
ACT



The Drift

Where leadership begins to lose its humanity.

It doesn't happen overnight but begins in moments like the one you just witnessed. The unraveling is marked by a discrete, logical, bottom-line-oriented mindset. A spreadsheet replaces a conversation. A metric replaces a name. Someone says, "*We're doing what we must.*" And everyone nods, because that's what survival sounds like in a boardroom.

But the drift starts long before the layoff. It begins twenty years earlier, in the places that shaped the people now sitting at that table. It begins in the classrooms, the case studies, the polished ambitions that taught them how to lead and, unknowingly, how to lose touch with the human side of business.

What follows isn't a traditional business book. It's a cautionary tale told through the rise and unraveling of Driftwell and its leaders.

Within this first act, you'll move through four scenes that trace that drift:

- **Scene 1: The drift from trust.** Inside the eMBA classroom where modern leadership's subtle cynicism first takes root.
- **Scene 2: The drift toward profits.** When the AI gold rush blinds leaders to purpose and value.
- **Scene 3: The drift from a shared reality.** When “startup mode” becomes a story leaders tell themselves, and no one else believes.
- **Scene 4: The drift to delirium.** When the layoff arrives, and detachment masquerades as discipline.

Each scene is fictionalized, but every one is true, drawn from decades of research and lived experience. Driftwell isn't one company; it's the story of what happens when a business forgets it's made of people.

Read these stories not as fiction, but as reflection. You may recognize your own meeting rooms, your own language, even your own blind spots. *The Drift* isn't just what happens to companies. It's what happens to us when we forget that leadership was never about control or valuation. It was, and still is, about staying human while the world accelerates around us.

To understand how these leaders ended up at that table, exhausted and divided, we have to go back twenty years and step into a classroom where this outcome always felt inevitable.

Scene 1: The Theory of Everyone Else

Anna's Beginning: January 25, 2005

The lecture hall buzzed with loud ambition. Keyboards clicked as people frenetically answered emails, espresso hissed in the

hallway after another long night of work, and the introductions were so overinflated that they reeked of corner office ambition.

Anna slipped into the front row and set her bag beside her chair. The scrape of metal legs dragging against the tile sounded deliberate. A small declaration that she intended to own this room.

The business school gleamed like a shrine to success: floor-to-ceiling glass, brushed steel, and corporate sponsor logos etched into every surface. It looked less like a classroom than a trading floor for future power.

Above the chalkboard hung a plaque in bold silver type:

"Only the paranoid survive."

—Andy Grove, CEO, Intel

Anna smiled. *Finally*, she thought. A commandment I can live by.

She scanned the room. Polished suits, confident smiles, everyone ready for the C-suite. *Which one will I be competing with for a Fortune cover?* she wondered. The imaginary headline flashed in her mind: ***The Biotech Visionary Who Saved Lives and Markets.***

She was still lost in that thought when someone tapped her shoulder.

"Hi, I'm Graham."

He had the kind of handshake that belonged in investor meetings. It was direct, unflinching. *A competitor*, she decided.

"Anna," she replied. "So, what's the endgame?"

"CFO," he said without hesitation. "Fast-growth tech. Something cool."

He radiated a dangerous confidence.

"And you?" he asked.

"I want to build something," she said. "My own company, maybe biotech. Doing good *and* doing well."

"Then remember me when you make it," he grinned. "Every CEO needs a CFO."

They both laughed, the way students laugh with optimism before the future hardens into reality.

The professor finally arrived, wrestling with the projector cable until a student stepped in to help. The screen blinked to life as a slide appeared with a single word in bold: **Leadership**.

He didn't bother with small talk. "You're here because you're different," he began. "Ambitious. Competitive. Wired for the C-suite."

Anna straightened in her chair.

"Let's start with agency theory," he continued, advancing the slide. "People are self-interested. Your job as leaders is to put in measures that control that self-interest and compel people to act on behalf of shareholders or investors."

A few students chuckled. Anna didn't. The word *control* hung in the air like static. It unsettled her but also thrilled her a little too. Control meant certainty. Certainty meant power.

The professor paced as he pontificated. "Most people don't actually want to work. Given the choice, they'll act in their own self-interest. That's why leadership exists: to ensure employees act in shareholders' interests. Incentives. Accountability. Guardrails. Carrots and sticks."

Heads nodded. Anna's pen raced across her notebook.

He clicked again: **Businesses are not people, and therefore not moral.**

"The most moral thing a company can do," he said, "is maximize profit."

A hand shot up from the back. "But wasn't that the thinking that led to Enron?"

The professor's expression thinned. "Ethics matter, of course. But regulation matters more. We can't rely on people to do the right thing; we have to make them."

Beside her, Graham whispered, "Sarbanes-Oxley, my daily nightmare."

The professor caught it. “Care to enlighten us, Mr. . . .?”

“Graham,” he said, standing easily. “SOX established corporate accountability after Enron. Internal controls. Audit integrity. The paperwork never ends.”

A few students laughed. The professor looked grudgingly impressed.

Anna watched him, intrigued. Even under pressure, he looked composed, almost smug. *He’ll make CFO someday*, she thought. *The question is whether I’ll make it all the way to the top.*

The lecture is winding down. Rows of laptops swiftly shut in practiced rhythm like the sound of ambition packing up for the day.

The professor erases the final equation: **Oversight = Performance**. The words smear into a gray haze, chalk dust catching the light like smoke.

