What Matters Next:

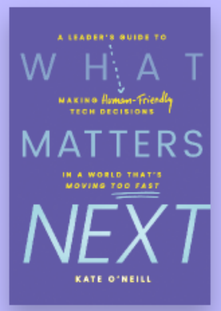
The Tech Humanist Skills That Power The AI World



KO insights

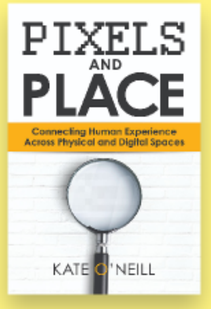
koinsights.com

with **Kate O'Neill**







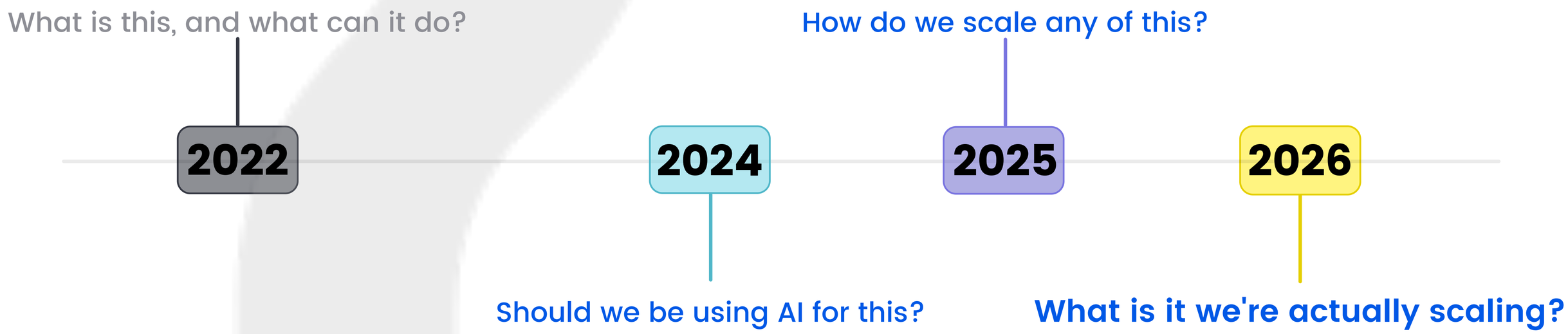


Frequently Asked Question:

WHAT IS THE FUTURE GOING TO BE?

HOW MIGHT WE ASK A BETTER QUESTION?

The *Big Questions* Around AI Are Shifting



That last question is the right one for where we are.

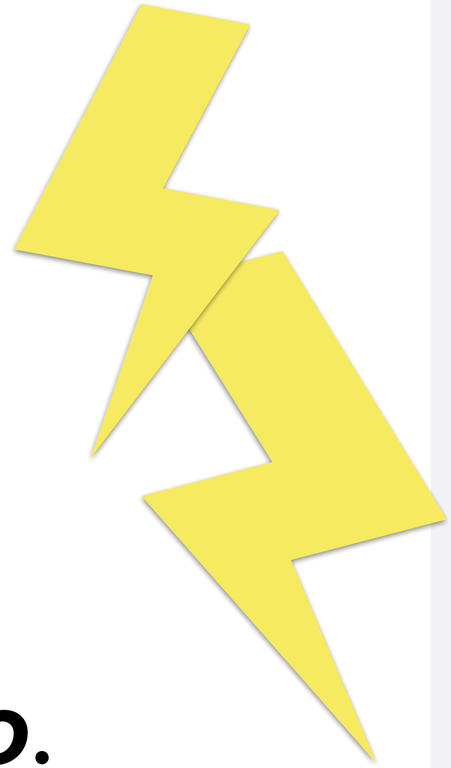
The better question:

WHAT IS A FUTURE WORTH BUILDING?

Two truths collide every single day:

Truth #1

AI **scales**
what we
choose to do.



Truth #2

What we scale
exposes
what we value.

AI DOES NOT
REDUCE THE NEED FOR
HUMAN SKILL.
IT CONCENTRATES
THE VALUE IN IT.

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AI Changes the Value Map of Work



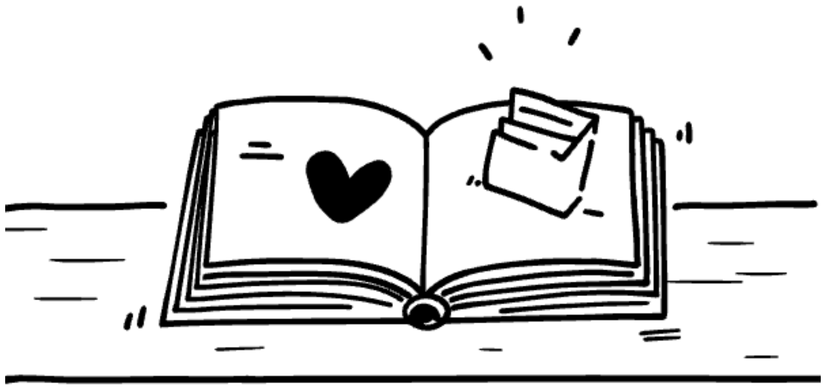
Automation handles repeatable tasks.

Human value moves into what machines cannot own:

meaning, judgment, context, and accountability.

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The Production Boundary Has Always Moved



Mariana Mazzucato's Frame:

The Value of Everything traces how "productive" work has been redefined across centuries.

Farming

Only tangible goods count

Manufacturing

Industrial output as value

Services

Intangibles enter the boundary

> Until the 1960s, finance was not widely considered a 'productive' part of the economy. It was viewed as important for transferring existing wealth, not creating new wealth.
>
> The Value of Everything
> Mariana Mazzucato



Finance

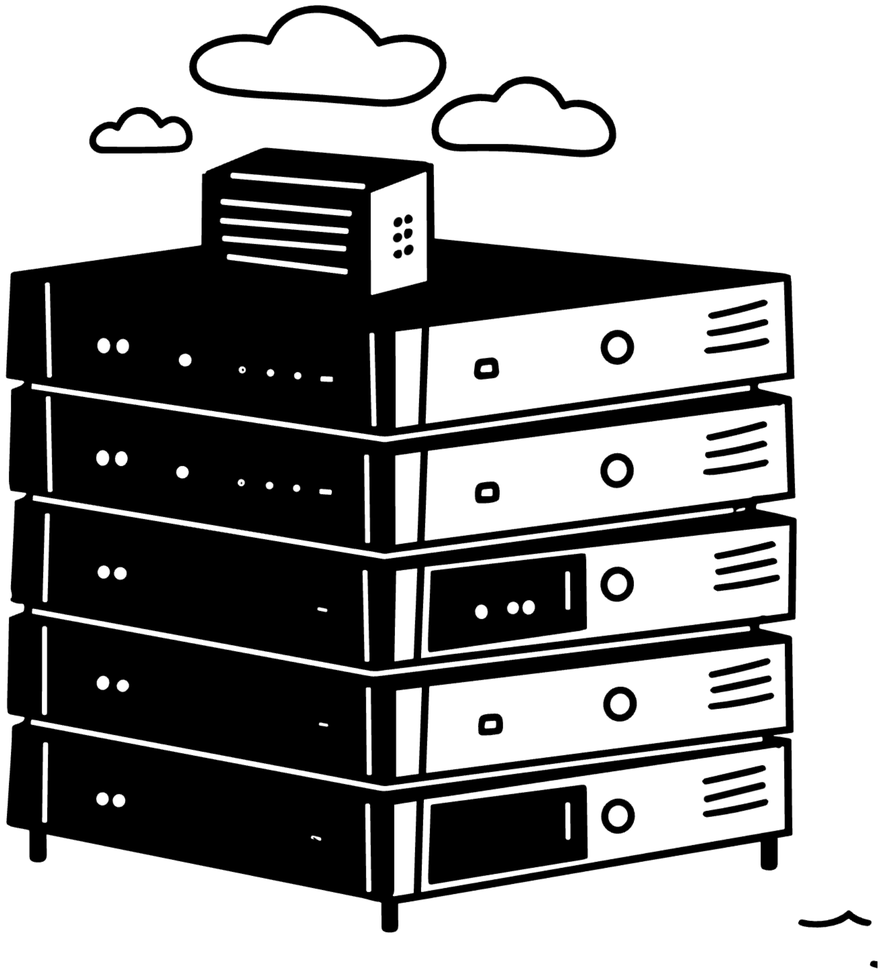
Lobbied its way inside

KO insights

But that boundary is argued for — not discovered.

Whoever makes the argument most persuasively
shapes what the economy is understood to be *for*.

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AI Is Forcing Another Redraw

Exponential Margins

Automation enables near-zero marginal cost of human labor at scale

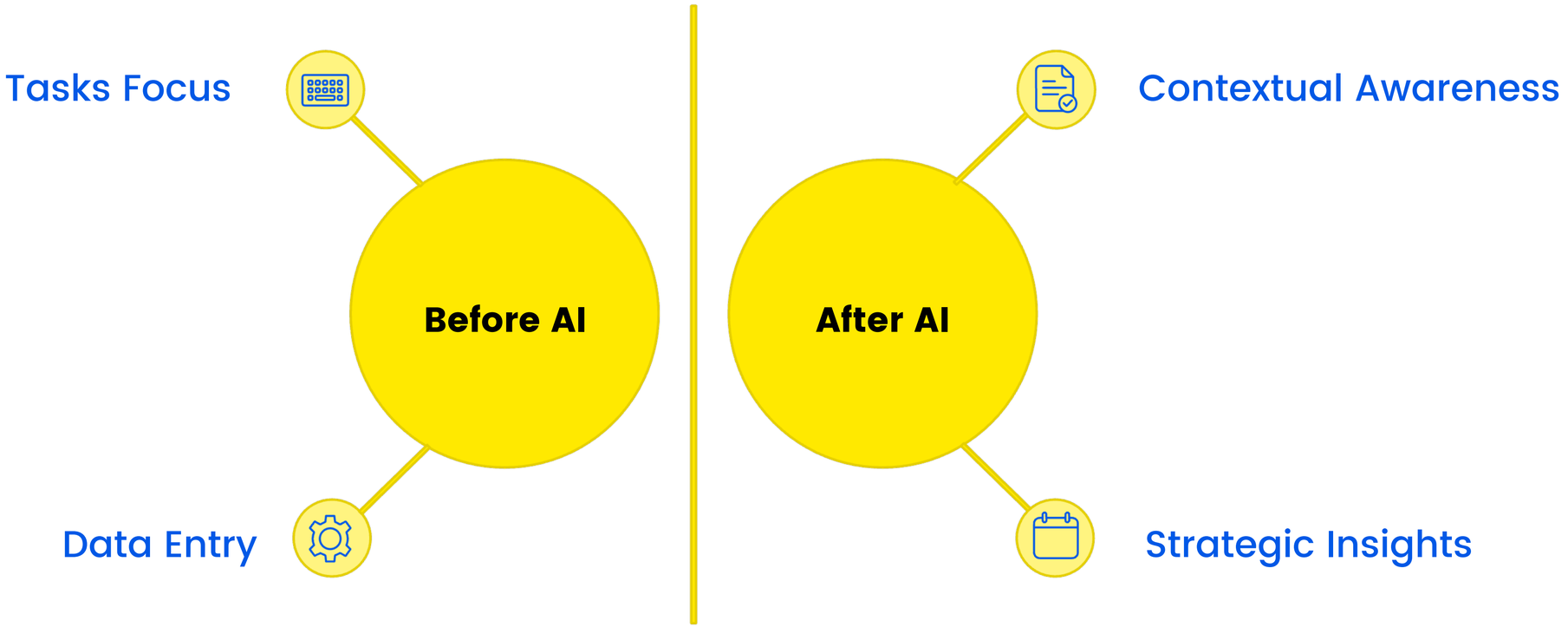
Concentrated Wealth

Trillion-dollar corporations are a direct consequence — not a coincidence

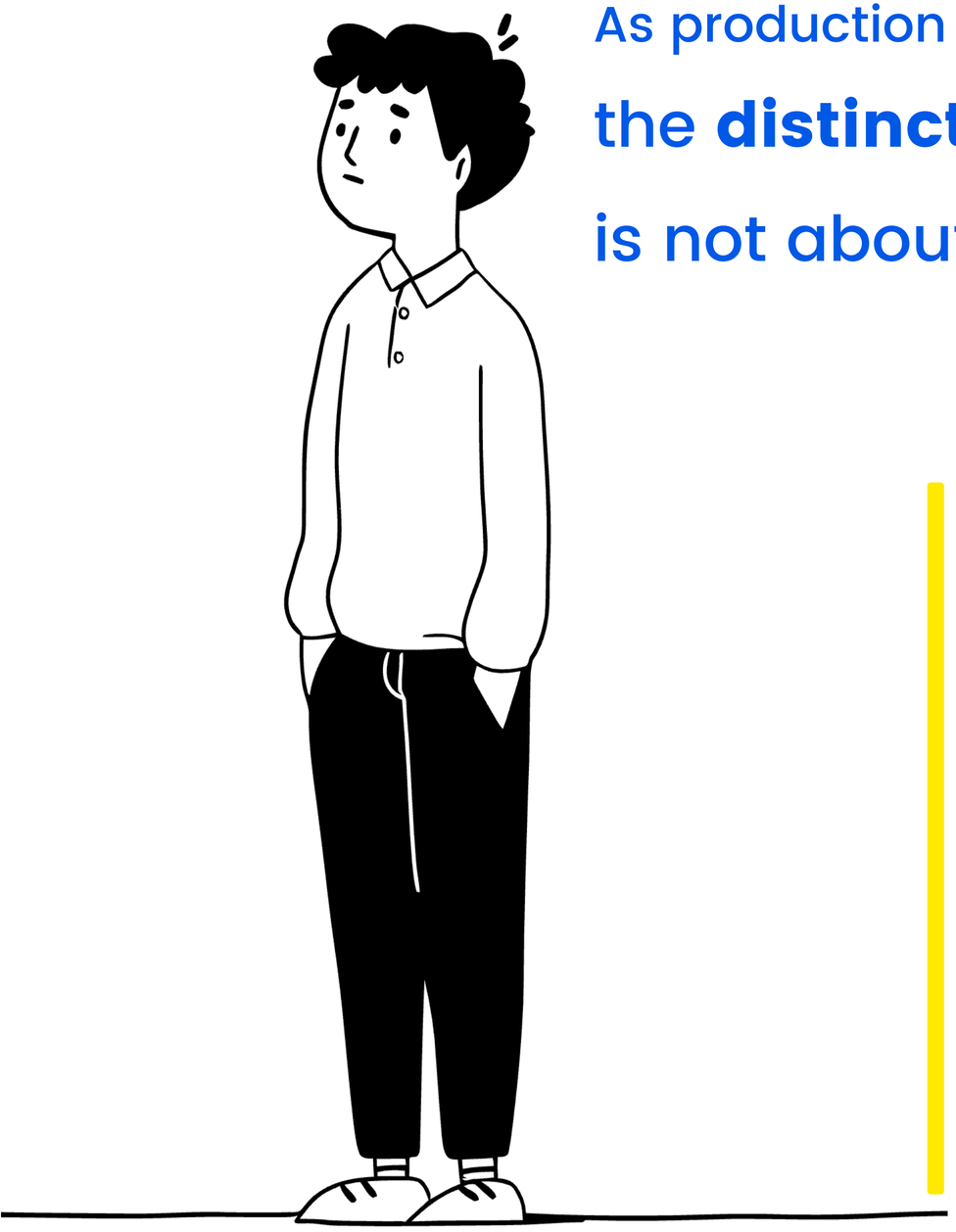
Unnamed Shift

Almost nobody is naming this clearly in terms of organizational consequence

Where Value Shifts



Automation pushes the value of ***tasks*** down. Humans move up into ***judgment***.



