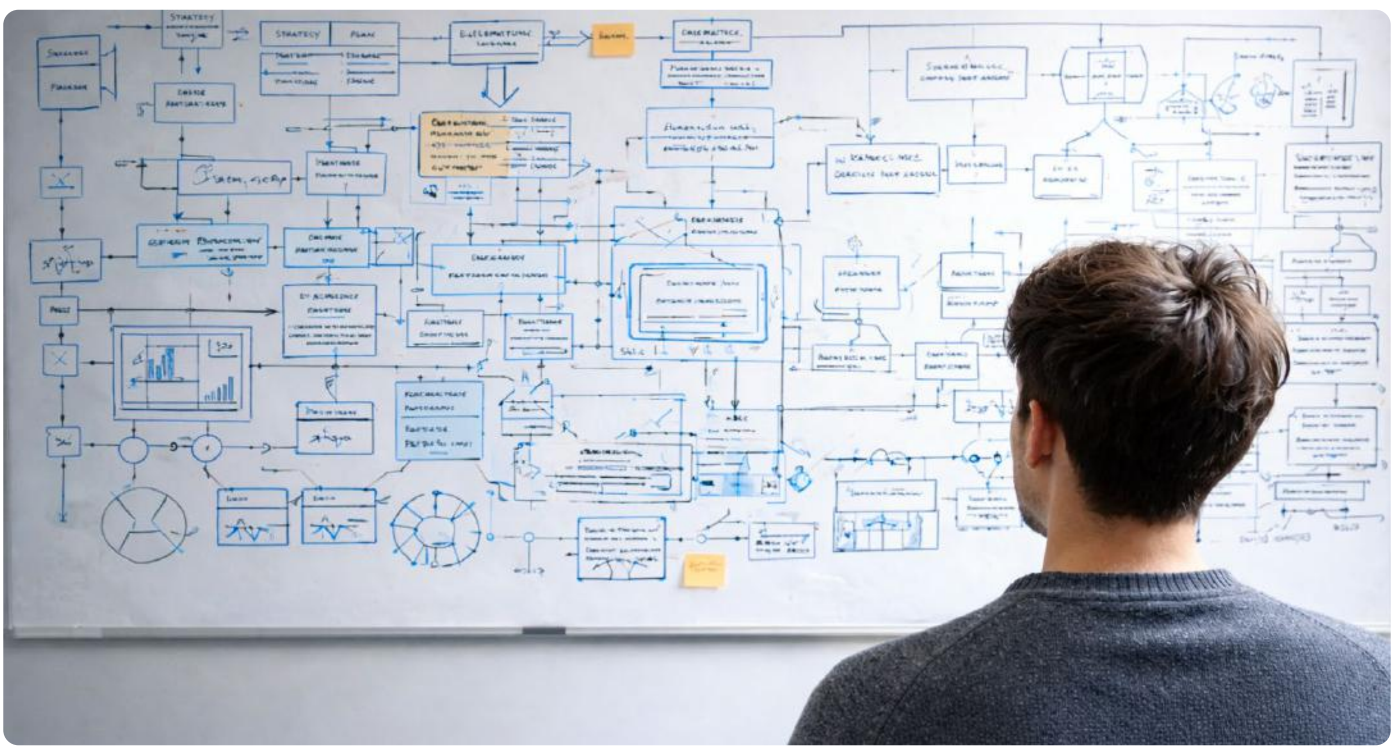
Judgement Over Rules

I was proven wrong quickly when I encountered the Netflix case. Netflix removed many formal controls: no fixed vacation policy, limited approvals and radical transparency. Reed Hastings trusted judgment over process. Instead of rules, they relied on context-driven decision-making by employees. Netflix proved that great leadership was not about having perfect rules, but about designing conducive environments where good judgement could emerge. The Netflix culture handbook was a testament to this practice, and I was in pure awe when I learnt about it.

> **Is there no art in management? Our course discussions were confined to frameworks and templates — every idea a blueprint. Is there no freedom? No creativity?**

Another way to look at this is by considering what firms like McDonald's and Ikea do. They are multimillion-dollar companies that understood the same products cannot be launched in all geographies, and that an intricate understanding of local society is necessary to succeed. Ikea appears to be the ultimate champion of standardisation: flat-pack furniture, uniform store layouts, identical product names and a globally recognisable brand identity. But guess where the art shows up — in the workplaces. In Sweden, their home market, flat hierarchies and informal decision-making feel natural. Employees are comfortable challenging managers, meetings are consensus-driven and authority is subtle.

However, they could not even think of replicating this structure in a high power-distance economy like India or China. For instance, Ikea India adapted store layouts to accommodate larger family groups and food menus to include local vegetarian preferences. None of this came from a global "best practice" manual. These decisions were made by managers exercising judgement: observing behaviour, listening closely and adjusting without diverting from core brand values. No leadership framework can prescribe how much hierarchy is appropriate, when empowerment becomes confusion, or how



cultural norms should reshape authority. These are not technical decisions — they are interpretive ones.

Turning to everyone's favourite, McDonald's, which is cited as the epitome of operational consistency. Globally, they maintain strict food standards, safety norms and a unified brand identity. But if you look at their menu, it is carefully tailored to suit religious and societal preferences. No Indian outlet serves beef, and they have created aloo tikki burgers and piri piri masala to match Indian consumer expectations. This proves that even the most process-driven organisations rely on human judgement at the edges. A global brand needs local leadership, and that comes from people who understand the nuances of a specific region because they have lived there, not because they studied it in a textbook chapter.

At Netflix, formal controls were removed and judgement was trusted over process. Leadership was not about perfect rules, but about designing environments where good judgement could emerge

Values Under Pressure

One of the most personal instances for me, however, is how the Tata group responded after the 26/11 blasts in Mumbai (my hometown). On November 26, 2008, the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, a Tata enterprise, became one of the main targets of the Mumbai terror attacks. In those hours, what mattered was not a protocol or a crisis manual — it was people. Waiters, housekeeping staff, security personnel, many of them barely trained for something like this, helped guests find their way through smoke-filled corridors, stayed behind to guide others and, in some cases, did not make it out themselves. There was no playbook for grief at this scale. It was a moment that demanded judgement, not instructions.

In the aftermath, the Tata Group made choices that went far beyond insurance coverage or legal liability. These were not acts of risk management, but expressions of responsibility. They committed to standing by the families of those who were injured or killed, with long-term support that included children's education, healthcare and financial security. They also offered employment to families as a symbol of belonging and support. What stands out for me is how, in a moment where there were no clear rules to follow, Tata chose to act in a way that reflected who they were as an institution. This choice was deeply human, quiet and contextual — precisely the place where management stopped being a science and started becoming an art.

Management cannot be reduced to formulas because it is practised on people, not just problems. The real essence lies in ambiguity, where we must interpret before we execute. And that very act of interpretation is, in my view, what makes management an art, not a science.

Sannidhya Ranade
is a first-year PGDM(BM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

The Canvas of the Corner Office

Why Great Leaders Paint Beyond the Framework

Business schools teach us models and methods. The corner office demands something more — instinct and imagination when the framework no longer applies

by Shrestha Mishra

As B-school students, we spend our days in the safety of the "known". We talk about optimising supply chains, calculating, and dissecting until the world looks like a series of logical puzzles waiting to be solved. We are trained in the science of management, and for good reason: this provides the foundation we build on.

But as I come across leaders who have truly shaped the world, I realise that the most pivotal moments in business don't happen on a spreadsheet. They happen when the frameworks fail, when the data are inconclusive, and the rulebook becomes invalid. This is where management transforms from science into the art of management.

When Data Says 'No' and Intuition Says 'Go'

One of the most famous examples of management as art is the story of Howard Schultz and the birth of modern Starbucks. If Schultz had relied purely on market research in the 1980s, the data would have told him that Americans wanted cheap coffee in a tin, not an expensive, rejuvenating, networking space between work and home.

There was no framework for the "Italian espresso experience" in suburban America. Schultz's decision wasn't based on a template; it was a subjective, human-centric gamble. He saw a gap in human experience that a survey could never capture. This reminds us that while data are a great rearview mirror, they are a terrible windshield.

The Satya Nadella Shift: Culture as a Masterpiece

In our organisational behaviour classes, we talk about culture as a variable. But observing Satya Nadella's turnaround of Microsoft reveals culture as a high-stakes art form. When he took over, Microsoft was infamous for internal silos and a "know-it-all" culture.

Nadella didn't just change the KPIs; he changed the feeling of the company. He shifted the mindset from know-it-all to learn-it-all. There is no formula for empathy, nor for convincing thousands of people to start collaborating after years of internal competition. That is the art of managing emotions, the art of sensing the invisible friction in a room and knowing exactly which lever of human psychology to pull.

Leadership in the Gray Space

Classrooms give us case studies that are little more than autopsies of past decisions, where the right answer is eventually revealed in the footnotes. In the real world, leaders operate in the "gray

> **The most pivotal moments in business don't happen on a spreadsheet. They happen when the frameworks fail and the rulebook becomes invalid**

space". Think of Reed Hastings at Netflix. When he decided to split the DVD-by-mail business from the streaming business (the Qwikster debacle), he was widely mocked. His rulebook told him to protect his current profit margins. His artistic sense, however, told him that the medium was changing irrevocably. He leaned into the discomfort of the transition. The art here wasn't just the strategy; it was the courage to be misunderstood for a long period of time.

Developing the 'Eye' for Management

So, where does this leave us, the students still learning the formulas?

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn outside the classroom is that frameworks are tools, not truths. A painter must learn the chemistry of pigments and the geometry of perspective (the science) before they can create a masterpiece (the art). Similarly, we must master the models so that we know exactly when to break them.

The subjective side of management requires us to develop:

- **Deep observation:** Learning to read the unsaid in a meeting.
- **Contextual fluidity:** Recognising that a solution for a tech startup in Bangalore will fail for a retail giant in Berlin.
- **Intellectual humility:** Accepting that sometimes the most logical path may also turn out to be the wrong one.

The Hook: Are We Ready for Silence?

In our exams, there is always a "correct" answer. But in the corner office, the most difficult moments are characterised by a deafening silence — the place where the textbook ends.

As we prepare to enter the corporate world, the question shouldn't be simply "How many frameworks do I know?" but rather "How well can I paint when the canvas is blank?"

Management is the science of certainty, but leadership is the art of ambiguity. Let's not just be managers of tools and techniques but architects of human potential.

