

HERDING TIGERS x THE INFINITE LEVER

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Workshop Summary & Key Concepts

WHAT LEADERS OWN

Leadership isn't about the title, the authority, or the impressive output. It's about the people. Everything we do as leaders comes back to people. And as leaders, we own three things:

Culture. The environment in which people operate—the beliefs, norms, and expectations that shape behavior when nobody is watching.

Talent. The people themselves—who you hire, how you develop them, whether they're growing or stagnating.

Work. The quality, integrity, and distinctiveness of what gets produced—not because you make it yourself, but because you create the conditions for others to make it well.

All three are about people. Culture is shaped by people. Talent is people. Work is produced by people. In a world where AI is a near infinite lever to produce work—with minimal human involvement—our job is to develop and protect the human capacity behind the work, not just the work itself.

THE STABILITY / CHALLENGE MATRIX

Every person touching your brand's work—whether they report to you or not—sits somewhere on two axes: the stability they experience and the challenge they face.

Stability means clarity of expectations, trust, understanding of brand standards, and resources. It's the foundation that allows people to take creative risks without fear.

Challenge means stretch assignments, high expectations, creative risk, and accountability. It's what forces growth, builds judgment, and develops capacity.

The combination of these two forces creates four quadrants:

High Stability / Low Challenge — The Comfort Zone. AI is pushing more people here than ever. When AI removes difficulty, smooths out friction, and makes everything achievable, people feel stable but stop growing. Output stays consistent. Capacity flatlines. Leaders mistake productivity for growth.

High Stability / High Challenge — The Growth Zone. This is where you want the people doing your most important work. But it requires leaders to intentionally preserve productive friction even when AI could eliminate it. The key question: are you removing friction that's in the way of the work, or friction that *is* the work?

Low Stability / High Challenge — The Anxiety Zone. Some people are here because AI has destabilized their sense of identity and contribution without providing new footing. They're producing but feel unmoored—especially people in other departments who are now expected to create brand work with AI tools but lack clear guidance or standards.

Low Stability / Low Challenge — The Apathy Zone. When people lose both the security of knowing their skills matter and the challenge of doing meaningful work, they check out. AI accelerates this when leaders use it to bypass people rather than develop them.

The diagnostic question: Where are the people making brand work across your organization sitting on this matrix right now? Where were they 18 months ago? What moved them?

THE THREE TRAPS

AI is an infinite lever. It takes minimal input—a prompt, a half-formed idea—and generates massive output. The lever is so powerful that the human effort can disappear entirely. When it does, organizations fall into three patterns:

The Proximity Trap: Product Without Process

People across the organization are delivering polished work, but the strategic thinking behind it is thinning. They're proximate to excellent output without having gone through the formative process that builds real understanding. Brand strategy and messaging looks sophisticated but lacks the hard-won insight that comes from wrestling with the problem. People are standing right next to great work—but they didn't become the people capable of creating it.

The Posturing Trap: Awareness Without Understanding

People sound smarter than ever. They speak fluently about trends, competitive dynamics, and consumer psychology. But the diversity of thought is collapsing. Everyone draws from the same AI-synthesized insights, and strategic points of view converge toward a mean. For branding leaders, this is existential: when everyone's thinking converges, brand differentiation erodes from the inside out. People know the answers but can't explain why those answers are right.

The Plateau Trap: Outcome Without Growth

People are hitting deadlines and producing acceptable work, but they're not developing into more capable contributors. The reps that would have built judgment, taste, and strategic instinct—AI is doing those reps for them. Neuroscience research on London taxi drivers shows that intensive cognitive work physically changes the brain—and that capacity atrophies when the work stops. The same principle applies to creative and strategic skills. The organization's creative capacity looks full but is actually hollowing out.

All three traps are variations on the same problem: optimizing for short-term output at the expense of long-term capacity.

FROM CONTROL TO INFLUENCE

Not long ago, all brand and marketing work flowed through you. Your team made it, or your team approved it. You controlled the quality, the voice, the strategy, the output. If something went out into the world with your brand on it, it came through your hands or the hands of people who reported to you.

That world is disappearing. AI has made it possible for anyone in the organization to produce content. Product teams generate their own messaging. Sales teams create their own collateral. Regional offices produce their own campaigns. HR writes employer brand content. The tools are so accessible and the output so polished that people across the organization are making brand work—whether you asked them to or not.