Anna lingers; pen still poised over her notebook. On the page, she’s circled one phrase three times: *People must be managed*. Around it, she’s drawn arrows, formulas, and margin notes, trying to make the concept fit inside her sense of rightness.

Through the glass wall, she can see the campus lawn outside, sunlight scattered across students sprawled on the grass. It’s loud with laughter, movement, and possibility. It’s the world she’ll soon be asked to organize, optimize, and measure.

Graham taps her shoulder on his way out.

“Coming?” he asks.

“In a minute.”

She waits until the room empties. She looks again at the quote above the chalkboard, glowing faintly in the afternoon light: *Only the paranoid survive*.

For a fleeting second, she feels the weight of it, as if the words are less advice and more prophecy. Then she closes her notebook with certainty, tucks it under her arm, and walks out, heels echoing against the tile.

On the desk behind her, a single page is left behind. It's the syllabus for next week's class:

Week 2—Incentive Design and Performance Metrics.

The door clicks shut. Next week, they'll learn how to design performance systems that keep people aligned with the interests of the organization, where incentives guide behavior and deviations are quickly corrected.

Commentary: What We Teach, We Become

This is how the drift begins, not with malevolence, but with lesson plans, not with greed, but with grades.

In classrooms like Anna's, business theory hardened into belief. What was once a field about people became a science of scalability. By the time the case studies reached the front of the room, leadership wasn't a human practice anymore; it was a control system.

When I first began lecturing in these same kinds of classrooms, I noticed it too—the hierarchy between head and heart. Students wanted certainty, not nuance. They wanted a playbook that promised success, not a conversation that questioned what success should mean. You could almost feel their shoulders relax when I said “data.” But mention “trust,” and half the room shifted in their seats.

It wasn't always this way. A century ago, management theorist and social worker, Mary Parker Follett, wrote about the “law of the situation,” which held that leadership isn't about power over others, but power *with* them. She advocated that no one person should have constant power, but that the situation should dictate who is best positioned to make a decision. She saw organizations as living systems of collaboration, where the leader's role was to integrate human energy toward a common purpose. Long before “systems thinking” or “psychological safety” became

buzzwords, Follett argued that management should be rooted in relationships, not control.

And yet, somewhere along the line, her voice faded. By the time I entered the workforce in the early 2000s, business school halls had replaced her relational wisdom with something far shinier: the language of VUCA, which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. It was the acronym of my early career, the water every young leader swam in. We were taught to brace for turbulence, to plan for chaos, to survive disruption. What no one told us was how that constant vigilance would change us.

When you live inside a VUCA world long enough, you start leading as if people are threats to be managed rather than allies to be trusted. The systems we built for control became a form of armor, a protection against risk, and eventually, against one another. That's when humanity began to leak out of the system.

We built organizations that reward intellect over empathy, precision over perception. Somewhere between spreadsheets and shareholder reports, the purpose of business, which was once framed as service to others, was reframed as something purely mechanical: maximize output, minimize friction.

The results are visible everywhere. Organizations designed for control inevitably produce exhaustion. Systems built on distrust demand endless oversight. The more we try to measure people, the less we seem to understand them.

Leaders like Anna and Graham graduate fluent in finance and strategy, but nearly illiterate in the psychology of trust. They enter the workforce believing that control is leadership and every incentive system, performance review, and "leadership competency model" reinforces that belief.

Here's the paradox: what we teach about human nature eventually becomes self-fulfilling. Teach leaders that people are lazy,

and they'll build systems that prove it. Teach leaders that people are capable, and they'll build systems that unleash it.

The stories we tell about human behavior don't just describe reality; they *create* it.

When I ask Executive MBAs in classrooms today whether they believe most people want to work, the answers are rarely surprising. There's a pause, then someone admits: "Honestly? No. Most people do the bare minimum."

Then I follow up with, "Do *you* want to work?" Every hand rises. Every time.

That's the moment drift becomes visible. It's immediately seen in the split between how leaders see themselves and how they see everyone else.

Research calls it the *fundamental attribution error*. I just call it losing the plot. *Because once you stop believing people want to do good work, you start building systems that ensure they can't.* We've taught generations of leaders to assume humans are self-interested, and then watched as they designed organizations that proved themselves right.

The Research: Can We Trust People to Work?

What follows isn't theory. It's the story of how trust softly leaked out of the workplace.

It started, as most things do, with good intentions and bad assumptions. In the early 1900s, mechanical engineer Frederick Taylor declared that "hardly a competent workman can be found who does not study how slowly he can work and still convince his employer he's going at a good pace."¹ That single line became the blueprint for modern management. A century later, we're still living inside it.

Taylor turned leadership into math. He believed people couldn't be trusted, so he built systems to measure, monitor, and

motivate them. Over time, those systems hardened into gospel, which are taught in business schools, reinforced by politics, and mocked in movies like *Office Space*. What began as a humanities discipline became an engineering problem: how to make humans more efficient.

Ironically, the more we measure people, the less we seem to trust them. Behavioral economics later gave this phenomenon a name. What we believe about human nature shapes how we design organizations, and those designs in turn shape how people behave.

- When we teach leaders that individuals are lazy or self-interested, they build systems to control them.
- When we teach leaders cooperation and interdependence, they build systems to help them flourish.

One experiment still stuns me. Researchers handed students a stack of 250 tokens.² They could keep them in a personal account for a guaranteed return or invest them in a shared pool that would multiply and be divided evenly. In theory, if everyone contributed, everyone would win. But if anyone held back, they'd profit from everyone else's generosity.