Shrestha Mishra
is a first-year PGDM(BM) student at XLRI Delhi NCR

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CEO LOUNGE

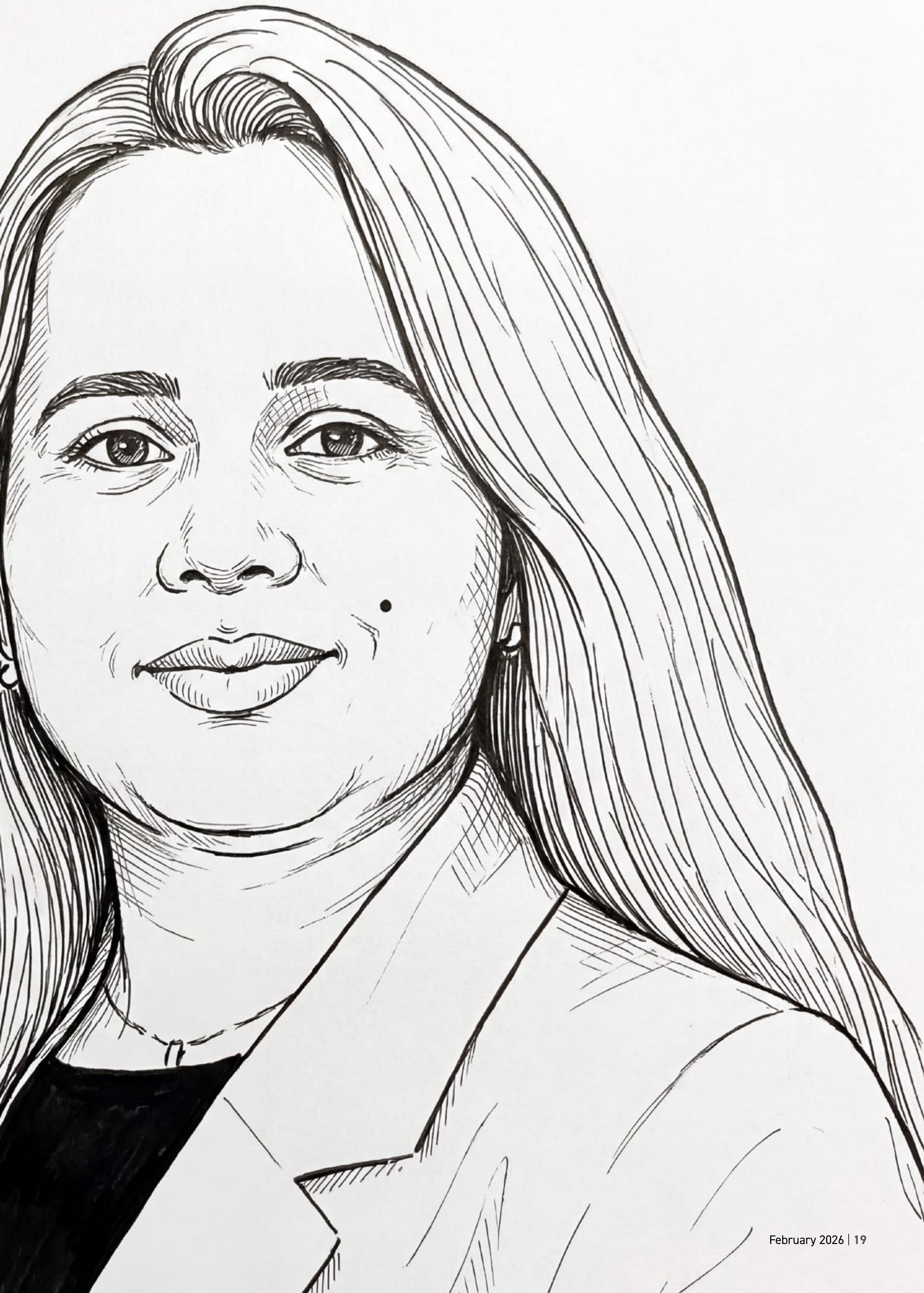
"Finance Is Psychology, Not Just Numbers"

Behavioural insights are reshaping how we understand financial decision-making, especially in emerging economies like India. In this conversation with *Anushka Aggarwal*, **Dr Malvika Chhatwani**, Assistant Professor of Finance at XLRI Delhi-NCR, explains why psychology, context and structural constraints often outweigh textbook logic. She discusses gaps between awareness and action, gendered financial behaviour, fintech risks and the importance of behaviourally informed policy. Drawing from research and classroom practice, she highlights how finance education must move beyond models to reflect how real households actually make decisions.

You moved from an MBA into a PhD in Finance and now teach at XLRI. Looking back, what moments or experiences first sparked your interest in behavioural and household finance?
The 2008 global financial crisis was a turning point for many of us studying finance. It became clear that traditional models assuming rational behaviour couldn't explain what we were witnessing. I was particularly struck by how ordinary households made financial decisions that deviated dramatically from textbook prescriptions. In India, this gap is even wider. Despite having access to formal banking and investment products, many families struggle with basic financial planning.

What fascinated me was understanding why educated, capable individuals often make suboptimal financial choices. This isn't about intelligence; it's about psychology, context, and the real constraints people face. That curiosity led me to pursue doctoral research where I could systematically study these patterns.

That interest challenges many classical finance assumptions. How did behavioural finance change the way you personally think about financial decision-making?
Behavioural finance fundamentally changed my understanding by showing that so-called "irrational" behaviour is actually quite predictable. We now know that people



use mental shortcuts that evolved to help us make quick decisions, but these same shortcuts can lead us astray in complex financial situations.

Consider loss aversion: people feel the pain of losing money roughly twice as intensely as they feel the pleasure of gaining it. This explains why investors hold on to losing stocks for too long, hoping to break even, or why they take excessive risks after a loss to "win it back." These patterns repeat across cultures and income levels. What changed for me was realising that good financial education isn't just about teaching concepts; it's about helping people recognise and manage their own behavioural tendencies.

When these behavioural insights are applied to Indian households, where do you see the biggest gaps between theory and real-world financial behaviour?
Three gaps stand out.

First, despite India's financial literacy rate improving to around 27 per cent, according to recent estimates, we still see a massive awareness-action disconnect. People may understand that diversification is important, but they still keep most of their savings in low-yield fixed deposits or gold. Risk aversion plays a huge role here, but so does trust in traditional versus modern financial instruments.

> **What fascinated me was why educated, capable individuals make suboptimal financial choices. It's not intelligence – it's psychology, context and the constraints people face**

Second, we're witnessing explosive growth in retail investment. More than 130 million unique investors now participate in securities markets, a near tripling since 2019. Yet many new investors, particularly younger ones, are susceptible to herd behaviour and speculation. A 2024 study found that over 68 per cent of cryptocurrency investment decisions were driven by FOMO (fear of missing out) rather than fundamental analysis.

Third, financial fragility remains widespread. Recent surveys show that a significant portion of households struggle to meet unexpected expenses, indicating that savings behaviours haven't kept pace with consumption patterns.

Given those gaps, what policy or institutional change do you believe could most meaningfully improve household financial outcomes in India?
I advocate for three interconnected changes.

First, we need financial education that goes beyond information dissemination. The RBI's Financial Inclusion Index has risen to 67 in 2025, up from 64 the previous year, showing progress on access. But access alone isn't enough. Education programmes must address psychological barriers like overconfidence and present bias, not just explain compound interest.

Second, we urgently need stronger consumer protection in the fintech space. India's digital payments market is projected to reach $10 trillion by 2026, with UPI transactions alone crossing 130 billion annually. This explosive growth creates opportunities but also risks. Gamification features and social media influencers can exploit behavioural biases, particularly among first-time investors. We need regulatory frameworks that incorporate behavioural safeguards, cooling-off periods for high-risk products, and clearer risk disclosures.

Third, we need to build financial resilience through structured programmes targeting vulnerable groups. Women, for instance, hold more than 55 per cent of Jan Dhan accounts but often lack the confidence and opportunity to make independent financial decisions despite having the knowledge.

So-called irrational financial behaviour is actually predictable. Mental shortcuts help quick decisions, but in complex markets they can systematically lead people astray

Financial literacy is often proposed as the solution. From your research, which types of literacy interventions actually translate into sustained behavioural change, and which tend to fall short?

The interventions that work share common features: they are timely, practical, and account for psychological realities. Programmes that succeed are delivered when people are making actual financial decisions, like getting their first pay cheque, buying a home, or planning retirement. They provide concrete tools, not just concepts. For example, auto-enrolment in retirement savings leverages inertia for good; automatic transfers make saving effortless.

What fails are generic awareness campaigns disconnected from people's lived experiences. Telling someone about the importance of diversification doesn't help if they lack surplus income to invest. Here's the uncomfortable truth: financial knowledge alone has limited impact if it is not paired with the means and opportunity to act on it.

A Kerala study from 2024 found that 84 per cent of respondents were moderately financially literate, yet significant gaps remained in actual financial behaviours like long-term planning and budgeting. Knowledge is necessary but insufficient. The best interventions combine education with behavioural nudges like default options, simplified choices, and commitment devices that help people follow through on their intentions.

Your work also highlights gender differences in financial behaviour. How should educators, employers, or product designers adapt their approaches in light of these findings?

Gender differences in financial behaviour are real but often misunderstood. The gaps are less about capability and more about confidence, opportunity, and socialisation. Women often exhibit greater caution in financial decisions, which can be prudent, but this can also stem from lower financial confidence even when knowledge levels are similar.

Educators should focus on building financial self-efficacy through practical, hands-on learning. Role models matter enormously. When women see other women successfully managing investments or starting businesses, it normalises these behaviours. Employers can make a significant difference through targeted financial wellness programmes and workplace policies. Providing equal access to retirement planning, transparent compensation, and flexibility that doesn't penalise career interruptions helps address the structural factors that create lifetime wealth gaps.

Product designers should avoid stereotyping. The assumption that women are naturally risk-averse or that men prefer complex products isn't just inaccurate, it's harmful. Good design accommodates diverse decision-making styles without reinforcing gender stereotypes. Financial products should be clear, accessible, and flexible enough for anyone to use confidently.

As fintech platforms rapidly expand access to financial products, how do you evaluate their impact on consumer behaviour, especially for first-time or underserved users?

Fintech is a double-edged sword. On one side, it is genuinely transformative.

