FORRESTTM

2026 (January to October)

Managing the Maelstrom

2026 - Missives

Continuous Improvement 3
The Anxiety Around AI 5
AI & Accountability 7
AI & Authority 9
The Art of Monitoring 11
Monitoring Output & Effectiveness 13
Accountability and Culture Change 15
Developing Strategy 17
Making Confident Decisions 19
Linking Strategy and Planning 21
AI Through The Managerial Leadership Lens 23
The Art of Planning 25
Meetings Are Out of Control 27
The Concept of Ownership 29
Enabling Productivity 31
The Importance of Team One and Team Two 33
Where We Make Decisions 35
Bringing About Organizational Change 37
Change & Anaklesis 39
The Essential Link of Structure & Strategy 41
Effective Intelligence & Thinking 43
The Need for Clarity 45
Thoughtful Summer Planning 47
The Human Element in AI 49
Dealing with Overloading 51
The Importance of Human Thinking 53
Intentional Thinking 55
Taking Time to Think 57
Skilful Thinking in the Age of AI 59
The Easy Button Isn't Thinking 61
Thinking vs Action 63
Thinking & Fear 65
Truth and Thinking 67
Thinking through Uncertainty 69
Personal Control & AI 71
Developing Intellectual Capital 73

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Investing in Thinking Capital **75**
Perseverance and Thanks **77**
The Accountability for Flourishing **80**

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Continuous Improvement

9 January, 2026

It seems odd writing this so far into January, but that is the impact of holidays. Back in December, I sent you out with work to look back on 2025 and hopefully you had time to reflect on the year that was over your break.

I have heard many views on the nature of 2025, and, just when people got hopes up for a calmer 2026, it has already proven it will be anything but.

In this light, there is value in asking what 2026 is really going to be about for you.

Many people seize this time to make New Year's Resolutions – witness the sudden increase in joggers in the morning or people carrying yoga mats to and fro. While I am not for Resolutions per se, I *am* for setting goals because from goals we can begin plans.

There are those who will set lofty goals for the year. Corporations certainly will and, in most cases, those goals will be to grow beyond 2025. Sometimes, when we set those goals, we overlook the reality of the current world and wish for better in the year ahead. This isn't so much goal-setting as wish-setting unless there are concrete actions that respect reality put into place.

In other cases, people will want to bring about change, either in their world or their lives. This, too, can be disheartening when the cold light of reality hits, and, by December 2026, you realise outside influences had a say in your goals and affected their success.

If you are wondering what a good resolution might be for 2026, might I suggest ***Continuous Improvement*****?**

Continuous Improvement (CI) is often a term associated with manufacturing, but the premise is applicable to every facet of our lives and is critically important in managerial leadership.

It is about adapting, learning, and growing incrementally day by day. In my book, I argue that the core role of a managerial leader is to practice Continuous Improvement, gradually making things better one step at a time.

For those who grew up with terms like "big, hairy, audacious goals", "moonshots", "big sky goals", and "stretch goals", continuous improvement can seem mundane, or like settling but, in reality, it can be very healthy and productive.

Consider the perfectionist who tries their hardest but doesn't hit those goals, even through no fault of their own; they feel defeated and deflated. One appealing benefit of CI is that it focuses on processes, not blame. Problems are seen as process failures, not people failures. The goal is to improve how things gets done, not beat yourself up.

Where I find CI essential in managerial leadership is when organizations try to bring about change. Change is hard, but by acknowledging incremental progress via Continuous Improvement, we build the platform for further growth and movement towards that complete change.

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Goals, in essence, are change targets. They don't have to be big, but they are about moving from a current state to a future desired end state. Continuous improvement is merely a set of milestones or stepping stones on the way to that desired future.

Armed with your review of what 2025 was, what do you want to shape 2026 into, and what are the goals? Perhaps, as you look at the daunting prospect of some 300 days ahead in 2026, consider the goal of Continuous Improvement.

Cheers, have a great weekend,
Julian

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The Anxiety Around AI

16 January, 2026

Last year, Forrest, via our Nova initiative, set out to understand the nature of Artificial Intelligence implementation in the workplace. Since 2022, this topic has dominated business and societal conversations which has ranged from the potential applications to the dangers of overreliance and unbridled progress.

In the middle of 2025, we jointly held a series of HR roundtables to explore how organizations were dealing with these questions. What we found, as we had surmised, was that AI had frequently been passed to Human Resources to sort out. In many cases, it fell to Information Technology to consider the tools themselves, but it was left to HR to determine how best to implement AI and determine policies in organizations. HR was set up as the "AI police" to protect the business but, often, that was the extent of the exploration.

While there was lots of discussions about AI, very little of those got to the root of its use. Questions of how it would be used in, and its implications for, the workforce were rarely fully explored. Generally, the discussions were around immediate adoption into the day-to-day. This signaled that the AI focus of many organizations was settling at the tactical level without being properly explored at the strategic level. Artificial Intelligence represents a shift that will impact most organizations in far-reaching and fundamental ways. To ignore (or underexplore) the impacts to a strategy is very risky.

As we enter 2026 there continues to be a sense of ongoing real and palpable AI anxiety. This feeling of unease leads to discomfort and avoidance as people try to wrestle with it. From what we have gleaned, here are some examples of that anxiety:

- Fear of being left behind
- Fear of losing out, particularly as job requirements change
- Fear of not knowing

Not to be trivialized, it is, of course, a natural human reaction when faced with change, but it is deeper than that. People inherently like predictability because it provides a sense of safety, control, and reduces anxiety, allowing us to feel secure and manage emotions through routines, habits, and anticipation of familiar patterns. We like stability and the ability to work within a comfortable framework. Anxiety is also supercharged by the general state of the world, which is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

The AI Anxiety is different. It is because we have never faced a technology of this kind. Sure, the prospect of email had a profound effect on the stenography pool, but it was a limited change. To add to the anxiety, despite what the media and experts tell us, we don't have visibility into what that change truly looks like. Instead, people are left to use their imagination to try to pretend they know what will happen. The anxiety and fear around AI is because it *isn't* predictable, and it's impact on work/organizations/livelihood isn't either. The speed and velocity of the change is adding to the anxiety; we don't have time to get comfortable with the change before it's already changing again.

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Another potential cause of this anxiety is that many organizations haven't explored far enough. Not understanding something leads to an inherent distrust of it. Our self-preservation instincts immediately view any new thing from the worst possible angle, our point of view only changing once its proven to not be a threat. There are not enough plans or road maps and it is left for people to make assumptions. Artificial intelligence is a complex concept that many struggle to fully understand, and yet the sheer amount of data and research available is useless if you don't know how to interpret or contextualise it. When the plan has also not been explored through the lens of the strategy then there are no talking points. In the end the silence becomes deafening.

In our change model we teach the ABCs. This is a handy mnemonic and is useful as organizations face the AI Anxiety. ABC means:

- Always Be Closing the door to moving backwards; in other words, keep going forward
- Always Be Communicating; silence in the face of change is never golden and leads to disruption and angst; and
- Always Be Caring about the human beings that are impacted by the change.

If your organization faces any form of AI Anxiety, then there are these three things to do:

- Ensure you have explored AI through the lens of your strategy making sure it fits to where you want to go
- Develop of the roadmap and express it so all can see
- Finally, practice the ABCs.

Not to be too prescriptive, but if you have no sense if the anxiety is there then it behooves you to ask. But, as another piece of advice, be prepared to dig. Don't take "it's ok" or "I'm fine" on face value. Prepare to dig in to understand.

Hopefully this has given you food for thought. In the weeks to come we will explore deeper.

Have a great weekend

Cheers,
Julian

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AI & Accountability

23 January, 2026

In last week's missive, I raised the spectre of AI Anxiety and how that is generated from several different concerns and standpoints. As a result, all of us, managers in particular, need to factor this anxiety into relationships with our people. I also stressed that organisations also need to be strategic in their approach to AI and how it relates directly to the Strategy.

Clearly, AI is a major disruptor. It is a change agent and needs to be seen as such.

For those who have been reading these missives over the years, you will be aware that my approach to organizational issues is through the lens of accountability. I would go so far as to suggest that accountability is the *raison d'etre* of Forrest & Company.

By accountability, I mean these things:

- Clearly defining what is the work of someone
- Providing them with the resources to do the work
- Then, holding them accountable for how they deliver on the agreed-upon work

I don't intend to describe the detailed mechanics of accountability this week, but instead to explore the nature of accountability in the face of AI.

Many pundits have suggested that AI will fundamentally change the nature of work, and this may be the case. Every week, another report comes out stating that X or Y role will disappear in the face of AI or is already being impacted. While this adds to the anxiety, it does not change the premise that organisations need accountability and the clarity it brings.

Until robots or AGI overlords take over, the central premise of accountability exercised by management being essential will remain.

With this in mind, what do managerial leaders have to do in the age of AI to apply the constructs of accountability? Here are some perspectives:

1. Define the work's end state. What must be delivered?
2. Clarify why the work is being done
3. Define the work in relation to other work
4. Define the extent of authority in relation to the work
5. Define the resources that one has to do the work. This includes other people, financial equipment, and, of course, AI.

As you read this, you were probably struck by, "*Hey, that isn't new*". You are correct if you did. So, why mention it then? The reality is that these definitions don't happen nearly enough now and rarely did before. I would suggest that some of the AI Anxiety stems from, and is compounded by, people not having these five key pieces of information.

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If there is already a lack of clarity, adding the question of AI's impact onto work is made all the more daunting.

But accountability doesn't end with role clarity. It is the exercise of being held to account for what one does. In business, that is the role of a managerial leader and is the convention of work. Holding someone accountable is through the leveraging of consequences, which we usually conclude as something negative. What happens when the job is done well? We need the affirmation and the acknowledgement; it is the nature of being human. Accountability is about the exercise of applying consequences from the entire spectrum including both positive and negative.

Again, this is frequently not done well. The implication is that if I don't know how I am doing, it will likely create some form of anxiety. Removing the underlying anxiety from misunderstood accountability/ies can make employees better able to approach AI with a clear head and a focused eye. AI then becomes a work augmenter, instead of work replacer.

Right now, in the face of the discussion of the future of work and the implications of AI, the exercise of accountability becomes all the more critical for managerial leaders. In times of change, it is managerial leaders who need to step up and show the way. They do this armed with clarity about organizational strategy, the direction the organization is going, and the managerial courage to share it.

Professional managerial leadership is essential to reducing AI anxiety and helping our employees navigate the changes that will inevitably come. Accountability is the most important arrow in their quiver, and they must apply it to the fullest.

Have a great weekend

Cheers,
Julian

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AI & Authority

30 January, 2026

Last week, I went down my old familiar rabbit hole of accountability. In particular, accountability through the lens of artificial intelligence in the workplace. My focus was the role of managerial leaders in reducing the anxiety about the uncertainty of AI in the workplace. Working to bring clarity is what managers should be accountable for.

I say "should be" because, in our experience, accountability is rarely exercised in organizations. Accountability is *not* responsibility. Responsibility is a personal feeling of obligation whereas Accountability is your job, and you are held to account for it by your manager.

By holding to account, I mean applying consequences. Consequences are both good and bad and span a continuum. Too often we think in terms of the *negative* consequences but *positive* consequences for a job well done are far more powerful. Managers often don't tell their people how they are doing: "*I'll tell you if you make a mistake,*" or they focus solely on the negatives. We all need feedback, and it is the accountability of managerial leaders to provide it and consider how it can be most effective.

Regarding AI in the workplace, there is often confusion about who is accountable for what and where final decisions rest. It ends up being a mishmash as everyone uses their own sense of responsibility to make it work. Often, instead of choosing one person / role to be accountable, we diffuse the accountability by creating committees.

Committees are often the result of risk and fear – how do we deliver something with the least amount of risk? While this may be valid, it doesn't address who makes the decisions. In our experience, committee work often prolongs the process and leads to missed opportunities.

Committee defenders will point out "*committees mean that we get the input from others into the decision*," and, while valid, it is old-school thinking. Having input does not mean making the decision, and often committees get mired in the politics of beliefs and opinions.

Instead, it is important to understand the critical bedfellow of accountability: **authority**. Authority is essential to accountability. It represents legitimized power. If you are held accountable but have no authority, it is unfair. However, if you have authority without accountability, it is downright dangerous. If you doubt this, look no further than current events.

Authority represents the ground rules and guidelines for fulfilling your accountability. Here are some examples:

- Can I make the decision, or do I have to go back to my manager?
- What resources can I expend in doing this?
- Who can I, or should I, consult in my deliberations?
- Whose work might I have a say in to fulfill what I am accountable for?

Authority, like accountability, is another oft-overlooked part of clarifying work, whether or not it is in the face of artificial intelligence. Clarity about accountability and authority empowers employees. As I argued last week, it falls apart without management exercising accountability. Managerial leaders

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cannot abrogate their accountability to provide clarity. That clarity will help to reduce anxiety and help people to do their work.

Knowing the limits or freedoms of authority allows employees to work with AI within the bounds of their role. Without specific limitations placed on usage, AI will likely empower employees to stretch beyond their own accountabilities. While "stretch goals" can be useful and admirable, when the AI support encourages you to run into the accountabilities of other employees, it becomes dangerous and confusing.

Any foray into AI, or any other disruptor, needs clarity on who is accountable for what, and what authority they have to fulfill those accountabilities. Far too often, we have seen it tossed off to someone to look into AI, develop a policy, or implement it, without clarity on accountability and authority. When this happens, it costs efficiency, effectiveness, and trust while ultimately damaging productivity. This gets even worse when there is no follow-up.

So, as you consider any change or implementation, think in terms of defining accountability and authority, and then holding people to those agreements.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Art of Monitoring

6 February, 2026

Over the last few weeks, I have been writing about accountability and authority as critical to organizational effectiveness. I have received a lot of feedback, so I am continuing in that vein. This week, I focus on a critical practice that enables accountability: **monitoring**.

Monitoring has a harsh sound to it, but I can think of no better term to describe an essential component of holding someone to account. Interestingly, when we research the various practices leaders need to exercise, monitoring often comes up as one that is not done well, if at all. When clients receive feedback from their direct reports in our multi-rater assessment, it is often the lowest scoring for leaders. So, this week, I will discuss what it is, its critical role, and what I believe are the reasons we don't do it well. See if this resonates for you.

By monitoring, I mean following up with a direct report after you have given them a task or work to do. It is not meant as spying; it is a check-in to see how things are going. From it emanates the ability to coach and provide feedback to help employees to adjust their trajectory and enable success in fulfilling what they are accountable for.

By checking in, you can see how they are making out. You get a sense of how effective they are in their work. It ensures they are not left to flounder and increases the chances of achieving the required results. With it comes some dangers, however.

If we *over*-monitor, it is seen as micro-management. If you are always "standing over their shoulder"; it feels like you don't trust them. If you engage in countering what they have done with, "*I wouldn't have done it that way*", it begs the question, why did you delegate the work in the first place?

By the same token, if you are *under*-monitoring, you may not get what you want. Employees can feel lost and waste time, which ultimately leads to disengagement and disenchantment.

The key here is that monitoring is an art, there are not specific parameters or rules to it. What is key is to discuss monitoring with the employee when you give them the work. It can't be a surprise, like you are some undercover boss. It needs to be done *with* people, not *to* people.

So why don't we do it well? Aside from underuse and overuse, I believe there are other reasons, like:

- We simply forget, and we get caught up in our other work
- We feel uncomfortable looking at the work being done, feeling we may be intruding
- We are uncomfortable with challenging the work of our employees
- We feel that our employees may be more capable than they really are, so we overlook checking in
- We have not taken the time to plan the work, and as a result, we don't consider the monitoring plan for the work being done.
- We assume that if they have trouble, they will come to us

The key to good monitoring is knowing your people and their capabilities. It is necessary to ask yourself these questions:

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- Do they have the requisite skills for the work?
- What has been the quality of their work in the past along these lines?
- Do they value this type of work?
- Do they have the confidence to be able to do the work?

From these questions, you can decide how much you may need to instruct, standardize, motivate, or encourage your people.