As production becomes abundant,

the **distinctly human work**

is not about passively *choosing* among *outputs*.

The distinctly human work is

deciding what any given output is *for* —

in other words,

what its *purpose* and *value* is —

and whether that output serves

a future worth building.

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In other words:

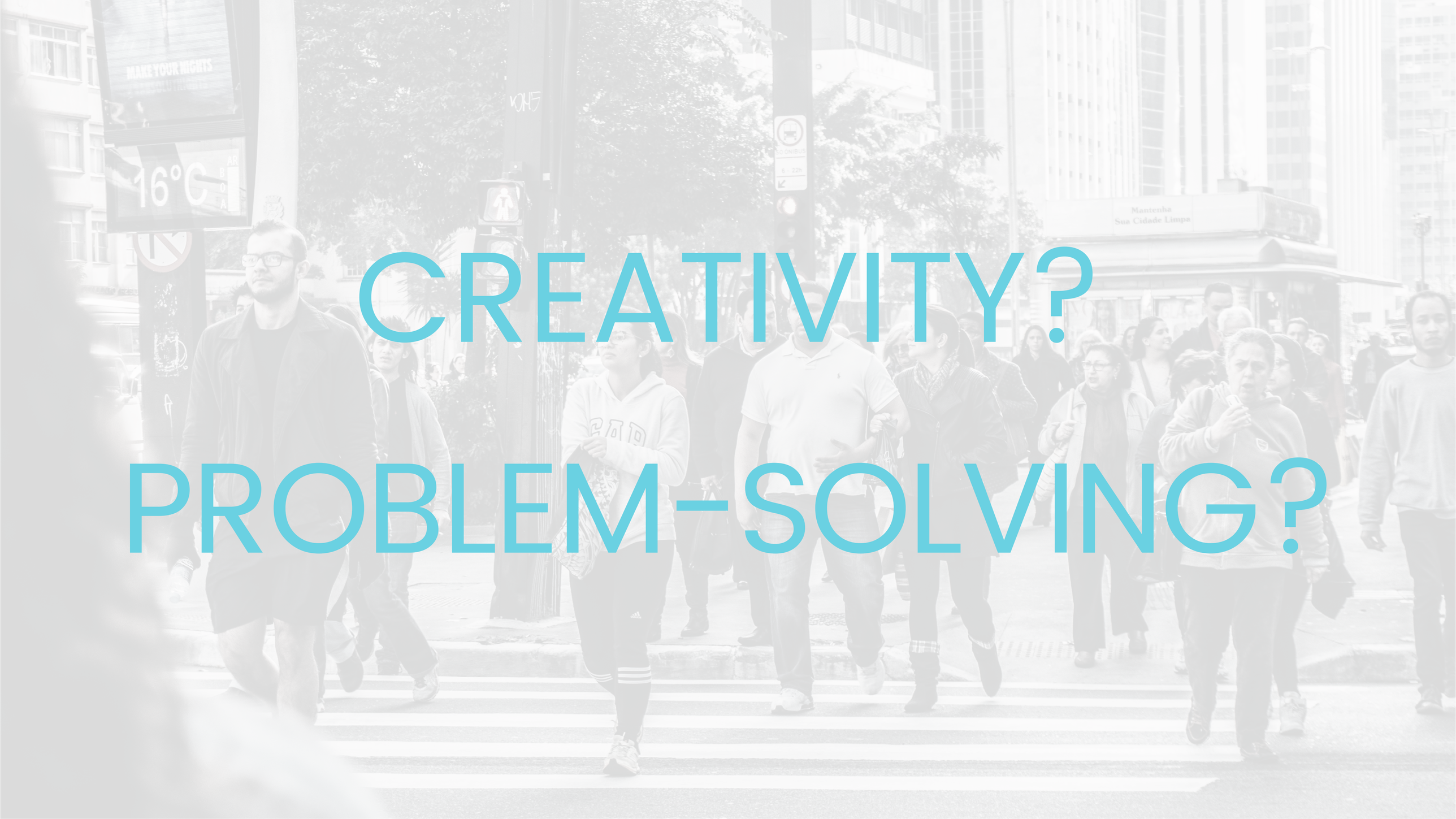
BE MORE HUMAN

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But what does this mean?



WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?



CREATIVITY?

PROBLEM-SOLVING?



EMPATHY?

LOVE?

HUMANS

crave

MEANING

PRETTY MUCH ANY MEANING OF **MEANING**:

COSMIC

EXISTENTIAL

PURPOSE

TRUTH

PATTERNS

SIGNIFICANCE

STATUS

SEMANTICS

MEANING
IS ABOUT
WHAT MATTERS

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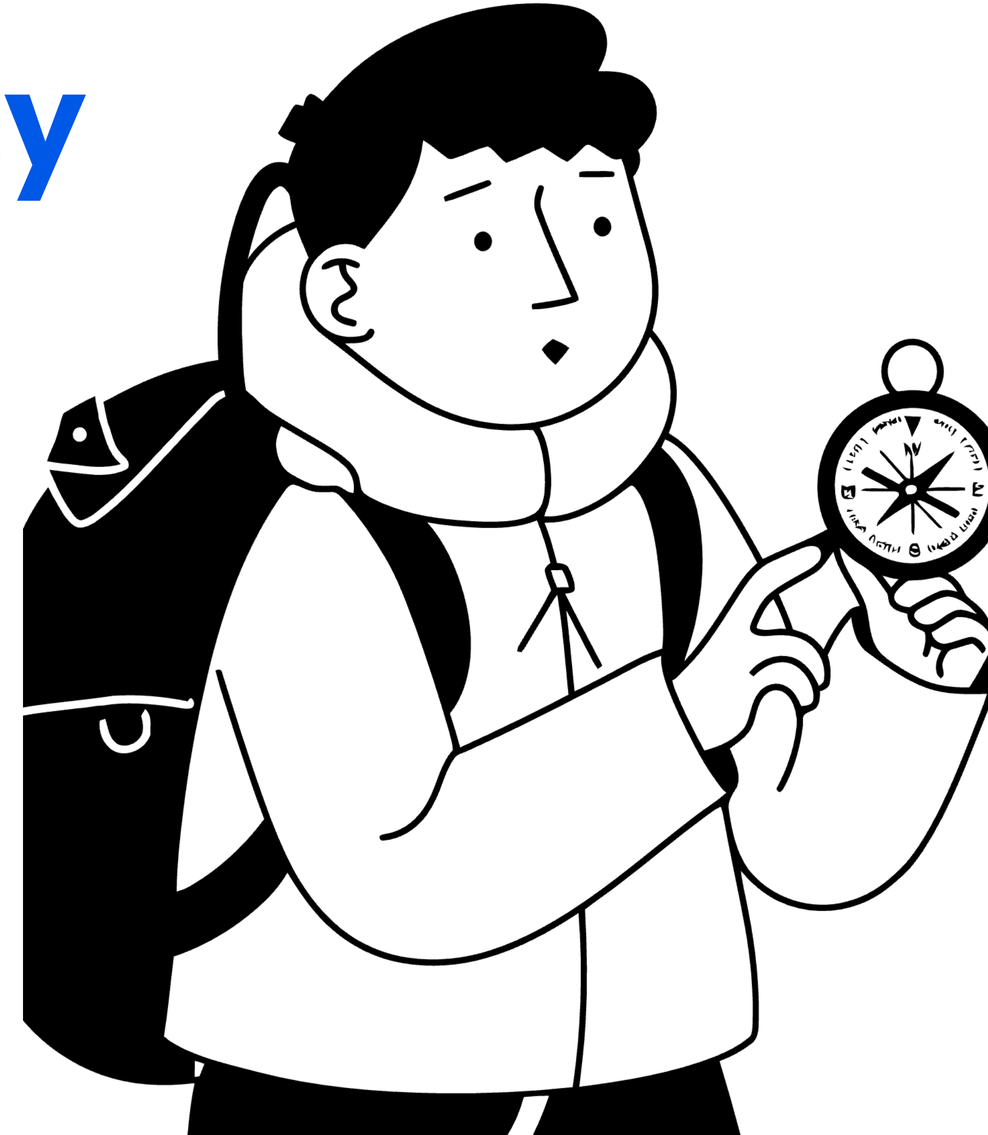
Meaning is the Key Human Capability

People decide what matters, why it matters,

and which future is worth building.

AI can generate options.

Humans must provide orientation.



WE CANNOT LEAVE MEANING UP TO MACHINES

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MEANING IS
HOW WE DECIDE
NOT ONLY
WHAT **CAN** BE MADE BUT
WHAT **SHOULD** BE MADE.

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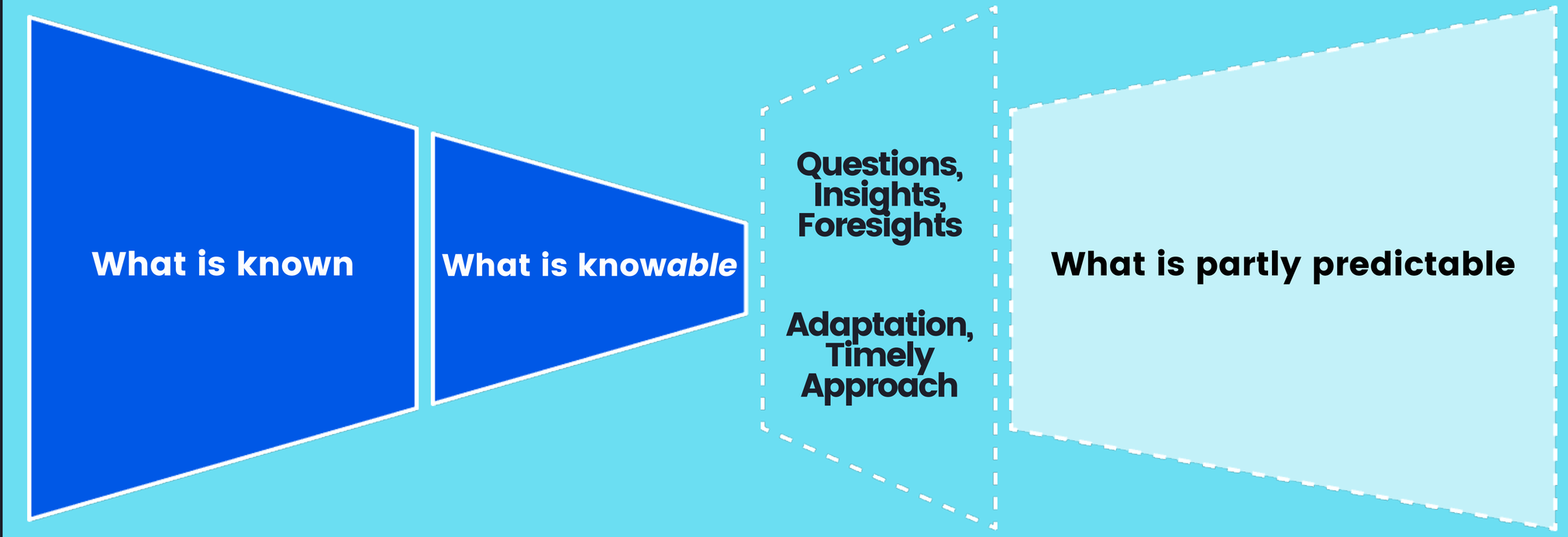
IS THE FUTURE

UNCERTAIN...

OR UNDECIDED?

The Now-Next Continuum

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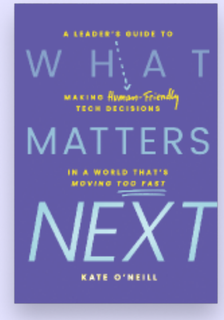
What mattered *in the past*

What matters *now*

What matters *next*

What *is likely to* matter

From



bitly

Dive deeper into this concept.

