



# The leader within

**A**BOUT three months ago, I was sitting with some old-timers in Wipro (having joined the company in 1976, I am definitely one of them) and discussing some of the people in the organisation. Without putting in too much effort, we listed about 70 ex-Wiproites who are currently CEOs of other companies. And then, I told my colleagues the story of my native place.

My native place is a small village, approximately 20 km from Pune and 2 km off the Pune-Bangalore highway. We were the *jagirdars* and had a seven-storeyed palace spread over nearly 10 acres. Sometime in 1936, the Britishers blew up the palace, suspecting we were part of the freedom movement. The solid stones of the palace were strewn all over the place. The village now has 60-70 houses. Interestingly, almost 90 per cent of the houses were built using stones from our torn-down house. In fact, the number of stones still lying around is so high that more houses can be built from them.

My colleagues could see the parallel between this tale and Wipro.

There is a huge similarity between Wipro and General Electric (GE) in this respect. It is said that nearly 25 per cent of the CEOs in the US were originally at GE. The percentage of IT industry leaders in India who were originally at Wipro is probably higher.

What has made Wipro such a powerhouse for turning out so many industry leaders? Did Wipro have a great commitment to develop leaders from within? Did it do something to specifically recruit people with leadership potential? Did it invest in building these leaders? Did the organisational growth provide opportunities for people to blossom into leaders?

Having been with the organisation for about 25 years, I can clearly see

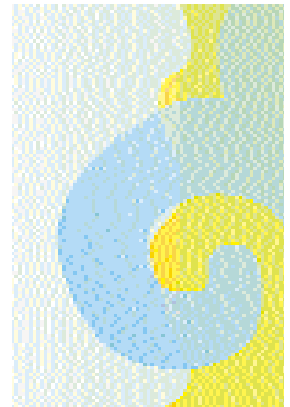
that Wipro has been doing all this and more.

To begin with, Wipro's top management demonstrated the vision to develop leaders from within. It did that by going to the Indian Institutes of Management way back in 1970 and recruiting bright, young graduates to take responsible positions right from the date of joining. It displayed the courage to do away with year-long traineeships that were the norm in the 1970s. Wipro trusted these young graduates, who were carefully selected after intense interviews, reference checks and an in-depth perusal of their background. In addition to the students' academic record, a lot of importance was given to their values, ability to learn, their need for achievement and success, their cultural suitability with Wipro, their ability to relate to people around them, their self-confidence and, finally, their honesty and integrity. Several hours were spent discussing with the candidates various issues and case studies before selecting them. And exactly the same process was followed whenever we wanted to select a person with lateral experience.

Though we were open to the idea of recruiting experienced people for positions that required special competence, we decided that most of our recruitments would be through campuses of premier management and engineering institutions.

And despite the fact that Wipro was not that known, the Wipro story was a hit on the campus. We were able to attract some of the best people from the best campuses and achieve a day-one status in most of them.

After attracting the best, the next important step was to integrate them into the organisation in the most exciting manner. We found that giving large responsibilities to completely untested talent was one of the best methods. For example, as a campus recruit I was given the responsibility of



*Wipro's top management demonstrated the vision to develop leaders from within.*

etc.  
RAVIKANTH



“We’ve a simple tool for churning out people with leadership qualities here – Big Boss has as many children as possible.”

an employee who had a clean slate, was able to absorb the culture and values of the company and help the organisation build a repository of knowledge and expertise.

While declaring its commitment to developing leadership from within, Wipro went all out and communicated to its employees that if the internal talent was even 60 per cent ready for a given position or role, it would get preference over external talent. This was established by practising it in numerous cases. At the same time, the organisation was open to recruiting people from outside whenever such talent was not available within.

As the organisation grew in size, and a lot more decentralisation and delegation happened, it became necessary to articulate a set of qualities that we looked for in all ‘Wipro Leaders’ and what it meant to the entire organisation. We, therefore, articulated ‘Wipro Leaders’ Qualities’ in 1991, which not only defined the qualities but also illustrated about five typical behaviours that demonstrated the presence of each quality. The Chairman himself taught these qualities to all existing as well as new employees. These qualities were essentially the success factors for Wipro Leaders and were very close to the competencies of these leaders.

Once you articulate what is expected of the leaders, it is also necessary to measure and give a feedback on where the leaders stand *vis-a-vis* these competencies. We, therefore, instituted a number of processes for this function, including the New Manager Assimilation Program, Skip Level Meetings and, at the end of every year, a 360-degree feedback to each person in a leadership position. There was feedback from the manager, juniors and peers. Even the leader rated himself/herself based on the qualities and behaviour defined and compared it with the ratings given by others. The feedback is

heading the personnel functions of the company’s only manufacturing facility, which was also its only real establishment and employed close to 600 permanent and 300 non-permanent employees. It was not a small factory by any definition. This was an opportunity which some of my classmates got only about five years later. It completely occupied my intellectual abilities and excited me no end. This kind of move requires a lot of guts and risk-taking ability on the part of the company. More importantly, Wipro was willing to compromise with the employee’s lower performance during the learning curve and treat it as an investment in leadership development. In the process, they got

more in the form of frequency of behaviour as well as qualitative suggestions on what the leader should continue, start and stop doing.

Perhaps the most critical process aiding leadership development from within is the annual Human Resources Planning and Review process. This process, in fact, is the mother of all people-development issues within the organisation. It consists of five key sub-processes: Succession planning, identification of the top and bottom 10 per cent employees, identifying employees who constitute the talent that must be retained at any cost and, finally, identifying employees who have been in the same job/role for five years and more. The senior management and the top management spend hours discussing the various people-issues involved in the above process.

For all positions reporting to the Chairman and those reporting at the next level, at least three successors are identified. These could be ready immediately or after a year or within 2-3 years. Along with identifying the successors, their current strengths and the areas of improvement are also determined. The business leaders review all actions on a quarterly basis.

More important than the administration and implementation of the processes mentioned above is the creation of an environment and culture that is most conducive to creating leaders. It is never just a matter of intentions but continuous active support to the process. The process has to flow directly from the head of the organisation. The most effective motivators are the actual examples of internal leaders being developed and internal candidates gaining opportunities even when they are only 60 per cent ready for the role. This also requires resource commitment from the top management and a complete thrust on meritocracy. It requires



"We do encourage informality here, Murthy. But calling me *Machchan* is going a little too far."

willingness to take risks with people, whom you provide with opportunities, knowing fully that they are only partially ready to do justice to the role.

There is a perennial debate on whether leaders are born or made. The truth is, given a spark of basic leadership talent, leadership can be nurtured provided both the organisation and the employee have the will to make it happen and work towards it. And Wipro did this with a good measure of success. ■

*(The author is Vice-President,  
Human Resources, Wipro Corp)*