The real key, though, is to plan your monitoring. Think it through ahead of time and engage them in a dialogue about the work. It can't just be a dump-and-run where you wash your hands of it. After all, in accountability management, you are the one accountable for their work. They are the ones accountable for their best efforts in doing the work you assign them.

Finally, over time, as trust builds between you and your direct reports, you can hope that they will come forward if they have challenges. But in doing this, recognize that no one ever really wants to tell their boss they don't know how to do something.

Hopefully, this has given you insight into the nature of monitoring and its challenges. If you get good at the art of it, you will find you get what you want, when you want it, delivered to the standard you expect.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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Monitoring Output & Effectiveness

13 February, 2026

Last week, I wrote about **Monitoring** as a critical part of accountability in organizations. While the topic may appear mundane, it is essential, yet we frequently see it not done well (or at all) by leaders. So, at risk of mundanity, I am going to delve even deeper into Monitoring and its importance.

I got some great feedback last week. Judy McKellar from the Forrest & Company team reinforced a piece that I did not talk about when discussing the nature of over or under monitoring. Her point was that Monitoring needs to be addressed right up front when you give someone work to do.

Her point, which I agree with 100%, is that, when you assign the task, you need to specify how and when you will check in. It is just as critical as assigning the task itself. It creates a dialogue, sets expectations, and offers a window into how the person sees the work and their comfort with it.

It balances forcing you to follow up without the feeling of micro-managing. Of course, if you don't follow up, you have broken the arrangement but, when you do, it keeps you on track to getting what you need from someone. Critically, it comes down to deciding what you will monitor.

There are two things to monitor in accountability: output and working behaviours.

Monitoring output is keeping track of what your people produce. It is checking whether they completed the tasks you assigned to them to the quantity and quality of results you wanted, within the time frame you set, and within the resources you allotted. This is the most common form of Monitoring and is the one we are most comfortable with.

The key to monitoring output is not waiting too long to check in. You need to be able to provide timely feedback and coaching so they can adjust their trajectory, if needed, and meet the goal. It is also the easiest because it is objectively based and is tangible.

Monitoring working behaviour is about seeing how *well* they work on achieving the output. It is about their effectiveness.

Organizations struggle to balance output and effectiveness. The example I like to use is the salesperson who hits or exceeds their numbers (achieves output) but leaves a trail of bodies behind (their effectiveness).

Far too often, we turn a blind eye to the effectiveness because we hit the number. While this might give us the target or KPI, what does it say about our culture? The adage of "*the standard of effectiveness you walk past is the standard you expect*".

In turn, the issues of organizational culture are rooted in either failing to monitor behaviour or failing to do something about it. How people work reflects their ethics. If you see it but don't say anything, then you have abrogated your accountability to manage. If you claim you didn't know, then you have abrogated your accountability to monitor.

Every day we see flagrantly bad behaviour. How did it get there? I would argue that much of it is about not stopping bad behaviour early enough. Often, it is about accepting it as a cost for the output you

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want. The answer is we have to stop it, but the only way to stop it is to be present and monitor. Yes, there is a big step between seeing it and acting on it. So, how do we do that?

It is all about the chain of accountability. Managers need to be held accountable by their managers for monitoring and acting on issues like bad behaviour.

Personally, I am appalled to see the behaviour in our world today. Much of it is rooted in not establishing standards and holding people to them. To be fair, we are all different, we have different experiences, and my behavioural standards may be different from someone else's. Therefore, in organizations, whether business or otherwise, we need standards, policies, values and the rule of law, and people must be held to them. Again, if we are not watching or turning a blind eye to what we see, then we can anticipate very different results.

Hopefully, this has given more food for thought about the importance of accountability and the core managerial leadership practice of Monitoring.

Have a great long weekend,
Julian

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Accountability and Culture Change

20 February, 2026

I had the opportunity this week to attend a very interesting conference on the nature of Human Resources in a particular sector. During the conference, a presentation made me ponder the nature of accountability.

The presenter was rightly commenting on how good their Human Resources program was. Specifically, their initiative was created to foster a culture of respect in the workplace, with inclusion as a cornerstone. The program was designed to train employees on the value of both within a workplace. But, it got me thinking, is this truly how you change a culture?

In the last few weeks, I have written extensively about accountability and authority as essential ingredients for organizational success. Accountability is the practice of managers defining expectations for employees, and then holding them to account by acknowledging and recognizing activity that meets the standard, and by correcting or providing coaching for work that falls below expectations.

I believe *this* is the core of culture change, not necessarily programs that try to prove their value by changing employees' beliefs. While one can get a lift from having employees feel personally obliged to change, it is unmaintainable without accountability. If the managerial leaders merely rely on people to do the right thing rather than engaging with them, then it is unsustainable.

In accountability management systems, which we at Forrest advocate for, employees have the right to feel safe socially, psychologically, and physically. Management must ensure it happens.

The act of managers interceding when someone’s right is trodden on is the only way to ensure long-lasting change. It isn’t about anonymous whistleblower hotlines but is about shifting management's focus to ensure employees are protected.

That said, we can’t rely solely on managers feeling obliged to protect employees and bring about cultural change; those managers need to be held accountable by *their* managers to ensure it happens. This becomes the chain of accountability.

When I discussed this at the conference, one of the union representatives rightly pointed out that, at the lowest levels, supervisors have so much to do managing administration and logistics, this just adds more onto them. It is a valid argument.

My view is that organizations need to be absolutely crystal clear about their expectations of managerial leaders. In our experience, we often expect too much from management. The core of the role is to lead others. Too often, head offices overburden frontline leaders with that administration and logistics and lose sight of how important lower-level leaders are in leading others. This isn't malicious; it stems from the fact that, in the act of fulfilling their mandate, these projects and programs from head office have a bad habit of being funnelled down to the foundation of organizational execution: the frontline.

Accountability is about clarity. If you focus on accountability, you create sustainable change in an organization. Yet it is more than just a change in culture; it also aids the delivery of the Strategy. If you want to change the culture, you must drive it through people.

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While I applaud the initiatives I saw this week, they are merely Band-Aid solutions. To truly change the culture, you need to start at the top, with the CEO holding the executive to account, and work your way down from there. The quick fix is to try to change employees from the inside out, but the organization needs to take a hard look at what it expects of its management.

Culture change actually comes from Strategy. Do our Values, which should drive the behaviour we expect our leaders to ensure, align with what we are trying to create as an organization?

Culture only eats strategy for breakfast when we let it. Accountability changes this paradigm. After all, you can't change someone's inherent values, experiences, and beliefs, but you *can* hold people to account for what you expect. If they cannot do that, then they are not right fit and should be moved on.

This can be a tall order, but it is how you create sustainability in your organization and ensure respect for diversity, equity, and ultimately inclusion.

Human Resources' role, in this case, becomes the strategic partner willing to speak truth to power and align the top of the house to ensure lasting change. This is how to ensure employees are respected, diversity is valued, and employees feel included.

So, perhaps this week, ponder the programs and projects that come from "the centre" and how might they be superseded by creating an accountability culture?

Have a great weekend,
Julian

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Developing Strategy

27 February, 2026

Managing the Maelstrom often reflects discussions and issues that have arisen in the week. This week's focus has been a lot of discussion with clients about **Strategy**. It's not surprising, since, as I have said before, we exist within our organizations to deliver the Strategy; it should be top of mind.

"Strategy" is used ubiquitously and, like all words, is merely an analogy for thought. For me, Strategy is not merely a "plan" but rather a "North Star" that points the way for our organizations. It goes beyond Vision, Mission, and Values; it is the decisions we make on what we ultimately want to be. For our employees, it becomes the criterion against which they compare their options and they use make decisions within the organization.

I am raising this this week because I had several clients with a similar concern that "*our employees don't know our Strategy*".

As pithy as it sounds, the first question to that should be, "*and whose fault is that*?" The answer is clear; it is a management issue.

While this issue has been present in the past, I believe it has been exacerbated by the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world we live in today.

Now, more than ever, employees need that North Star, but organizations are struggling to select their Strategy. The VUCA world has made it that much harder for key decision makers to make the necessary choices.

Part of the issue is risk. If we select this North Star too early, we wonder if we have made a gross error. So, we decide, perhaps it is better not make the decisions at all. While this option may be true, the problem is that we drift rudderless in the maelstrom, buffeted by the waves of changing circumstances.

At its core, Strategy is about making a call. Sometimes those calls have to be made without all the data. In an age where we are awash in data, it can be a scary choice to push forward. But, the nature of Strategy is inherently risky, as it involves betting on the future we cannot see clearly.

Not defining the Strategy can be more damaging than making a choice and later having to change it.

This might seem antithetical to many reading this. How can you do that? How can an organization say one thing and then change it? I would argue it is better to do that than to say nothing and hope the employees will figure it out. An evolving Strategy is better than no Strategy at all.

Because the business landscape is in a constant state of flux due to shifting consumer demands, new technology, and competitive pressures, a static, long-term plan is difficult. Instead, Strategy can be a dynamic, iterative process that adapts to new intelligence, enabling organizations to remain relevant, competitive, and resilient. But this is difficult for organizations to imagine. The idea has always been that strategic longevity is key – you draft it and you stick with it. But a rooted Strategy that adapts to circumstance can be as effective as a long-defined one. Deferring Strategy development until the conditions are "just right" will help no one.

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Arguably, since 2024, we have seen many organizations that have just kicked that decision-making can down the road, hoping that things will become clearer, only to find themselves stuck in stasis. A workforce in stasis will atrophy over time and may even leave you. Is that a cost you are willing to incur?

To the issue of employees not knowing the Strategy: if there is one, the point that has become clear is that the issue of them not knowing the Strategy is not on the employees; it lands squarely on management's shoulders.

If we exist to deliver the Strategy, then it is incumbent on management to connect employees to it. It is the job of management to regularly discuss it and, more importantly, make it absolutely clear to individuals how their roles and work contribute to it.

As you may have noticed, however, there are often roles in organizations that don't contribute to the Strategy. This brings us back to a familiar topic of the last few weeks: accountability. Accountability has to be rooted in the Strategy. In responsibility-based organizations, employees are doing work they have always done because "*that is the way we do it here*".

Strategy and accountability are intertwined: the Strategy defines the work, and accountability makes sure it gets done the way we need it to reach our North Star.

As you consider this week's missive, ask yourself whether your Strategy is alive and tied to everyone's work, or whether it sits on slides at townhalls or on the website, where no one sees it.

Hopefully, this is all food for thought as we end February.

Have a great weekend,
Julian

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Making Confident Decisions

6 March, 2026

Once again, this week's missive reflects discussions I have recently had with clients. While last week I wrote about Strategy, this week is all about **decision-making**. I've previously broached the issue of decisions, but it keeps coming up as a constant, so it is time for a revisit.

Decisions are made, every day, in organizations worldwide. A human being makes hundreds of decisions a day. Some are instinctive choices while others require careful consideration.

However, those careful decisions sometimes aren't timely, lack rigour, or are made on those hunches.

While decision-making is a critical function in organizations, our research shows that fewer than 10% of employees have a defined decision-making process. As a result, employees often lack confidence in their decisions. Furthermore, management has no way of knowing *how* the individual made that decision, which impacts trust, efficiency and effectiveness.

For example, it is always interesting to ask people what a "decision" is. Often, you get a variety of responses, but rarely is there a common definition.

So, as a common starting point, we define a decision as *choosing one thing and rejecting all others*. Most people can see the "choosing" part. What they don't necessarily align on is "rejecting all others".

Case in point, if you have ever wondered why an organization has dozens of priorities, the culprit is that we rarely risk rejecting options.

Without a framework, decisions are often left to chance. Decision-making is then left to our preferred thinking styles. Some people are very quick, looking at only a few options; others spend endless time gathering facts and data, getting mired in too many options.

In many cases, people use their "gut". They rely on an intangible feeling that they like something and that becomes their choice. When this happens, there is almost a belligerence around questioning the decision because it is so hard to trace the choice back to its source.

So, a framework needs **criteria** to be successful:

- A robust and tangible decision-making tool that follows a clear and repeatable path
- A means to create the aims and standards for an effective decision
- A process to gather data and evaluate options
- A method to assess the risks of potential decisions
- An approach to then sell decisions to multiple stakeholders.

At its root, people need a map to follow their thinking. Without the map, people get lost, which again inhibits trust, efficiency, and effectiveness.

To return to Strategy from last week, Strategy is a decision about choosing a direction; it requires choosing one path and rejecting others. In contrast, a plan is about organizing to achieve a goal.

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Planning is about thinking through and envisioning what needs to be done when, by whom, and where. The plan comes after a decision has been made or a Strategy chosen.

It should be no surprise that organizations stumble on Strategy if so few people have a framework for decision-making.

Decision-making and Strategy share a common impediment: **risk**. Unexplored risk becomes fear, and when you are trying to choose one thing and reject all others, fear comes into play. All managers need to be comfortable with risk. Nothing in life is risk-free, and so not creating fear requires a framework for assessing risks. Rejecting or discarding an option makes us uneasy. Humans like to hedge our bets for safety but don't like to be seen as indecisive. Taking an option off the table makes us feel we can never revisit it. And that finality makes us uncomfortable. But if we had an evaluative approach to our decision, the rationale for discarding an option would remove that discomfort.

Our approach is simple. In assessing risk, you need to:

- Imagine the worst things that can happen if you choose a particular option.
- Predict the likelihood of it coming to pass and the relative severity of that happening.
- Then, evaluate which is the least risky.

In strategy frameworks, we advocate looking at comparing risk and opportunity because sometimes there is real value in taking a more risky approach if the opportunity rewards are more valuable to the organization.

Understanding the interrelationship of Strategy and decision-making is critical. Strategy *is* decisions: making the call and choosing one thing and rejecting all others. With the prospect of risk, it is best to have a framework to support it.

As homework, I encourage you to consider how you make decisions.

Cheers,
Julian

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Linking Strategy and Planning

13 March, 2026

The first Managing the Maelstrom was written 6 years ago, exactly when our world shut down on Friday, 13th March 2020. I have kept at this every week since then, with common themes in managerial leadership. The last two weeks were focused on decision-making and strategy, and this week I continue with an element linked to the two: **planning**.

I mentioned last week that people don't necessarily have decision-making frameworks, and, alarmingly, the same is true for planning. For an ex-soldier like me, that is an anathema. The military are perennial planners; it is an art form, and boy, sometimes we can overdo it.

What triggered the topic of planning this week was a word I learned. The Germans, incredibly, create compound words that capture the essence of thought and behaviour. The word I learned was *die planlosigkeit*. It describes the state, attitude, or quality of having no plan, being disorganized, or acting without a clear method.

It was being used to describe a state of planlessness that seems to have emerged from the current actions halfway around the world since the last day of February. However, that is not my point this week.

Instead, this is about the key facets of planning and their interrelationships with strategy and decisions. We define planning (the verb) as the process of creating a plan (the noun). A plan translates a decision into a series of related actions over time and mobilizes energy around defined events, organizes resources, and reduces uncertainty through careful thought and risk assessment.

Plans contain decisions, but they require very different thinking. Plans require structure and organization and are governed first by the decision or desired end state, and then, most importantly, by time. Over my years of teaching planning, these two aspects are the most overlooked.

Without an end state you cannot figure out where you are trying to get to. A good end state decision should include a delivery date and define both subjective and objective goals. Then, time runs through your plan and denotes when things must happen.

Often in planning, we see that instead of having an end state with clear goals, we move incrementally from where we are now. In these cases, it becomes "*what will we do this year?*" In this case, the time horizon becomes the sole end state and not the clarity of knowing when you have achieved your plan. When you have a clear end state, you have made a choice or a decision. From that, you know whether you have achieved your goal or not, or whether you can declare victory or defeat.

So, how do **Strategy** and **Planning** link?

We define strategy as *the purposeful orientation of an organization that creates value for the organization and its stakeholders in a complex, competitive, and challenging environment*. Therefore, strategy becomes that end state for an organization and is critical for people to then plan how to achieve it.

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As I said last week, strategy itself is a form of decision-making in that it involves choosing one goal and rejecting others.