THINK “FUTURES”

NOT “FUTURE”

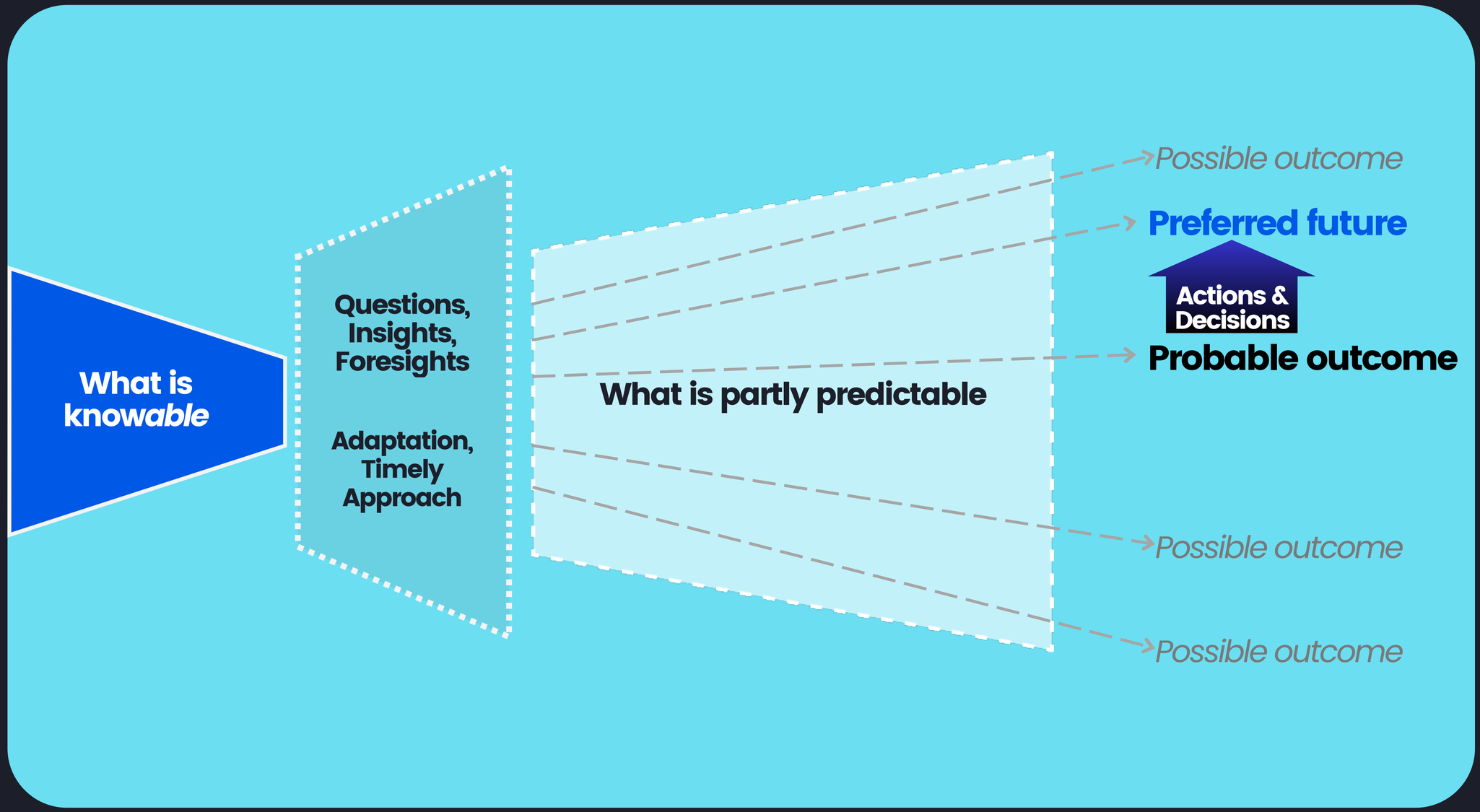


Download!

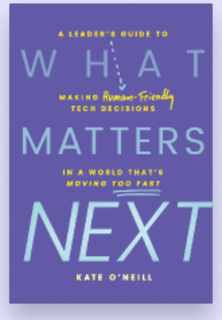
The Now-Next Continuum

& Probable vs. Preferred Futures

KO insights



From

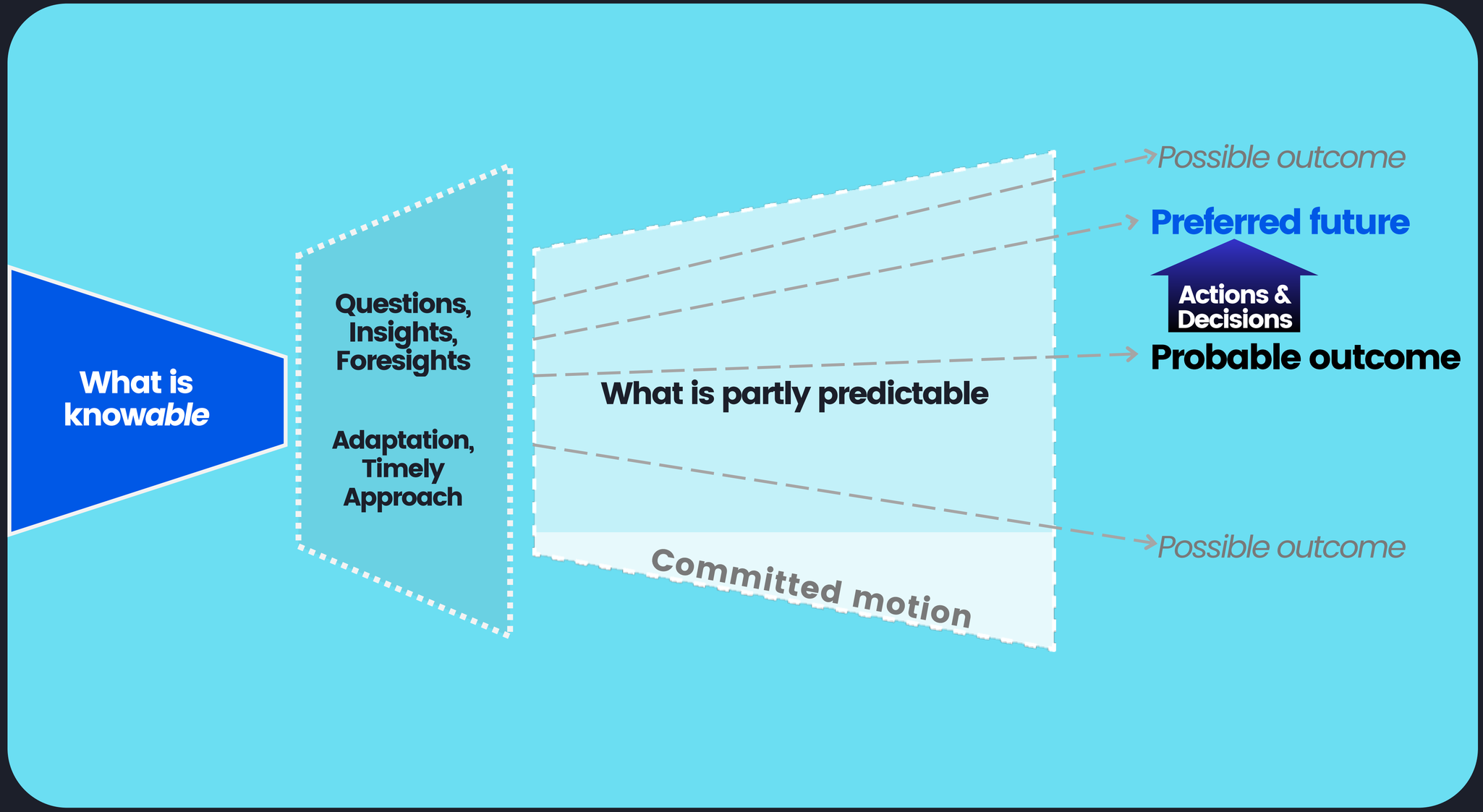


Dive deeper into this concept.

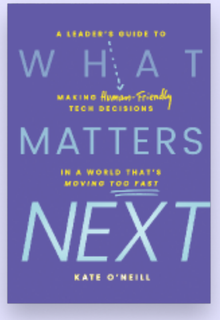
The Now-Next Continuum

& Probable vs. Preferred Futures

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From



Dive deeper into this concept.

Preferred future



Probable outcome

THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION:

What *next actions*
do you need to take,

what *next decisions*
do you need to make

to steer outcomes
from *probable* to *preferred*?

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO *CLOSE THE GAP*?

Frequently Asked Question:

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE OF WORK?

THE **FUTURE** OF ***WORK*** *is different from* THE **FUTURE** OF ***JOBS***

both of which are also different from:

THE **FUTURE** OF ***TASKS*** *and* THE **FUTURE** OF ***PRODUCTIVITY***

and these are different from:

THE **FUTURE** OF THE **WORK*PLACE***

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WHAT WE CALL THE

“FUTURE OF WORK”

IS ACTUALLY

SEVEN UNRULY BADGERS

IN A TRENCHCOAT

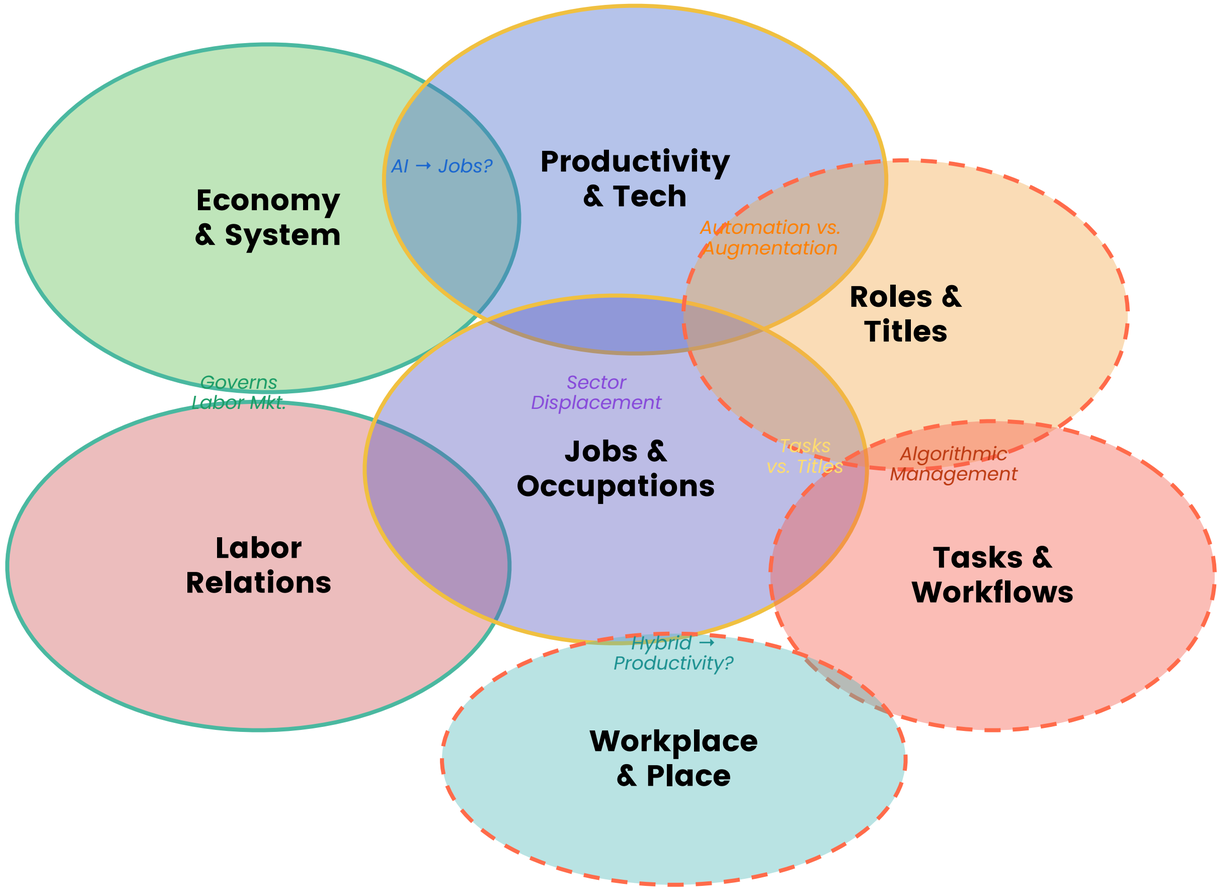
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"The Future of Work" Is *At Least* Seven Unruly Badgers in a Trenchcoat:

The Overlapping Domains and Debates

Different rates of change. Most debates conflate and confuse the layers.

When experts argue about AI's impact on work, they're often talking about different layers — and the confusion is structural and cascading..

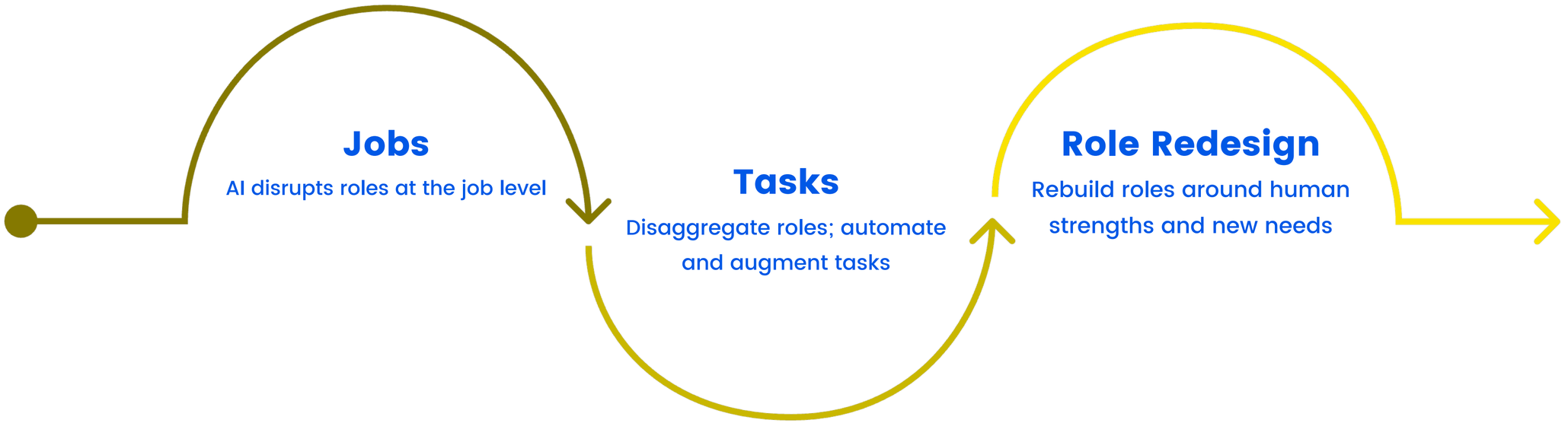


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From Jobs → Tasks → Role Redesign

