

Leadership Talk By:

Dr. Raghu Krishnamoorthy, Senior Fellow and Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Chief Learning Officer doctoral program and Member of the Governing Council ADCLOD

Dr. Raghu Krishnamoorthy, in his insightful talk, addressed the profound shift required in leadership amidst continuous disruption and uncertainty. He contended that traditional leadership models, based on control, predictability, and individual charisma, were insufficient for the volatile, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, which he argued was evolving into a "Brittle, Uncertain, Non-Linear, Incomprehensible (BUNI)" environment. Instead of attempting to eliminate uncertainty, leaders, he emphasized, had to engage with it directly, making sense of emerging patterns and guiding their organizations with flexibility and purpose. This context shift, he explained, was driven by three major paradigm shifts: the exponential curve of technological change, including mobile, AI, and cognitive computing, the changed workplace expectations in a post-pandemic "word soup", and evolving societal factors.

A central theme of his message was the necessity for a fundamental mindset shift in leadership. Leaders, he noted, had to transition from a control-based approach to one rooted in adaptability, where plans were provisional and open to iteration. This meant moving from a "Find-it-Out Era" of planning, analyzing, and strategizing to a "Figure-it-Out Era" of experimenting, engaging, responding in real-time, and sense-making. Dr. Krishnamoorthy underscored that true leadership lay not in knowing all the answers, but in cultivating the ability to ask better questions and facilitate collective sense-making. He highlighted the limitations of hierarchical thinking, urging organizations to move toward flatter, networked structures where diverse voices could contribute to adaptive strategies. He also noted that organizations were evolving from functional and matrix structures to interconnected ecosystems characterized by fluid networks and dynamic partnerships, where culture, not just structure, drove the organization. Culture, in this context, he defined as the unspoken rules, decision patterns, crisis responses, and what was recognized within an organization.

Dr. Krishnamoorthy introduced practical frameworks that supported this leadership transformation. He discussed the use of scenario planning to prepare for multiple possible futures, rather than relying on a single linear forecast. He also introduced learning loops systems that allowed leaders and teams to experiment, receive feedback, and adjust quickly. Such approaches, he explained, were vital for fostering resilience in both individuals and institutions. Equally important was the creation of psychological safety within teams, enabling people to share ideas, take risks, and learn from failure without fear of blame. The talk also redefined work itself, moving from a task-oriented, productivity-driven past to a new model focused on fulfilment, development, engagement, empathy, and purpose, allowing for intrinsic growth and happiness.

What emerged from his talk was a compelling redefinition of leadership one that was less about heroic action and more about creating environments where shared learning, trust, and adaptability could thrive. He suggested that while the leadership context had changed, the essential content of effective leadership remained the same in its core principles. Central to this new leadership paradigm was the "Warm Demander" framework, which he characterized by high standards coupled with high support. He outlined four key behaviours of a "Warm Demander": inspiring employees and showing genuine interest in their development, as well as collaborating with them on relevant goals; building trust by providing resources and demonstrating empathy and honesty; treating all individuals fairly through public appreciation and defending them when needed; and dedicating time to coach for growth and provide constructive guidance. The talk concluded with the powerful idea that leaders should strive to bring out 'the best' not just 'the most', from their employees. This vision, he noted, deeply aligned with ADCLOD's mission to develop context-sensitive, research-driven approaches to leadership for both Indian and global organizations.