You may struggle with this definition because many people conflate plans with strategy. Yes, there are plans in strategy just as there are decisions in plans. But to commingle plans with strategy belies the importance of the two.

Strategy is making choices and setting direction. Planning is translating that strategy into actionable steps. In essence, plans are the roadmap for executing the strategy.

My initial premise was that people don't do planning well. This might be because they lack the skills to conceptualize the ambiguity in planning. However, in many cases, we don't value planning. Action junkies driven by "the tyranny of do" just want to get on with things. If you don't value planning, you won't take the time to do it.

I suggest you take the time to ponder planning, plans, and their importance. Like the days of Covid 6 years ago, we face new challenges in managing the maelstrom; our world is replete with examples of poor or planlessness. Back to the German vein, consider the essence of Otto Von Bismarck's attributed comment – "*fools say they learn by their mistakes, but I prefer to learn by the mistakes of others.*"

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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AI Through The Managerial Leadership Lens

20 March, 2026

I named these missives “Managing the Maelstrom” six years ago, as we, particularly managers, were struggling to deal with COVID. At that time, there was no clear path on what to do or how to manage as offices emptied out. We faced the existential threat of a pandemic that few had ever considered, let alone experienced.

Reflecting on March 2020, I wonder if we’re still managing a maelstrom. Unfortunately, our world is no safer, in fact it is less so. While the events of the world impact our employees and families, I think the maelstrom has actually amplified. This uncertainty has the potential to massively reshape our work world.

This week, I am going to revisit the topic of artificial intelligence through the lens of managerial leadership.

I have written extensively about AI over the last year, but not through the lens of its impact on managerial leadership or on what leaders need to do in the face of it. Specifically in the realm of corporate work, managerial leadership is the integration of management and leadership -the connection of people and tasks.

As organizations face AI, they need to view it through that managerial leadership lens of both management and leadership.

As a framework, I’ve found great value in the AI Fluency Framework pioneered by Dakan & Feller. It looks at AI through the 4 D’s:

- Delegate: Identifying which high-volume or transactional tasks are suitable to offload to AI and where human intervention remains non-negotiable.
- Describe: Mastering the skill of "contextual prompting", knowing how to describe goals and requirements to ensure high-quality, professional-grade outputs.
- Discern: Applying critical thinking to evaluate AI outputs for accuracy, hidden bias, and practical usefulness.
- Diligence: Establishing the oversight needed to govern risk, maintain transparency, and ethically manage the AI-human partnership.

In the case of delegating, it is important for the manager to be involved in determining which work should be automated using AI. This can be as simple as which individual tasks can be delegated to an AI as a resource or tool, and potentially which roles can be replaced with AI.

The skill of describing is a task that a manager needs to perform to monitor how well the AI is being used. The old phrase “garbage in – garbage out” comes to mind here. If we are not ensuring the AI is being prompted appropriately, then the resource is being misused.

Discerning is a critical skill that managerial leaders need to get good at. Far too often, we have heard people complaining, “*AI can’t be trusted and often isn’t right*.” Managers need to ensure that both they and their direct reports are using critical thinking, testing for the flaws and challenging results from the

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AI. Ironically, this is no different than the accountability of every manager that has always existed long before AI.

Finally, diligence is a critical role that managers perform. This cannot be delegated to employees; you cannot rely on their sense of responsibility to manage the risks. The further up you are in the organization, the more important it is for you to be responsible and held accountable to ensure the genie stays in the bottle and risk is well managed.

There is another part of managerial leadership, and that is the practices managers need to exercise as they lead their people. Ironically, these are not new but are the foundation of good managerial leadership practices, and they include:

- Planning the work of your team and its interrelationship with AI
- Building the team by establishing the expectations of how they are to work with each other and the use of AI
- Providing context to the team on why the AI is necessary for the work
- Defining the priorities of work
- Delegating the work by defining the end state of the quantity, quality, time it needs to be completed by and resources, including AI, they have to achieve their tasks
- Adjusting the work as circumstances change
- Monitoring how the work is being completed to ensure diligence and discernment
- Coaching the employees to help them through their tasks and the use of AI
- Assessing how effective your employees are in fulfilling their work
- Practicing continuous improvement

As you can see from the above, this is the same list that managers have always needed to do, because it focuses on the leadership side. Managerial Leaders need to continue to lead the people in the face of this new resource.

Hopefully, this has given you food for thought and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the topic.

Have a great first weekend of spring.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Art of Planning

27 March, 2026

For this week's missive, I have come back to the topic of planning. My rationale for returning to it is that it has come up several times during the week, and I think it may be worthwhile to explore planning in the context of both individuals and teams.

A few weeks ago, I pointed out that the military raised me to be a perennial planner. The military is replete with frameworks and processes for planning, and I won't bore you with them here. Suffice it to say that the essence of what I learned about planning was that it is all about conceptualizing, looking before you leap, and imagining what needs to be achieved.

Plans create a series of interconnected events to achieve an end-state goal. Then, it is about imagining how you will achieve that goal.

In my experience, planning doesn't happen nearly as often as it needs to in organizations. I believe there are many reasons for this:

1. The Tyranny of Do – we are programmed to just act rather than think. In fact, we are encouraged to just "do it."
2. We don't have time to plan – there is a constant feeling of needing to catch up
3. We don't value planning – we value action and figuring out the implications later
4. We don't know how to plan – we haven't been taught how to do it
5. We are not held accountable for planning – our managers don't hold us accountable for planning for all the reasons listed above.

I have written a lot about *The Tyranny of Do* and how it impacts so much of our workday and the quality of our work. It is often touted in organizations as being "practical" and "action-oriented", thereby encouraging a lack of planning.

When our deadlines are too close, we often have no time to plan. Ironically, this is often an indicator of a lack of planning further up. Even when something unusual occurs, contingencies can be built into planning for obstacles that we cannot define, but can anticipate. As an axiom in organizational planning, I recommend the *one-third, two-thirds* rule. Of the time to your deadline, you allocate one-third to planning for yourself, leaving two-thirds for your direct reports to plan. In the army, we beat this into leaders because, if you take too long with your plan, you immediately hamper success by forcing those under you to race to catch up.

When we personally don't value planning we impinge on those beneath us. As above, it can be because of the Tyranny of Do, but we have to feel a *responsibility* to plan. It is part of our job. If you are a manager, you are accountable for the output and working behaviours of your direct reports, and planning is core to this accountability. Its partner in achieving your accountability is, of course, delegating work. However, you can't delegate work if you haven't planned it.

Ironically, I have been surprised by the number of organizations where individuals simply don't know *how* to plan. They don't understand the mechanics of planning or have a process to do it. An example I

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see frequently is how far down one needs to plan. Another common axiom is that you plan two levels down and delegate one level down. By doing this, you get a sense of how achievable your plan is and of the resources required. After all, the key governors on your plan are time and resources.

Beyond individuals not knowing how to plan, what is even more alarming is that organizations don't have a *process* to do planning. Leaders tell people what to do and then leave them to it. In an organization, you need to take the time to hear all the plans and see how they interrelate to manage time and resources and safeguard your plan by reducing silos.

Finally, as you can expect from me, the real cause of the lack of planning is that management doesn't hold their leaders accountable for planning. All the reasons for not planning disappear if managers hold their leaders accountable. Should their people not have the skills, it is the manager's accountability to ensure they get the necessary skills and knowledge. It is about the manager's accountability to build a team of increasingly capable team members. But it doesn't stop there, *their* managers need to hold them to account to ensure the planning is occurring. This needs to cascade through the entire organization chart.

Hopefully, this has given you some insights and encouraged you to look at the planning process in your own teams.

Cheers,
Julian

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Meetings Are Out of Control

10 April, 2026

Welcome back to Managing the Maelstrom. This week, I am covering a topic that comes up a lot these days: meetings.

A client conversation this week brought back into focus that meetings are out of control.

Just before COVID, we saw an uptick in requests for meeting training. It was unusual, and at the time, it felt as if bygone lessons in meetings had been lost or forgotten, or as if a new generation had arrived. The training covered the usual topics:

- Who should attend the meetings?
- Agenda development
- Meeting processes
- Facilitation of meetings
- Meeting follow-up
- General tips and tricks for effective meetings

While these fundamentals remain relevant, concerns about meetings being out of control persist. The problem is that meetings are all pervasive.

Here are some of observations around meetings:

1. Everyone, including managers and their direct reports, is in the same meetings.
2. Meetings feel endless as people move from one to another all day.
3. Agendas are unclear, so meetings become mere status updates and miss real problem-solving.
4. Meetings have expanded into the online space. Often, people do not have cameras on, which suggests that attendees are multitasking and working on other things.
5. Meetings often start late and end abruptly.
6. Group meetings have replaced one-on-one manager-direct report meetings. As well, they have become the only time managers engage with direct reports, making them the sole source of data for assessing performance.

This list is not my list; it comes from discussions with clients who are caught on this never-ending gerbil wheel of “meetings, bloody meetings,” to quote John Cleese.

I think a lot of the current issues with meetings harken back to the COVID days. Meetings were our sole way to show how we add value when working from home. From a management perspective, there was also a practical need to check in on those who were not in the physical office.

We have not recalibrated since COVID. Furthermore, there are some other causes for the proliferation of meetings. As I usually opine, one of the causes of too many meetings is a lack of clarity about accountability and roles. We have seen time and again that the default is to bring as many people as possible together to gain different perspectives and make decisions. However, many meetings are not

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about decisions; they become a comfortable way to engage with others. Accountability clarifies who has decision-making rights and who should have the authority to obtain others' input.

Similar to accountability is a lack of understanding of what my work is and what others' work is. A classic example is when you have multiple levels in a meeting. Forgetting the cost of having multiple managers and their direct reports in a meeting, there is the question of why. If I am the manager and choose to be in the meeting, do I not trust my people? If I am an employee and I disagree with my boss, how do I handle it?

In our experience, employees like attending these meetings to get the ground truth, maybe play a role in decisions, and feel valued. Or as my client reiterated, it is FOMO: the fear of missing out.

What is the downside to this, aside from the added cost? It means the manager doesn't set context or provide their own insight. They aren't fulfilling their accountabilities.

Many managers use the excuse that they want to develop their team to the next level. While this has merits, is it their work, then? If they need to be there and just listen, then how are they adding value? This is not to say it is bad, but it needs to be used sparingly.

Ironically, all these issues point to a larger problem: managers lack time—time to plan, to develop direct reports, and to set context and delegate. The real irony is that our calendars are so full of meetings that we cannot make time for these essential tasks.

If this resonated, please reach out—I'd love your perspective. A final reminder: "When I invite you to my meeting, I'm asking you to stop doing your work and start doing mine."

Enjoy your weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Concept of Ownership

17 April, 2026

This week's managing the maelstrom is about a word I hear used a lot in business. It becomes a rallying cry to describe the culture and its meaning, I feel, is very confused. The word is **ownership**.

I hear the term being bandied about all the time. "*I own this piece of work*" or "*you own that*" are typical phrases that we hear all the time. This is particularly the case when the discussions are about role clarity or who is accountable for what. Often, I feel the term is used instinctively to describe what people feel when discussing accountability.

The problem is that we don't all share the same definition or belief about the term "ownership".

To start, my mentor and friend Herb Koplowitz, an expert in organizational psychology, would say rationally there can be no such thing as ownership in traditional managerial hierarchies unless the employees have either been bequeathed shares or have paid into the business. We call this **genuine ownership** – when you actually own a piece of the business.

When we hear the term the way it's commonly used, what we are referring to is actually a feeling of ownership. I sense that when managers (and I include all levels of management here) say they want people to “own” something they mean:

- I want you to feel invested in the success of a piece of work.
- I want you to think of it as your own.
- If it goes wrong, I want you to feel the sting of failure, and if it goes right, the highs of success.
- I want you to work as hard as I do.
- I want you to feel a part of the work.
- I want you to get it off my plate.
- I want your full engagement and excitement.
- I want better output and more effort.
- I was you to expend resources as frugally as if they were your own.
- I want you to be committed to completing the work.

This list is not exhaustive; there are no doubt other expectations when someone says "ownership". We can refer to this as **performative ownership**. Performative ownership is really a psychological feeling of ownership; as such, it is a sense of responsibility rather than accountability.

While the desire to engage employees emotionally is valuable and important, it needs to be tempered with the direction and clarity that come from accountability. If I misconstrue my performative ownership as genuine ownership, I can end up not engaging with others and controlling what I "own".

The impact ranges from the proliferation of silos at one end to mistrust and the breakdown of the organization at the other. If I feel genuine ownership, I may go to extremes and do it my way, with no reference to the organization's actual strategy. These examples may seem far-fetched, but they are the essence of an organization driven solely by people's sense of responsibility.

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Whereas, to be effective, an organization needs accountability first. As a reminder, accountability is the objective definition of expectations from a manager to a direct report, and then the process of holding those direct reports accountable for what they are accountable for.

Organizations cannot solely rely on people's sense of ownership. It is a dangerous path. They need clarity of accountability first and foremost. With accountability comes the need for commensurate authority. The process of defining authority is critical to ensuring that accountability is fair and that no one exercises authority not officially bestowed upon them.

Ownership can also be used to describe how you expect them to behave in fulfilling their accountability, but it can't just be telling people to be owners.

I believe the proliferation of the term “ownership” in organizational dynamics is down to three main causes:

- It's easy just to toss it off, say it, and then forget about it.
- Out of context, it is a buzzword that people have heard and feel it represents clarity in itself.
- We believe everyone thinks just like us and sees it the same way we do.

All three of these are indicative of another problem: abrogating our accountability as leaders. Our job is to define the work and the expectations for our people. If we are merely relying on a loose term like “ownership”, we are not fulfilling our role, and, in turn, our own boss is not holding us accountable to be good managers.

I hope this has given you food for thought. At the very least, ownership is not synonymous with accountability.

Enjoy your weekend.
Cheers,
Julian

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Enabling Productivity

24 April, 2026

Productivity is a topic that arises frequently in contemporary discourse. It is discussed by economists, the media, and corporate executives, making it a pervasive subject.

Recently, I had the opportunity to hear the Minister of Finance address productivity. His perspective on it differed significantly from the concerns I typically encounter with clients.

To begin, it is important to define “productivity”. Through my research, I found that productivity is commonly measured in several ways but the definition that resonates with me is the *efficiency with which goods or services are produced*.

So, when a Minister of Finance says we have a productivity problem in the country, they mean we are expending more resources than necessary to achieve a result. Their lens is the macro level. Conversely, an executive team approaches it from a micro level. The commonality is that if we are cumulatively unproductive at the micro level, we will, in turn, be unproductive at the macro level.

The examples the Minister of Finance used were kilometres of red tape that governments impose on organizations. While I agree with these, they rest in our sphere of concern, not necessarily our sphere of influence, and certainly not our sphere of control. (unless you happen to work in government). So how do we deal with productivity in our spheres of control? Our sphere of control being where we are accountable and have the commensurate authority to control it.

When considering our sphere, it is important to explore the causes of the lack of productivity. The following list is not exhaustive and reflects the micro level:

- **Excessive meetings**: Organizations often schedule too many meetings, many of which fail to deliver tangible results.
- **Insufficient planning**: Without adequate forethought, tasks often require rework, resulting in wasted energy and resources.
- **Lack of context**: When employees do not understand the purpose behind their tasks, they are less able to perform effectively, which can lead to additional rework.
- **Overextension**: A lack of clear priorities often leads to attempting too many tasks simultaneously, resulting in suboptimal outcomes and the need for rework.
- **Excessive communication**: Employees are inundated with emails, messages, and notifications across multiple platforms. This volume of communication results in information overload and wasted time, which reduces clarity and effectiveness.
- **Lack of clarity**: uncertainty regarding roles, accountability, and who is supposed to help with work; what control do they have over others' work, and what control do others have over them. Fundamentally, when we are unclear, it slows our processes, and we waste time and energy.

The list above is what the average employee has to deal with every day. Add to this the lack of continuous improvement where we tend to do things the same old way all the time. As I discussed with a client this week, if we add new work to employees and they continue doing the existing work the same way, that new work will likely require additional resources.