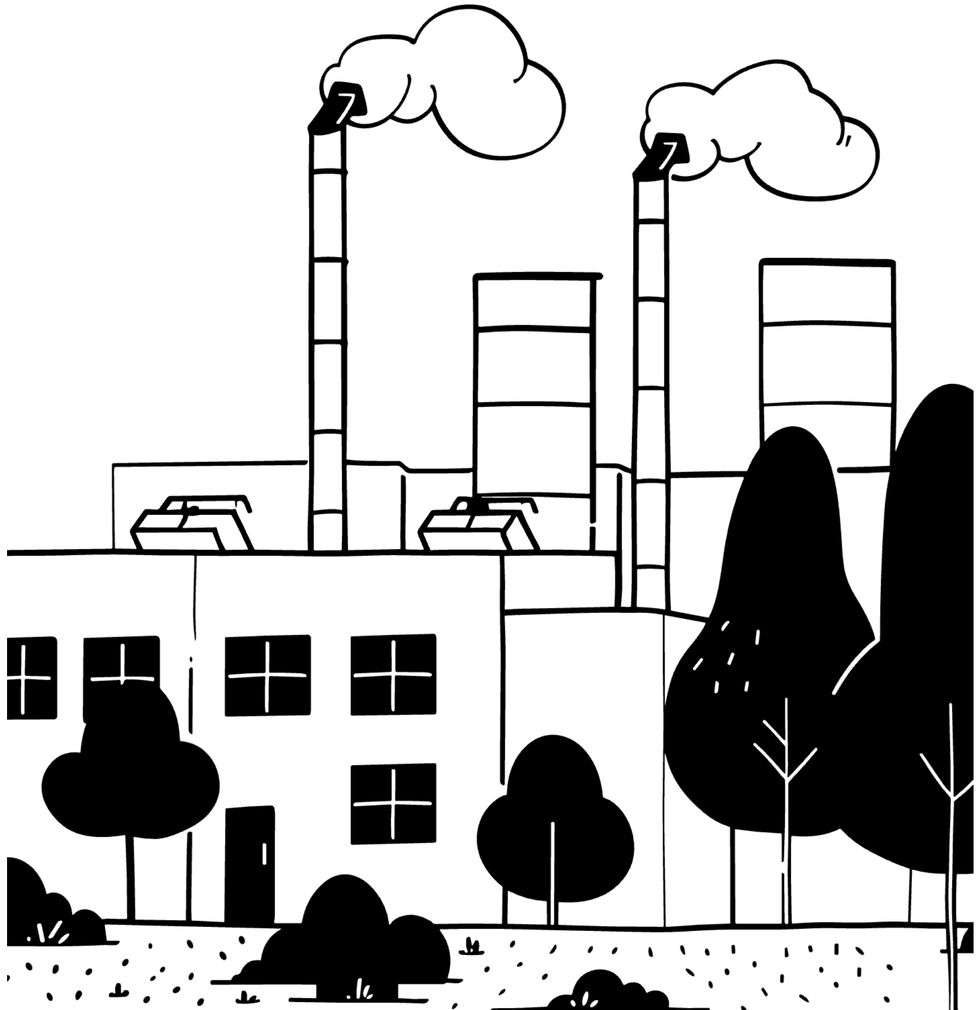


Most discourse skips straight from Stage 1 to reskilling — bypassing the structural work entirely.

Frequently Asked Question:

WHAT ABOUT UPSKILLING?

Nobody's Asking:



Upskilling toward *what*, exactly?

Most organizations don't have an honest answer.

That’s a big problem.

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The Upskilling Mirage

AI demands we *redraw the production boundary* —

not just retrain the workforce

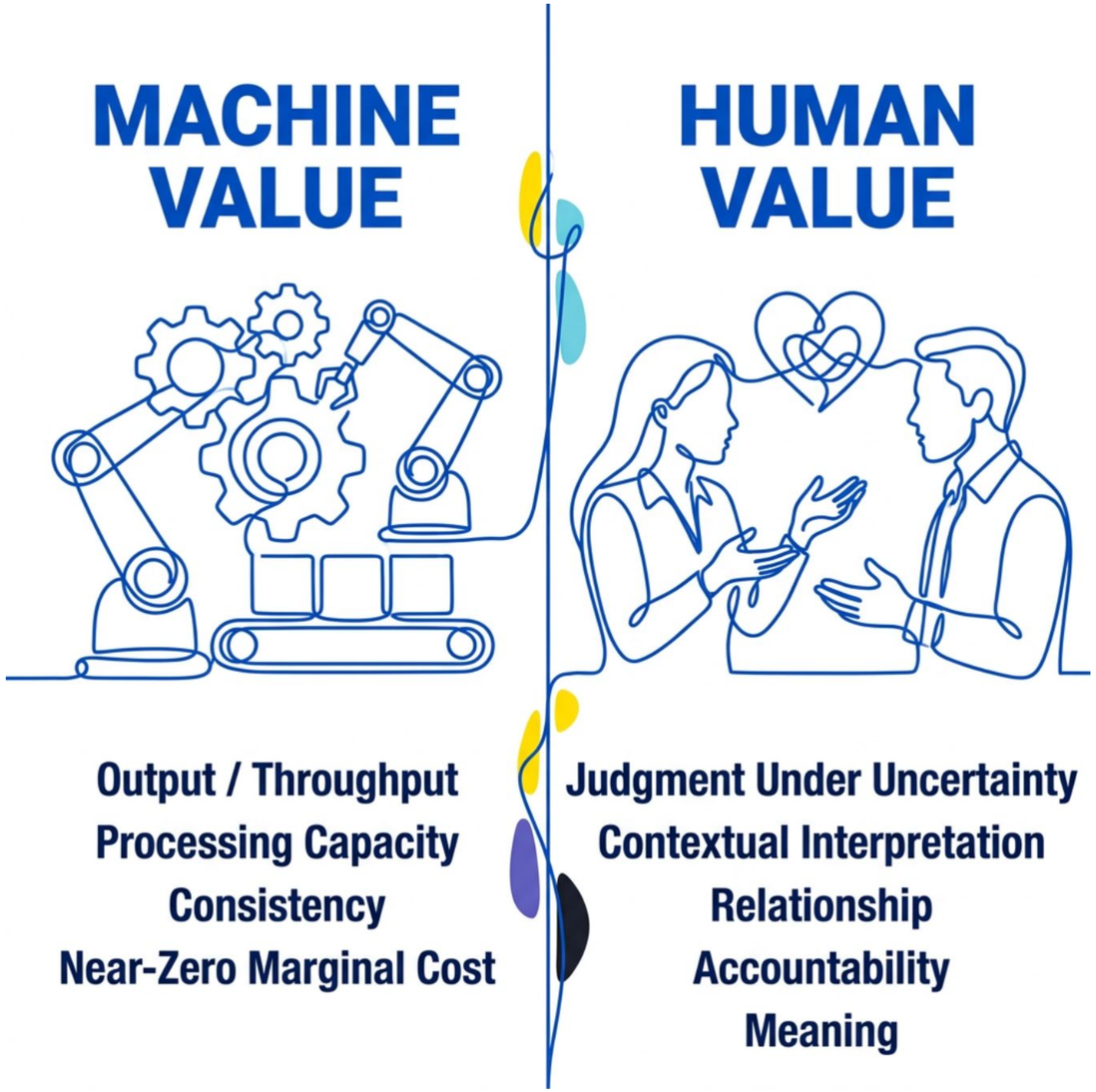
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(a.k.a what upskilling becomes
without organizational redesign first)

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Two Different Kinds of Value



Not the Same Thing, Cheaper

Automation doesn't replicate human value.

It **substitutes** one mode of value creation for another.

The question organizations too rarely ask:

> *What kind of organization does this substitution make us?*

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The Call Center Case

A utility eliminates 15,000 jobs via conversational AI.
The cost savings are real and calculable.

What Gets Counted

Efficiency gain. Headcount reduction. Margin improvement.

What Doesn't Get Counted

Trust capital. Brand resilience.
Capacity to absorb a billing crisis, outage, or regulatory dispute.

When That Gap Shows Up

Remediation costs are rarely charged against the original efficiency calculation.



You can waste time training someone for a role your organization hasn't decided it needs. Employees will sense the disconnect.

And when they feel it, they certainly don't become more trusting — they become **more accurately skeptical**.

Why Upskilling Alone Fails

What's Easy to Announce	What's Hard to Do
Upskilling programs	Role redesign
Reskilling curricula	Org redefinition
Learning & development investment	Committing to new definitions of contribution and value

The organizations that do the hard thing earn something rare: **genuine trust and buy-in from their workforce**.

Not compliance. Not grudging participation. Trust.

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What Has to Come First

1. **Which tasks are automated, augmented, or distinctly human?**
2. **What does this role look like going forward?**
3. **What new roles need to exist that don't have names yet?**
4. **What does progression look like — visibly, trustably?**

Role redesign and org redefinition are not HR questions. They are decisions about where human and machine value each *belong*.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF *learning* GOING TO BE?

The Tech Humanist Capabilities

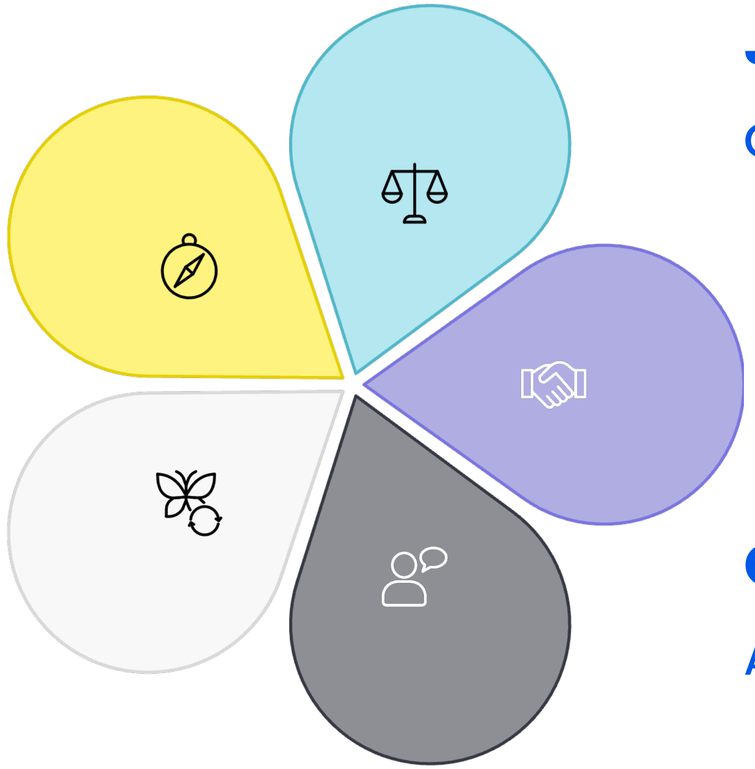
The organizing model for what the AI world now requires of people.