The twist? Economics students who'd spent years studying self-interest kept nearly 80% for themselves. Conversely, nursing students, steeped in care and empathy, gave away almost half. Same math, different mindset.

When asked why, the economics students didn't hesitate: "That's just rational." Fairness barely registered. It wasn't that they were colder people. They were simply acting out the story they'd been taught.

Another classic experiment used the *ultimatum game*: two people split a sum of money.³ Offer too little, and your partner can reject it—leaving you both with nothing. In most groups,

people offer about half. Economics majors offered fewer dollars and accepted more unfair offers. They'd learned that self-interest was rational and cooperation optional.

My favorite version of this came later, when researchers renamed the same activity. Half the group played "The Wall Street Game." The other half played "The Community Game." Same rules, same payoff. Only the label changed. Those playing "Wall Street" competed twice as often. Those playing "Community" cooperated.⁴

Nothing else mattered, including education, IQ, or personality. Just the story they thought they were in. When we call business a *war*, people start looking for enemies. When we call it a *community*, they start looking for each other. The metaphors we use become moral instructions.

As sociologist C. Wright Mills once put it, "*We influence a man by naming his acts or imputing motives to them.*"⁵ When we tell people that the world runs on self-interest, they begin to act as though it does. And soon, that story becomes reality. And for many people today, that reality has created a lived experience that simply doesn't work.

Hot Take: When a Lack of Trust Moves Outside the Classroom

To be fair, the context around leadership has shifted dramatically. Precariousness has become the norm, unsettling every layer of business. Macroeconomic models are no longer effective as tariffs fluctuate and inflation rises. The polarization of both employees and customers has compelled brands to adopt political identities they never intended to take on. And technology, instead of simplifying, often multiplies the complexity. All of this has made the work of managing and developing talent harder than ever before, further straining the belief that people do indeed want to work today.

When I joined Meta as its first Future of Work Research Lead, it felt like one of the coolest jobs imaginable. We were still deep in the pandemic, and remote work was a brand-new muscle for the company. It may sound surprising that the same industry building the tools for virtual collaboration often resists using them to rethink work, but it's true. Some of the most technologically advanced companies I've worked with have the most traditional people practices.

While I was running experiments in virtual reality to figure out how to host meetings in the metaverse, I was also leading studies to understand how remote work was actually working. Despite the rhetoric of innovation, there was a deeply held belief that “real” work could only happen in person. As the workforce became more distributed, the question “How do we get people back to the office?” became existential.

For a year, I ran analysis after analysis with a team of brilliant PhD data scientists to uncover what worked. We found that the traditional “moments that matter” in HR needed a serious refresh. Onboarding thrived when it began face-to-face. Project kickoffs benefited from an initial in-person gathering. Big wins deserve to be celebrated together. But between those milestones, people worked just as effectively, albeit often better, on their own terms.

The problem was that there was no playbook for this work rhythm. It required a deep level of trust within teams and comfort with ambiguity at the top. It required discretion and a willingness to admit that one size doesn't fit all. It required leaders to treat people like adults capable of making adult decisions. Trusting people ultimately meant sharing leadership power.

That was a risk few were willing to take. And so, like many others, the company returned to the office, which meant returning to the comfort of control and distancing itself from the possibility of something new. The old playbook reigned, while a new

one sat behind scattered Google Docs and meeting notes, never to be written.

It was another moment where I experienced how organizations drift, not because of the technology but because of the struggle to trust each other.

For all our talk about innovation, we still lead with fear—a deep fear of losing control, of being left behind, of trusting people too much. We chase the future through technology while clinging to the past in how we manage people.

And until leaders can acknowledge those contradictions honestly, we'll continue to mistake progress for advancement.

Reflective Exercise: The Beliefs Beneath Your Behavior

I now turn to you. What do you think? Do most people want to do the right thing at work? Can people be trusted? Your answer changes everything about the way you approach your job and the way you lead today. If you went through a similar MBA program to Anna's, then the answer might be no. Or your own lived experience may confirm your assumption that most people are unreliable and disengaged.

One of my favorite thinkers in this space is writer and management consultant, Dr. Meg Wheatley, who offers an alternative perspective on how to think about people at work. She describes sane leadership as “the unwavering belief that people can be generous, creative, and kind. It is a place where the best human qualities can manifest even in the midst of fear and

turmoil. . . leaders choose to use their power and influence to support the human spirit rather than control it.”⁶

Table I.1 illustrates how we present ourselves and design work, depending on the assumptions we hold. Please look at the work design elements and reflect on which column most accurately describes your world of work today. To aid with the reflection, consider the following prompts before moving on to the next scene in Driftwell’s story.

Table I.1 How our assumptions shape the world of work

Work design element	Assumption 1: People don’t want to work	Assumption 2: People do want to work
Core belief	People are naturally lazy and must be controlled or motivated.	People are naturally curious and want to contribute meaningfully.
Leadership style	Command and control: monitor, measure, correct.	Trust and enable: coach, connect, and remove barriers.
Organizational structure	Hierarchical, compliance-driven, focused on oversight.	Networked, purpose-driven, focused on autonomy and collaboration.
Motivation system	External rewards and punishments (bonuses, threats, key performance indicators).	Intrinsic motivation (purpose, mastery, belonging).
Workplace culture	Fear-based: “Don’t mess up.”	Growth-based: “Learn and adapt.”
Performance measurement	Hours logged, visible effort, short-term outputs.	Value created, learning, long-term outcomes.
Role of manager	Enforcer of discipline.	Builder of context and clarity.
View of humanity	People must be fixed or optimized.	People are capable and evolving.
Impact on innovation	Conformity and risk aversion.	Experimentation and creativity.
Emotional climate	Cynicism and burnout.	Energy and shared ownership.