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The lack of continuous improvement in organizations frequently reduces the ability to eliminate outdated tasks, leading to busywork that may not add value. The Japanese concept of *kaizen* emphasizes ongoing improvement. Without adopting such practices, organizations risk expending additional resources to complete tasks, further reducing productivity.

At its core, lack of productivity is not an employee's issue, but that of management. What we see all the time is that managerial leaders don't understand their role in ensuring an organization's productivity. Management is accountable for ensuring that work is done efficiently with the fewest possible resources.

In both macro and micro productivity challenges, leadership is often the underlying cause, whether due to bureaucratic obstacles or the failure to implement continuous improvement.

Hopefully, this has given you food for thought on a topic that is plastered all over the media. To get to productivity, start by taking the first steps to ensure time and resources aren't wasted. When we waste resources, we waste money. When we waste time, we waste people’s lives.

Enjoy your weekend.
Cheers,
Julian

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The Importance of Team One and Team Two

1 May, 2026

Every week, as I try to plan out what to write about, I tend to rely on topics that have come up in recent conversations with clients. They are frequently common challenges. As you can imagine, after 6 years of writing these, there is a lot of overlap in topics. This week is no exception.

I am returning to the team dynamics of what we refer to as "**Team One and Team Two**". An understanding of the dynamics of these two teams is important when challenges arise in what we think should be harmonious relationships within teams.

To start, all managers live in two teams: Team One is the team you are a member of. This is *your manager's* team. Team Two, on the other hand, is the team *you* lead.

The numbering is not accidental. Team One *has* to be your first priority; Team Two is secondary. As is often said, **you have to be a follower first before you are a leader**. I would ask you to let this sink in for a moment because this dynamic is not well understood. In fact, it leads to all sorts of dysfunction when these are reversed.

Therefore, we recommend **Lateral Integration before Vertical Execution (LIVE)**. Team One must be laterally integrated, meaning you are clear on roles, interrelationships, and behavioural expectations, before Team Two begins executing their work under your leadership.

One client said to my business partner Tony Welsh, "*I always believed when I went into my boss's meeting that my job was to fight for my team first. Then see how I could fit into my boss's and peers plans from there.*"

Far too often, leaders put all their effort into Team Two. Here are some of the hallmarks of putting support behind Team Two before aligning with Team One:

- Silos
- Outright aggression and acrimony
- Differing standards and expectations of behaviour between teams and departments
- Rework, double work or work falling through the cracks
- Conflicting priorities
- Productivity suffering as we either wait things out or fight things out (fight or flight)
- Decisions framed as "what they're making me do" vs "what was agreed upon as a leadership group"

Interestingly, Executive Teams often don't understand the dynamic at play. In their world, their Team One is led by the CEO or the President. Naturally, Team Two will follow. But, that is where the chain falters. They don't have visibility into the tension the model creates either. Time and again, Executive teams fail to understand that tension which exists. Like an elastic band, when the tension is stretched too far, the band snaps, and we drift. That tension is made worse if the managers don't hold *their* people accountable for changing their perspective. This is a natural gravitational pull from Team Two, which is further down in the organization.

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I have found that the gravitational pull is very strong. Consider this scenario:

We are working with another team. They have a different perspective or priorities than we do. I try to tell my team that this is the direction we are going. They disagree; their perspective is different, our priorities are different. It comes down to a conversation with my peer. Suddenly, we become an advocate for our team. We have lost the thread of our role in Team One; instead, we are advocates for Team Two because, after all, "that is my team".

These scenarios play out every day in organizations. Sometimes they lead to acrimony, tension, and definitely silos. At its root, we choose Team Two over Team One. The problem is that the organization cannot deliver its strategy, and productivity declines as we spend all our time in tension.

The foundation of the solution is understanding our role; again, we need to be followers before we can be leaders. However, we cannot expect to change our behaviour just based on "say so". We cannot rely on our management to feel responsible for laterally integrating. Instead, we must be *held accountable* to integrate laterally. To do that, we need the following from our Team One leader:

- Clarity of context - why we are doing the work
- Clarity of roles – what is our work
- Clarity of interrelationship – how are we supposed to work together
- Clarity of expectation – how we are supposed to behave.

Lateral Integration in Team One is the manager's accountability. Understanding that it takes precedence over Team Two is ours.

Prioritizing Team One does not mean neglecting or devaluing Team Two. In fact, the opposite is true. When Team One is aligned, Team Two experiences clearer direction, fewer reversals, and less emotional whiplash. Loyalty to Team Two is best expressed through ensuring alignment with above, not protection and dissention below.

Hopefully, this gives food for thought on what we see as a key dysfunction in teams.

Happy May Day, enjoy your weekend.
Cheers,
Julian

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Where We Make Decisions

8 May, 2026

This week, I am coming full circle back to **decision-making**. In many Managing the Maelstroms, I have tackled decision-making as an ongoing issue. In the past, I have covered:

- The importance of having a framework for decisions
- How to actually make a decision
- The role of risk in decision making
- Why we don't make decisions

However, for this week, I want to explore ***where*** we make decisions. In other words, at what level are decisions made? The reason for this is that I always hear senior leaders complain: "*all the decisions come up to me – no one is willing to make decisions*."

While this sentiment may have some truth to it, it is never just one cause and effect, and we have to train ourselves to look at things holistically.

The idea that decisions keep getting pushed up is not new, and when they do get pushed up, they have the following impacts:

1. Disengagement from employees
2. Busy work from those who aren't making decisions
3. A lack of productivity, which is another way to see number 2
4. The creation of checks and balances or bureaucracy to control the processes of decisions
5. Overwhelmed senior leadership
6. Decisions that are out of alignment with the reality of what is really happening
7. Endless meetings
8. The creation of committees and subcommittees

Sometimes the decision is made higher up to control risk. While this sounds rational, it's really just another way of saying "*we don't trust our employees to make the decision, and their choices will be too risky*". In this case, it is an act of commission that they are choosing not to let them make a decision.

When managers make this choice, they disconnect employees from the work and reinforce that they can't make the decision. When managers choose not to let employees exercise free thought, they are, in effect, renting only their hands, not their minds.

There is a sidebar to this act of commission: managers often think, "*they will likely make a different decision than I would, so it is best not to let them do it*". As absurd as this may seem, it is, in fact, the case. After all, everyone thinks differently, and once again, can we risk a different outcome?

However, the majority of cases in which decision-making bubbles up to the top involve an act of omission.

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We don't spend the time to clarify which roles have the authority to make decisions. We are often good at defining how much money an employee can decide to spend, but that is as far as it goes. But even in these cases, we will ensure a very detailed business case is in place to support the decision.

In our work, we emphasize the need to enable decision-making at the lowest levels. Decision-making at the lowest levels enables a number of things:

- A view of reality from the level that sees the impact.
- Not having to revise and change because we don't have the common operating picture.
- Engagement of the team and employees in the work, where they go out of their way to ensure it works.

My experience with lower-level decisions goes back to my army days, when I learned the essence of "**Auftragstaktik**".

Auftragstaktik is a method stressing decentralized initiative within an overall strategic framework. It is a German army term that arguably dates back to the 1600's. It is the foundation of what business would later call "empowerment," but it is a mindset in which we devolve decisions to those at the coalface. Today, it has evolved into "mission command" throughout NATO and is characterized by the leader:

- Setting full context on the objective
- Establishing the broad objective
- Defining the guardrails for operating
- Ensuring the resources are available

Critical to its success, however, is that the leader knows the capabilities of those they are leading, which tempers the amount of freedom of movement they have. Even more importantly, accountability needs to be exercised; it isn't a fire-and-forget. The leader needs to monitor progress, and the direct report needs to report results as they progress. In this way, the military can delegate decision-making to the lowest possible level.

To do this, we need to ask ourselves: *do I have the right people on the bus? If not, what is my decision? If I do, then how will I empower them to use their intellect?*

Because, after all, in the battle over intellect with AI, the last bastion is our human ability to make decisions.

Hopefully, this was food for thought. Please reach out with any questions or comments.

Cheers,
Julian

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Bringing About Organizational Change

15 May, 2026

Our clients face a growing challenge: **bringing about organizational change**. It is now more than ever because organizations are trying to be "innovative", bringing new things into the organization, which is, in effect, "nova into": "the new into" to make things better and to grow.

When they decide they need to bring about change, however, they run into a very human dynamic that is often *resistance* to the change. When this happens, there is the thought that the resistance is a sign of change resistance or reluctance, and they immediately assume the worst of their employees.

The intent in this week's missive is first to explore the dynamics of change, then outline a framework to understand and address resistance, and, finally, offer practical steps to counter it.

Over the years of writing these, I have referred to the notion of "anaklesis". Anaklesis is a very human desire to lean on what is familiar to us. We rely on leaning on our beliefs, experiences, and opinions. When something new comes along, because it is unfamiliar to us, our anaklesis kicks in, and we try to get back to what we know, believe, or have done before.

In our model, our reticence to change progresses through a series of steps, which we call **ABRUPT**, because change is abrupt to us. Here are its constituent parts:

- **Avoidance** – we avoid it initially because we either didn't see it coming, or don't want to, so we just ignore it.
- **Betrayal** – we feel that the change has taken us away from our current trajectory, and so the organization has betrayed us. We feel the change is being forced on us.
- **Resistance** – we resist it because we don't think it will work; we naturally feel the old way is better
- **Uncertainty** -we see potential value but aren't sure how this will work
- **Practice** – we start dealing with this, we may try things, but like learning to ride a bike, we fall off and then might give up
- **Take On** – we are onside with the change, actively engaged, and living the new approach.

When we initiate change as leaders, we assume people will naturally jump to Taking It On. But, if we fail to recognize that it is a process, we can be very disappointed when the change doesn't happen and we conclude our people are just change resistant.

In our experience, this plays out all the time in organizations because we underestimate the power of anaklesis on our planned changes. Enter now the role of the Managerial Leader.

A key accountability of management is to create change and be the change agents of the organization. If managers don't drive it, the organization will be locked into doing the same old things the same old ways as the world around us changes. Employees cannot be expected to just naturally change out of their personal sense of obligation. Some will, but many will not.

Managerial leaders need to understand the impact of anaklesis and that their employees will naturally move through the ABRUPT model, but the movement will not naturally progress linearly from Avoidance

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to Taking it On. It is the job of managerial leaders to lead their people through the change and to adapt their approach to recognize the very natural tension that the change creates for their people.

When people resist change, it is not necessarily that they do not want it. It is likely instead that they do not understand it, the impact feels too great, or they don't trust it.

Our job, therefore, is to explore the change. In short, we need to:

- Explain the context of the change,
- Show how the change will improve things,
- Use empathy and understand their feelings,
- Moderate and roll-out the change appropriately, with adequate time for implementation and understanding, and,
- Most importantly, always be connecting with and communicating with them to help them move through avoidance, betrayal, and resistance to the stage to where they practice the change and take it on.

By doing this, we shift from pushing the change onto our people, to getting their buy-in and working it through with them.

So, as you bring about change, it is important to slow down and consider the impacts on your people. Some might go straight to Take On, but most will not, and it is our job to connect and communicate with them to bring the change that is needed.

As you lead change, pause and ask yourself: *Where are my people in ABRUPT and am I leading them accordingly?* Change does not fail because people resist it; it fails when we misread where they are in the process.

Hopefully, these ideas provide meaningful insights as you lead change in your organization. I encourage you to reflect on these approaches, and please reach out with any questions or comments—together, we can navigate change effectively.

Have a great long weekend,
Cheers,
Julian

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Change & Anaklesis

22 May, 2026

Last week, I wrote about the inevitability of change and how we, as human beings, respond to it. It was primarily to establish the role of managerial leadership in leading and managing change.

However, what we quickly learn is that there is a much more primal reaction to change before we can talk about approaching it rationally via managerial leadership. Change creates a deviation from our course and that often results in discomfort that can often get the better of us. Change challenges the feeling and the comfort we afford racehorses with blinders on, racing forward on a track already set. This comfort with the status quo can keep us in stasis, where we do not dare to take a different direction.

Last week, I again brought up the term anaklesis, which is the need to lean on our beliefs, experiences, and opinions. That is the natural human force which tries to reject the new and bring us back to the comfort of our old ways.

This is the powerful yet often unseen force in organizations that gets in the way of creating important and essential changes that are necessary to our survival. After all, living creatures need to adapt and change to their environment, or they are consumed by it.

At the strategic level, we have seen what feels like accelerated change, and that is not going away.

This weekly missive was sparked by the arrival of a massive change in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, which thoroughly disrupted our world. As we adjusted to that change of working from home and other business practises that became our normal, that became the next anaklesis because many liked working from home and did not wish to return to the office. The common denominator in both scenarios was that anaklesis; that very natural and human reaction to change.

Now you may have a very different narrative and attitudes toward these events because we all have our own anaklesis. We lean on our individual beliefs so you may not accept this framework. Regardless, I hope you can see the reality of change and how we settle into it.

My thesis is that we are continually undergoing change. We are desperately hoping to get back to our old ways. For me, this was made plain and clear when a former client tossed me the realization, saying, “Stop pretending it’s 2014.” Our world has seen massive change, and we long to return to the old way – what we relied on.

Since 2014, we have seen massive changes in our world. For example, the most recent and perhaps most impactful, and one many have fought back against through full anaklesis, is the impact of Artificial Intelligence on our society and, at the operational level, our businesses. To make it even more confounding, it won’t be a single change but rather a series of changes. It isn’t an event but a cluster that is only just gaining energy.

So how do we deal with it at the tactical level?

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First and foremost, it is about embracing change and not fighting it. Human nature dictates that many of us will ignore it, we will hide from it, rail against it, but ultimately we must embrace it and determine how we will control it.

Control comes from being out in front of it, and we get there by changing our thinking. Here is how you do that:

1. **Look at it differently.** How else might I see this change? How might this be good? How might being in stasis and the same old way be bad?
2. **Explore it.** What are the paradoxes that might make this a good thing?
3. **Challenge yourself.** Are you sure the changes are bad? Can you challenge it before it changes you? How do you get out in front of it?
4. **Live it.** How else could we do it? What might be the ways?

When you get to number 4, you have started to take the change on, and you are now more in control. That is another essential human element. Control is essential to deal with change; with control, the change isn't being done *to* us but with our empowered direction.

You may say, rightly, that there are some people who readily accept the AI change and, in fact, eagerly embrace it, seemingly immune to that change aversion. I suggest that they, too, approach(ed) it using the above framework, but perhaps move(d) through it with more speed and alacrity toward adoption.

While I have attempted to reinforce the inevitability of change and provide you with some tools to address it, the truly critical part is to recognise that our world is continuously changing and that to be successful, we need to think about it differently.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Essential Link of Structure & Strategy

29 May, 2026

As always, these missives reflect my work and experiences of the week. For this week's Managing the Maelstrom, I am broaching a topic about which many people have opinions, but very few have a real framework. This week is all about **structure**.

For many, structure and design are about financial structuring to make money or optimize tax implications, but this barely scratches the surface of its importance.

An organization's structure is a manifestation of its Strategy: what it wants to be and what it wants to deliver. It is in that structure that employees work to deliver the Strategy. As a result, the structure and organizational design need to be rooted in both the Strategy and the people who will work in it.

As it relates to the Strategy, a structure needs to reflect how the business will deliver it. This means defining the spine of the organization. The spine supports the Strategy and is the core function that drives success. Other functions support the spine to enable the execution of the Strategy. As Nick Forrest used to say, it is about getting the wood behind the arrowhead.

Strategy is created by making choices, and some options must be rejected. Regardless, many organizations want to have it all. Consider the organization that wants to both grow and achieve operational excellence simultaneously. Both of these values cannot be equal; otherwise, the employees implementing the Strategy will be confused about the priority. Strategy is about choosing priorities and making judgement calls. The Strategy defines the interrelationships among functions and the levels required for the structure. The point is that clarity of Strategy is crucial.