Your role has fundamentally shifted. You've gone from being able to control the work to having to influence how work gets made by people who don't report to you, who may not share your expertise, and who now have a tool that makes them feel like they don't need your guidance.

This is the hardest transition in leadership: moving from control to influence. When you had control, you could enforce standards. You could be the quality gate. When you must operate via influence, you need something different. You need principles that travel—ideas and standards that shape how people think about the work even when you're not in the room.

You can't solve this with policies. You can't write an AI usage guide detailed enough to cover every situation across every department. And you can't be in every room where brand decisions are being made. What you can do is establish principles—a shared framework for how people engage with the work itself, regardless of what tools they're using. That's what influence looks like at scale: not controlling the output, but shaping the thinking that produces it.

WORKING WITH VERVE

VERVE is a set of five principles for ensuring that people remain meaningfully engaged in the work they produce, regardless of the tools they use to produce it. Each principle is framed as a question leaders can ask of themselves, their teams, and the broader organization.

V — VOICE: *Does the work sound like us?*

When elite chess players all memorize the same AI-generated opening sequences, nobody is actually playing chess for the first fifteen moves. When every team across the organization draws from the same AI-generated insights, brand voice converges toward a mean. Your voice isn't

something you have, it's something you discover by doing the work. By making choices. By trying things that don't work. By developing a style through thousands of micro-decisions about what feels right and what doesn't. When AI writes for you, you don't discover your voice. You borrow the averaged voice of millions of people whose work the AI was trained on. It might be technically excellent, but it's not yours.

In practice: Require a “voice draft”, or a human articulation of the strategy and intent of the work, before any engagement with AI. This ensures that human voice is always in the loop in the early stages of shaping the work.

E — EFFORT: *Are we preserving the friction that builds people?*

Not all friction is valuable. Some friction is bureaucracy, inefficiency, bad systems—automate that all day long. But some friction is where growth happens. Some struggle is the point. There is a critical distinction between support work (infrastructure, logistics, formatting) and soul work (the thinking, strategizing, and creating that builds capacity). The question isn't whether to use AI. The question is whether you're removing friction that's in the way of the work, or friction that is the work.

In practice: For major brand initiatives, designate which phases are “hands-on” (people do the thinking, AI may assist with execution) and which are “hands-off” (AI handles infrastructure). Communicate these expectations across departments.

R — RESPONSIBILITY: *Can people stand behind the work?*

If the AI disappeared tomorrow, could the person who delivered this work recreate it? If not, you have a dependency, not a capability. Responsibility means being able to stand behind the work because you understand the reasoning. You made the decisions—or at the very least, you deeply understand why the decisions were made and you've chosen to endorse them. This is about intellectual ownership. When you can explain your process, you're not dependent on the tool. You're using the tool. There's a difference.

In practice: Build “defend your thinking” into review processes and cross-functional checkpoints. Don't just evaluate the output—ask people to walk through their reasoning. This scales because it's a question, not a policy: “Walk me through how you got here.”

V — VERDICT: *Is our organization developing taste?*

Taste—the ability to make discerning judgments about what's right for this brand, this audience, this moment—is the single most valuable asset in branding and marketing. It develops only through repeated decision-making: choosing, seeing the results, learning what works and what doesn't. Our decisions aren't made purely in our minds—there's a complex mix of emotional and cognitive processes that form our intuition. This is where taste evolves from. When people default to AI's recommendation, they never build the judgment muscle. AI can give you options. But you have to make the call.

In practice: When AI generates multiple options, require people to choose and justify before presenting or publishing. The justification is the development. This works across departments because it doesn't require brand expertise—it requires people to engage their own judgment.

E — EVOLUTION: *Are people growing through this work?*

Every piece of work should leave you slightly more capable than you were before—more skilled, more knowledgeable, more confident, more discerning. That's how you build a career. That's how you go from doing good work to doing great work to doing work that only you can do. But when AI does the work, you don't evolve. You stay the same. You produce output, but you don't develop capacity. When you stop exercising your creative capacity, when you stop doing the thinking that stretches you, your capacity doesn't just plateau. It atrophies.