Rewriting the Plot of Work

1. Think of a moment when you felt *most alive* at work. What assumption about human nature was operating in that environment? Did you trust others around you to bring their best selves to work?
2. Now think of a time when you felt *most drained* at work. What assumption seemed to be driving leadership behavior at that time? Was a lack of trust a contributing factor? Were you playing more politics than doing the work itself?
3. Write one sentence that begins: “If I truly believed people want to work, I would lead differently by. . .”

Scene 2: Blinded by the Stock

August 10, 2023 (approximately two years before the opening boardroom scene)

Anonymous Reddit post on r/driftwell

You showed me your graph.

It rose, up and up, like a prayer to the market gods.

You mistook my silence for awe.

It could double again.

My bank account stayed still,

but your pupils dilated with profit.

The stock price blinded you,

never seeing the talent bleeding below.

You asked for weekends,

for faster, for more shine,

until the glow became the glare.

Your MBA taught you trickle-down economics.

But the tide never came.

The trickle was too slow.
The rich floated; the rest of us drowned.

There's only one way out:
stand up,
walk out.
Let the crash happen without me underneath it.

#Anna #Graham

Comments

+1. All they care about is the money.

Has anyone else seen the insane compensation packages for Driftwell's leaders?! And for what?

Couldn't have said it better myself. Been here for a few years and seen the place go downhill. It used to be about the people, but the top people seem to care only about profits.

I hope the Driftwell leaders see this. Their greed is running this place into the ground.

What happened to the medicine here? I get we are a public company, but are we even doing good anymore?

The post spread like wildfire through Driftwell before lunch. Phone screens glowed, Slack threads buzzed, and even the interns were whispering.

Anna's heels characteristically struck the polished tile as she walked briskly toward her office, the sound sharp against the dull hum of the open workspace. Graham's voice cut through behind her—"Anna! Wait up—"

She didn't. Not yet. The company she built was bleeding credibility in real time. And the worst part? She couldn't tell if the post was wrong.

“Anna, we really need to talk.” Graham was nearly out of breath trying to catch up to Anna. A few brave workers turned from their screens to watch the executives scrambling down the hall.

Sensing the stares, Anna lowered her voice to a strained whisper. “Graham, we have to put out this fire. I can’t have our internal teams turning on us. We are so close to a product breakthrough here. I need them laser-focused on building, not shit-posting to this stupid thread.”

James, the company’s CHRO, was already in her office multitasking on his laptop as he waited for Anna to arrive. He had a mixture of anxiety and annoyance regarding the anonymous posting that was going to derail his day. And each time he refreshed his feed, the comments kept piling up, echoing the bleak sentiments of the voice before.

Anna took a seat behind her desk and invited Graham to sit next to James on the other side. Anna opened her energy drink, but the caffeine wasn’t cutting through the fatigue anymore. James’s laptop pinged again. It was another notification of a new comment on the thread. She flinched at the sound.

“Okay, James, have you been able to identify this poster yet? Do we think it’s someone currently employed here or a disgruntled person we let go?” Anna’s dark brown eyes remained on James, seeking to assess his sense of urgency on this.

“Anna, I’ve reached out to Reddit, but it’s against their policy to share any sort of identifying information. I even just asked for an IP location to see if we could do some triangulation, but they aren’t budging.”

“Well, how do we get this to stop? The comments are too much. I know it’s not personal, but even I am having trouble getting through some of them. And if I’m getting distracted by this, then you both know all those people out there are too.”

“I understand. Let me get a pulse survey out, and let’s hold a town hall next week. Let’s reinforce our commitment to our

people, and honestly, just getting some face time with you, Anna, will go a long way.”

“Graham, you’re quiet. What do you think?”

“Anna, I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t really care about the posting. I am here to talk about a potential acquisition that is urgent.” Graham shifted his eyes toward James to wrap this up so he could get back to business.

Anna looked back at James, the strain from not sleeping clearly visible in her eyes. “James, schedule the town hall and get that pulse survey out. And please script my portion for next week. I don’t have time for this, and you need to make this as light a lift as possible for me.”

James let out a sigh. He was used to playing the cleanup role since joining Driftwell. He knew Anna was a sharp business leader and could even be considered ruthless when necessary. He at first respected this about her leadership but had slowly come to resent how little attention she paid to his side of the organization. HR was the last thing on her mind, and she constantly reminded James that he was solely accountable for the talent side. He felt like he was to be seen but not heard most days at Driftwell.

Unlike Anna, James had undergraduate and master’s degrees in industrial and organizational psychology. He was beginning to question some of the more recent leadership decisions made by both Anna and Graham. If he were honest, he didn’t disagree with the anonymous post, but he dared not voice it out loud.

As James exited Anna’s office, she turned to Graham, shut her laptop, and leaned in. “Okay, you have my attention. What is this acquisition you want to make?”

Anna knew something had to change. Their core customer base was shrinking. AI was looming in the background, and no one had a good idea what the technology would do to the business. She just knew they had to get ahead of it. Or at least,

that's what she heard loud and clear coming out of the last board meeting.