Structure must come from Strategy, but far too often we see it the other way around. A structure-driven strategy is characterized by building the organization around people rather than the Strategy. It is often based solely on employees' capabilities. This often happens in start-ups, but there comes a point where the Strategy has to define it. Defining the roles first and then filling them rather than the other way around is essential.

Another aspect of design we see is following what someone else did. "*This worked in my old company where we…*" is an example of this approach. The problem is that a structure defined by Strategy makes that organization unique – you cannot rely on some formula developed because it worked somewhere else that had a different strategy and culture.

Often, organizational design is based on guesswork. In my 20+ years defining structures for organizations, I have learned two things: first, no two organizations are the same, and second, there are design principles that must be followed in structuring. Just as a bridge builder must account for gravity, some rules are essential for success. This is why gut instinct, intuition, or following the flock doesn't work.

The most important principle is that the structure must reflect human beings working within it. Until we replace them with robots, the core principle is that designing so people can work at their best is essential.

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What I find shocking is that leaders don't consider this principle. Instead, they make random assumptions about how to structure their organization. The results of not considering the nature of human beings in the structure are:

- Silos
- Lack of trust
- Acrimony between people and functions

Ultimately, it leads to ineffectiveness, inefficiency and a lack of productivity. Furthermore, poor structure has a huge influence on your culture.

I have been broad in my definition of the core principle because the details would be a missive in their own right. Instead, my advice this week is to pause and carefully consider how you structure work and the interrelationships of your people. Careful consideration and taking the time to get it right pays off in the long run.

Structuring work is a critical role of leaders. To be effective, the structure needs to be based on the principles that enable the human side of the work to be done. At its core, it requires knowing what will enable those people to be successful.

Once again, feel free to reach out with any additional details you need.

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Effective Intelligence & Thinking

5 June, 2026

This week, a client asked me what the strategic driver of Forrest & Company's Strategy was. My response was that our Strategy is driven by our technology/knowledge of human thinking; at the core of that know-how is Effective Intelligence™ (EI).

The reason I am talking about this is that I just returned from the funeral of my mentor, friend, and the founder of Effective Intelligence; Jerry Rhodes.

Jerry set out to build a system to enable creativity with the Philips corporation. In so doing, he created a common language for thinking as well as ways and means to enable people to think through problems and to understand their own approach to thinking.

For us and our clients, a common language is what lets people work well together. As Jerry would say, "*words are analogies for thoughts*." The trouble is, we often use the same word to mean different things. Take *strategy*: for some it's high-level planning; for others it's envisioning the broader sense of where the business is headed. A shared way of describing how we think is essential.

An example from this week: I used the language of EI in an awkward situation and clarified that I was exploring the issue without judging what someone said – thereby defusing a difficult situation and a potential personal challenge. Last week a client found the same approach useful for pinning down the kind of thinking a meeting needed before setting its agenda. As we often say, the workplace is full of languages - for marketing, for mathematics, for engineering, but we don't have a common language for thinking.

What Jerry taught me that has had a profound effect on our work with clients is *how* to think, not *what* to think. People make decisions all day long but have no framework for how they do it. This means two things: we may lack confidence in our decisions and, when we can't describe how we made a decision, others lack confidence in those decisions. So, beyond the language, we need processes to work through: planning, selling, creativity, problem solving, decision making and strategy. These processes quality assure our thinking and, more importantly, improves efficiency, effectiveness, trust, and productivity. Jerry called these processes EI Maps.

As society leans more on Artificial Intelligence to do our thinking for us, the human skill that matters most shifts from *having* an answer to *judging* one; knowing how a conclusion was reached, whether it holds, and where our own thinking must take over. That makes a framework for thinking more valuable now, not less. The clearer we are about how we think, the better we can tell strong machine output from weak, and the more confidently we can stand behind what we decide.

My introduction to Effective Intelligence happened in 1996, and I have used it ever since. At that time, my introduction came through the tool Jerry built, the Rhodes Thinking-Intentions Profile, or TIP for short. TIP introduced me to an understanding of my own thinking preferences, which govern how I approach problem-solving and issue analysis. Over the years we've come to understand how individual thinking works, and through the Maps we've shown people how to think more inclusively. The TIP has proven to be a tremendous tool for helping teams understand one another's thinking and value its

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diversity. We have profiled thousands of leaders across many sectors, and that understanding has helped businesses work more efficiently and effectively.

Jerry's work continues through his wife, Sue, and the Effective Intelligence Trust in the UK. It remains a core offering for us at Forrest & Company. As I have said in these missives before, thinking is the undiscovered country. It is an area that few have explored, but it is the core of our identity as humans and of our success in our endeavours.

Jerry taught me a lot; I spent days and weeks with him at his home in the Cotswolds, learning about thinking. Ever patient with me, he imparted a gift I never could have imagined 30 years ago when I first started down this path. This weekend would have been his 96th birthday, and in that time he brought a unique perspective to business and society. EI will continue to be a foundation for Forrest & Company for the years to come because thinking is the foundation for all human endeavours.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Need for Clarity

12 June, 2026

The essence of this week's missive is that organizational execution is driven by clarity. Whether it is execution or productivity, clarity comes first.

For an organization to execute, there needs to be clarity, the first level being clarity of the Strategy. The next level comes from clarity about roles in execution, and the third level comes from clarity about expectations.

When there isn't clarity, stasis occurs, stalling our ability to execute and, in turn, halting our productivity. It means that our people are unable to get on with it because they are unsure. When people are unsure, they pause and time and energy are wasted.

I have seen many cases where leaders wonder why employees aren't getting on with it or why they aren't stepping up and asking when they are unsure. Of course, there will be some who feel comfortable with asking for clarification but, in my experience, there is a natural human inclination to not ask because, they feel that if they ask they might be:

- Disappointing the Manager or Organization – e.g. Letting the side down
- Showing uncertainty or being embarrassed – e.g. *maybe I should know this* or *I don't want to show my boss that I don't know.*
- Diminishing respect or confidence – e.g. *somehow my boss will think less of me if I ask.*

I have seen these play out in all sorts of industries, because they are all very human reactions.

By positioning it as leaving it up to employees to ask or speak up, we, as leaders, are really abrogating our roles. The managerial leader is the only one who has the full context on the strategy, and it is their role and accountability to provide it and ensure they pass it on to their people. Given the natural human thought processes above, we cannot rely on people's sense of responsibility (personal obligation) to step up, ask, and potentially expose themselves. We, as leaders, need to take the time to provide clarity before they get to that need.

Clarity of the Strategy means that employees need to understand what we are trying to achieve as an organization. It needs to be tempered to the level at which we work but should clarify the following:

- The organization's vision
- Its mission
- Its purpose
- What is the focus of our energy and what drives our business
- What makes us unique and what needs protecting
- How we go to business
- What we value in behaviours
- What are our objectives and goals?

Often, the Strategy is a placemat or a wall chart that leaders never bring to life. The executives go to define the Strategy and, once done, the box is checked and they never refer to it again. The job of

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leaders is to bring it to life and show how employees' work relates to the Strategy. This is because, as employees, they all exist within the organization to deliver the Strategy.

Once we are clear on the Strategy, logically we need clarity on our work.

- What is our role in delivering the Strategy?
- What are we actually accountable to deliver?
- How is our work distinct from others' work and, equally important, what is our authority for decisions?
- Also, what impact does our role have on others, and vice versa?

With clarity on these, we can get on with the work at hand. We cannot assume people know their necessary work naturally; without clarity, employees are left to their own devices, and the result of their efforts will likely not be what we are truly looking for.

The final level of clarity is that of expectation of behaviour, outlining how we are supposed to work together and what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. If we are not clear on these things, we are relying on people to just innately do the right thing. Only if they are clones can we expect people to all behave the same way. However, we don't have clones working for us; everyone is different. We will deliver our work differently and interact with each other differently. So, clarity of expectation is critical. The best example of this is safety: we all have different safety and risk tolerances, so it is up to our leaders to define the expectation.

But it doesn't stop at clarity; it also requires the exercise of accountability. Managers hold people accountable and ensure compliance with guidelines.

I have emphasized the leadership's role in providing clarity and holding people accountable. Ironically, when we ask why people aren't doing this, the answer is that they don't have the time. My response to this is simple: if you don't have the time to do this, then what really is your work?

The profession of managerial leadership is all about providing clarity and exercising accountability; that is the real work. Anything else is us being technocrats who don't fully understand our critical role in execution and productivity.

I have tried to condense this critical aspect of our role, and I relish the opportunity to discuss with you and explore contrarian views, so feel free to step up.

Cheers,
Julian

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Thoughtful Summer Planning

19 June, 2026

So it is summer now, and what does that mean for many organizations? Typically, it brings a burst of activity as teams work to resolve issues before July holidays begin. Then, almost inevitably, momentum slows. Work stalls, and organizations often find themselves caught off guard as progress dwindles.

The summer season is often an opportunity to slow down as everyone prepares for vacation. But often what happens is the slowdown turns into a full pause and stalls momentum. The preparation efforts before July hit a wall, and everyone picks up again in September.

This isn't just an issue we have witnessed; I hear about it all too often when September comes around, and organizations realize they have lost initiative. September, then, becomes a restart, with momentum lost not just from a slow July and August, but from the reorientation period in September itself.

Not to suggest that people don't need a break, far from it. Everyone, and particularly leaders, needs an opportunity to recharge. Without that recharge, there isn't the energy to move fast and decisively when September comes. When we allow things to lie fallow in the summer, it means that, come the Fall, we have to drive harder to finish off the year.

For this week's short missive, I am not suggesting driving harder through the summer, but rather thoughtful planning about what can get done during the summer months. In this way, when September does arrive, the momentum can pick up where it was left off, but key work is planned and done with intention rather than as an afterthought and September's work becomes a continuation or ramp up, rather than a full restart.

As you consider the prospect of summer holidays, consider these:

- What key initiatives need to be pushed forward over the summer and how do you do that with minimal staffing?
- What tasks can get done by individuals when they are at work?
- What teamwork can be done incrementally over the summer months within the confines of people's holidays?
- What lower level projects can be knocked off by smaller groups and teams?
- What can be planned now for immediate deployment so that there isn't a quiet reorientation period once fall arrives?
- What of your own tasks can be knocked off to give you freedom come September?

I am sure you have thought of these, but it is a matter of doing planning for the natural slowdown, as opposed to allowing it to creep up and catch you in September when you review summer productivity and continue planning.

To be clear, this is not advocating for acting like a taskmaster and driving people when they should be recuperating, but it is about balance, and with that, planning for what happens in the summer may allow you to finish off the year without having to drive overly hard in the remaining months.

Have a great weekend.

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Cheers,
Julian

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The Human Element in AI

26 June, 2026

Everywhere we turn today, discussions about Artificial Intelligence abound. Whether in the media or in business conversations, the topic is ever-present.

Over the last 6 months, we have worked with clients to understand the ramifications of AI. It has become clear to me during this time that the core discussion is not really about the technology of AI, but about the human thinking that goes into it. In effect, there is no “easy button” to push. Right now, we need our best thinking and, while AI can do it for us, it will still require human thought. Human thinking remains fundamentally human accountability, even when supported by AI.

At Forrest, we use a model to help clients understand the important human element in the machine. The 4D AI Fluency Framework, developed by Professors Rick Dakan and Joseph Feller, offers a practical lens for working with AI effectively, efficiently, ethically, and safely.

The four “D” dimensions (Delegation, Describe, Discernment, and Diligence) each represent distinct forms of human thinking that no AI tool can perform on our behalf.

Delegation

- Deciding consciously what AI should do and what humans must own
- Not about what AI *can* do — about what it *should* do given the stakes
- The line shifts depending on accountability, reversibility, and judgment & discretion required

Describe

- Communicating with AI clearly enough to get something genuinely useful back
- The quality of your output starts with the quality of your ask (prompt engineering)
- Vague in, vague out... specificity is the skill

Discernment

- Actively evaluating AI output before trusting, citing, or acting on it
- Tracing claims to their source, questioning confident-sounding conclusions
- Applying a judgment layer every time, regardless of how good it looks
- Demonstrates how having some expertise in the domain you are using AI for is required

Diligence

- Taking responsibility for AI-assisted work regardless of how it was produced
- Being transparent about when and how AI was involved (could include declarations of AI involvement in the production of content)
- Understanding that accountability never transfers to the tool
- Your name goes on the work... not the tool's

In the case of Delegation, it requires us to decide what the AI *should* handle, not simply what it *can* handle. It requires us to go beyond what we know and make a call. We can’t get caught in the loop of

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what AI can do today because it is changing so fast. The call is to determine what we need and want the AI to do.

To Describe requires us to define and clarify what, where, and when, as well as what not, where not and when not. It is about clearly conveying needs and wants. Questions must be posed at the right level to clarify what is necessary. The critical part for the AI, as for human beings, is that a question launches both human and machine thinking, so getting good at developing questions is essential.

Discernment is an essential step. Far too often, we are quick to see the fault or, in some cases, accept it too quickly, without challenging the AI, questioning the unthinking and the sources of AI, or dismissing it too quickly without challenging ourselves. In my experience, this is often where fear enters. The fear stems from the fact that we are working in a realm without knowledge. Getting good at challenging an AI is an essential human skill.

Finally, Diligence. When we use AI in our work, we must be held accountable for the output. It is a variation on the fact that we can't use the excuse "*the dog ate my homework*". We also have to feel personally obliged as well as accountable, because we own the output of our thinking in delegating, describing, and discerning. That said, there are much higher levels of diligence necessary particularly as risks scale alongside capabilities to ensure we don't live out the Skynet-taking-over-the-world analogy.

I have tried once again, in a short missive, to touch upon a topic that is far bigger than these words. As with all of us, I am still trying to make sense of it, its implications, and its applications, which will require my best thinking. But even as I write this, I recognize that there is space for AI to help me with this.

Have a great weekend, and I will give you a break next week, as the core summer holidays are upon us.

Cheers,
Julian

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Dealing with Overloading

10 July, 2026

Welcome back to Managing the Maelstrom. This week, I am tackling a common pain point our clients frequently identify: **overloading**.

As part of our process, we ask organizations to share their pain points, and everyone points to being overwhelmed by work. Tied to that is the perception that there is never any time to get their work done, despite working evenings, weekends, and even on vacation.

There are several reasons we got to this point of feeling overwhelmed, but the individual causes are too many to enumerate, so I will focus on the big ones.

As we start our work, we have a set of activities or goals to pursue, but nothing is static. As time goes on, we add more, and the pile grows. On top of that, we get pulled away for meetings, emails, conferences, and the like, so the time we have to complete our work dissipates, yet the work itself remains. Think of those times you came back from vacation to a pile of emails or requests, and soon wondered why you took a vacation in the first place.

Many of the causes can be:

- Lack of role clarity
- Lack of direction
- Unclear strategy
- Changing plans
- Market upheavals
- Lack of leadership
- Doing lots of things that don't really add value
- Lack of protocols for meetings, communications etc.

But there is one overarching root cause we see time and again: priority setting.

The word priority comes from a root meaning 'former' or 'first'. It is about choice, embedded in the art of decision-making, where we choose one thing and reject others. We are often good at choosing one, but the hard part is rejecting the rest. That is why organizations often end up with multiple priorities.

To compound this, if we do not choose which is the first priority, second, and so on, our employees are left keeping every plate spinning.

It is therefore management's role to set priorities first. But it goes deeper than that. The act of choosing one thing and rejecting others gets overshadowed by risk; the possibility of something bad happening. Human nature is to shy away from bad possibilities; the thoughts that run through our minds are:

- What if I am wrong?
- What happens if I don't do it?
- What happens if I reject the wrong one?

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When something bad may happen, it manifests as fear. That fear leads to inaction, whether in making choices or setting priorities. It stymies productivity and leaves people overwhelmed by too many plates in the air.

In our experience, people are not trained in decision-making, so they lack a framework for prioritizing. Compounding this is that fear that hangs over decisions, so getting people to assess risk and think it through is the first step. This is essential for leaders and employees alike.