> **India faces a massive awareness-action disconnect. People understand diversification, yet still concentrate savings in fixed deposits or gold because trust and risk perceptions dominate behaviour**

India now accounts for 46 per cent of global digital payment transactions, with UPI alone processing more than 13,000 crore transactions in FY 2024. For millions of previously excluded Indians, fintech means their first bank account, their first investment, their first insurance policy. The convenience and low costs are democratising finance in ways traditional banks never could.

But there is a darker side. The same features that make fintech accessible can also exploit behavioural vulnerabilities. Retail investors now constitute more than 45 per cent of cash market turnover, up from 33 per cent just five years ago. Many are first-time investors with limited financial knowledge, making them susceptible to biases like herd mentality, overconfidence, and anchoring.

The proliferation of financial influencers on YouTube and social media amplifies these risks. Recent analysis shows that many influencers disproportionately discuss momentum stocks and trending investments without adequate risk disclosure.

Financial knowledge alone has limited impact if it isn't paired with the means and opportunity to act. Knowledge is necessary, but insufficient for sustained behaviour change

For underserved users, the risk is even greater. The ease of getting credit through fintech can lead to over-borrowing. The excitement of trading can become addictive. We need fintech regulation that is as innovative as the industry itself, incorporating behavioural insights to protect consumers while preserving the genuine benefits of financial inclusion.

Bringing these realities into the classroom, how do you design finance courses at XLRI that balance analytical rigour with behavioural and contextual understanding?

I teach courses ranging from corporate finance to behavioural finance and portfolio management, and my approach integrates three elements. First, analytical rigour remains foundational. Students must master valuation models, understand capital structure, and apply portfolio theory. These tools are powerful and necessary.

Second, I layer in behavioural perspectives. When we study portfolio optimisation, we also examine why real portfolios look nothing like mean-variance efficient frontiers. Students analyse actual cases where behavioural biases led to poor outcomes, learning to spot these patterns in themselves and others.

Third, I emphasise Indian context. Concepts that work beautifully in developed markets often need adaptation here. For instance, students study how factors like family structure, caste, regional economics, and informal lending networks shape financial behaviour in ways that standard models miss. The pedagogy is deliberately research-oriented. Students work with real data, conduct surveys, and use statistical software. They learn to question assumptions and test hypotheses.

My goal is producing finance professionals who are technically skilled, behaviourally aware, and contextually grounded. They need to design products and policies that work for real people, not idealised rational actors.

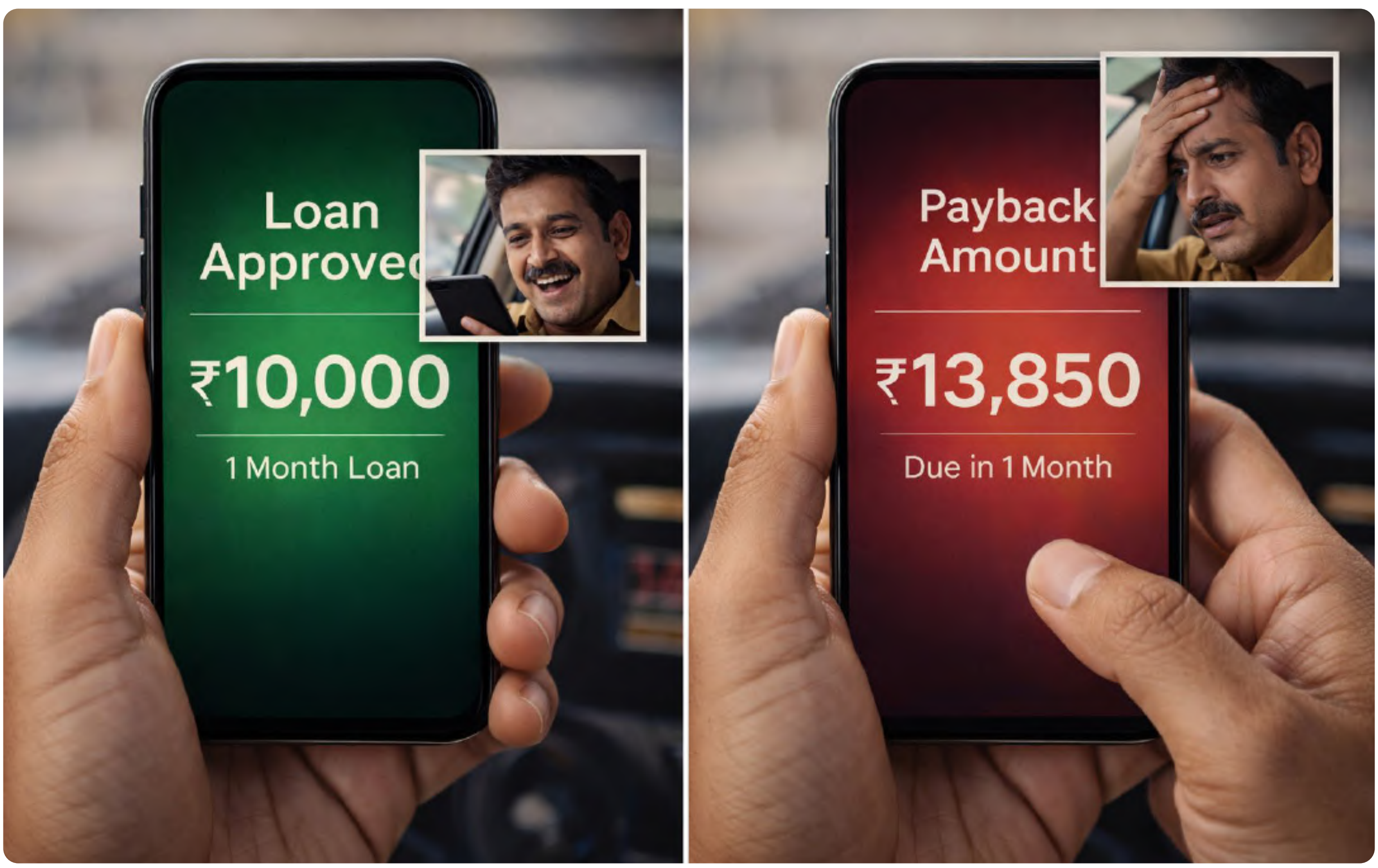
Xplore, XLRI's premier CXO club, aims to bridge academia, industry, and students through dialogue and shared learning. How can platforms like Xplore help students connect academic finance concepts with real-world decision-making and industry practice?

Platforms like Xplore serve a vital bridging function. Academic finance gives students powerful analytical tools, but applying these tools in messy, real-world situations requires wisdom that only comes from experience and dialogue. When CXOs share how they actually make decisions — under time pressure, with incomplete information, and conflicting stakeholder interests — students see the gap between textbook problems and real problems. They learn that "maximising shareholder value" sounds clear in theory but involves difficult trade-offs in practice. This is valuable for students, but I think it is equally valuable for industry.

Practitioners benefit from exposure to current research and analytical frameworks that can sharpen their thinking. The best platforms create genuine reciprocal learning. Students should present their analytical work to industry leaders for critique. Executives should bring real, unresolved problems for academic analysis. This back-and-forth creates insights neither side would develop alone.

For Xplore to maximise impact, I'd emphasise the quality of dialogue over the quantity of events. Deep conversations on focused topics, where both academics and

> **Fintech is genuinely transformative, but the same features that increase access can also exploit behavioural vulnerabilities — especially among first-time investors with limited financial experience**



Gender gaps in finance are less about capability and more about confidence, opportunity and socialisation. Building self-efficacy and removing structural barriers can significantly narrow them

practitioners come prepared to challenge and learn from each other, generate more value than surface-level networking.

Finally, for students aspiring to work at the intersection of finance, technology, and social impact, what guidance would you offer as they prepare for their careers?
Four pieces of guidance.

First, develop dual competencies. The future of finance is deeply technical, requiring strong quantitative skills, programming ability, and comfort with data. But equally important is understanding human behaviour, psychology, and social systems. The students who will thrive are those who can build sophisticated models and understand why real people might not behave according to those models.

Second, cultivate healthy scepticism toward technological solutionism. Technology is a powerful tool, but it is not a panacea. India's fintech adoption rate of 87 per cent is impressive, but we're also seeing new forms of financial vulnerability emerge. Innovation that genuinely creates social impact must address psychological, social, and structural barriers, not just technological ones.

Third, commit to equity and inclusion. India's financial inclusion story has bright spots, such as 560 million Jan Dhan accounts, but huge gaps remain. Financial literacy is 40 per cent in urban areas versus 27 per cent in rural areas. The middle class is growing, but millions remain excluded or vulnerable. Creating real social impact means designing solutions for the hardest-to-reach populations, not just the most profitable segments.

Finally, embrace intellectual humility. Finance and human behaviour are complex. Our understanding remains incomplete, and unexpected interactions constantly surprise us. The best career advice? Stay curious, keep learning, and be willing to revise your views based on evidence. The finance-technology-impact intersection rewards those who combine analytical rigour with empathy and adaptability.

The Quiet Power of INTUITION

In boardrooms and start-ups alike, instinct often shapes critical decisions. Research suggests intuition is not magic — but experience processed at speed

by Nikhil Natarajan

When data is scarce and stakes are high, top leaders often lean on instinct. Executives frequently struggle to balance intuitive judgment with analytical thinking under pressure. A recent CEO survey highlighted unpredictable markets and "a lack of reliable data" as major hurdles in critical decisions. In such settings, seasoned leaders report that gut feelings play a pivotal role. Over half of surveyed CEOs said they must weigh instinct and analysis, aware that emotions or biases can intrude.

Visionary Decisions by Instinct

Consider Apple's Steve Jobs, who famously ignored conventional market research in favour of insight from within. He believed "you can't ask someone how you can blow their mind; after all, if they could tell you, it wouldn't be all that mind-blowing." Peers say Jobs had a powerful intuition and even a "near-supernatural ability to see into the future" and sense what customers wanted. Tim Cook likewise trusted his instincts in joining Apple in 1998: his pros-and-cons list strongly disfavoured the move, but intuition said he should do it — a decision that paid off handsomely.

Intuition isn't just an arbitrary thought or emotion — it is the culmination of years of data and observation

One analysis found roughly 85 per cent of CEOs rely on intuition for major decisions. Lenovo CEO Bill Amelio later admitted he ignored an uneasy gut feeling when assembling a new management team, a mistake that taught him to "trust your intuition" on people and strategy.

Media mogul Barry Diller is blunter: he says he makes every decision by gut feel and considers any other approach a mistake. In the start-up world, Uber's early backers felt no certainty in 2008, only an inexplicable "clarity" that the app could work despite the evidence.