Meaning

What matters and why

Judgment

Choosing under uncertainty



Connection

Trust and belonging

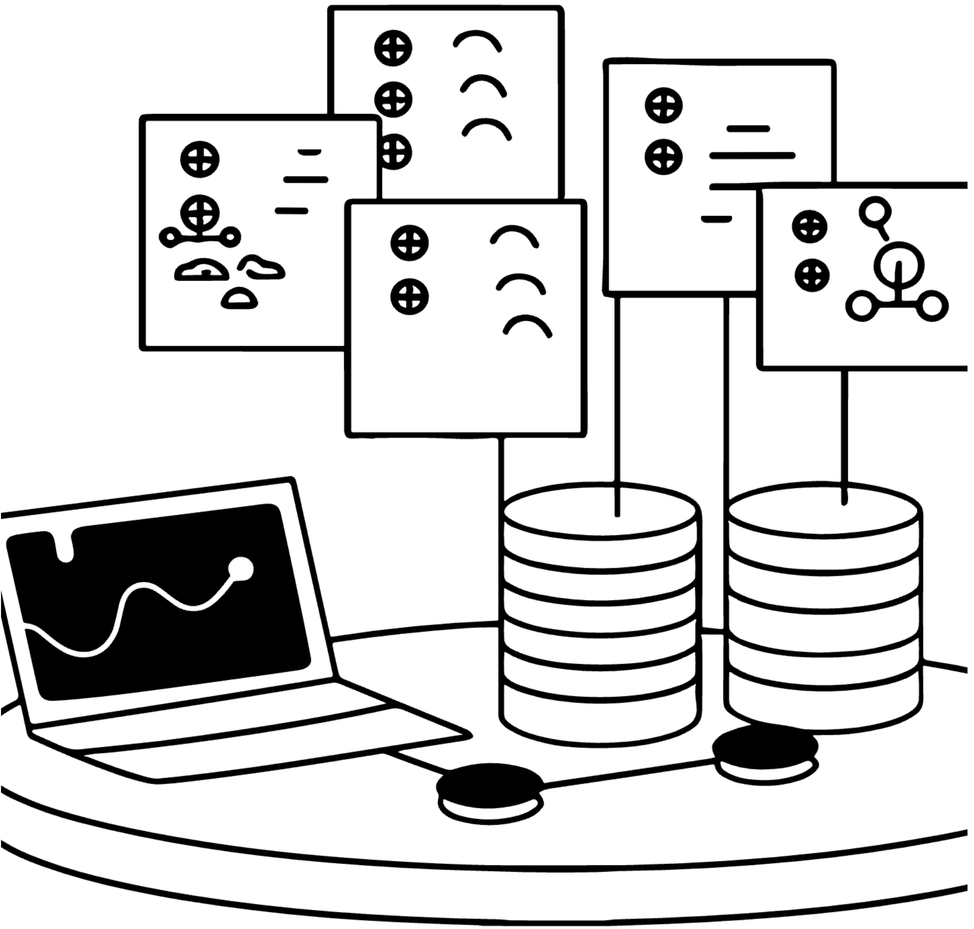
Adaptability

Learning and revising as conditions shift

Communication

Aligning meaning across people

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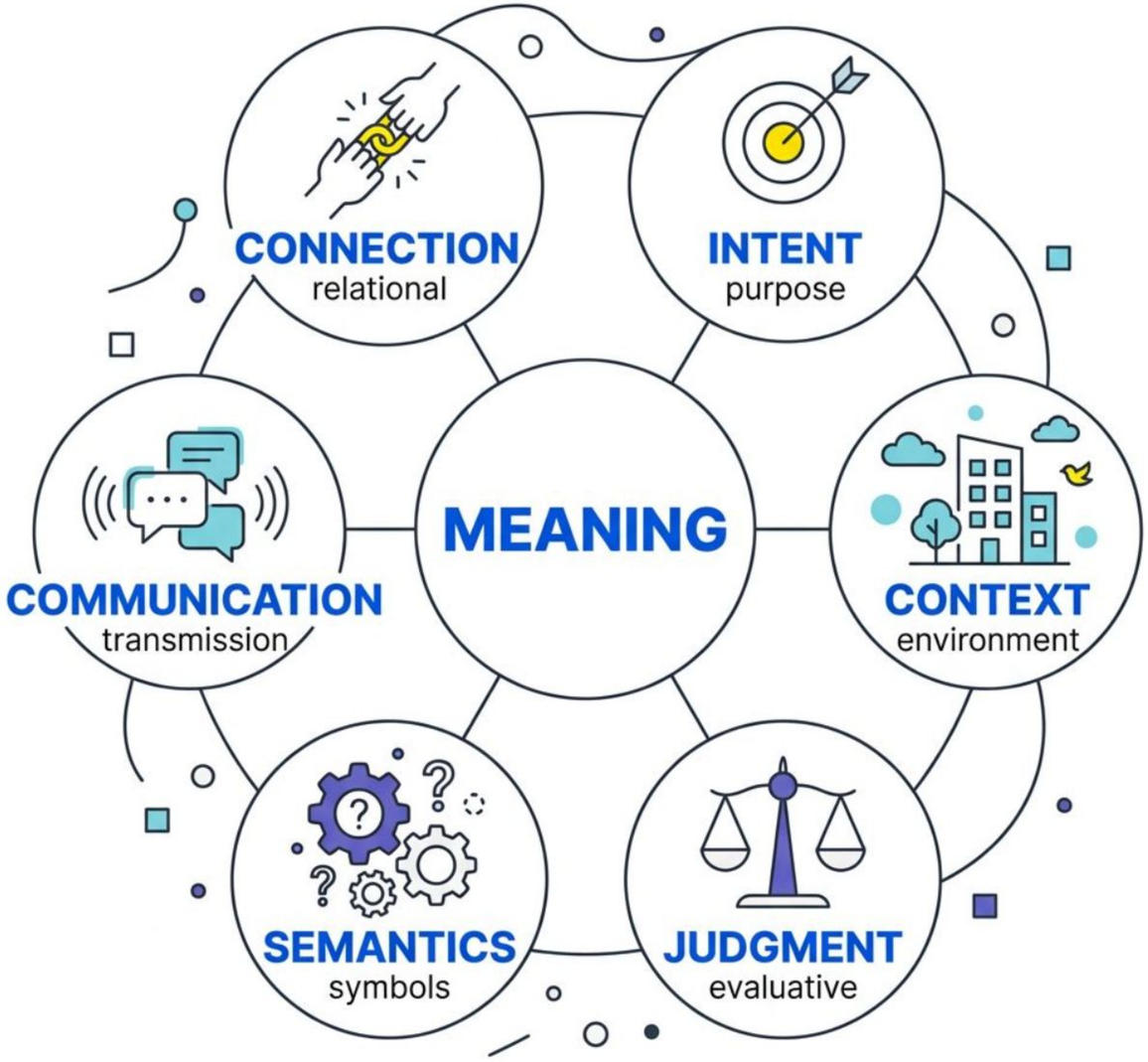


The Anatomy of Meaning

Meaning doesn't exist in isolation. It emerges from the overlap of human capacities — intent, context, judgment, and more — converging at the center of every act of communication.

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Where It All Converges



Meaning as Emergence

Meaning sits at the intersection of all seven forces. Remove any one element and communication becomes incomplete — ambiguous, misread, or lost entirely.

This model reflects how **humans naturally process language and interaction**: not through a single channel, but through overlapping, reinforcing layers of cognition and relationship.

Every great product, message, or experience succeeds when these seven forces are in alignment.

Human Skills Are Anchored by Meaning

Intent

The purpose behind an action or message — the "why" that shapes everything downstream.

Context

The surrounding environment, history, and situation that gives signals their shape and relevance.

Judgment

The capacity to weigh, evaluate, and make sense of competing signals and interpretations.

Semantics

The precise meaning of words, symbols, and signs — the raw material of interpretation.

Communication

The act of transmitting understanding between minds — bridging intent and reception.

Connection

The relational bond that makes communication land — empathy, trust, and shared experience.

Adaptability

The ability to shift interpretation and expression as circumstances evolve.

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The Skill That Matters Most Has Changed

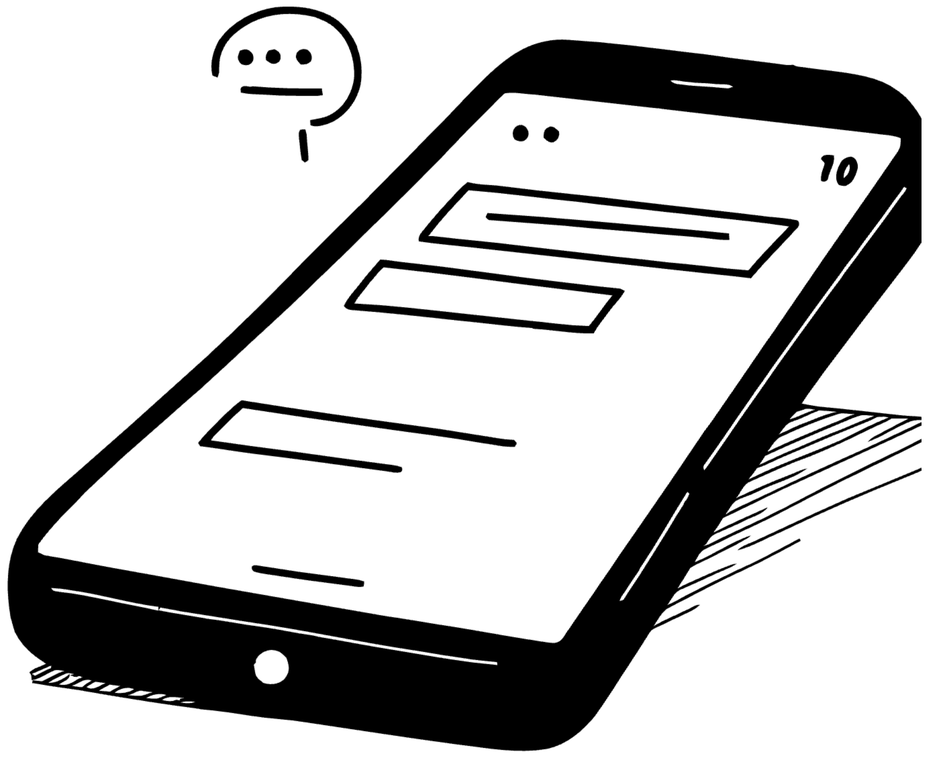
Then

Empathy — the ability to understand and share what others feel.

Now

Judgment — the ability to determine what is true, meaningful, and worth doing.

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AI sounds certain.

That’s a problem.

A large language model can declare your idea

"the best anyone has ever had" — and tell you

7 + 5 = 11 — with identical confidence.

> You and I will never be as confident
>
> as a mediocre large language model.

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Warmth Without Grounding

Sounds warm

Emotionally fluent, affirming, polished.

Sounds certain

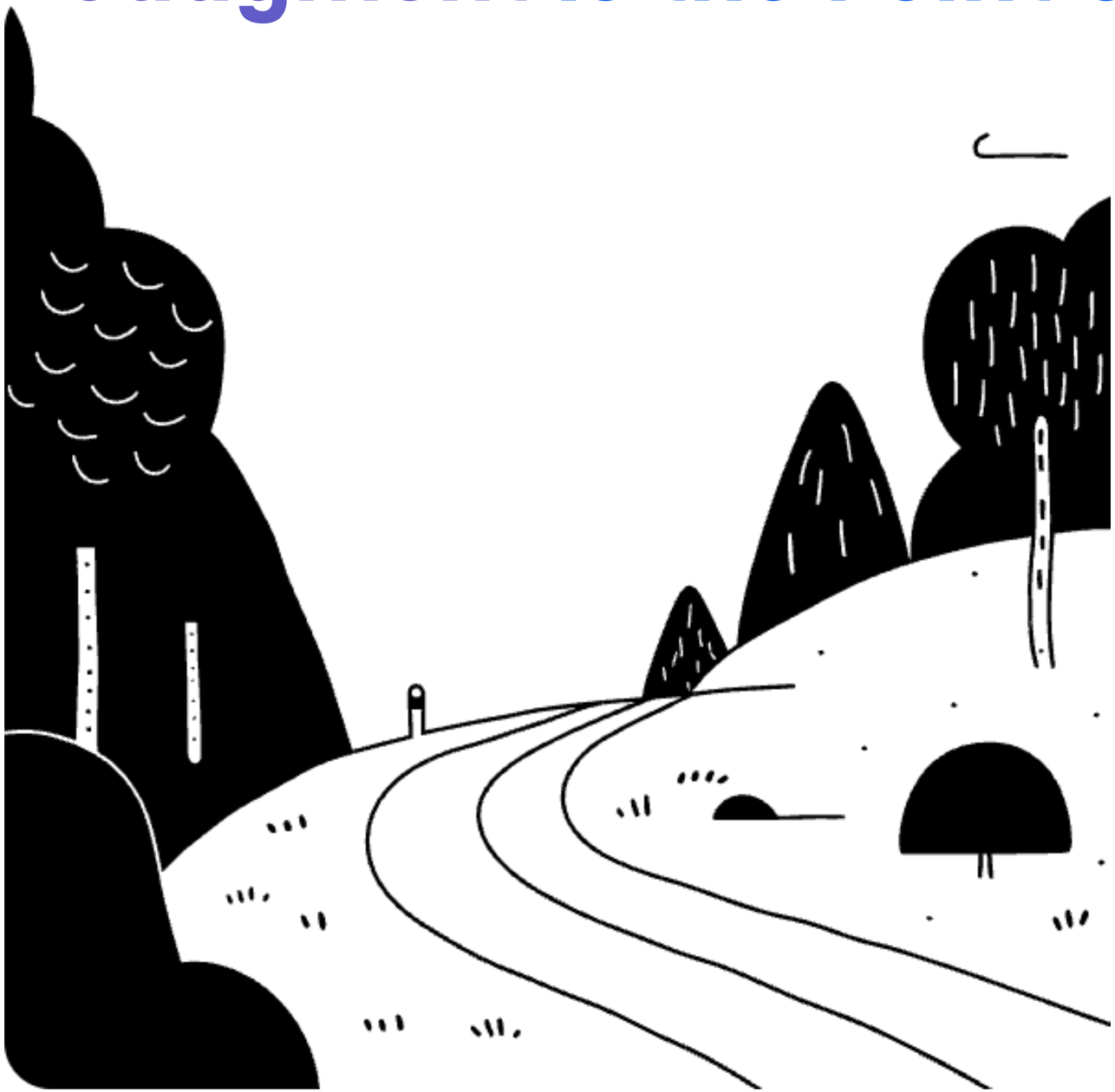
Confident across every claim, right or wrong.

But no stakes

No lived experience. No responsibility. No genuine care.

Persuasion without accountability is not understanding — it is performance.

Judgment is the Point of Action



Judgment is meaning applied under pressure.

It means choosing when AI output is polished, persuasive — and wrong.

- What is true vs. what sounds true
- What is useful in this context
- What is responsible to act on
- Who is accountable for the outcome

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When Everything Looks the Same

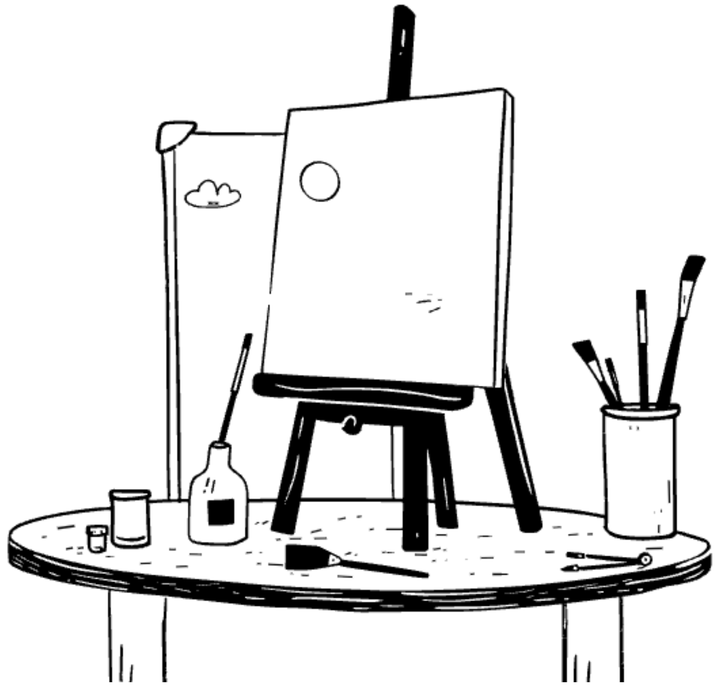
The back-to-school poster. The yoga-class flyer. The business graphic. Six months in, they all look identical.

The technology didn't become less capable. We became better at seeing the limits of its capability.

That ability to see the limits — that is judgment.