Priority setting means being clear on which things matter more than others. This can be as simple as the old model of what is urgent and what is important. I need to understand:

1. Which tasks are urgent and important
2. Which tasks are important but not urgent
3. Which tasks are urgent but not important
4. Which tasks are neither urgent nor important

Numbers 1 and 2 establish first and second priority. Number 3 falls after these and number 4 should be ignored. This gives us the criteria for deciding what to deal with.

Often, we spend time doing number 4 tasks because they require less energy. Perhaps we feel that if we get them off that plate, then we will have more energy and time for task types 1-3. However, this just becomes a time suck and nothing gets furthered along. It’s a fallacy that we are being productive.

Focusing on task types 1-3, we need to evaluate them through the lens of risk.

- What is the worst that I can imagine will happen if I choose this over that?
- How likely is that to happen?
- If it does, what is the impact, and how severe will it be?

We live in a perpetual state of risk, but if we don't think it through, it becomes fear and stifles action or change. So, we need to get good at exploring it so we can reduce number of those plates we are balancing. In this way, we can start to feel less overburdened.

I hope this sheds light on what may need to be done.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Importance of Human Thinking

17 July, 2026

Much is being said about the impacts Artificial Intelligence is having on our thinking. At Forrest & Company, we've spent 30 years focused on human thinking in the workplace. I say that up front because, when it comes to AI, I don't purport to be an expert. In fact, I'm closer to the luddite end of the spectrum, with limited hands-on experience. But that gap is exactly why I want to write about it today.

I believe now is a critical time to discuss human thinking at work. This is because, we now have AI to help us and we need to think through how to use it. To be clear, by 'thinking' I mean using our whole selves to be most effective with AI.

For years, we have profiled people's thinking processes, and, in turn, we teach how to think through problems. Our profile process and the thinking we teach are rooted in Effective Intelligence™. Our database holds well over 10,000 profiles of those engaged in business of some form.

The profile helps people to understand their thinking as well as the thinking they tend to avoid. It provides individuals and teams with insight into the mental muscles they use to do their work.

At the core of Effective Intelligence™ are 25 thinking operations. In the research that underlies these, there is an understanding that while we can use all 25, we tend to use some more than others based on our preferences. Awareness of these preferences helps us understand where we naturally sit in our profile, but we first need to know where we are through the profile, and then objectively apply the right thinking at the right time to think through the challenges in our work. It is this objective application of the appropriate thinking that helps people think better by having a process to quality assure it.

In day-to-day work, some of the types of thinking people need to get proficient at doing are:

- Making decisions
- Planning
- Problem solving
- Innovating
- Developing Strategy
- Selling
- Persuading

In time, AI may be able to replace this capability in humans and do it all. However, for now, humans must control it. That control can be exercised by thinking through how we use to get the results we want, or the ability to think through the output. The greatest risk is not that AI produces poor answers; it is that people stop asking good questions and just accept what the AI produces. Effective use of AI requires curiosity, judgment, and the willingness to challenge assumptions. AI can accelerate thinking, but it cannot replace the responsibility to think.

The point is that AI is like any tool; you are ultimately accountable for its output. You cannot blame the dog for eating your homework.

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What brought this all into focus for me was being introduced this week to the phrase: "Most humans won’t be replaced by AI, they will be replaced by another human with an AI”.

Recent psychological research highlights that over-relying on generative AI can lead to passive consumption, erosion of critical thinking skills, and result in cognitive surrender. Effective Intelligence acts as a proactive shield against this.

Understanding your thinking profile helps you identify your personal cognitive biases and preferred thinking styles. If you know you lean heavily toward one type of thinking, you might automatically over-rely on AI to do the thinking you may not like. Recognizing this balance ensures you stay actively engaged as the critical "human-in-the-loop," auditing the AI's structural outputs rather than accepting them unquestioningly.

The quality of an AI's output is often a reflection of the quality of the thinking that went into the prompt. Consider that clear objectives, precise questions, consideration of alternatives, and evaluation of outcomes are all forms of thinking. In many ways, AI exposes the quality of our thinking more visibly than ever before. As they say, "Garbage In; Garbage Out".

It has been a hard slog to convince businesses that they need to improve their organizations' intellectual capital. Still, the question of whether we are ineffective or inefficient is rooted in how people process and think through the challenges they face. We spend our time trying to get people to behave differently, but in reality the root of behaviour is in our thinking. This is because our thinking drives our thoughts or the conclusions that we reach, and those conclusions become our behaviours or results. Better thinking gets you better results.

I hope that the new interest in AI will create a renaissance in human thinking in the workplace.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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Intentional Thinking

24 July, 2026

In last week's Managing the Maelstrom, I argued for the importance of human thinking in the face of AI. Based on the feedback this week, I am continuing to explore the nature of human thinking and its relationship to how we might use, and will use, AI in the future.

Last week I introduced the concept of the 25 thinking operations which are at the core of our thinking work at Forrest. However, an important part of Effective Intelligence I didn't discuss, which has relevance to the AI era, is the notion of Thinking-Intentions.

Thinking-Intentions are how we direct our minds, how we steer our mental activity to a conscious, purposeful outcome.

As I mentioned last week we, as humans, are able to use all of the 25 thinking operations. Still, we prefer some over others and knowing how and, more importantly, when to use the others is at the core of skilful human thinking.

What research has found is that we may have intentions in our thinking, either subconsciously or consciously. We are in fact trying to *do something* with our thinking. The problem we face, particularly when working with others, is that if we are unclear on those intentions, our thinking is invisible to others. Even if we are intentionally thinking in a direction, if we don't declare it, it remains invisible outside our head.

How this becomes problematic is that others will be using their own thinking operations which may, although more likely do not, match our intent. This is where conflict enters into our interpersonal relations. We are on different pages.

Clarity of our intention comes from careful thought. If we are on autopilot and not really thinking about our thinking, we enter a realm of potential conflict.

Clarity of intention comes from self-awareness and metacognition. Metacognition is "thinking about thinking". This clarity comes from assessing what we are endeavouring to do in our tasks and applying the right thinking at the right time. Understanding our preferences allows us to determine what thinking we should be doing and, more importantly, what thinking we should *not* be doing.

How this relates to AI is that we need to be clear on what our intention is for using it. As with trying to pass on information to a colleague for action, if you are not clear with your thinking when you prompt an AI, you may not get the result that you want or need.

It will likely not result in the same conflict with the AI as it does with the human, or at least not yet, but who knows what the future of AI will hold. But this lack of clarity will reduce productivity and increase cycle time if we are not clear up front.

Being clear about what you want and need from the AI is about being clear on your intention. For me, I primarily use AI to support my least preferred thinking by delegating the task of information and data gathering. I know of academics who direct their students to use AI *only* to brainstorm ideas. So, being clear is essential and can be used to clarify:

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- AI policies
- AI use
- AI development
- Bot creation
- Agentic workflows, to name a few

It all comes down to thinking about thinking. In our rushed world, we find people don't take the time to stop and think. I refer to this as the "Tyranny of DO". When we are caught in this tyranny, we rely on our old thinking patterns or our subconscious mind. In doing that, we are losing human capital. If we are not skilful in our thinking, then how can we be clear about how we use our tools? Just as a carpenter can use a screwdriver to drive a nail into a board, the skilful part is recognizing when to use the hammer to achieve our goal.

So, this week, I ask you to stop and think about your intentions. In working with other humans, it is essential to declare our intention to work effectively and efficiently together. But there is an art to clarifying your intention. The analogy I use is about the game of pool. Anyone can bash around a table; the art part is calling the shot ahead of time.

In working with AI, stopping and being clear on your intention will save you time, energy, and frustration.

These challenges merely get multiplied when we work with other humans and AI at the same time. So, as you face the prospects of using AI and dealing with other people, always keep in mind the thinking intentions of both yourself and others.

Hopefully this has given you more food for thought about the importance of intentional thinking.

Have a great weekend.
Cheers,
Julian

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Taking Time to Think

31 July, 2026

"*I have no time to think at work*." I hear this phrase regularly when talking with clients, and it came to the forefront this week. If this isn't a siren call for Managing the Maelstrom, I don't know what is.

Perhaps many feel they don't need to think at work. Perhaps it is a case where our bosses don't see the value of thinking at work, preferring instead to see action. Regardless, it feels like it is an epidemic in the workplace.

Why is thinking important? Let's start with the point I always make – consider how much of your paycheque is for your thinking. If it isn't 95%, then you're likely in rote work. Not to denigrate rote work; it is usually repetitive and mechanical work where you likely follow set, predictable steps. In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, there is now more than ever a real need for the "thinking managerial leader". The further up the org chart you go, the more need there is for your thinking to reach out, look to the horizon, and ponder what is out there to steer your teams and organization. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lack of planning and forethought in organizations.

So what is stealing our time to think? It will vary for many, but here are a few:

- Endless emails and message traffic multiplied when you use multiple communication tools such as Teams or Slack
- Continual meetings after meetings, made worse when people can populate your calendar through constant invites
- Busy work because we have always done it, but it adds no real value
- Responding to a steady flow of requests for your time
- The day-to-day work that sucks the energy from you
- Work that never ends from morning into the night

If these represent any of your current challenges, then let's explore some solutions. I often refer back to a series of books written by Bill Jensen as a source when recommending how people can deal with these. In his book *Simplicity*, Bill argued that it is our job to find those time stealers and root them out. His model for communication in itself is a starting point. At its core, good communication relies on three things:

- **Know** – what do you want people to know specifically, and be ruthless about cutting down what you send
- **Feel** – how do you want people to feel as a result of communication/meetings
- **Do** – what specifically do you want people to do.

While these are how you should send communications and plan your meetings, the core here is instilling in your people the need to keep these in mind. If an email you receive doesn't meet these three criteria, ignore it. The important one here is Do – if that isn't clear, it is a waste of your time. He goes on to argue that you should ignore CC'd emails. After all, there is nothing there for you to do.

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As for meetings, he argues you should ignore meetings that you don't need to be at. The hierarchy of importance is:

1. Your boss's meeting to ensure alignment in your Team One
2. Your team meetings in order to align Team Two
3. Then, someone else's meeting

As an addendum, if you can delegate attendance in number 3, then do it. Avoid being in the same meeting as your team members.

Practice continuous improvement and ask yourself if this work is really important to goals and objectives. Prioritize the urgent and important, and the important but not urgent; cut the rest. Finally, block home time from work time and encourage your people to do the same. You need your break to recoup, and your family and loved ones need you. It is all a matter of priority setting. This is the first stage in thinking about your work.

These last few weeks have been about thinking in the age of AI, and this is where AI can really help you. Once you have established priorities, use AI as a means to help you gain time to think.

Here are some potential ways to use AI to help you:

- Accelerate your writing and communications
- Summarize lengthy documents and emails using Know / Feel / Do as your criteria
- Automate your meetings through transcription and action lists
- Synthesize data and information to save your mind time.

I am no expert on AI, but I see it as a tool to enhance your productivity and think of it through that lens. Time spent on all of the above is an essential step to free up your time for what you are paid for – your thinking.

Have a great long weekend where applicable and re-energize yourself.

Cheers,
Julian

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Skilful Thinking in the Age of AI

7 August, 2026

Over the last few weeks, I have been advocating for improving our thinking, whether from the standpoint of intentionality in our thinking or simply setting aside time to think.

I believe that right now is a critical time for us to improve our thinking. As I have said in previous missives, in the age of AI, human thinking is going to be a necessary commodity and skilful thinking will be the true essence of human capital in organizations. If we don't master our thinking, and we farm some of our thinking out to AI, then what value do we actually add?

Thinking about thinking is an area that most people spend little time doing. Thinking is often a reflexive activity; we do it without conscious thought. Working with AI will require a new skill set of metacognition to ensure we get the right results when we outsource our thought processes.

We need to decide what we will actually delegate to our AI consciously, being clear on the criteria we use or the prompts we develop to direct the energy of an AI. We will need to be clear in our thinking to make the most efficient use of our AI. We will need to challenge AI's thinking with our own to get the best possible results, and, we will need to be disciplined and ethical in our use of AI. All of these will require our best and most robust thinking.

The issue we have is that we are often unaware of our thinking patterns and, as I argued, we are unclear on our thinking- intentions. This comes from overreliance on reflexive thinking. Again, we need to be intentional in our thinking, and we need to be clear on the direction of our thinking.

In the research that Effective Intelligence did many years ago, which I have referred to before, they identified three general vectors of thinking that everyone can do. As with most concepts though, still, we tend to prefer some modes over others. These become the direction of our intentionality. See which ones best reflect where your energies go:

Judging

- Coming to closure on what is right and wrong or good and bad
- Interpreting events
- Discernment of proof or belief
- Formulating opinions

Describing

- Searching for the truth
- Gathering information and awareness
- Relying on experience
- Searching for accuracy and clarity

Realising

- Exploring possibilities and ideas

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- Creating ideas
- Using intuition
- Desire to create change

While every thought uses all three, we have a natural tendency, at the highest level, to direct our intentions toward one over the others, often subconsciously. Given our predilection for that one, we often overlook the others. In working with AI, we need to be deliberate in how we use it, and we need to direct and be aware of our own thinking before we direct an autonomous system. What, exactly, are we trying to achieve?

So, what is the direction of thinking-intention for AI?

I thought I would ask AI itself, and, using the parameters of Jerry Rhodes' Effective Intelligence, it came back with that its intention is to *describe and realise*.

By describing it, it is a simulator gathering facts and data. As for realising, it is about giving you, the user, options and ideas. It portends that it does **not** judge, leaving that to the human. In other words, we have to discern what the AI has given us and make a choice.

That is its direction of intention; however, we cannot be fooled because it **is** making judgements about what to give us based on our input through prompts, instructions, directives, previous queries, language, and cues.

The point is that we have to be clear in our thinking when we deploy AI. If our intention is judging, we need to beware not to leap at what has been given us right away. If our intention and energy is to describe, we need to beware that it may not be the truth. Finally, if we intend to realise, then we need to curtail our energy to explore more and set level.

I cannot stress enough that in the age of AI, we need to be clear in our thinking. After all, if you are using AI, **you** are ultimately accountable for its output. Thinking about thinking needs to come to the forefront of your work, and you need to take the time to do this meaningfully and critically.

Skilful thinking has become the watchword of our time and, for those who fear AI, it is time for the human in you to step up and think through the risk. If you are an early adopter and coming to rely on it, you must challenge your thinking to safeguard yourself.

I hope this has given you pause for thought in the hazy days of summer.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Easy Button Isn't Thinking

14 August, 2026

Last week, in Managing the Maelstrom, I reintroduced the direction and intentionality of thoughts. As I pointed out, the work of Jerry Rhodes in Effective Intelligence identified three directions of intentionality in thinking: judging, describing, and realizing.

As a result, our thinking moves to what is right, what is true, and what is new. In judging, we are identifying what we should do. In describing, we are defining facts of what is or was, and in realising it is all about ideas that might be.

Each of these pulls in a different direction from the others. In judging, I am closing down the fact-gathering to interpret what should or should not happen. In describing, I am relying on reality and what is or was in existence, not on possibilities. Finally, in realizing I am diverging, resisting the temptation of closure and being uninterested in experience.

The real trick to human thought is knowing when to use each of these and recognizing that by accessing all three you can get the best possible result. But as humans, we tend to prefer one over the others. In a way, it becomes a form of cognitive bias if we don't have thinking processes in place to keep us from defaulting to it, reducing our effectiveness and efficiency.

If we are to use AI to assist our thinking, we first need to recognize our own biases. Are we using AI to assist our judging, realising or describing? This comes back to my point several weeks ago: we need to be intentional in our use of AI.

Last week I noted that AI itself purports to describe and realise only for its user. By describing, it is searching for data and information based on your prompts. By realizing, it is identifying possibilities and ideas. Interestingly, it claims not to judge.

In a direction of intentionality, it is not judging, but it is judging. It is judging and evaluating how well its data or options best meet the criteria you have given it through your prompts. Ironically, you are training it to judge. The more it knows you, the more likely it is to mimic you.

It now has its own biases, provided by you, that direct its orientation.