The Science of Gut and Data

How do scholars explain these leaps of faith? Laura Huang, a professor and researcher at Northeastern University, notes intuition "isn't just an arbitrary thought or emotion" but "the culmination of years of data and observation." Every gut feeling contains the residue of prior lessons. Huang emphasises that "there is data even inside what feels like gut decisions."

In one study of investors, each described rigorous financial analysis followed by an intuitive "feeling" about whether a pitch was a winner. When they trusted these instincts, they often hit rare jackpots; gut-based picks included the unicorn deals yielding 30x or 300x returns and excluded the flops.

Psychologists find intuition complements analysis, especially under uncertainty. After decades of debating Daniel Kahneman's "System 1" versus "System 2" thinking, many experts conclude intuition can be superior in complex or time-pressured contexts. Kahneman co-authored a study showing that while raw judgment can err through overconfidence, expert intuition proves more reliable in familiar situations, allowing seasoned decision-makers to detect subtle cues that are otherwise missed.

Cognitive scientist Gary Klein's work on "recognition-primed decisions" echoes this: experienced leaders match new problems to stored patterns, choose a promising action, and mentally simulate outcomes before acting.

Cultivating Intuition

Intuition grows with experience. Every decision adds to a leader's internal store of cases. Seppälä, during her research at

> **One analysis found roughly 85 per cent of CEOs rely on intuition for major decisions — even when data appears to point elsewhere**

Yale, notes intuition is a "fine-tuned, rapid form of perception we are wired for." Even military training incorporates intuition: US Marine "Combat Hunter" programmes drill soldiers to spot subtle anomalies, like an eerily empty playground in a combat zone, and act on that instinctive alarm.

In business, leaders hone intuition through varied roles and feedback. The cognitive system runs silent checks against stored knowledge. As one analysis puts it, a veteran CEO's mind can "draw upon useful themes from unrelated events" to solve novel problems, with bodily cues alerting them that something matters. Over time, this pattern recognition becomes sharper, enabling swift insight when time is short.

When Gut Goes Wrong

Yet gut instincts have limits. Foundational research on decision biases shows intuitive "heuristics" are prone to systematic errors. When leaders misapply a familiar script, they may reject innovation. The biggest danger of unchecked intuition is unconscious bias, since gut feel often carries hidden prejudices. A hiring manager might feel drawn to a candidate who seems familiar, mistaking that for genuine fit.

Intuition also suffers outside one's domain: Kahneman notes that beyond an area of expertise, "intuition becomes significantly less dependable." As one leadership coach warns, intuition built on outdated experiences can "stifle innovation and prevent teams from exploring ideas that might succeed in a new context."

Blending Instinct and Analysis

Ultimately, effective leaders blend head and heart. They use analysis to structure decisions but pay attention to subtle signals that data miss. Studies suggest the best leaders make decisions that feel right and then test them with critical thinking. As Lynn Tilton advises: "Intuition without intellect is like buying a plane without any propulsion. I do the analysis, but my decision comes from my place of knowing."

In fast-changing business landscapes, intuition — informed by experience and checked by reflection — often distinguishes decisive leadership from paralysis.

Nikhil Natarajan
is first-year PGDM(BM) student at XLRI Delhi NCR

"Supply Chains Are No Longer Back-End Cost Centres"

In a rapidly evolving global landscape, supply chains are emerging as strategic differentiators rather than operational afterthoughts. In this conversation, **Dr Sayan Mukherjee**, Assistant Professor of Production Operations at XLRI Delhi-NCR, explains how organisations must balance cost efficiency with resilience, sustainability and near real-time decision-making in an increasingly uncertain environment. Speaking with *Shrestha Mishra*, he also emphasises the importance of systems thinking and first-principles reasoning, arguing that future leaders need to move beyond tools and buzzwords to understand trade-offs more deeply.

Your career spans both consulting and academia, with a significant shift into teaching and research in operations and supply chain. Could you share what motivated this transition and how it has shaped your professional journey?

My transition from consulting to academia was motivated by a recurring tension I experienced in practice. In consulting, I was often involved in designing technically sound solutions. Yet I repeatedly saw that similar solutions produced very different outcomes across firms. The gap was rarely in analytical capability; it lay in incentives, organisational context, execution discipline, and how decisions interacted over time. That raised deeper questions for me: why do some operational strategies scale and sustain performance while others break down under uncertainty?

Academia offered the space to step back and systematically examine these questions. Research allowed me to abstract real-world experiences into models and empirical analysis, while teaching gave me the opportunity to help students develop first-principles thinking about trade-offs, uncertainty, and system-wide effects. Over time, this shift reshaped my professional journey from solving isolated problems to understanding and designing decision systems.

The combination of consulting intuition with academic rigour has been central to my work. I craft research questions grounded in reality and ensure that what I teach remains relevant to the complex operational challenges organisations face today.

Many professionals discover their interest early on, so was there any experience in your early career that sparked your interest in operations and supply chain as a field?
Growing up in a coalfield area strongly influenced my interest in operations and supply chain. My father worked in materials management, and from a young age, I was exposed to conversations about procurement, inventory availability, logistics constraints, and the consequences of even small delays in material flow. In a capital-intensive, safety-critical environment like mining, I could see how the availability of the right spare part or consumable at the right time directly affects production continuity, worker safety, and costs.

What stayed with me was the realisation that these were not abstract management issues. These were real coordination problems with tangible outcomes. Equipment downtime due to missing materials, overstocking of slow-moving spares, or challenges in transporting inputs across difficult terrain made it clear that materials management was central to operational performance. That early exposure helped me intuitively understand the importance of flow, uncertainty, and trade-offs long before I formally studied them. Later, when I encountered operations and supply chain as academic fields, it felt like a structured language for the problems I had observed first-hand, which naturally drew me towards the discipline.

Supply chains have moved from being back-end cost centres to front-page strategic concerns, with boards now viewing them as both competitive advantage and strategic vulnerability

Academia and industry evolve quickly, so how do you stay connected with what's happening in the industry while teaching and doing research?
Staying connected with the industry requires being intentional about how research and teaching are designed. I do this in three ways.

First, many of my research questions originate from real managerial problems discussed during interactions with practitioners, industry collaborators, and policy-facing organisations. Working with

applied datasets and industry-driven problem statements ensures that my research remains grounded in operational realities rather than purely theoretical abstractions.

Second, the classroom itself is an important channel. Many students come with prior industry experience, and classroom discussions often surface emerging practices. I actively incorporate these insights into cases, assignments and simulations, which keep the curriculum current and bidirectional.

Finally, I engage regularly through executive education, workshops and practitioner-oriented forums. These interactions help me validate whether the frameworks we teach and study still resonate with managers facing uncertainty, disruption and performance pressures.

Together, these channels create a continuous feedback loop where industry informs research and teaching, and academic rigour, in turn, sharpens industry practice.

The gap in operational outcomes is rarely analytical capability; it lies in incentives, organisational context, execution discipline and how decisions interact over time

Supply chain strategy has changed rapidly in recent years, so what do you see as the biggest shifts, especially with digital transformation and analytics becoming mainstream?

In my view, supply chain strategy has undergone three clear shifts in recent years.

First, supply chains have moved from being back-end cost centres to front-page strategic concerns. Recent disruptions exposed how deeply resilience, risk management and even national policy considerations are embedded in supply chain design. As a result, boards and top leadership now view supply chains not just as execution engines, but as sources of competitive advantage and strategic vulnerability.

Second, digital tools and analytics have changed the time horizon of decision-making. We have moved from managing through the rear-view mirror — that is, through post hoc monthly or quarterly reports — to operating in near real time. Concepts such as predictive alerts and scenario rehearsals enable firms to anticipate disruptions and respond coherently, rather than scrambling reactively after each shock.

Third, organisations are no longer solely driven by cost efficiency. Today, it is about balancing cost efficiency with robustness, sustainability and stakeholder expectations, whether related to decarbonisation, labour standards or data transparency. Digital transformation and analytics are powerful enablers, but they create value only when embedded into everyday decisions, incentives and governance structures. When treated as isolated pilots or impressive slide decks, they add little strategic impact.

Companies today are trying to balance sustainability with performance, so how can organisations pursue sustainability without compromising on cost and efficiency?
The tension between sustainability and performance is often a symptom of short-term accounting, not a real trade-off. When sustainability is embedded into process design — reducing waste, redesigning logistics networks or enabling circular flows — it frequently improves both cost efficiency and the overall risk profile. For instance, better demand planning reduces overproduction, lowering emissions and inventory holding costs rather than adding to them.

The organisations that do this well do not treat sustainability as a parallel agenda; they redesign how value is created so that 'green' and 'lean' reinforce each other. Practically, that means three things: using circularity and waste reduction to cut material and energy costs; building efficiency into processes through better planning and network design; and hard-wiring sustainability metrics into business cases so that emissions, risk and reputation are evaluated alongside rupees and lead time.

The real turning point comes when boards stop seeing sustainability as a moral extra and start seeing it as the core of risk management and opportunity. Once incentives and KPIs move in that direction, many 'sustainable' moves simply look like good operations decisions.

The global supply chain environment is becoming more dynamic and uncertain, so what skills do you think future supply chain leaders need to succeed?
Future leaders will need a blend of analytical depth, managerial judgement, stakeholder fluency and learning agility. Comfort with data, optimisation models and simulation is essential, but so is the ability to interpret model outputs critically. Leaders must also manage uncertainty, coordinate across organisational boundaries and make ethically defensible decisions under pressure. The leaders who will succeed are those who

> **We have moved from managing through the rear-view mirror to operating in near real time, using predictive alerts and scenario rehearsals to anticipate disruptions**

can stay calm under stress, run 'what if' scenarios before crises hit, and treat every disruption as data for redesigning a stronger system, not just as a fire to be put out.

Systems thinking — and understanding interdependencies, rather than optimising isolated components — will be a defining capability.

XLRI places a strong emphasis on ethical and value-based leadership, so how do you bring those values into teaching technical subjects like operations and supply chain?

In operations and supply chain, ethical questions arise naturally: whom to prioritise during shortages, how to balance efficiency with equity, or how risk is distributed across suppliers. I incorporate these issues by embedding ethical trade-offs into technical problems. For example, allocation models can be discussed not only in terms of cost minimisation but also fairness or access. This helps students see that technical rigour and ethical reasoning are complementary, not competing, skills.