In practice: Add a standing question to project retrospectives and cross-functional reviews: “What did you learn by doing this that you didn't know before?” If the answer is consistently “nothing,” the work isn't developing people, even if it's getting delivered.

Five questions to ask every time you use AI:

- Does this reflect my authentic voice?
- Did I embrace the friction that builds capacity?
- Can I explain and defend my thinking?
- Did I make the final call based on my taste?
- Did I grow through this work?

SHAPING CULTURE

Principles only matter if the environment reinforces them. The VERVE questions are powerful individually, but they become transformative when they're embedded in how the organization operates. That's the work of culture.

Know What You're Optimizing For

Every organization is optimizing for something. The question is whether it's intentional. In many organizations, AI has introduced a new, unspoken optimization: speed, efficiency, volume of output. Because nobody made a deliberate decision to optimize for those things, they've quietly become the culture's default values.

The leader's job is to name the real priority. Is it speed, or is it distinctiveness? Is it volume, or is it depth? Is it output, or is it the development of the people producing it? These aren't binary choices, but they are priorities—and if you haven't made the priority explicit, AI will make it for you. It will optimize for efficiency every time, because that's what it's designed to do.

Shared Beliefs Come from Somewhere

Every team and organization operates on a set of shared beliefs about how work should be done. These beliefs don't appear from nowhere—they're formed by what gets rewarded, what gets tolerated, what gets celebrated, and what gets ignored. The beliefs become the culture, and the culture shapes every piece of work that gets produced.

AI is introducing new beliefs into your culture whether you're deliberate about it or not. When AI-generated work gets accepted without scrutiny, the shared belief becomes: the tool's output is good enough. When speed is rewarded over depth, the shared belief becomes: thinking is optional. When nobody asks "how did you arrive at this?" the shared belief becomes: process doesn't matter, only product. The beliefs you tolerate become the culture you get.

Prune Ghost Rules and Normalization of Deviance

Ghost rules are unwritten rules that persist long after their original purpose has expired—the "that's just how we do things here" norms that nobody questions because nobody remembers why they started. In an AI era, ghost rules are especially dangerous because they create rigidity where you need adaptability, or permission structures that were never intended.

Normalization of deviance is the gradual acceptance of lower standards as normal. It happens incrementally: the first AI-generated draft that gets approved without real review becomes the baseline. The next one gets even less scrutiny. Before long, the standard has quietly shifted and nobody made a conscious decision to lower it.

Leaders need to actively prune ghost rules that no longer serve the organization and confront normalization of deviance before it becomes invisible. The question to keep asking: What do we accept today that we wouldn't have accepted a year ago? Is that an intentional evolution, or have we drifted?

Reward to Scale

Culture is ultimately shaped by what gets rewarded. Not what you say you value—what you actually recognize and celebrate. If you want these principles to take root across the organization, you need to reward the behaviors you want to see more of.

When someone pushes back on an AI draft and produces something more distinctive—recognize it. When someone defends their thinking with depth and conviction—celebrate it. When a cross-functional team takes longer to produce something genuinely original instead of accepting the first AI output—make sure people know that's what excellence looks like.

Reward to scale means identifying the specific behaviors that reflect your principles and making those behaviors visible, celebrated, and contagious. This is your most powerful tool as a leader operating through influence: you may not control what people do, but you can shape what people aspire to by making the right behaviors the ones that get noticed.

YOUR VOICE. YOUR LEGACY.

In a world where AI can generate infinite output, the most valuable thing you bring is the one thing it can't: the distinctiveness of your perspective and the conviction behind it.

Every person in this room has a unique voice—a way of seeing, thinking, and leading that no tool can replicate and no algorithm can average into existence. The same is true for the people you lead. Your job is to help them find that voice, protect it, and develop it—even when the tools make it tempting to skip the work that voice requires.

And that leads to the most important idea in this entire workshop: your legacy as a leader is not the work you accomplish. Your legacy is the people you develop. The campaigns will fade. The strategies will be replaced. The content will be forgotten. But the people you shaped—the judgment you helped them build, the taste you helped them develop, the voice you helped them find—that endures. That's what compounds. That's what outlasts you.

Your job isn't to produce great work. It's to develop people capable of producing great work. And in the age of AI, that has never been more important—or more at risk.