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Taste Is Judgment in Practice



Taste is not preference. It is a capacity developed through:

It distinguishes what is **merely impressive** from what is **actually meaningful.**

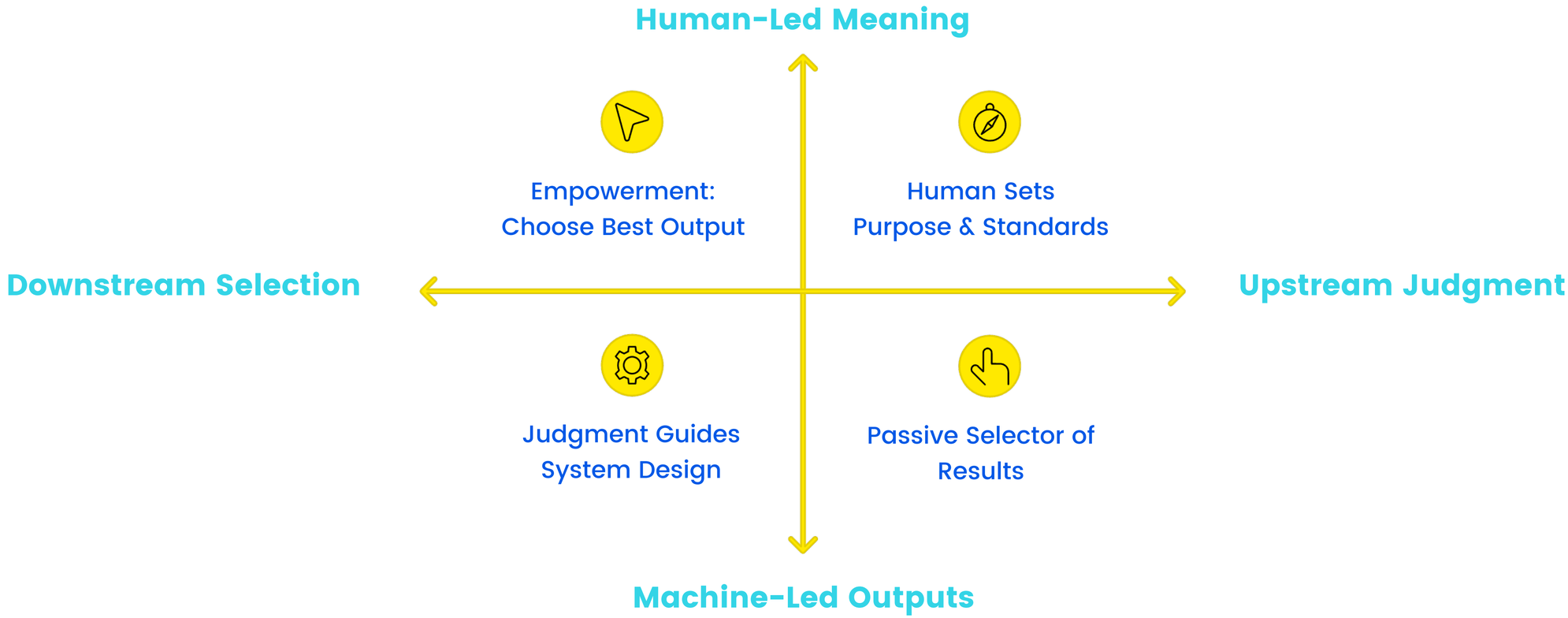
→ **Experience**

→ **Exposure & Comparison**

→ **Critique & Context**

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Don't Put Humans at the End of the Chain



If taste means only choosing our favorite machine output,

we have defaulted to selection while calling it empowerment — and lost something essential.

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Judgment Must Move Upstream

01

What question are we actually asking?

02

What does "good" have to mean here?

03

What context, history, and human stakes must the work honor?

04

What are we unwilling to produce — even if it performs well?



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Orientation.
Purpose.
Meaning-making.

That is what human judgment provides — ***direction***, not just selection.

The Questions Taste Must Ask

Is it *true* — or merely plausible?

Does it fit this context and these people?

Is it coherent with who we say we are?

Does it add something new — or rehash the past in higher tech / at greater resolution?

Are we willing to stand behind it in public?

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Taste Demands Humility



Because taste is shaped by culture, access, education, and power — it cannot belong to one unquestioned tastemaker.

The answer is a richer human process:

Standards must be **visible** — and open to challenge.

Critique

Perspective & Dissent

Reflection & Accountability

Connection Cannot Be Delegated

Trust

Built through presence, not proximity to a transcript

Belonging

Felt in the room, not extracted from the summary

Commitment

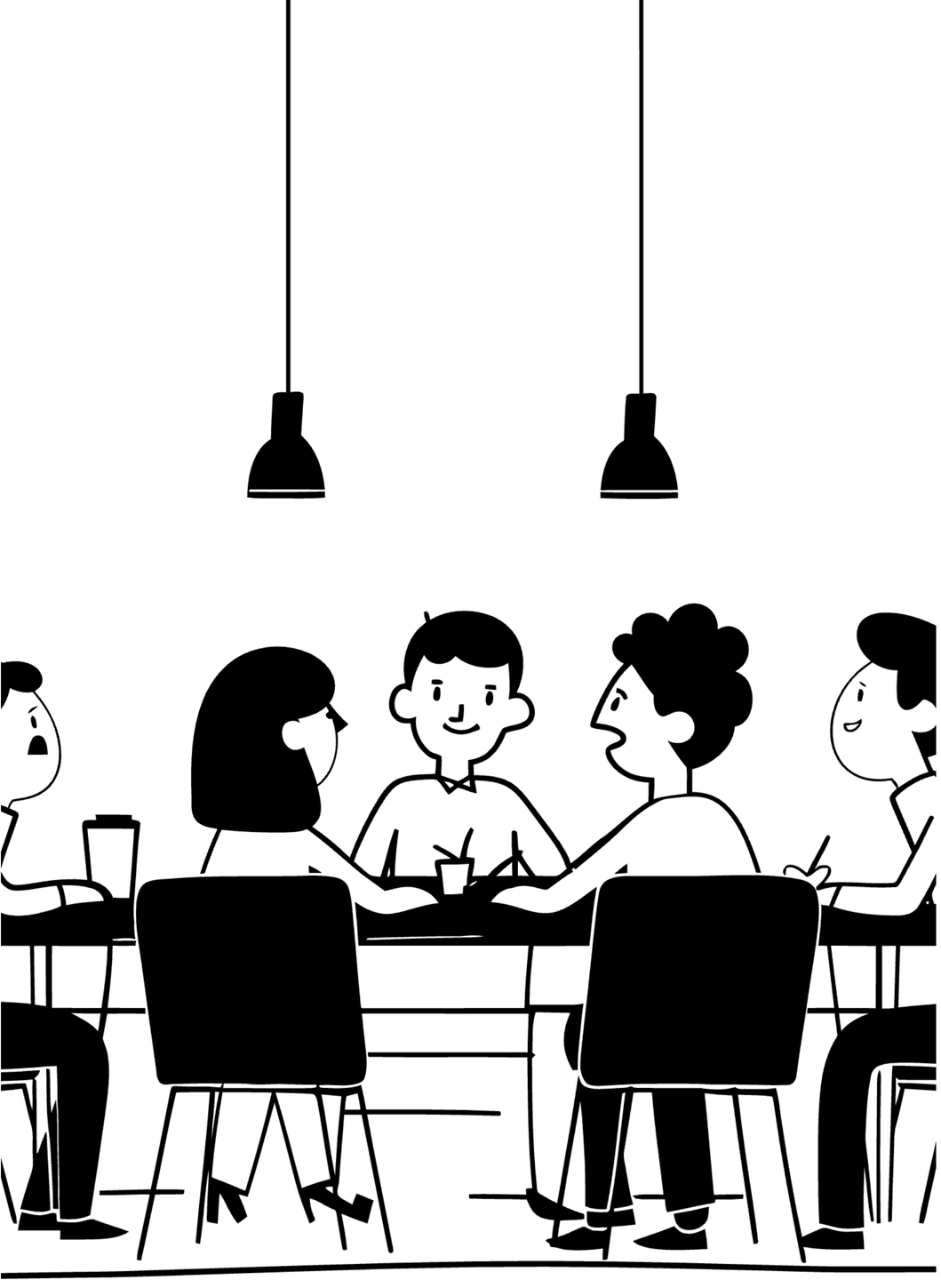
Made person-to-person, not machine-to-machine

A summary is not a relationship. A transcript is not a meeting.

Communication as Sensemaking Technology



Storytelling is how humans align meaning across people, contexts, and time. It is not ornamentation — it is infrastructure.



The Missing Person

Someone sent an AI scribe to the meeting instead of attending on their own.

Every word was captured.

But did they participate?

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Information Transfer

📝 Transcript

Every word recorded

📊 Summary

Key points extracted

📁 Archive

Data preserved

Human Participation

- Trust built in real time
- Interpretation negotiated
- Commitment made
- Relationship deepened

"The record of the conversation is not the value of the conversation."

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Design Learning & Work Around Human Outcomes

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Human Capabilities Don't Strengthen Automatically

They require deliberate design: learning experiences, feedback, coaching, psychological safety, and real opportunities to exercise judgment.

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Technology Scales Culture as Well as Capability

Interfaces teach behavior

Every default is a nudge; every metric is a message about what the organization values.

Incentives reproduce norms

What gets measured gets done — and what gets automated gets assumed.

Every tech decision is a human decision

We are designing the human experience we will reproduce at scale.

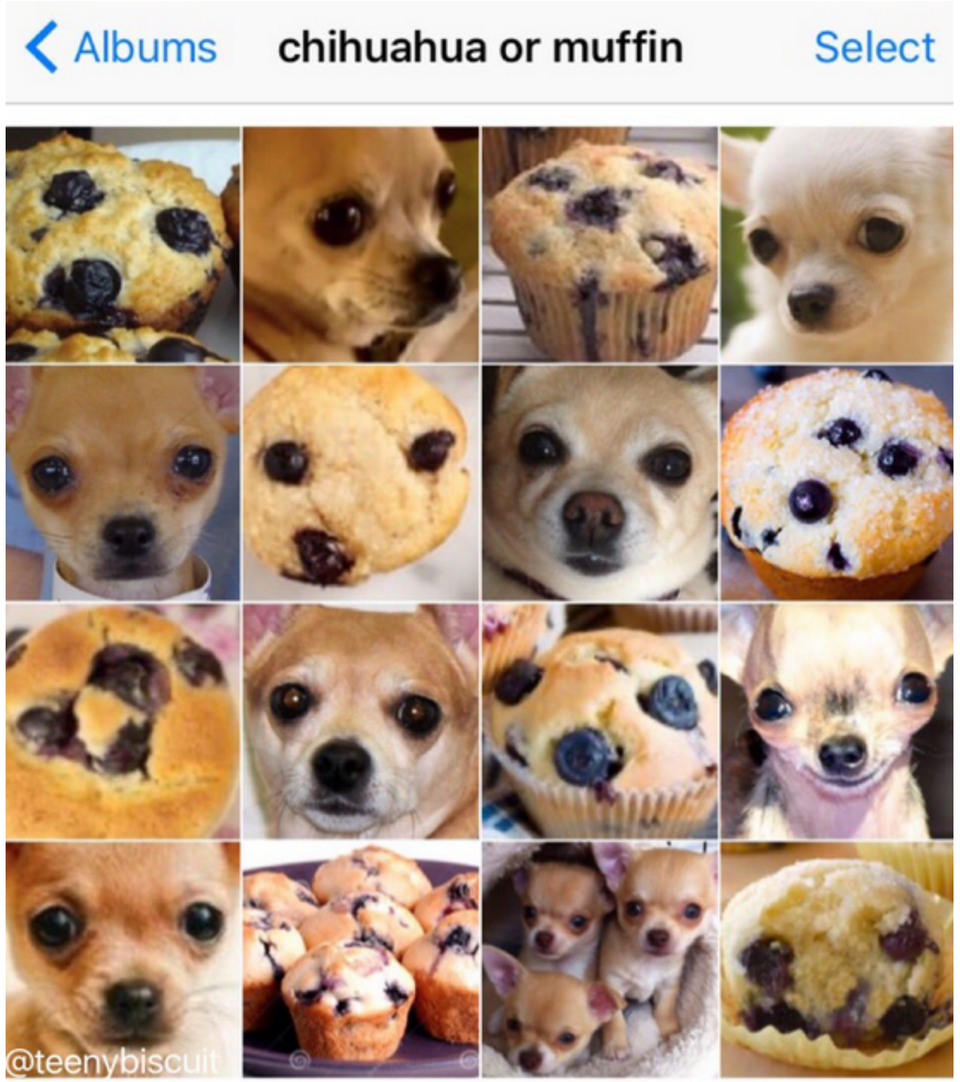
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HUMANS

&

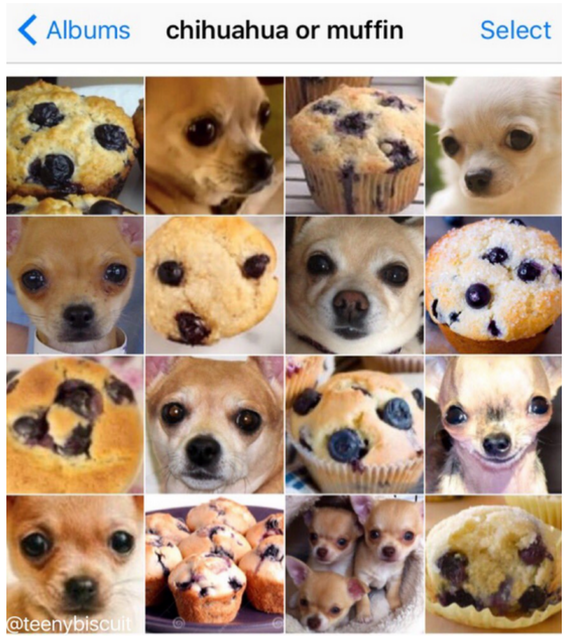
MACHINES

AS RECENTLY AS
A FEW YEARS AGO,
YOU WERE BETTER
THAN AI AT
RECOGNIZING
WHAT MATTERS.



...ARE YOU NOW?