"I was with our investor community a few weeks back. They made it resoundingly clear that we need to move from simply being a biotech company to being an AI-enabled biotech company. Companies that are crossing this AI valuation bridge are seeing a $2\times$ – $3\times$ on their valuations."

"But Graham, we can't just flip a switch and become an AI company overnight. Aren't we talking years of investment and R&D? And where do you think that funding is going to come from?" Anna's lack of sleep was coming through in her tone.

"There is a new AI startup led by an up-and-coming founder named Priya. She just made the cover of *Fast Company* last month. She's developed a new large language model specifically for the biotech industry. It's going to help us not only move faster but also tell the AI story to our investor community. Her startup could be key for us crossing that AI valuation bridge."

Anna reopened her laptop and went to the *Fast Company* site. She saw Priya, who looked like a recent college graduate, sparkling with a smile on the magazine cover. *Ugh, these kids have no clue what it actually takes to build a business*, Anna thought. *Must be nice.*

She looked into the distance, contemplating this acquisition and picturing adding Priya to her coveted leadership team. "Do we have the cash flow for this? Do you think it's a good deal?"

"Listen, Anna. This is never going to be cheaper. We need to get this while it's still in development. They need the cash to keep building, and we need the AI story to keep growing. It's really a win-win." Anna nervously clicked her pen a few times as she considered this.

She let out a long sigh. "Alright, make it happen. Make sure to let James know as he will have to manage the merging of the

cultures. And I want a meeting with Priya ASAP. I need to make sure she and I can work together.”

Graham leaped up from his chair, excited that this was a much easier discussion than he had prepped for. “On it.”

Anna returned to the anonymous post on Reddit. Why was this getting under her skin? It wasn’t the first time someone accused her of greed. But something about the poem—its discrete mocking—felt different. It was like hearing a truth she’d worked years to silence.

James got word of the AI startup acquisition through the grapevine. He pinged Anna to confirm whether the rumors were true. A few hours later, she sent back a thumbs-up emoji.

Always the last to know, James thought.

He initiated a background check on Priya and was surprised to see what came back. Apparently, she’d left her PhD early and was on bad terms with a top professor at Stanford. Her references were lukewarm, and some even cautioned on her leadership approach. The most concerning was a comment from her former co-founder: *She may present as laid back on the surface, but she’s vicious behind closed doors.*

James raised these concerns with Anna in the break room when no one else was around. She’d become increasingly difficult to pin down. Surprising James, she brushed the concerns off quickly.

“James, I’ve met her and she is exactly what this company needs right now. I am sure her former co-founder is just bitter and jealous since they left before the big acquisition.”

James bit his lip, wanting to press the issue. But Anna had already turned around and was heading back to her office, seemingly unfazed by the red flags.

From the hallway, he heard her shout back in his direction, “And don’t give up on that Reddit poet James. We need accountability for those actions.” Her voice trailed as she turned the corner.

Commentary: But Leaders Do Care

I am convinced that most leaders care deeply about people. They are human, after all, meaning they too are biologically wired to connect, to empathize, to belong. Business, at its best, can be a remarkable force for good: it gives people purpose and fair pay, meets customer needs, and leaves communities stronger than it found them.

But somewhere along the way, something startling happened. Over the past fifty years, corporate lifespans have shrunk, creating instability for the people and places that depend on them. EY research shows that a company's lifespan on the S&P500 was 67 years in the 1940s; today, that number is down to 15 years.⁷ To make matters worse, toxic leadership behaviors have fueled a post-pandemic mental-health crisis. An unrelenting obsession with automation and the valuations that come with it has begun to replace livelihoods with algorithms.

Somewhere along the way, we lost the plot of what business is all about. Like all things that matter deeply, losing our way is complex—full of human emotion, ambition, and contradiction. And as the old saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The modern work life, whom many describe as a hellscape, wasn't meant to be this way. When Milton Friedman wrote in his 1970 *New York Times Magazine* essay that “there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits,”⁸ he stripped business of moral obligation. He declared the enterprise amoral. *I doubt he imagined the unbridled pursuit of profit that would follow or the human cost it would leave behind.*

That single idea—that a business could be amoral—gave generations of leaders permission to separate personal conscience from corporate decision-making. The end (profit) justified any means. And the means, over time, came at the expense of humanity.

Before we grab our pitchforks and blame Friedman for everything, it's worth noting that the shareholder landscape he described looked very different from what it does today. In 1971, roughly 60% of listed stock was owned by individuals. Today, according to *Forbes*, the wealthiest 10% of Americans own 93% of the stock market's value.⁹ In practice, that ownership rarely shows up as a person. It shows up as institutional funds, index benchmarks, and quarterly performance targets. Take a typical index fund: it may hold shares in thousands of companies, governed by rules and algorithms rather than human judgment. The "shareholder" has become a faceless institution, a fund, a mathematical entity.

Then, in the 1970s, came another idea that cemented the problem into the very architecture of business education. Economists Michael Jensen and William Meckling took Friedman's premise and codified it into orthodoxy. They called it *agency theory*, and it became the cornerstone of every MBA curriculum that followed.¹⁰ You may remember it being mentioned in Anna and Graham's lecture.

The theory was deceptively simple. They agreed with Milton that a company exists to maximize shareholder value. But since people can't always be trusted to do that, they must be watched, measured, and incentivized. The assumption was that employees, left to their own devices, wouldn't work hard or make the right choices unless financially motivated or closely controlled.