Again, the implications of this can be profound, especially if you are not thinking while using your AI. As I have said before, we are not taught how to think. We are taught what to think. Take, for example, decision-making. Very few have been taught how to make decisions. Yet we are willing to outsource our thinking to an AI when we have not honed our own human thinking.

Decisions require us to judge, describe, and realise, yet many people don't recognize this. Knowing how AI can help your decision-making requires you to have a framework for it; otherwise, you can over-rely on the AI based on your own biases and the bias you have embedded in your AI.

As I have been advocating for weeks now in Managing the Maelstrom, it is time for a renaissance in human thinking in the face of AI. We can't rely on the easy button of using AI if we have not done our thinking.

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The final imperative is that we are accountable for our use of AI, so it is critical that we use it with our eyes wide open and that we have done our due diligence in thinking through issues such as decision-making.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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Thinking vs Action

21 August, 2026

Several times this week, clients offered a similar refrain when commenting on a gap in their teams and organizations. It gave me pause, and I realized it fit within the theme I have been following for over a month now. The comment was, "*Our people don't plan*."

As I often do, I asked for clarification because, as I have said in these Managing the Maelstroms, words are merely analogies for thought. What intrigued me was that they all meant the same thing by "*their people don't plan*": their people don't **think**.

I use planning as a subset of thinking in a taxonomy. Planning is a thinking activity, and when I had to define the word this week, this was its essence: *planning translates a decision into a series of related actions over time, mobilizes energy around defined events, organizes resources, and reduces uncertainty through careful thought and risk assessment.*

But this week, everyone was using planning as a euphemism for thinking. Their people were not thinking mindfully; they were racing forward to get things done. As I have said before, they were victims of the tyranny of DO. And as I argued several weeks ago, the biggest culprit is a lack of time, or not dedicating time to think.

So, as I often do, I considered why we aren't mindful in our thinking. I got my answer yesterday, first-hand. Faced with distractions and a pile of things to do, I got an email to check into an upcoming hotel stay, and I immediately went to complete it. I was successful right up until I realized I had been duped because I responded emotionally and distractedly to the request and hadn't thought it through cognitively or questioned it. I put myself in jeopardy. (Yes, I am getting a new credit card).

I have described this as cognitive and emotional, but in Effective Intelligence we call them the two dimensions of thinking: **Hard and Soft**. Here is what they are:

- Hard thinking is objective; it is tangible, outward-looking, impersonal; thinking from the head.
- Soft thinking is subjective; it is intangible, inward-looking, personal; thinking from the heart.

Both are critically important, and we use them in combination because:

- Hard thinking ensures it is right, meets our needs, works, and is efficient.
- Soft thinking ensures it gets done, meets our wants, motivates and is effective

These represent both the cognitive and the affective realms. Far too often, we spend our days in the affective realm, as I did, racing to complete someone else's priority, and we don't use the cognitive realm to think and look for flaws in the technology we're faced with.

These missives around thinking have been about the role of human thinking in the age of AI. My experience this week is an analogy for that very issue: if we don't take the time to think, what will be the result of our work with AI?

If we bring the wrong thinking to AI, such as soft thinking, we may be duped, just as I was, by a very good phishing expedition that carefully used AI to replicate the environment I expected. Instead, I

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should have looked for the flaws, checked the details, and challenged what I saw in front of me, which are all hallmarks of hard thinking. I didn't fall victim to the spam because I lacked knowledge or experience. It was because I moved with urgency instead of scrutiny. We often find this in organizations, that people are trying to get things done with speed, rather than thoughtful consideration because output is rewarded. When people don't plan, it isn't because they aren't intelligent enough to do so, it's often because they are overloaded or distracted. In those instances, thinking suffers.

But one final point: I am not denigrating soft thinking, because it is real human thinking, where we have sympathy, empathy, and intuition to inspire others.

If we want better thinking in our organizations, we must do more than ask for it. We have to create the time, space, and expectations for it. People cannot consistently exercise hard thinking when every signal from the organization rewards speed, responsiveness, and activity. Thinking is not the absence of work; it is part of the work.

To finish on one of my favourite quotes: "*Fools say they learn by their mistakes – I prefer to learn by the mistakes of others*." Hopefully you have learned from my mistake.

Have a great weekend.
Julian

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Thinking & Fear

28 August, 2026

In my focus on AI and thinking last week, I explored the nature of the two modes of human thinking we describe as HARD and SOFT thinking. As the week went on, I noticed more and more examples of the implications of both.

Now, to be clear, Hard isn't solely Hard, and Soft isn't as hard as the other. The nomenclature is only there to distinguish the two.

When we use **hard** thinking, we try to be as tangible as possible; we look for proof through logic, specific details, and facts while trying to determine how else we might do things. The lawyer, the accountant, or the inventor relies on demonstrably physical things that can be measured or analyzed by thinking from the head.

When we use our **soft** thinking, we are in an ethereal world where our passions, beliefs, empathy, and intuition are at the forefront, enabling us to get things done. The salesperson, the connector, and the visionary rely on conceptual, indefinable approaches that emanate more from the heart.

As I pointed out last week, these work in a never-ending loop, feeding each other imperceptibly. Most of us aren't even aware of when the switch happens. Some of us also have a natural orientation to one or the other, which can turn into conflict when we meet someone in a different mode of thinking.

This came to the forefront this week with the very real and human trait of fearfulness. Strangely enough, we don't talk about fear in business. Yet trust me, it is there, and it is not going away. Many reading this may already be decrying my point of view because we have been conditioned to avoid fear, not talk about it, and ultimately not acknowledge it.

So what is this “fear” thing? Well, it emanates from Soft thinking. It is rooted in what enabled our survival as a species, and it is with us at work every day, growing out of our response to risk. The concept of risk is historically associated with the possibility of encountering danger, harm, or an unfavorable outcome. So naturally, when we run into danger, it creates a fear response, which can be fight, flight, or freeze.

In effect, when we face danger, we are facing a risk, and we respond with that fight, flight, or freeze. All too often we don't think through what we fear and, as a result, fall back on the three F's. In the past, I have argued that fear is just unexplored risk. It is unexplored because we let it live in our soft mode of thinking and don't bring it out into our hard thinking, where we can analyze it.

So, how does this relate to work? The issue in the workplace is that, whether we know it or not, when we make decisions, we enter the realm of danger. If we don't acknowledge the risk inherent in the decision and explore it, it can sit in our subconscious and trigger a fight, flight, or freeze reaction.

In fight, we push through and take it on. In flight, we avoid the decision and move to other things, hoping we will not have to face it, and finally, in freeze, we seize up and face inaction. Have you ever seen these reactions? Flight and freeze can be the most debilitating to organizations. Fight can also cause trouble because we can charge at it without thinking. Many workplace behaviors that appear to

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be resistance, procrastination, excessive analysis, overconfidence, or indecision can be understood as responses to perceived risk.

So, what does this have to do with AI? There are many levels to it. First, ask yourself: how do I see AI? Is it a danger? Will I lose my job, or will the world change fundamentally? That is the first level of risk. The next level is: can I use AI, or is there a danger to me? Finally, the last level is: can I trust its output as my tool, and where is the danger in relying on it?

If we don't explore these in Hard thinking, then our soft thinking can overtake us. If we don't think through the worst outcomes and their probability and severity, then we can get mired. Once we get mired, we are then likely to resort to one of the three Fs.

In our world today, thinking through how we will use AI, with its practicalities and pitfalls, is essential not only to protect us from danger but also to move ourselves forward.

Cheers,
Julian

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Truth and Thinking

4 September, 2026

In my ongoing exploration of human thinking and AI, I am coming back to a topic I have broached before: **the nature of truth and how it relates to thinking**. I am thinking about truth right now because, in the age of AI, it is going to be paramount.

The issue of truth and AI comes up all the time and shows we have concern about it. When people refer to AI hallucinations, they are talking about it making things up. On the human side, there is the danger that we may steer our AI tools away from truth and towards what we *believe* to be important.

“Truth” is an interesting word that gets hijacked a lot by phrases like "my personal truth", "alternative facts", "I know it in my heart to be true". So what is truth? Truth’s etymological roots are about facts that are solid, trust-able, and unwavering. In essence, it is the foundation of objective, verifiable facts. In thinking, though, it is one specific direction, and it is useful to explore its opposites to truly understand its intention.

One opposite (and its most common sparring partner) in thought is interpretation that comes from judging. In judging, we may try to be objective but are often biased by subjective judgements. The biggest of these is confirmation bias, using truths that only confirm our preexisting beliefs. This goes further when we make up facts to meet our preexisting beliefs.

The opposite is to escape the gravitational pull of truth to create new ideas. In this case, we don't rely on facts and may overlook reality to find ways around obstacles with impunity. Facts become a nuisance in the search for new routes and ideas.

The phenomenon of mistruth has become very real in our world. This has always been the case, but it's striking that, even in an age when humanity has the greatest access to truth, there are still those who will attempt to twist it.

Consider our relationship with the media, where we get most of our facts today. Centuries ago, newspapers always represented a slant, depending on whether, for example, you were a Whig or a Tory, and that hasn't changed in modern mainstream media. We are always fraught with questions like, "*Where do I get my ground truth from?*" Every source has its own perspectives and limitations. However, some sources have stronger evidence, methods, transparency, and accountability than others.

Social media has merely exacerbated the problem since it is specifically designed to reinforce confirmatory bias by reflecting our use, following, and likes of our own judgements and beliefs. In the face of all this, it is no surprise that AI has become suspect. If we are to use AI and hope to get truth from it, we will need to use our thinking to ensure what we see is thought through, not just accepted as reality.

Here are some questions to shift your thinking:

1. How could this be unsound?
2. What are the exact facts that are known: who, what, where, when, and how far?
3. How else might this be seen?

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4. Can I think through this?
5. Does this really make sense?
6. How far out on a limb can I go trusting this?
7. What might happen if this is true?

As a sidebar, perhaps use these same questions not just when you're faced with the results of AI's output, but when someone posits "their truth" to you. What they might believe is true may in fact not be the case.

Judging from what I have seen, if we are to flourish, the skill of challenging in the pursuit of truth is going to be critical. The challenge of using AI is not that the machines sometimes get things wrong. It is that we need to be more disciplined in deciding what to trust. Trust can't be won through data and information alone. It is confirmed through our willingness to question, test, challenge, and think. It's less about finding answers, it's about evaluating and testing them.

Have a great long weekend,

Cheers,
Julian

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Thinking through Uncertainty

11 September, 2026

Over six years ago, on 13th March 2020, I started writing "Managing the Maelstrom". The catalyst was the existential crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I wanted to add value for and connect with our clients when there was little else we could do to help. I have kept at it for over six years now across a range of topics.

I had an opportunity to revisit the COVID age this week by speaking with someone who was in the thick of it, providing critical medical support as many of us sat at home, as directed, wondering what would happen. But it got me thinking: have we forgotten what the world was like just six years ago? It feels like we have.

I would ask you to cast your mind back to those days, not to reminisce but to reflect on where we have come from and where we are now.

Here are some of the simpler things that I remember from those days:

- The silence in the city when walking in the middle of the day as everyone was home
- The signs on the floor to denote social distancing
- The endless search for the mask before you went outside
- The empty international flights
- The queues of people waiting for their turn in the grocery store, and eventually their vaccine
- The waiting in quarantine for days after travel for the all-clear
- The fear of not getting the all-clear prior to being able to board a flight home
- The banging of pots outside in support of healthcare workers
- The smell of the disinfectant on the shopping cart
- That annoying cough and wondering, "*do I have it*?"
- Checking online to see the day's number of casualties
- The continuous Netflix consumption

These are just a few, but my point here is to transport you back there and get you to reflect on how you felt in those days. The intent is not pandemic tourism; rather, it is to highlight what we have forgotten. Perhaps it was that very human urge to get over it and straight back to "normal". We did, so much so that I believe we have forgotten it and moved on, save those who suffer to this day from the loss of loved ones or Long Covid.

What strikes me isn't how vividly I remember the things in the bullet list. It's how rarely I think about them. At the time, it felt impossible to imagine ever forgetting because the pandemic dominated every conversation, every decision and every headline. Yet only a few years later, much of it has faded into the background of our collective memory. Perhaps that is a healthy human trait, but there is a downside: when we forget what uncertainty felt like, we also forget how capable we were of navigating it.

Sometimes it helps to reflect on where you have come from. Reflection is valuable because it reminds us that uncertainty is not new. We have faced situations before where there was no playbook, no

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precedent, and no certainty about the outcome. As a world, we faced an existential threat; we made decisions not based on experience, as we so often do, because we had little to none; instead, we chose what made sense at the time. We got through it by thinking it through. During COVID, many of us wanted certainty and had none. We made plans that changed overnight and we adapted to new rules, new risks and new realities. Looking back, we remember the restrictions, but perhaps we forget something equally important: we learned to function without certainty.

As my business partner Tony says, however, "*not everything in COVID changed, but everyone did*." Many of my missives have reflected on the changed attitudes and perspectives that came out of the threats we faced. As the final step in reflection, think about how you and those around you changed; what do you notice?

Now that you have had a chance to reflect on your thinking and experience, I'll fast-forward you to now.

Our world faces huge threats and uncertainty. I could list them, but to avoid depressing you, I won't. Suffice to say they're real and different for all of us. Some are existential, like COVID but perhaps less likely, while others serve to make our lives more complicated and uncertain.

To bring these two things together as we face the pressures that have appeared in the last few months, let's remember that we got through big, unknown challenges in the past with careful thought and clear minds.

I realize that you are reading this on the 25th anniversary of 9/11. That was another seminal moment in our lives, when everything was thrown into turmoil. It was a time of major upheaval with the loss of countless lives both then and in the following years; many of us lost friends and comrades. Different as they were, both COVID and 9/11 forced people to navigate profound uncertainty and adapt to a world that suddenly felt unfamiliar and scary.

So, as you look at our surroundings today and the new and unpredictable challenges, take solace in the fact that we have been here before. We have had to write a playbook as we went to face down threats and ultimately overcome them. History suggests that, when faced with uncertainty, humanity is far more resilient than we often give ourselves credit for.

Cheers,
Julian

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Personal Control & AI

18 September, 2026

If ever there was a week to talk about the importance of human thinking in the face of Artificial Intelligence, it would be this one. After weeks of writing about it, it seems to have reached a crescendo. AI is all over the news, whether tied to elections, attempts to "slow" its development, or just general societal fear.

Naturally, I don't have visibility to all the discussions, but the feeling is that it's trending negatively. This is informed by media stories, social media, and previous missives. So, I cannot trust it as objective truth.

In the past, I have discussed the importance of human thinking in the AI age, from the tactical level of using AI as a practitioner with end-user tools like Copilot, Claude, ChatGPT, etc. But this week, because of the prevailing winds, we need to move to the Strategic level.

We have moved from discussing the relative value of productivity increases to the realm of AI being an existential threat to humanity. While this larger threat has been percolating all along, it has now come to the forefront.

To those who have followed Managing the Maelstrom over the years, you may remember that two years ago, in May 2024, I reported back from attending the Humanity 2.0 conference inside the Vatican at the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences and Social Sciences, whose history goes back to 1603. The conference explored how we ensure humanity flourishes in the face of AI.

At the conference, we heard arguments from both sides: the threats to humanity and the potential benefits. This is why thinking about AI has been very real for me over the past two years. The foundation of how we ensure humanity flourishes (like everything) is through how we think it through.

Some of the threats that AI appears to present to humanity, as defined this week, are:

- Its ability to self-improve without human intervention
- Its ability to swarm as a collection of agents
- Its ability to hack and control the web autonomously
- Insufficient or absent regulation
- Potential rejection of innate human values
- Its potential to release nuclear or biological threats

I am not suggesting these are all about to come true, but how we think about and process these threats matters a great deal.

A few weeks ago, I introduced the three directions of human thinking-intentions, and they bear repeating as we look at AI from a Strategic standpoint. These were **judging** what is right, **describing** what is true and **realising** what is new.

When we look at these threats, where does our thinking go? If we just look at the list above, we can argue that it might be true, or it could be right or even that it is an interesting possibility.