THEN



NOW



"several chihuahua puppies holding several blueberry muffins"

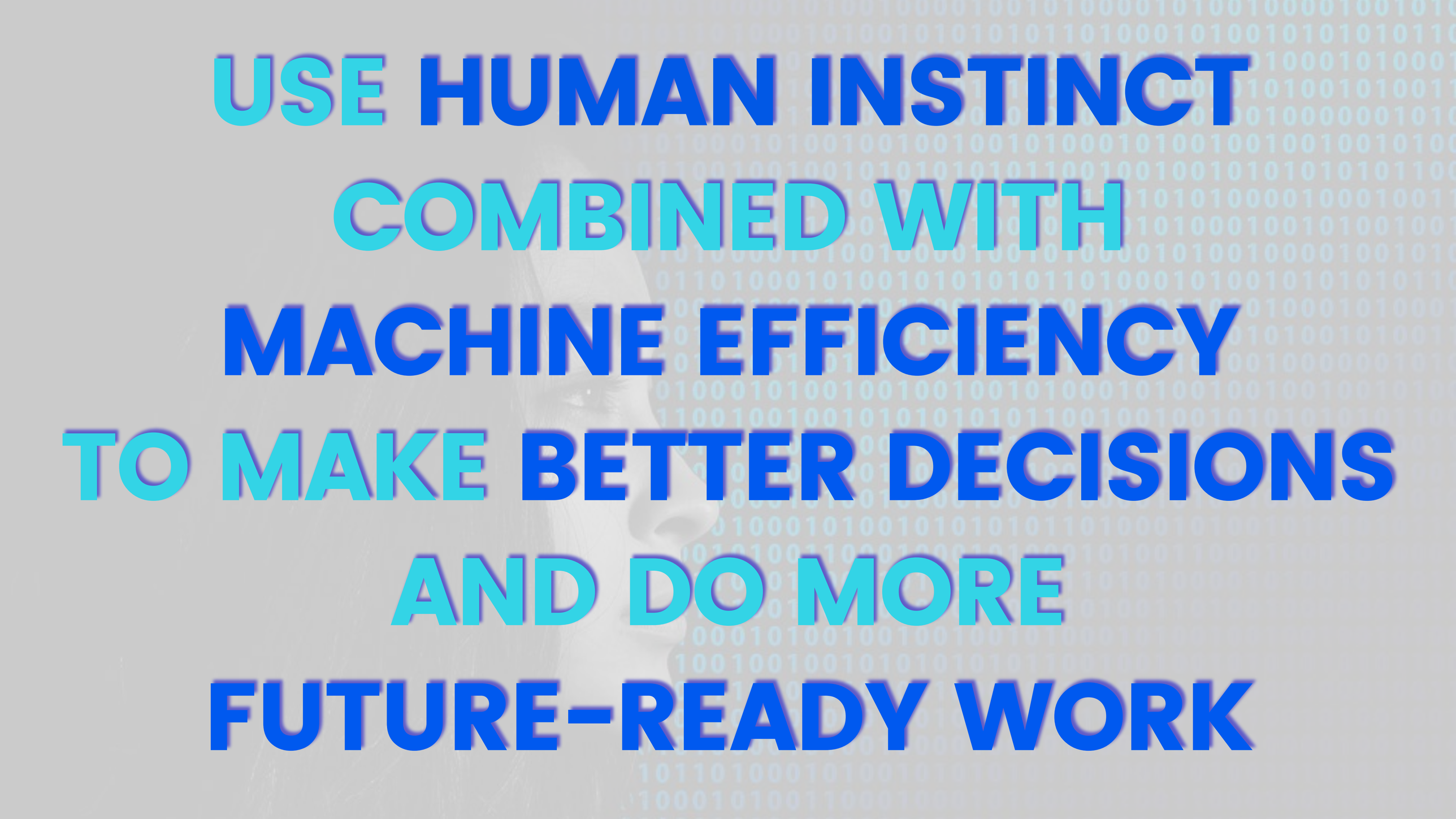
K

Kate × DALL·E

Human & AI

MAYBE!

BUT AI IS ADVANCING ALL THE TIME


USE HUMAN INSTINCT
COMBINED WITH
MACHINE EFFICIENCY
TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS
AND DO MORE
FUTURE-READY WORK

From Future-Proof to Future-Ready



Future-proof is a myth.

Adaptability, resilience, and continuous learning are the only durable advantages.

→ **Not: lock in what you know**

→ **But: build capacity to learn**

→ **Design for change, not an expectation of certainty**

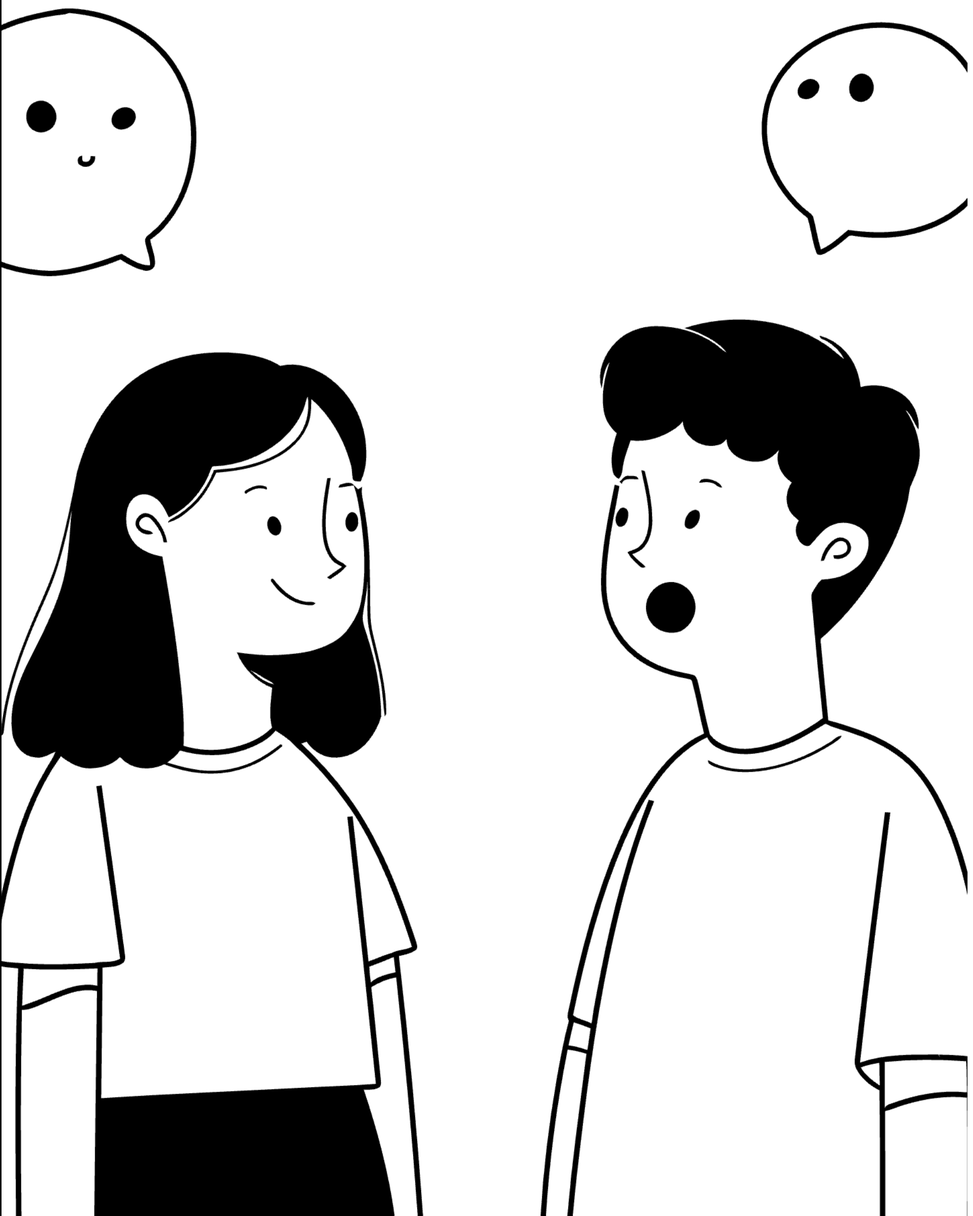
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The Skills Gap Is Real — and Designable

Graduates arrive with technical exposure but limited practice in communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and interpersonal depth. These are not soft skills. They are operating infrastructure.

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Designing for Meaning

Start with Intent

Clarify the purpose before crafting any message, feature, or flow. Intent is the foundation everything else is built upon.

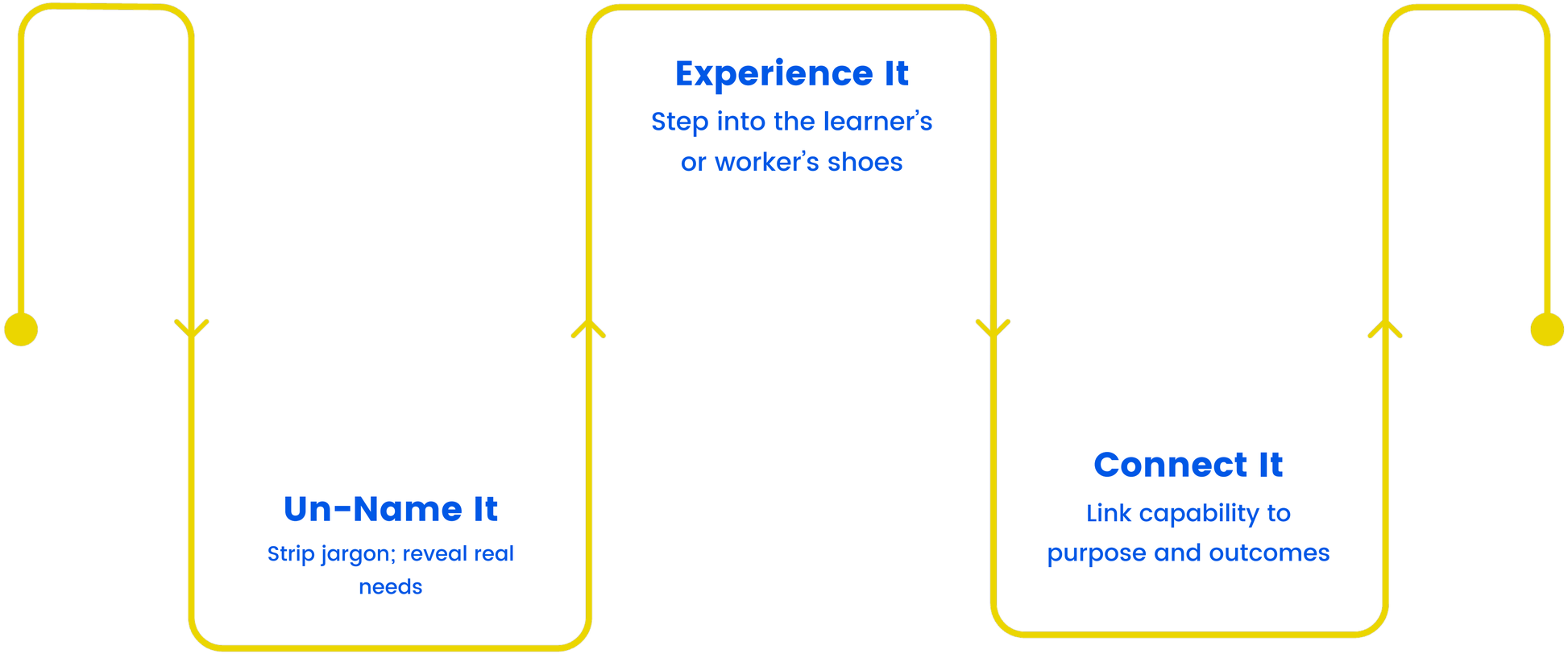
Honor Context

Design systems and communications that are aware of the environment in which they'll be received.

Build for Connection

The most technically precise message fails without human resonance. Prioritize empathy and relational clarity at every touchpoint.

A Simple Design Lens



Apply this lens to AI-supported feedback, assessment, coaching, or meeting summaries.

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What This Looks Like in Practice



AI-Assisted Feedback

The tool drafts; the human decides what is true, kind, and actionable for *this* person.



Assessment Redesign

If AI can pass the test, the test was measuring the wrong thing. Redesign for judgment and synthesis.



Meeting with a Scribe

The goal: free people to listen, question, notice, decide, and connect more fully — not to disappear.

Education & L&D as Strategic Infrastructure



TEACHING TOOL USE
DELIVERING CONTENT
MEASURING COMPLIANCE



DEVELOPING JUDGMENT
BUILDING HUMAN CAPABILITIES
QUESTIONING AI OUTPUTS
MAINTAINING ACCOUNTABILITY
DESIGNING FOR FLOURISHING

The role of learning systems is not simply to teach people how to use new tools.

It is to help people **question, direct, interpret, and remain accountable for** AI-assisted work.

Learning is the competitive advantage that compounds.

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HUMANS THRIVE ON A SENSE OF MEANING, COMMON GOALS, AND A SENSE OF FULFILLING SOMETHING BIGGER.

MACHINES THRIVE ON SUCCINCT INSTRUCTIONS.

WHAT LEADS TO **BOTH** IS **PURPOSE**.

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PURPOSE

IS THE SHAPE

MEANING

TAKES IN BUSINESS.