So, companies built systems, including incentives, scorecards, and surveillance tools, to make sure employees acted in shareholders' interests, even if that meant trusting them less. As agency theory took hold, another shift occurred. In the 1970s, CEO pay was mostly salary and bonus. Equity was minimal. But if leaders were to act like shareholders, the logic went, their pay should mirror shareholder returns. The results were staggering. From 1978 to today, CEO compensation has risen over 1,000%, while typical worker pay has grown around 24%.¹¹

Hot Take: It Is the Responsibility of Leaders to Care for Their People

I remember my time at one of the world's largest consulting firms, leading research on human capital. I wrote a piece urging executives to consider the impact of declining employee engagement as they pursued aggressive cost-cutting. A respected colleague left a single comment in the review: *"I don't agree with this argument. Business leaders have responsibility only to profits, not the wellbeing of people."*

That sentence has haunted me ever since. And to be clear, the person who wrote this was absolutely lovely to work with. This wasn't your typical consulting partner. They were soft-spoken and kind, and super ambitious; a lot like Anna in her early years. But this person reflected a mindset produced by decades of one-dimensional business education—an MBA stripped of moral imagination. Why worry about people if profits rise? Employees are listed as costs, not assets, on the balance sheet. They should be grateful, we're told, just to have a job.

That piece I wrote sparked an internal debate that reached the C-suite at the company I was with. We found ourselves asking: *Is "do no harm" really enough for businesses? Does business have a deeper duty to the people behind the profits?*

Here's the uncomfortable truth we came to in the room that day: even when we say we're doing no harm in business, we often are. We pollute the environment. We lay off workers. We label human consequences as "externalities." And then we do what business does best. We quantify it, assign it a dollar value, and move on.

But this, my friends, is losing the plot. Business was never meant to be morally neutral. It was meant to build, to serve, to create value that lifts everyone it touches. Yes, shareholders

matter, but so do workers, customers, suppliers, and the communities that make business possible.

Profit is not the enemy. Amnesia is.

It's time we remember why we built businesses in the first place, not merely to extract value, but to create it. To measure success not just by what we earn, but by what we contribute and create.

The Research: What Is the Purpose of Business?

In management scholarship, there's a question that has echoed through classrooms and boardrooms for more than a century—a kind of academic analogy posed to those who study the role of enterprise in society:

“Justice is to law, as medicine is to health, as business is to _____?”¹²

It's deceptively simple, but profound in its implications. If law's purpose is to pursue justice, and medicine's purpose is to restore health, then what, exactly, is the purpose of business?

This riddle appears in management literature throughout the twentieth century, as scholars debated what a firm is ultimately for. As I describe in *How Behavioral Economics Influences Management*,¹³ the question became a philosophical counterweight to the rise of shareholder primacy. Economists such as Adolf Berle argued in 1931 that corporations exist to serve shareholders, while Merrick Dodd countered that they also bear obligations to employees, customers, and the wider community.

Later thinkers would expand this debate, suggesting that the true purpose of business is not profit itself but the creation of prosperity and flourishing, an outcome in which people,

organizations, and societies thrive together. As the text notes, this analogy forces us to confront the deeper moral dimension of commerce: just as justice gives meaning to law and health gives direction to medicine, business, too, must orient toward something beyond its mechanics of exchange.

The most enduring answer to that riddle? Business is to **prosperity**.

Profit may fuel the system, but it was never meant to be the purpose. The purpose is to make life better. It's to build, to serve, to leave things improved because business exists at all. The real question is how we broaden our understanding of business, so it captures prosperity, not just profit.

The scholars who first posed this riddle offered four ways to rethink business in pursuit of shared prosperity and to counter the drift we see today.

The Moral Architecture of Modern Capitalism

- 1. Reframed the purpose of business.** It is *not to maximize shareholder value, but to optimize collective value*, which includes all the good created for employees, customers, communities, and society, minus the harm caused. Profit is one expression of value, but not the only one. True success lies in maximizing the net positive impact of business activity across everyone it touches.
- 2. Expanded accountability.** Business, they wrote, is responsible to all who are affected by its actions across time and space. Looking through the lens of past, present, and future widens accountability beyond shareholders to workers, suppliers, customers, communities, and even generations not yet born. Decisions ripple outward, shaping lives and ecosystems long after quarterly reports are forgotten.

3. **Drew a moral boundary around control.** Business must never violate human dignity. Every participant, whether a factory worker, software engineer, or contract cleaner, deserves respect as an end in themselves, not merely a means to efficiency. Governance, incentives, and culture must protect that basic dignity.
4. **Redefined success.** Financial performance matters, but it isn't the whole story. The test of a thriving business is how much it contributes to human flourishing while safeguarding dignity along the way. Profit, innovation, and community renewal are all paths to success, but each must serve this larger purpose.

Together, these four ideas form a moral architecture sturdy enough to hold the weight of modern capitalism. They challenge the narrow shareholder doctrine that dominated the past half-century and replace it with a more human standard. If law is for justice and medicine is for health, then business, at its best, is for the creation of collective value, the art of turning ambition into shared prosperity without sacrificing the people who make it possible.

The problem, of course, is that collective value is difficult to measure. Shareholder returns can be tracked by the minute; prosperity can't be charted on a Bloomberg screen. And what we don't measure, we stop managing.