Many students aspire to build long-term careers in supply chain, so what advice would you give to someone entering the field today?

The following would be three cents from my side to the budding supply chain managers:

a. Master not only the fundamentals, but go one step further by learning to reason from first principles. Instead of asking 'which tool should I apply?', ask what the core problem is, what constraints truly matter and what trade-offs are unavoidable. This kind of critical thinking allows you to cut through complexity and evaluate new technologies or analytics solutions without being driven by buzzwords.
b. Deliberately seek ground exposure early in your career. Spend time in warehouses, plants, transport hubs and with suppliers or customers. Observing how work happens sharpens problem definition and prevents purely theoretical or spreadsheet-driven solutions. First-principle thinking becomes far more powerful when it is anchored in real operational constraints.
c. Be solution-oriented but not tool-obsessed. Invest as much in people skills as in analytics, because supply chain problems are rarely solved by models alone. They require collaboration across functions, trade-offs, negotiation and clear communication under pressure.

The tension between sustainability and performance is often a symptom of short-term accounting; when embedded into processes, sustainability frequently improves both efficiency and risk profile

When you combine strong fundamentals, critical thinking from first principles and the ability to translate insights into implementable actions, you can navigate uncertainty and create lasting value.

Xplore functions as the CXO club of XLRI, so how do you think it can contribute to students' careers, spark greater interest in supply chain and operations, or introduce new initiatives to strengthen learning in these areas?

Xplore already sits at a powerful intersection: it is student-led, has CXO access and runs formats like roundtables, speaker sessions, workshops and podcasts. Xplore can curate focused CXO conversations on high-impact topics such as inventory crises, network redesigns, tech outages and decarbonising logistics, so students can see how core operations decisions play out in boardrooms. They can work on sourcing live projects from industry partners where students work on real data.

Xplore can use its media platforms to spotlight operations stories: short columns or podcast episodes in which alumni and leaders narrate a single decision, failure or redesign that changed how their organisation runs.

Marketing, Fresh Off the Tawa

At the Maha Kumbh, Lifebuoy used an out-of-the-box idea to turn an everyday meal into a powerful marketing medium, influencing millions through behavioural insight and perfectly timed contextual relevance

by Juhi Agarwal


लाईफबॉय से
हाथ धोए क्या?

The 2013 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj was one of the largest temporary human congregations in history, with an estimated 80-120 million pilgrims participating over a 55-day period. In such a high-density atmosphere, where shared food preparation, communal eating and limited sanitation were the norm, hand hygiene stood out as the most crucial public health concern.

Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), through Lifebuoy, executed a highly contextual and behaviourally focused marketing campaign known as the 'Roti Reminder'. Rather than relying on conventionally preferred above-the-line advertising, the campaign adopted an innovative, low-cost activation strategy that demonstrated an exceptional amalgamation of cultural insights, behavioural science and brand purpose.

Campaign Objective and Insights

The primary challenge for the brand was to incentivise handwashing at the precise moment of need — that is, immediately before eating, when the behaviour is most relevant but often overlooked. Recognising this gap, the team identified the roti (a flatbread), a staple food consumed across significant parts of India by all socio-economic segments, as an ideal medium for delivering the hygiene message at the point of consumption.

Execution Mechanics

In collaboration with OgilvyAction, Lifebuoy developed a food-safe, edible heat stamp that imprinted the question: *'Lifebuoy se haath dhoya kya?'* (Have you washed your hands with Lifebuoy?) directly on freshly prepared hot rotis.

The campaign was carried out over a 30-day activation period in more than 100 dhabas, roadside eateries and community kitchens, involving a committed team of over 100 promoters to help with the stamping and serving of more than 2.5 million rotis within the mela premises. Free Lifebuoy handwash stations were then strategically positioned close to the eating areas to facilitate a seamless call-to-action following the prompt.

Embedding the Message with the Ritual

One crucial aspect of the campaign was that it did not disturb the spiritual sanctity of the Kumbh. Lifebuoy avoided loud banners, aggressive logos or slogans that would feel out of place in such a holy atmosphere. Instead, it used a simple, gentle question stamped on the roti, making it feel like part of the routine. This subtlety prevented any sense of commercial intrusion.

By quietly integrating into existing food preparation rather than creating a separate, branded spectacle, the campaign remained respectful, organic and perfectly contextual. That is why pilgrims accepted it so easily, leading to better recall and real behaviour change.

> **Instead of conventional advertising, the campaign used an innovative, low-cost activation that combined cultural insight, behavioural science and brand purpose to deliver exceptional impact**

Theoretical Underpinning

The campaign represented a textbook application of nudge theory. It is a flexible and modern change-management concept for understanding how people think, make decisions and behave; helping people improve their thinking and decisions; managing change of all sorts; and identifying and modifying existing unhelpful influences on people.

The challenge was to incentivise handwashing at the precise moment of need — before eating — leading the team to identify the roti, a daily staple for millions, as the perfect medium

Business and Social Outcomes

Despite having a modest media budget, the campaign delivered outstanding results:

- Direct reach to over 5 million individuals through shared rotis.
- 4 per cent uplift in unaided brand recall — the highest recorded in three years.
- Achievement of a three-year high in market share within the relevant category.
- Earned media value estimated at $59.3 million, yielding an approximate ROI of 1,600x.
- Significant organic amplification through word-of-mouth, social sharing and earned press coverage.

Beyond the business metrics, this campaign made a meaningful contribution to Lifebuoy's standing social initiative, focusing on public health and the mission of promoting handwashing to reduce diarrhoeal disease incidence, aligning with HUL's broader Sustainable Living Plan.

Strategic Takeaways

The Roti Reminder campaign remains a benchmark case in marketing literature for various reasons, such as:

- Exceptional contextual relevance and cultural embedding.
- Practical application of behavioural economics principles at scale.
- Demonstrated ability to achieve disproportionate impact with limited financial resources.
- Seamless integration of commercial objectives with genuine social purpose.
- Superior earned media generation through organic relevance rather than paid amplification.

In a generation characterised by increasing advertising clutter and consumer scepticism around traditional formats, this campaign illustrates the enduring power of insight-driven and contextually intelligent activations. It serves as a potent reminder that strategic marketing mastery often lies not in the scale of the campaign or the spend but in the precision of timing, relevance and execution.

Juhi Agarwal
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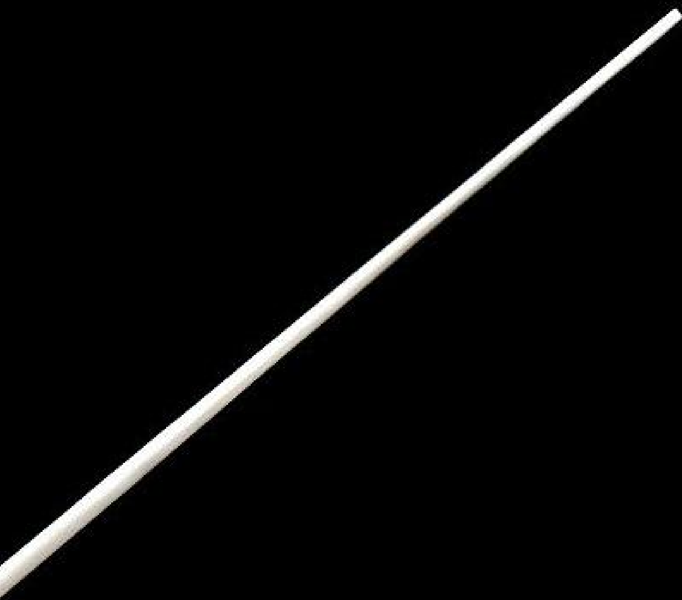


Management Isn’t a Formula — It’s an Art

The slides were perfect. The plan was flawless. The client wasn’t convinced. That failure revealed a bigger truth: management works best when you stop following the script

by Rishabh Dalip Singh

The conference room was quiet, except for the soft hum of the AC. I was standing at the head of the table, watching my well-prepared pitch slowly fall apart. Across from me sat a senior client, arms crossed, clearly not impressed. I had done everything the way I was taught: neat slides, a structured plan, and proper talking points. But nothing was working.

So, I dropped the script. I stopped presenting and just started talking. I asked him what he actually wanted, listened properly, and responded honestly. That moment changed everything. He opened up, we found common ground, and somehow the deal was saved. That is when I realised management is not just about following a formula. It is about knowing when to adapt.

When the Script Breaks

At first, I thought I could learn management by copying those who were good at it. I watched my seniors closely. I followed their habits and styles. It helped at first. But over time, I started feeling stuck. Their way did not always work for me. That is when I realised I had to build my own way of managing, not by copying, but by learning from experience. Management is personal. What works for one person may not work for another. The real journey begins when you figure out what works for you.

As a young manager, I was often praised for being efficient. I liked ticking off tasks and hitting deadlines. But at some point, I started asking myself: are we doing the right things or just doing things right? I remembered a quote that said, "Leadership is about doing the right things." That made me think differently. A good manager needs vision. You cannot just focus on daily tasks. You have to think ahead. Once I started sharing a clear direction with my team, I noticed they were more motivated. They were not just working for the day. They were working toward something.

Beyond Efficiency

This does not mean ignoring rules. Rulebooks and frameworks help. But they are only the starting point. Real life is messy. Once, a client rejected every standard solution I offered. I had to come up with something new on the spot. That is when I saw how important flexibility is. No two situations are the same. You need to adjust based on who and what you are dealing with.

One of the biggest lessons I learned is that people are different. One style

I had done everything the way I was taught… but nothing was working. That moment showed me management isn't following a formula – it's knowing when to adapt

does not fit all. I found this out when I was managing an older teammate who had more experience than I did. My usual pep talks and energy were not working. So I stepped back, listened more, and asked for his input. That built trust. I saw that emotional intelligence is not just a buzzword. It is about understanding people and responding in ways that work for them.

Surprisingly, some of my lessons in managing people and pressure came from outside the workplace. I used to spend time playing strategy-based games with friends. It might sound unrelated, but those sessions taught me how to stay calm under pressure, coordinate with others, and adjust quickly when things did not go to plan.

Looking back, I realise those same skills helped me handle unexpected challenges at work. Whether it was a sudden client change or a team issue close to a deadline, the ability to stay composed and think clearly made a real difference.

Of course, not everything I tried worked. I made mistakes. I avoided risk, micromanaged at times, and even lost the team's interest during one project. But I took feedback, owned my errors, and changed my approach. That helped me grow. I learned to let go, delegate better, and involve my team more. Over time, this created a space where people felt safe to speak up and try new things. I saw that failure is not the end. It is just another way to learn.