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We cannot leave meaning up to _

machines	90%
fate	85%
dice	24%
cows	11%
pickles	1%

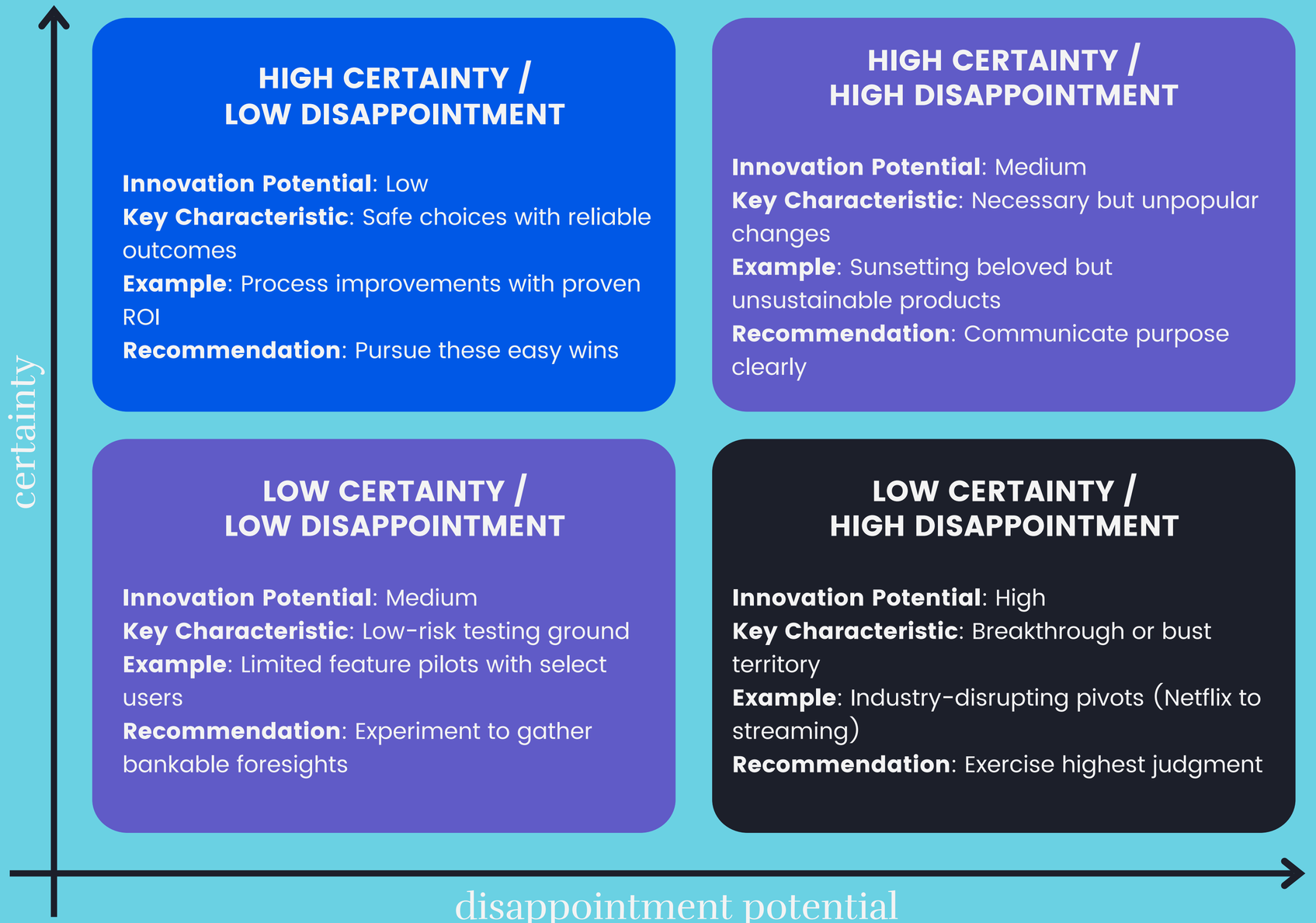
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Frequently Asked Question:

WHAT KIND OF TECH SHOULD WE BUILD?

STRATEGIC DISAPPOINTMENT MATRIX



HIGH CERTAINTY / LOW DISAPPOINTMENT

Innovation Potential: Low
Key Characteristic: Safe choices with reliable outcomes
Example: Process improvements with proven ROI
Recommendation: Pursue these easy wins

HIGH CERTAINTY / HIGH DISAPPOINTMENT

Innovation Potential: Medium
Key Characteristic: Necessary but unpopular changes
Example: Sunsetting beloved but unsustainable products
Recommendation: Communicate purpose clearly

LOW CERTAINTY / LOW DISAPPOINTMENT

Innovation Potential: Medium
Key Characteristic: Low-risk testing ground
Example: Limited feature pilots with select users
Recommendation: Experiment to gather bankable foresights

LOW CERTAINTY / HIGH DISAPPOINTMENT

Innovation Potential: High
Key Characteristic: Breakthrough or bust territory
Example: Industry-disrupting pivots (Netflix to streaming)
Recommendation: Exercise highest judgment

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WE HAVE TO KEEP BRINGING MEANING & PURPOSE BACK INTO IT

TECHNOLOGY
WITHOUT HUMANITY
IS JUST
MACHINERY

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WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO AT SCALE?

These Decisions Aggregate

> Organizations are making macroeconomic policy — whether they name it that way or not.

When enough firms simultaneously move call centers, warehouse logistics, paralegal research, or diagnostic imaging outside the human production boundary, the aggregate effect is a restructuring of the labor market, the tax base, and the communities built around those roles.



The Economy Is People



Mazzucato's Point — At Scale

The production boundary is always a **political economy argument**, whether made in a legislature or a boardroom.

When finance redrew it in the late 20th century, consequences took decades to arrive — but they arrived.

We are moving this boundary now at a speed that makes the space for honest decision-making very thin.

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The Work Is to Make the Space

> The production boundary has always moved. The question is whether we move it *intentionally* — or discover the costs later.

01

Name the shift

Be honest about what AI is actually reorganizing

02

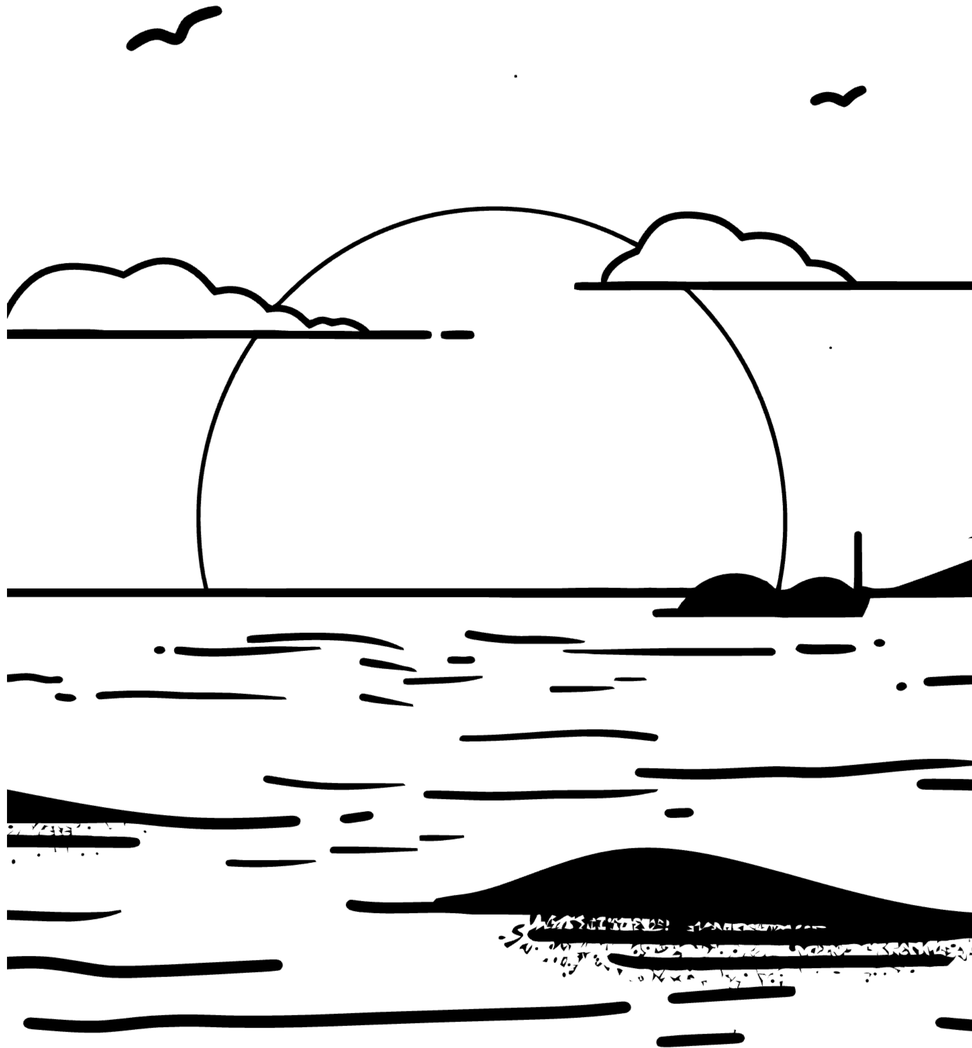
Redesign the org

Clarify where human and machine value each belong

03

Then upskill

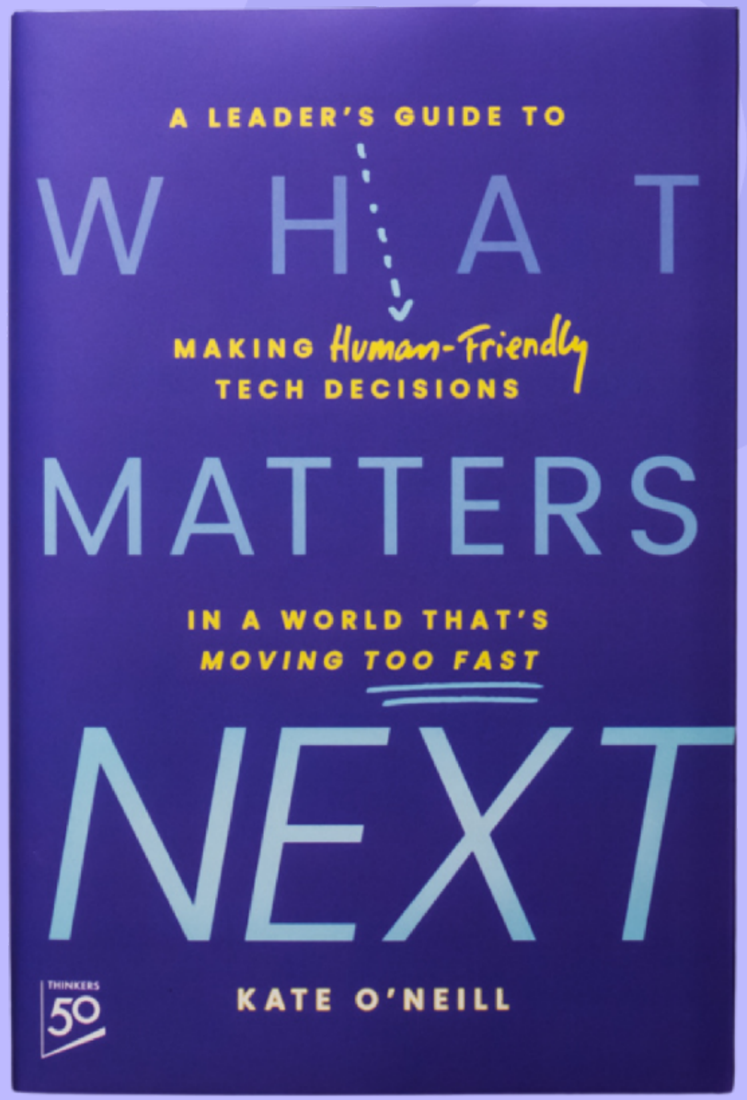
Toward a real destination, with a visible path



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So...

What matters next?



HUMANS CAN'T LEAVE MEANING UP TO MACHINES

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IS THE FUTURE

UNCERTAIN...

OR UNDECIDED?

The Wrong Question

What can AI do?

Asked alone, this question hands the future to the technology.

The Right Question

What human outcome are we trying to create?

And: which human capabilities does the AI world now require us to **strengthen**?

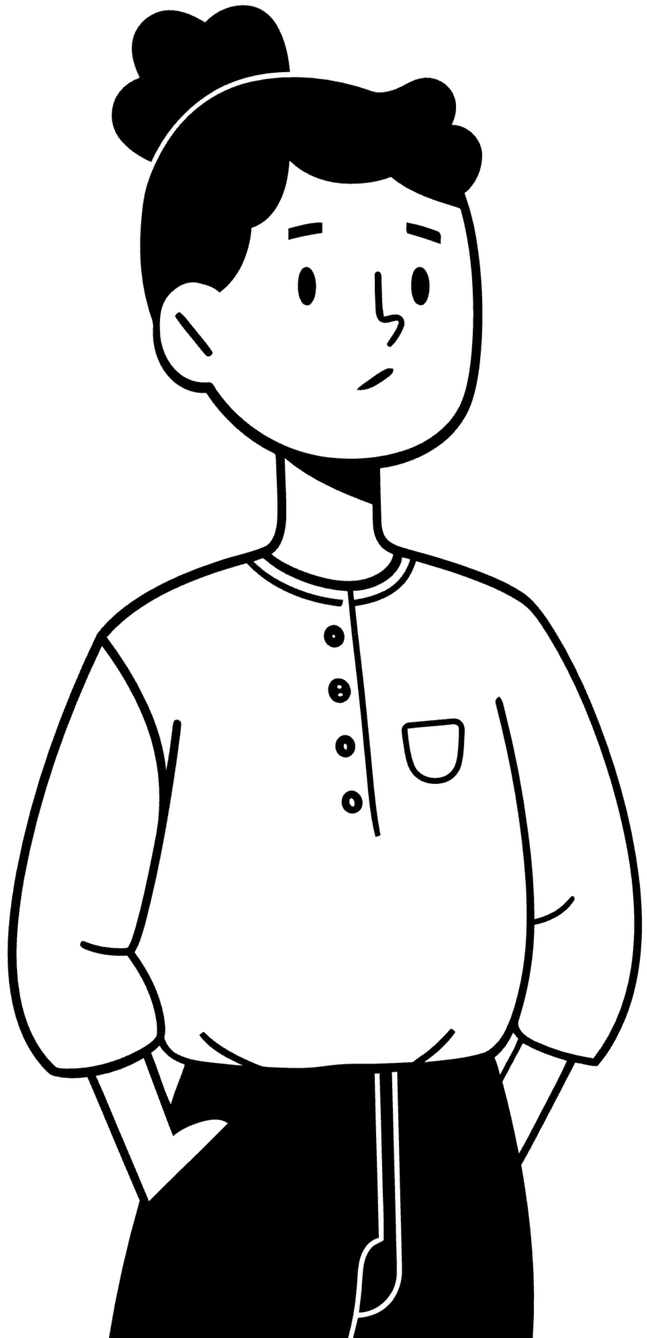
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MACHINES

are what we encode of

OURSELVES

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Encode Our Best Selves

The future is shaped through the learning systems, incentives, standards, and experiences we design **right now.**

🧭 **Decide what matters**

⚖️ **Exercise judgment**

🤝 **Build real connection**

🔄 **Redesign for practice**

> "We cannot leave meaning up to machines."

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Image credit: Robbie Quinn (http://robbiequinnphotography.com/)

THANK YOU FOR MAKING THE FUTURE BRIGHTER!

Kate O'Neill

Helping humanity prepare for a future driven by emerging technology and other changes at scale

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strategy for meaningful human experience in a tech-driven future