Measuring What Matters One of the oldest truths in management is also the most overlooked: what we measure, we focus on. For decades, business measurement has revolved around a narrow axis of shareholder returns. The balance sheet became our moral compass because it was an easy way to measure success. Earnings per share became the language of value. And, over time, the metrics we used began to shape the behaviors we rewarded. When profit is the only measure that counts,

everything else—people, purpose, community—eventually becomes invisible. But what we fail to measure, we fail to manage.

At the beginning of this act I shared about the consulting company and the exercise that ensued about whether a company is okay with simply “do not harm.” I was at Accenture at the time, and the leaders believed deeply that businesses could do better than simply “do not harm.” So, when Accenture launched its 360° Value framework in 2021, it wasn’t just a branding exercise. It was a recognition that, if business is to remain legitimate in the twenty-first century, it must find new ways to define success. Their approach measures six dimensions of value—financial, client, talent, inclusion and diversity, sustainability, and what they call “custom value” tailored to each stakeholder group.¹⁴

The name itself—*360° Value*—captures something profound: that business operates in a full circle of stakeholders, not a straight line from investor to return. It took years to create and numerous PhD data scientists to ensure it was ready to go head-to-head with the longstanding profit metrics.

In the traditional model, financial outcomes sat at the top, and everything else was subordinate. But in this expanded model, profit becomes one dimension among many, not the sole purpose of enterprise. It’s a recognition that businesses are living systems, interconnected, adaptive, and dependent on trust, people, and the planet that sustains them.

This shift matters deeply because measurement drives attention, and attention drives culture. When leaders start quantifying inclusion, sustainability, and employee well-being with the same rigor as revenue growth, priorities begin to realign. New conversations emerge in boardrooms. Incentives begin to shift. Suddenly, the invisible becomes visible.

Accenture’s framework doesn’t reject profit; it reframes it. It argues that long-term prosperity depends on balancing multiple

forms of value—not just financial gain, but also human, social, and environmental health. Profits can only be sustained when individuals and communities prosper.

And that’s the lesson for every organization wrestling with its purpose. If we truly believe business exists to create collective value, then we must learn to measure collective value, to give form to what we claim to care about. Because history has taught us that the moment we start measuring what matters, businesses begin to change.

Reflective Exercise: When Purpose Goes Missing

According to Gallup research, 41% of American workers cannot clearly articulate their organization’s purpose.¹⁵ Nearly half of the workforce has no idea what makes their company distinct—or why it exists beyond turning a profit.

And let’s be honest: the blunt reality of “*maximizing shareholder wealth*” isn’t exactly the kind of purpose that gets people out of bed on a Monday morning.

I remember attending a team meeting early in my career led by someone I deeply admired—a senior leader who had earned his PhD in Business from Harvard. I thought, *How incredible it must be to have been trained at one of the best business schools in the world.* I showed up that day eager to absorb whatever wisdom he might share, hoping that just being in the same room might spark some of his brilliance to rub off on me.

He began the meeting by expressing concern about the team’s health. The quality of our work, he said, had started to slip, and he suspected that the long hours—the sixty-plus-hour weeks that had become routine in consulting—were taking a toll. He paused, giving us a moment of hope that maybe, just maybe, he was about to say something human.

Then he concluded with words that sucked the air out of the room:

“Don’t forget,” he said, “the only reason you are here is to make the partners of this firm rich. You won’t get wealthy working here, so don’t kill yourself trying. You’ll make a good, honest living, but never forget the purpose of this company—to maximize profits for the partners. Your focus is to do good enough work to keep this job.”

Silence followed. A few people laughed nervously, thinking it was a joke. But it wasn’t. His statement was completely sincere and, in his mind, entirely logical.

I sat there stunned. This was a person trained at one of the most prestigious institutions in the world, yet even he could not imagine a vision of business larger than enriching those at the top. It struck me that this wasn’t just an individual belief. It was a world-view; one deeply embedded in our systems of education and leadership.

At that moment, I realized how easy it is for a business to lose its soul when purpose is reduced to profit. When leaders can’t articulate why their organization exists beyond making money, people eventually stop bringing their full selves to work. They comply, but they don’t commit. They perform, but they don’t believe.

Take a few moments to reflect, either personally or with your team:

1. Can you clearly state the purpose of your organization in one sentence—without mentioning profit or shareholder return?
2. What would you tell a new employee on their first day about *why* your company exists?
3. If your organization disappeared tomorrow, what would the world lose?

Write down your answers. Notice whether they come easily or require effort. The gap between what you *say* and what you *measure* often reveals where purpose has gone missing.

When people no longer know *why* they work, even the best strategy won't save a company. Purpose isn't a slogan; it's the oxygen your workers need to perform at their best. Without it, every business eventually suffocates under the sole pursuit of profits.

Scene 3: Startup Mode

Flashback

Anna had taken the helm of Driftwell during the heat of the pandemic. Demand for biotech had exploded as government money flooded the sector, chasing anything that promised to blunt the effects of COVID-19. It was a strange, heady time—equal parts anxiety and euphoria—as scientists, executives, and investors united around a single goal: saving the world and making history.

But with the gold rush came competition. Barriers to entry fell. In a single year, more than 115 biotech companies went public. Growth looked limitless, until it didn't.

Anna knew the surge was temporary, but she'd earned the CEO job by promising the board an *aggressive five-year growth plan*. And that plan would require a partner she could trust.

The moment the offer came through, she called Graham, her closest ally from graduate school. He had done exactly what he'd set out to do—he was next in line for CFO at a major tech company. If she wanted him, she'd have to make an offer he couldn't refuse.