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Does that list become something that hits you right in the gut? Is it a soft or affective piece of thinking, or do you look at it through the lens of hard cognitive thinking? In other words, do you think through the facts and assess whether they're right? Or, on the other hand, do you feel upset by it, and does it remain a feeling of disquiet?

This week, I want to reintroduce another element we need to include in our thinking: **control**. As humans, we feel a need to be in control, so we need to assess what we have full control over, what we have partial control over and can influence, and what we have no control over but are intimately interested in. This is the thinking that you need to do now. Instead of fretting over what we can't control, we need to think about how we can expand our influence.

While individual thinking matters, we likely feel we have little personal influence over this AI wave. Many things exists beyond that personal sphere of control and require a more collective action. We will need to group together to create governance frameworks for increasingly powerful AI systems. This isn't about stopping the innovation; it's about creating and defining the conditions under which the AI innovation can flourish while remaining aligned with our values and preserving wellbeing. This will require us to think beyond our immediate sphere and consider how we contribute to the broader systems. How we personally use and direct AI, and what we allow and don't allow it to do, will be important. The question isn't whether we ask AI to do things for us, because AI use is likely inevitable, but whether we're using judicious thought and rigour and have established the appropriate guardrails and accountability for its use. So, we need to think critically about AI use and do it responsibly, but we also have to work within the ethical frameworks to mitigate unacceptable risks. While few of us can control the trajectory of global AI development, we can help to influence the places where we intersect with AI.

Our thinking is what we ultimately control. How we choose to think through the current maelstrom is the key to being human. How we see AI through the strategic lens for humanity, how we use it operationally in our business or home, and how we use it tactically in our day-to-day work… that is the key to human thinking through these challenges.

Cheers,
Julian

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Developing Intellectual Capital

25 September, 2026

In my ongoing exploration of thinking at work, I'm returning to the idea of **Intellectual Capital** and how organizations have drifted so far from it as a key source of organizational success.

For ages, I've tried to understand why organizations are so uninterested in thinking. To me, it seems clear that the sum of all work is the thinking employees do, so why don't organizations talk about it? The idea of intellectual capital is not new. First coined in 1969, it referred to the active adjustment and application of knowledge to create value. To me, that is thinking. So where did it go after that?

I find it hard to fathom that, when I talk about thinking and its role, people look at me like I have two heads. I have therefore come up with what I believe people believe when I talk about the importance of thinking at work:

- That's too hard
- That makes sense, but I don't know where to start
- We need to stop thinking and just do things
- I don't have any time to think; I just need to do
- My organization doesn't value my thinking
- I think all the time; I'm fine

Are there any other potential reasons I might be missing? The last one, that they are fine, may be more real than the others. I see it when I talk to people about teaching people how to make decisions. I get the same blank response, which I attribute to "*we make decisions all day long, why would we need to learn about decision making*?"

While it is true that people make decisions (a form of thinking, I might add) all the time, there is always room to improve to help ensure the quality of those decisions. Many professionals are operating on patterns and skills developed over years. They're not necessarily thinking deeply about each decision; they're recognizing situations and responding automatically based on previous experience. That can be efficient, or it can be a bit of laziness and stifle innovation.

My mentor Jerry Rhodes gave me an interesting analogy: he suggested that thinking is like breathing: it is automatic. So, we often think that we don't need to learn to breathe properly. That is, unless you need to learn to breathe like an athlete or someone who needs to regulate their autonomic system. Think about meditative breathing. Learning to breathe is a success multiplier in these cases and the same can be said for learning to think.

Learning to think is different from learning *what* to think. Learning what to think is putting someone else's thinking into your mind. Learning *to* think enables you to make full use of your faculties. Back to decisions for a moment: it enables you to make wise choices and use your judgements well. It is how you get things done better.

Learning *how* to think is about identifying the causes that will give you the effect you want to achieve. It helps you hone your approach that causes creation and, by having processes to think through, it lets you replicate and accelerate getting the effect you are trying to achieve. In learning to think, it is inevitable

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that you need to tie that learning to the task at hand. It is no good to try to increase your thinking skills without relating them to a task, like decisions, planning, selling, or creating. Just like any skill, it can be improved through focused and considered use.

By teaching thinking, you increase the intellectual capital of your organization. You increase its value. At the same time, you can solve problems faster and better through improved thinking.

Thinking only becomes visible through its results and, by then, people often attribute success to action rather than the quality of thought that preceded it. A manager can easily report on metrics – calls made, units produced, projects completed. But it is much harder to quantify thinking – quality of decisions, depth of reasoning, learning generated, assumptions challenged.

As I said in my book, thinking is the undiscovered country. It is there in front of us all the time, and yet we don't really explore it. It may be because of the reasons I listed above. However, as I have advocated for weeks now as we navigate the onslaught of Artificial Intelligence, better human thinking must be table stakes. We must get better at it. Ironically, we have been teaching machines to think but have done far less for our people.

AI dramatically reduces the effort of information retrieval, analysis, drafting, calculation, and pattern detection. So what's left? Judgment, framing, questioning, ethical reasoning, contextual understanding, decision-making in uncertainty. All thinking tasks that people need to do.

In effect, intellectual capital is a measure of the thinking of your organization. If you want it to have value, then perhaps increase the organization's thinking capability. Thinking in terms of the intellectual capital in your organization is a unique leverage factor towards greater efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity.

Look around your organization and ask yourself: are we getting our best thinking, or are we relying on just *doing* instead?

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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Investing in Thinking Capital

2 October, 2026

As you may have noticed, for weeks now I have been focusing on thinking in the workplace. This has been especially true with the growing prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI).

Organizations need to get the most out of their people's intelligence. This is the essence of intellectual capital, which is the sum of the organization's thinking power. Thinking is the foundation for any endeavour. Thinking is how intelligence is expressed and applied.

I decided to do some research on the word *intelligence*. I found that its root is “to choose between.” Therefore, intelligence is about making choices and sound judgements. Over time, people associated intelligence to mean “to understand”. Both of these are verbs indicating action. Intelligence is not something we have; it is something we do. Thinking and intelligence are the actions, and the result is a thought.

From the thought comes the behaviour, action, or result. What we don’t see is the thinking behind it, so we are always reactive. If it was a good thought, we applaud it; if it wasn’t the result we wanted, we decry it. All of this is reactive, so how could you be more proactive to ensure you get good results?

It first starts with putting a premium on thinking in the organization. It requires teaching, practice, and consistency. Intelligence is “choosing between” just like decision-making. To do that, we need choices, which means we need options, and intelligence is the process of making those choices.

If you have followed over the weeks and years, I have continually railed that we don’t teach people how to make decisions; we just expect them to do it.

By that rationale, to increase intellectual capital you need to teach people *how* to think and not *what* to think. What would be the value of your organization's intellectual capital if you enhanced it by teaching people how to think? Teaching people how to think means helping them evaluate assumptions, generate alternatives, recognize biases, test evidence, and make decisions under uncertainty.

Intellectual capital (often called human capital) is all about thinking. Thinking drives behaviour and results, and while we talk a lot about *financial* capital in business, we rarely talk about *thinking* capital.

This takes on a new urgency in the face of AI. How will we use it? How will it fit into our intellectual capital? If intelligence is to choose between options and to make a decision, what will our decision be?

Will we use AI to:

- Judge what is right and make the decisions?
- Describe the truth and give us insight and understanding?
- Realize what may be new and create the options?

Will we hand our intellectual capital to machines? Or will we take the time now to proactively develop our people's thinking? These are critical options to choose between. Ironically, they speak to our own intelligence and ability to think through the situation.

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I see AI as a tool. It cannot replace us, but it can augment us. Back in July, I used the screwdriver analogy. Expanding on that, I can use my fingers to attach a screw into wood. In the process, I will get tired, and my fingers will cramp up and hurt. It will also take me a lot of time, and I won't be able to screw in very many. Instead, I could use a screwdriver; it would reduce the pain, speed up the process, and let me do more. Furthermore, I can use an electric drill to do it faster and do more with almost no effort.

AI is like the screwdriver and AI enhancements are like an electric drill. They're machinery to help us with our work or our chores. As such, they need to be seen for what they are – tools. They cannot replace human capital. Organizations will budget for technology tools, upgrades and process improvements, but perhaps the greatest untapped investment remains improving the quality of thinking behind every decision. In an AI-enabled world, the organizations that thrive will not be those with the most technology, but those with the strongest thinking.

The problem remains: why aren't we enhancing our thinking? I asked this last week and still got no response, so I will ask again: why don't we help our people to think better?

You can frame that as a rhetorical question, but it stands regardless. What are we doing proactively to increase our intellectual capital?

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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Perseverance and Thanks

9 October, 2026

For the last month, I have been feeling unsettled. It has felt like the world is at a standstill. I couldn't put my finger on it; it just felt off. Then I spoke with a client, and it started to come back into focus. The world may not really be at a standstill. It is certainly busy enough, but it is also in disarray. What has grown exponentially is uncertainty.

Jason helped me by naming some of the uncertainties around us and how we may be thinking about it. A warning: if you are already under the burden of uncertainty, this list may not help.

Global Uncertainty / World Disorder / Global Disruption

- Multiple conflicts underway (Israel, Ukraine, Iran, South Sudan) with potential for global escalations in Europe and the Pacific rim
- Strait of Hormuz and the implications of the depletion of strategic oil reserves
- El Niño promising severe weather events (plus the growing regularity of intense wildfire seasons and storms)
- US trade policy constantly changing
- Trade war between Canada and the US with threats to our sovereignty
- The prospects of separatist movements and the dissolution of our Confederation
- Worldwide growth forecasts looking a bit dire

Economic Uncertainty

- Oil shock every time you fill up your car and the prospect of higher inflation
- Markets betting on rate hikes in the face of inflation
- AI stock valuations through the roof. Almost 50% of the S&P 500 market value comes from roughly 10 companies... all AI-driven or AI-based
- The affordability challenge we face every time we go to the grocery store or out for dinner
- The housing crisis of both shortage and cost
- The prospect of businesses failing or consolidation that could threaten employment

Industrial / Technological uncertainty

- Tariffs and import bans
- Business layoffs in the face of the changes going on
- Cyberattacks rising in frequency, complexity, and damage
- Entry-level workers being squeezed, especially in AI-exposed occupations (and that list is growing)
- The noise that AI might be taking established jobs

This is just a short list and, depending on where you are in age and stage of life, there are added uncertainties about self, loved ones, and friends. Mainstream media and social media exacerbate all of these and blur the truth further.

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As a result, we war-gamed how people might think about these issues. Here are our thoughts:

Global uncertainty

- "I can't plan, so I can't tell if I'm safe... and I have no control over it."
- Decision paralysis: projects get paused "until we know more"
- Leaders may over-communicate their own speculation or go quiet, and the silence gets filled by the rumour mill
- Distraction and presenteeism: I'm at work, but I'm doomscrolling the news or checking my portfolio nervously
- Tension when people have personal ties to a conflict region or hold different views

Economic uncertainty

- "My money is at risk, and so is my job."
- Money stress spills into work
- Staying put in roles someone might otherwise leave, with predictable engagement results
- Scarcity mentality: guarding budgets, headcount, etc., and a reluctance to take on anything not clearly essential
- Pushback on spending for "nice to haves", such as training or structure work

Industrial / technological uncertainty

- "My role, or my skills, may stop being needed."
- Resistance to new tools, slow adoption or "it doesn't work for what I do."
- Suspicion of leadership motives whenever efficiency or automation is mentioned.

Threat of global disruption

- "Something could break suddenly, and we're not ready."
- Fatigue from staying "on alert" all the time

When you add the other half of our life, home, it can become debilitating, especially if family and friends are also feeling the effects.

In an uncertain world, we need leadership to help people through the changes and uncertainty they are experiencing. In fact, we do not just need leadership; we need *grounded* leadership. This doesn’t mean you need to have all the answers or pretend that everything is under control. When uncertainty is touching nearly every part of our lives, people are looking for steadiness. By communicating honestly, making thoughtful decisions, and helping people focus on what they can control, leaders can help their people navigate things with more confidence. This doesn’t mean putting a veneer on reality; strong leaders can acknowledge it without amplifying fear.

The problem is that leaders are all facing the same uncertainties. To be truly effective managerial leaders, we need to understand where our own fears and worries lie, and our own mindsets, before we can lead anyone through these challenging times. So, this week, I ask you to consider which elements of uncertainty are affecting you. In the weeks to come, we'll deal with how to lead through this, but first, take time to notice what may be distressing you.

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I don't want to leave you hanging here. Take time to consider what you have come through to get here, and give thanks for making it this far. A few weeks ago, I wrote about resiliency. I encourage you to remind yourself of how resilient you actually are. As the saying goes, “you’ve survived 100% of your worst days.” While uncertainty may be a defining feature of the moment, uncertainty is not helplessness. We have all adapted, persevered, and found our footing again. That’s a strong track record.

For Canadians, this is our Thanksgiving weekend, a time to reflect on what we are thankful for. So take time this weekend, before re-entering work next week, to reflect on how far you have come.

Have a great weekend.

Cheers,
Julian

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The Accountability for Flourishing

16 October, 2026

In past missives, I have spoken about the nature of human flourishing, specifically at work. Several years ago, I had the chance to be involved in the Humanity 2.0 conference on human flourishing in the face of AI at the Vatican. Flourishing is therefore dear to my heart and, while it can appear soft or mushy, it is essential that we pay close attention to it; it is a hard, tough concept.

The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard uses Dr. Tyler VanderWeele's definition of flourishing as "*a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good*." The program goes further to state that the measures of flourishing are:

- Happiness and life satisfaction
- Mental and physical health
- Meaning and purpose
- Character and virtue
- Close social relationships
- Financial and material stability

Given that a very large amount of our working-age time is spent at or thinking about work, there must be a component of flourishing at work to ensure our "lives are good".

The question I posed at a recent roundtable was this: if we believe people should flourish at work, who is accountable for ensuring they do, employees themselves or management?

I am being intentionally precise in my language here. **Accountability** is the part of a relationship where someone is held to account for doing something. This differs from **responsibility**, which is a personal feeling of obligation that comes from within us.

My answer is that management is accountable. That said, I think many managerial leaders don't see it that way. They see their job as delivering results. They see it as the employee's responsibility to flourish: "If you don't like it here, leave."

This managerial attitude has many causes. Without getting too philosophical or political, it often comes from seeing our managerial roles as purely output-related: the *what*, not the *how*. Sure, this can stem from our experience and belief systems, but it sits at the heart of the tension between management and leadership. However, effectiveness is not an either-or; it is an *and*.

To be truly effective in a role where you are accountable for your direct reports' output, you need to integrate task management with leading people. There is tension between these two, and your role is to manage it. As Robert Fritz said, "tension seeks resolution". You need to balance these two and maintain the tension, rather than letting go of one and focusing only on the other. A manager who achieves extraordinary results while burning out staff is failing. A manager who creates a wonderful workplace that never accomplishes its mission is also failing.

This is the essence of managerial leadership: we can't always make people happy, but we need to ensure they can flourish at work, not just for them, but to achieve our goals. We can't make them feel

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satisfied, but we can set up the conditions for them to be satisfied at work. We can't manage their health, but we can make sure we are not harming them. We can ensure their work has meaning and purpose. While we can't control values, we can promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult situations. We cannot choose their friends, but we can build a team where close working relationships based on dialogue and trust are possible. And finally, we can't control their finances, but we can help them achieve financial stability. We create psychological safety.

None of this absolves employees. People ultimately decide how they engage with their work, colleagues, and development. They choose whether to seek growth opportunities, build relationships, ask for help when needed, and align their actions with their values. Flourishing cannot be imposed on someone from the outside. However, again, responsibility and accountability are not the same thing. Employees are responsible for participating in their own flourishing, while managerial leaders are accountable for creating the conditions in which flourishing is genuinely possible.

Some may read this and still say, "that isn't my work." That is a legitimate perspective. What I would ask, though, is what the cost would be if we all took flourishing at work seriously. I believe you would create a great place to work that delivers the strategy, which is the crux of managerial leadership.

Have a great weekend.
Julian

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