Are we doing the right things or just doing things right? A manager needs vision — once I shared direction, the team worked toward something bigger

People Over Power

In the early days, I thought being a manager meant being in control. I had the power to decide, approve, and lead. But I also saw how much my words and actions could affect others. One careless comment or rushed review could ruin someone's confidence. That made me rethink what power means. I started giving credit openly and feedback carefully. I realised that a manager's real job is to build others up, not boss them around.

Looking back, management is an art. There is no perfect formula. You learn, adjust, and grow with every challenge. What matters is being honest, staying flexible, and caring about people. That is what makes a good manager. And that is what makes the journey worth it.

Rishabh Dalip Singh
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

"Clarity, Not Tools, Defines Great Product Leadership"

Product leadership in the age of AI is no longer about shipping features but navigating ambiguity with clarity. *Kanishk Wadhwa* speaks with **Adarsh Agrahari**, Associate Director of Product at HROne, about his unconventional journey from teenage founder to enterprise product leader, the evolving role of AI in HR and product leadership, and his view that leaders must treat AI as a collaborator while continuing to think independently. Agrahari argues that as technology advances, the real differentiator will remain human judgment, discipline, and the ability to ask better questions.

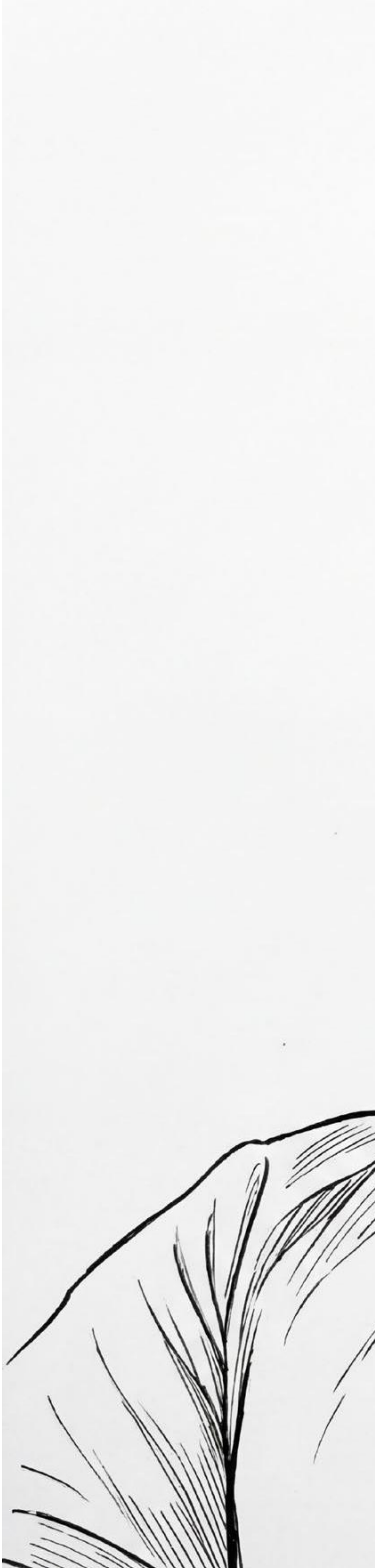
Your journey into product management is inspiring. What shaped your early mindset and drew you to this field?
I began as an under-19 founder in a tier-3 town, where I started SCS Business Solutions. Our goal was simple: automate billing systems for small businesses in a pre-GST era marked by tax complexity. I did not know then that what I was doing was called 'product management'. I only knew that we were solving real problems for real users.

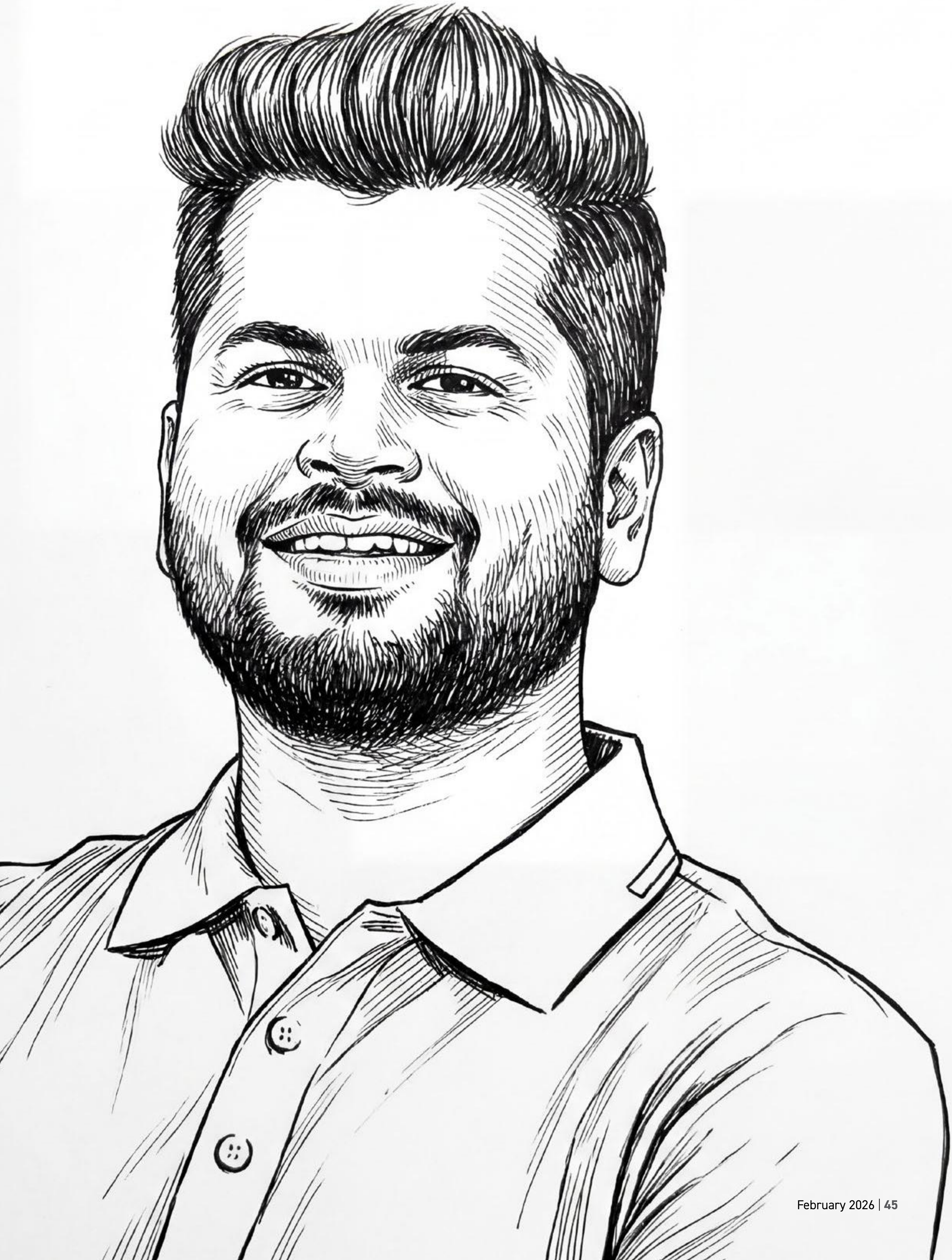
We would visit mandis, talk to traders, understand their daily frictions, and build solutions accordingly. When GST arrived, compliance requirements changed overnight, and we were not prepared. That disruption became a turning point. Eventually, I exited the business through an acquisition by a leading e-commerce platform, and that is when my formal product journey began.

In hindsight, product management was never about the title. It was always about solving problems that genuinely improved people's lives.

Was there a moment in your career that did not go as planned but changed how you lead today?
There were many. One significant phase was my repeated attempts at CAT between 2017 and 2019. Despite scoring in the 100th percentile in quant, I initially could not secure admission to the top colleges. Instead of giving up, I started teaching quant at leading institutes. Teaching forced me to simplify complexity and understand how people actually learn.

In 2019, I scored in the 99.87th percentile





Product management was never about the title. It was always about solving real problems for real users and improving lives in meaningful, practical ways

and was accepted into top B-schools, including IIM Kozhikode. But I realised something important: I was relearning concepts I had already internalised through work. Around the same time, I was working at Mahindra, writing books, mentoring, and building products.

I have also pivoted careers multiple times: from aspiring doctor to entrepreneur, to UPSC aspirant (AIR 151), to product leader. The one constant across all failures and successes has been mental models. Failure teaches you how to think. And those models help you navigate ambiguity long after the success fades.

You have taught product management at ISB. What has the classroom taught you about how people learn product thinking?
Teaching sharpens your own thinking first. At ISB, I worked with professionals from across industries — competent people, yet often unclear about why they wanted to transition into product roles.

My role was never to give answers but to help them reflect. Conviction without clarity is fragile. Once people understand *why* they want to build products, their learning accelerates. Product management is not about frameworks alone; it is about self-awareness and intent.

What does a typical day look like for you as associate director of product at HROne?
No two days are the same. My teams include senior product managers, PMs, and UX designers. My mornings are spent removing ambiguity, helping teams recognise and navigate uncertainty.

We begin with short stand-ups, followed by deeper discussions on customer feedback, market signals, and UX challenges. Since HR software automates human decisions, experience design is critical.

About 60 per cent of my time goes into stakeholder conversations and alignment, while the remaining 40 per cent is spent understanding emerging trends, especially AI-driven interfaces. With OneAI, we are rethinking the UI itself. Employees can now apply for leave, access their payslips, or request information by simply speaking with an agent. That shift fundamentally reduces friction.

Can you share a challenging moment where adoption, not technology, was the real problem?

At Mahindra's cleantech division, we built digital products for solar and wind plants. Site engineers were deeply attached to legacy systems and resisted change, even when our tools clearly simplified their work.

Adoption was the real challenge. We visited sites, spoke directly with engineers, and involved them in the redesign of workflows. Once they saw tangible benefits, they became our strongest advocates.

Technology adoption is less about logic and more about trust. Those who adapt early grow faster. Those who resist eventually struggle.

How do you see HROne shaping the future of HR work?

I do not see this as transforming HR alone. I see it as transforming human effort.

Just as we moved from physical travel to phone calls to video calls, we are now moving from forms and dashboards to agents. Employees no longer need to navigate interfaces. They ask questions. Systems respond. Whether it is attrition analysis, policy interpretation, or performance insights, what once took hours or days can now be done in seconds. This does not replace HR; it frees HR to focus on culture, judgment, and people.

How should upcoming HR leaders and product managers think about AI?

AI is already changing how we create content and learn. Next, it will reshape analytics, performance systems, policy design, and product documentation.

However, AI should never replace thinking. I always advise product managers: never let AI write the first version. Write V1 yourself. Then let AI refine it. That is how learning compounds. If we outsource thinking entirely, we risk becoming less intelligent while AI becomes more so. AI should be a collaborator, not a crutch.

What HR tasks will become invisible in the next two to three years?

Policy explanations, form-filling, basic queries, and operational clarifications will be removed from HR's plate. With RAG-enabled systems and policy agents, employees will self-serve instantly. This allows HR to focus on what truly matters: leadership development, engagement, and culture.

Your book, *The Infinite Game of Product Development*, reflects an evolutionary view of products. What inspired it?

AI should be a collaborator, not a crutch. Write the first version yourself, then let AI refine it. That is how learning truly compounds

No product is ever perfect. What you ship today will feel inadequate tomorrow, and that is natural.

Products evolve the way humans do. The first version is always the worst version you will ever build, and that is okay. The fundamental mistake is waiting for perfection. Launch early, learn fast, and iterate relentlessly.

What core message should readers take away from the book?

Two things: First, always seek clarity through better questions and genuine curiosity.

Second, stop chasing perfection. Build, release, learn, and evolve. That mindset applies equally to products and careers.

Finally, what daily or weekly habit compounds the most for young leaders?

Motivation is cheap dopamine. Discipline is sustainable. Reset how you earn dopamine, through routine, learning, and curiosity. If you stay curious across domains, clarity naturally follows. And clarity, over time, compounds into conviction.

THE LONG GAME OF **AGREEMENT**

In Bengaluru, the Xplore roundtable turned its attention to the spaces where leadership expresses itself quietly. The pauses, the phrasing, the calibrated responses, and the decisions that unfold across time rather than within a single meeting became the centre of reflection. Across negotiation tables, screens, and closed rooms, the group examined how agreement takes shape through discipline, timing, and judgment.

Influence often extends beyond the visible conversation. It appears in how leaders hold their ground while preserving relationships, how intent is sensed beneath formal language, and how momentum is sustained when outcomes evolve gradually. Across industries and leadership journeys, the discussion traced how seasoned leaders remain present in unfolding situations and build alignment through composure, clarity, and patience.

Holding the Line Without Drawing One

Boundaries can be expressed with nuance. Participants reflected on how experienced leaders signal limits through tone, pacing, and deliberate phrasing. Language becomes a tool for maintaining possibility while protecting position. The conversation explored how timing shapes leverage, how silence can create space, and how long-term relationships benefit from calibrated responses that keep dialogue alive.

What the Room Reveals When It Stays Quiet

Rooms communicate through energy as much as through words. Leaders shared how attentiveness to posture, response patterns, and shifts in engagement offers insight into direction. Sensitivity develops through experience, allowing leaders to interpret alignment, hesitation, and interest with clarity. In digital settings especially, attention to rhythm, presence, and subtle cues strengthens judgment and awareness.

When the Conversation Continues Without You

Certain phrases signal a shift in terrain. When discussions move inward within an organisation, influence travels through structure, alliances, and internal deliberation. The roundtable explored how preparation extends beyond presentation, shaping narratives that remain coherent as they circulate. Follow-ups become strategic touchpoints that reinforce presence while respecting process. Agreement, in this context, matures through continuity and thoughtful sequencing.

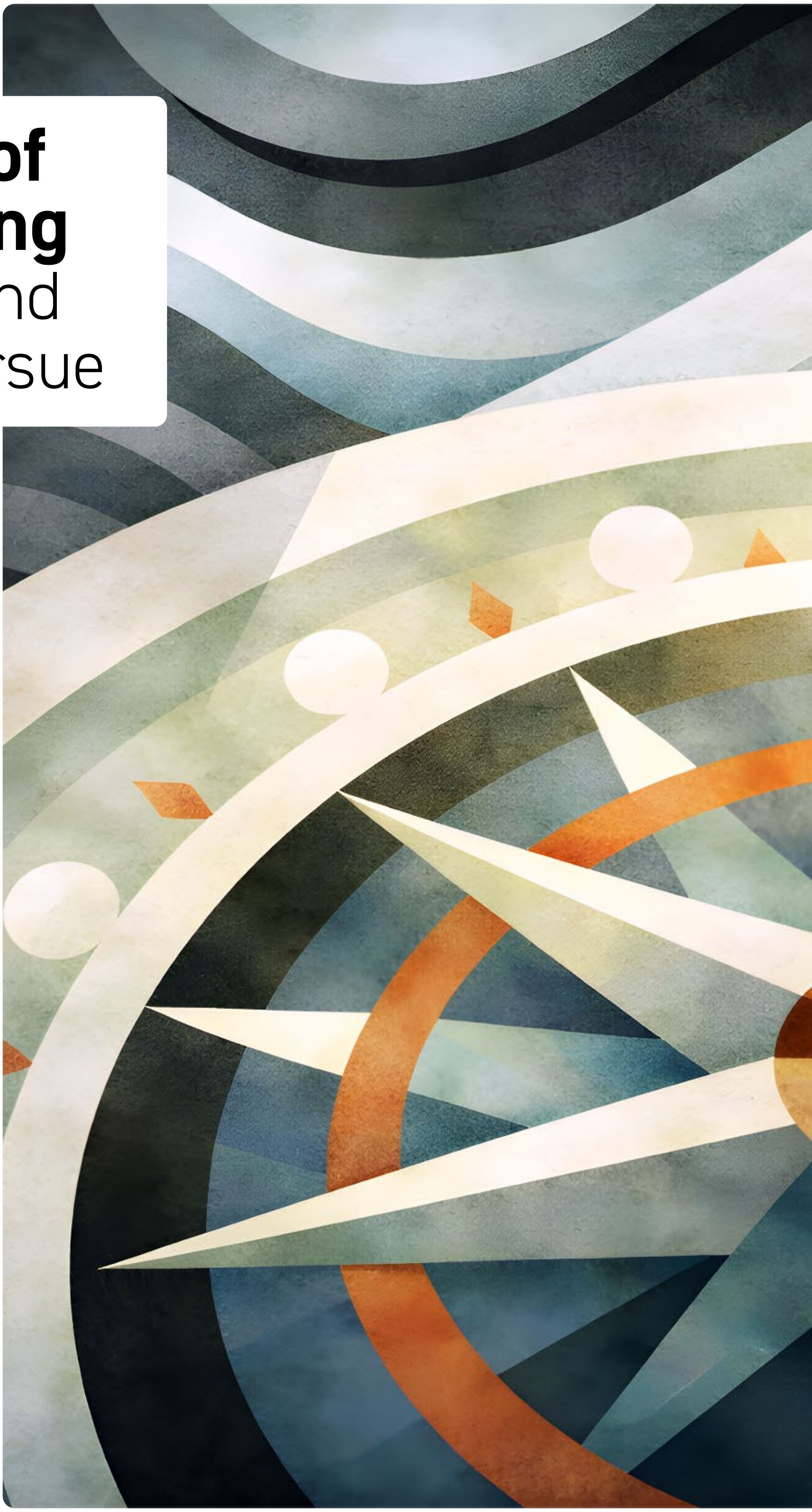
What Experience Teaches Over Time

Negotiation insight develops through accumulation. Leaders reflected on moments that expanded perspective, sharpened awareness of power dynamics, and deepened appreciation for context. With experience comes steadiness, measured pacing, and clarity about when to advance and when to allow space. Patterns become visible, and judgment strengthens through reflection and recalibration.

The Bengaluru roundtable highlighted that agreement unfolds across stages. It grows through attentiveness, composure, and the discipline to sustain dialogue across time. In playing the long game, leaders cultivate influence that endures, relationships that strengthen, and outcomes shaped through patience and intent.

Attendees: **Abhishek Mehrotra**, Yubi Group; **Amit Sharma**, Gokaldas Exports; **Chirag Jain**, S.R. Batliboi & Associates LLP; **Deepak Yadav**, CEO Lounge; **Gaurav Dev Burman**, BCG; **Navin Bishnoi**, Marvell India; **Navin Dhananjaya**, Dentsu Global Services; **Nikhil Shembekar**, Brigade Group; **Pradeep Lankapalli**, Thomson Reuters; **Sanjay Chaudhary**; **Shruthi Bopaiah**, Axis Bank; **Sreedevi Hegde**, Vervent; **Sourabh Issar**, EY; **Sujoy Jana**, BigBasket; **Vikas Gupta**, Lenovo India; **Yogesh Goel**, Infosys

The Power of Self-Coaching
Turning Around What You Pursue



We live in a dynamic, often overwhelming world. Plans change, priorities shift, and the ground beneath our careers sometimes feels like it's constantly moving. If you've felt that you're stuck in neutral despite a long list of goals — you're not alone; but help is at hand, and it's actually in your hands!

by Gopalji Mehrotra

In a world that demands both performance and reflection, one question matters more than any other: "Am I driving my life or just a passenger in it?"

That's where coaching comes in. Over the last two decades, coaching has evolved from a luxury for executives to a life skill for anyone who wants to navigate change, pursue purpose, and stay grounded.

But here's the good news: You don't always need a coach on speed dial. The most powerful kind of coaching — the one that lasts — is the one you give yourself.

Yes, self-coaching.

If there's something you're avidly working on — a new job, a career pivot, a personal goal — here are five self-coaching lenses that can help you turn things around.

What is Coaching, Really?

Coaching is not advice. It's not therapy. It's not someone telling you what to do. Coaching is the art of unlocking your own mind by asking better questions.

As an ICF-certified Master Coach and an HR leader with over 30 years in corporate life, I've seen coaching transform not just performance, but people — from fresh graduates to seasoned CEOs.

Self-coaching simply means becoming aware of your thoughts, asking yourself the right questions, and holding yourself accountable with compassion, not judgment. It's a practice that can shift your mindset and transform your outcomes.

> **You don't always need a coach on speed dial. The most powerful kind — the one that lasts — is the coaching you give yourself**

(1) Retain Your Locus of Control: Don't Outsource Your Power

In uncertain times, it's easy to fall into the trap of blame. The economy, the boss, the hiring freeze. But here's the truth: The most successful people I've met never give up their locus of control.

Self-coaching question: *What is still in my control right now — even if it's just how I choose to respond?*

Whether you're a fresher job-seeker or a senior executive, your power lies in what you choose to focus on. You can't always control outcomes, but you can control your effort, your mindset, and your learning.

(2) Perform and Transform: You're Not a Machine, You're an Evolution

Yes, we're expected to deliver. Meet goals. Show up. But performance alone without reflection leads to burnout. Self-coaching helps you pause and ask not just "What am I doing?" but also "Who am I becoming in the process?" and "Am I liking this self that I am becoming?"

Self-coaching question: *Am I only performing, or am I also transforming? What am I learning about myself in this process?*

Transformation happens in small, consistent shifts — not in grand moments. Whether it's improving your skills, handling feedback better, or finding your authentic leadership voice, remember this: progress is performance.

(3) Be an Ambidextrous Leader: What is Worth Doing Today?

In cricket, an ambidextrous player can bowl with both arms. In leadership and life, being ambidextrous means balancing action and awareness, speed and depth, logic and emotion.

Self-coaching question: *Of all the things I could do today, what is truly worth doing?*

This isn't about a to-do list. It's about filtering what matters. What will move the needle — in your goals, your energy, or your learning? You don't need to do everything. You need to do the right things well.

(4) Align Goals with Purpose: When It's Off, You Can Feel It

Many of us chase goals because they look good on paper — a promotion, a job title, a higher salary. But when those goals aren't aligned with your deeper purpose, you feel restless, even when you "succeed."

Self-coaching question: *Why do I want this goal? Does it align with who I am becoming?*

If the answer is unclear, that's okay. Clarity comes from reflection, not just action. And if your goals are misaligned, don't be afraid to course-correct. Better now than later.

(5) Own It to Yourself: You Owe You

This might be the most important one.

Self-coaching helps you pause and ask not just 'What am I doing?' but also 'Who am I becoming in the process?'

In a world that measures success in likes and job titles, here's a quieter truth: your deepest commitments are the ones you make to yourself.

Self-coaching question: *What is one promise I've made to myself that I must not break — no matter what?*

It could be getting healthier, starting something new, speaking up more, or being kinder to yourself. Whatever it is, honour it. Because when you keep a promise to yourself, your self-trust grows. And that, more than anything, creates momentum.

In Closing (Or Maybe, Just the Beginning)

Self-coaching is not about being perfect. It's about being present. It's a lifelong habit of asking yourself the right questions, listening without judgment, and showing up for your own growth — day after day. So whether you're reading this in your hostel room, on a flight to your next board meeting, or in between job applications, remember:

You are your most powerful coach. Don't wait for the perfect time. Start now. Ask yourself one bold question today — and then listen. That one answer might just change the year ahead.

Gopalji Mehrotra
is Group CHRO at ACME and a respected voice in India's HR and leadership space

"Start With the Problem, Not the Solution"

Product leadership in large enterprises is often seen as a trade-off between innovation and stability. In reality, it is a discipline built on clarity of thought, structured experimentation, and the ability to scale ideas within complex systems. *Shruti Jain* speaks with **Sunil Mishra**, Senior Director, Product Management at Publicis Sapient, a seasoned product and innovation leader with more than two decades of experience across digital banking, enterprise technology, and global consulting. From Infosys Finacle to McKinsey, Accenture, and Oracle, his journey reflects a blend of strategic rigour and execution. He discusses how a product mindset transcends industries, why structured innovation matters, and how AI is reshaping the way products are imagined, built, and scaled.

Looking back across banking technology, consulting, and product management, what is one constant in product leadership, and one thing that has changed dramatically?

One thing that has remained constant is the essence of product leadership itself: starting with a clear problem statement. No matter the industry or era, a product leader's responsibility begins with understanding what problem needs to be solved.

What has changed dramatically is *how* we solve those problems. The tools, methodologies, and technologies have evolved significantly. Today, AI has made many aspects of product development far more efficient. But the foundational responsibility — defining the problem — has stayed the same.

What does it take to successfully launch an innovative product within a large, established organisation?

Business-as-usual operations typically consume large organisations. Their time and energy are focused on supporting existing customers and revenue streams. As a result, innovation often struggles to find the bandwidth it needs.

The most effective approach I have seen is creating a small, empowered, and insulated team dedicated to innovation. This team must be free from daily operational burdens and organisational constraints, with the mandate to make independent decisions and pursue blue-sky thinking.

You often speak about "product mindset." In a world full of buzzwords, what does it truly mean to you?

For me, product mindset goes far beyond product development. It can be applied to almost anything.

First, it is about outcome over effort. Customers pay for value, not for the effort that went into building something. Measuring success by effort is a flawed paradigm.

Second, it requires a lifecycle perspective — from inception and development to launch, adoption, and long-term value maximisation.

Third, it is about owning the problem statement. In services, you build what the client asks for. In product organisations, the product manager defines the requirement, synthesising inputs from customers, stakeholders, and the market.

Finally, product mindset means building for scale, ensuring strong product-market fit, and continuously iterating against the original problem.

How do you anchor product vision when client requirements and priorities keep shifting?
If you mindlessly execute every client request, you are not managing a product; you are running a feature factory.

No matter the industry or era, a product leader's responsibility begins with understanding what problem needs to be solved

Product managers must always ask "why." You can say yes to a request, but only after understanding its purpose and relevance to the broader market. Build for the market, not for a single client. Acting as a gatekeeper to the roadmap is a critical part of the role.

Personalisation drives engagement, but privacy concerns are rising. How do you balance user delight with trust?
Trust always lags technology. We saw this with internet banking decades ago; people were initially hesitant, yet today it is second nature. With any new technology, trust develops over time, supported by strong guardrails, transparency, and responsible implementation. If the value is clear and the safeguards are strong, user behaviour eventually adapts.

When faced with competing priorities from sales, engineering, and leadership, how do you decide what to build next?
Traditional prioritisation exercises often fail because everyone believes everything is essential.

One technique I have used is

> **Customers pay for value, not for the effort that went into building something. Measuring success by effort is a flawed paradigm**

constrained prioritisation. For example, I give stakeholders a hypothetical budget, say $1,000, and ask them to allocate it across requirements. Constraints force real trade-offs and reveal true priorities.

How do you manage the creative tension between product, engineering, and design teams?
The key is a shared product vision. When everyone understands the problem being solved and buys into the vision, roles naturally converge.

With AI accelerating convergence, engineers may prototype experiences, and product managers may build minimum viable products (MVPs) themselves. Alignment comes from clarity of purpose, not rigid role boundaries.

How do you ensure product vision remains consistent while being communicated across diverse teams?
Once the team truly understands and believes in the vision, translation happens organically. Each function interprets the vision in its own domain. The leader's role becomes facilitative, ensuring coherence without micromanagement.

What is your philosophy on building a minimum viable product, and how do you decide whether to pivot or proceed?
An MVP is the stage at which a customer can experience the product and provide honest feedback. Until that happens, you should not over-invest in development.

The critical decision point lies between MVP and the first paying customer. If that gap persists despite repeated validation attempts, it is time to pivot.

You introduced formal innovation labs in large organisations. Why is structured innovation critical?
In large enterprises, ideas rarely die because customers reject them; they die navigating internal politics.

A structured pathway with sponsorship, funding, and insulation from business-as-usual constraints allows ideas to survive long enough to prove their value. Dedicated incubation teams prevent innovation from competing directly with core operations.

How do you decide what not to build, or when to sunset products?
Sunsetting products is one of the most complex product decisions, yet it is essential. Organisations often waste resources supporting products everyone knows will not scale.

Portfolio prioritisation requires courage to drop features, products, and even entire lines of business when they no longer serve strategic goals.

Which phase of the product lifecycle has AI accelerated the most?
AI has impacted all phases, but ideation has seen the most significant shift. What once took months — prototyping, experimentation, and feedback — can now happen over a weekend.

Faster ideation leads to more rapid learning cycles and a dramatic increase in experimentation.

Your book *Mysteries of Mind* explores empathy and human cognition. How does that influence your product practice?
Product management is ultimately about storytelling. Customers are the heroes of the story; the product serves as a guide that helps them overcome a challenge.

> **If you mindlessly execute every client request, you are not managing a product; you are running a feature factory**

Understanding how the human mind processes narratives helps in shaping compelling product stories, both internally and externally.

In product teams, what is the biggest thief of focus and momentum?
Stakeholder alignment. Product managers act like mini-CEOs, aligning leadership, engineering, sales, and customers.

This invisible work — communication, alignment, and expectation management — consumes enormous time but determines product success.

Beyond Apple or Google, which strategies excite you today?
The future belongs to companies that combine people *and* product. We are already seeing this shift: product firms adding consulting capabilities, and services firms building products. Adaptability will define the winners.

One daily task you wish AI could do perfectly?
Prioritise my work and personal commitments across teaching, writing, and product leadership. A faithful personal assistant would be invaluable.

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CEO LOUNGE

'Thanks to AI, the minutes are clearer than the meeting.'

'We track stress so thoroughly it now qualifies as a stressor.'

'Art Appreciation Fridays–but only if it's on the blockchain.'

Twisters by **Shivam Litoria**

1 This global brand's iconic slogan, introduced in 1988, was inspired by the last words of a convicted criminal before his execution. Today, the three-word phrase is considered one of the most powerful marketing taglines ever created. Name the brand and the slogan.

2 Taking its name from the Hindustani phrase for "Six Gardens," which Indian sporting arena was built on the grounds of the Nawab of Arcot's official residence?

3 X was a visionary who revolutionised modern computing and laid the foundations of artificial intelligence. His code-breaking brilliance at Bletchley Park proved vital to the Allies' success in World War II. Yet, despite these extraordinary achievements, he was later convicted under unjust laws and died tragically in 1954. Identify X.

4 This Chinese automaker, founded in 1986, began by making refrigerators before moving into motorcycles and eventually cars. In 2010, it became the first Chinese company to acquire a major Western carmaker, buying Volvo Cars from Ford. Today, it's one of China's largest privately owned automakers and has global ambitions. Name the brand.

1. Nike — Just Do It 2. Chepauk Stadium 3. Alan Turing 4. Geely

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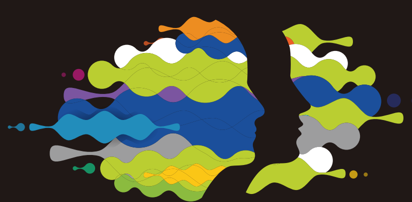

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