She took a deep breath and dialed.

"Graham, it's Anna."

"Anna? Oh my God—you got the job, didn't you?" His excitement made her smile.

"You beat me to it. How did you know?"

"I knew the minute we met in that economics class you'd end up running something big. Congratulations. It must feel incredible."

"It does," she said softly. Then, more firmly: "And I want you with me. Come to Driftwell. Be my CFO."

There was silence on the other end. Graham leaned back in his chair, calculating. He was about eighteen months away from the CFO role at his current firm. Three years from full vesting. Anna's offer could hit his financial target two years faster and added the bonus of doing something meaningful.

"Graham, are you still there?"

He chuckled. "For once, I'm actually speechless." He could hear Anna clicking her pen. It was a nervous tic she'd had since business school.

"Let's do lunch next week," he said. "I want to see the books."

"Deal. But I'm picking the place this time. No more pizza joints."

"Hey, I'm just thinking like an owner," he teased. "Keeping expenses down."

Graham laughed, though part of him wondered when they'd both become so obsessed with numbers.

The following week, they met over lunch. Anna came armed with a printed deck—a sharp, color-coded five-year growth plan. She slid it across the table like a poker hand she was sure would win.

Graham skimmed it, his brow tightening.

"What?" Anna asked. "Why that face?"

"Anna, the plan's ambitious, but you've got a cost problem. You've given out so much equity it's depressing the stock. I don't want to be the guy who comes in and starts clawing that back."

Anna didn't flinch. "Then we make the tough calls. People understand. The pandemic reminded everyone what matters, right? Family, health. . . not stock options." Graham studied her. He didn't remember her being this detached from reality. At his

current company, employees had become *more* entitled to perks, not less. But she seemed to genuinely believe it, and in the end, he took the job.



August 15, 2024

Powerful Duo Acquires Rising Founder's AI Startup

It was exactly the *Fortune* cover Anna had pictured back in graduate school. She just hadn't imagined sharing it with Graham. Still, without him, the acquisition would never have happened.

When Anna met Priya for the first time, she was a little awe-struck. Priya was, in many ways, everything Anna wasn't. She moved through conversations with an easy, laid-back confidence, yet her work carried an intensity that was unmatched. She told story after story of all-nighters and pushing her team to make the impossible possible.

Graham noticed the shift almost immediately. Anna began using startup language and adopting a founder mentality, slipping borrowed phrases into conversations that felt like they came from Priya's world. It didn't sound entirely natural coming from her, but she was smiling for the first time in a long while, and he didn't want to dim that light.

Still, the dynamics had shifted. Priya's presence energized Anna, but it stirred something else in Graham—an awareness that the stakes of his decisions were even higher now.

He had been one of the most bullish voices championing the acquisition when the macro environment was still roaring. In a market that rewarded speed and bold bets on AI, their move had felt obvious. Anna had trusted his conviction, and he'd carried that trust with pride.

But as conditions tightened and capital grew more cautious, he felt a nagging fear he didn't want to name: they might have overpaid. And Driftwell was beginning to feel the strain.

The numbers told the truth. Priya's AI acquisition was burning through cash, and Driftwell was running out of runway. He knew he had to bring it to Anna, not to deflate her excitement, but because she deserved honesty.

"Expenses have to come down," he told her flatly. "The clearest place to start is equity. We've been too generous, and investors are raising questions. We talked about this when I first saw the books."

Anna looked at him, really looked, and he felt the familiar steadiness in her gaze. "Graham, are you sure there isn't another option? I don't love walking back a decision I made less than a year ago."

She wasn't challenging him. She was checking the ground beneath them, making sure he had scanned every angle, every implication. This was how she led: direct, principled, careful.

"I've run every scenario," he said. "This is the least painful path."

Anna nodded slowly. Not because it was the answer she wanted, but because she trusted him. She always had. Even now, in a market that rewarded second-guessing and fear, that trust felt like the thread holding everything together.

"Okay," she said finally. "Then we'll do it. I'll get James to schedule an all-employee town hall next week where we will make the announcement." She sounded somewhat defeated but quickly moved on to the pile of printouts on her desk.

And in that moment, despite the downturn and the growing weight of the acquisition, something between them settled. They were still on the same side.



When Anna suggested an all-employee town hall, Graham assumed she would prepare the workforce for austerity. He spent the night before writing her talking points. No doubt, the next

year or two were going to be bumpy, and Graham was hopeful that Anna would set the stage for tough decisions ahead. Instead, she delivered more of a rally cry.

“Starting today,” she said brightly, “we’re moving into *startup mode*. Priya’s team has shown us what’s possible when people act like founders—long hours, full commitment, all in. That’s the culture we’re building here. We will change the world together, but only if you think like an owner of this company.”

Graham’s stomach dropped. He knew a company-wide equity freeze would take place by the end of the week. Why would she tell people to “think like owners” when their ownership was about to vanish?

Anna left the stage energized, convinced the room was with her. She saw inspiration where Graham saw panic. “They’re hungry again,” she told him later. “Who doesn’t want to work at a startup? That’s where the magic happens.”

Moments later, Graham was storming down the hallway after her. He caught her just before she reached her office.

“Anna, we need to talk.” He shut the door behind him, hard enough to make her jump.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded. “Why would you say that right before we freeze equity?”

Anna blinked, caught off guard by the anger in his voice. “Graham, people need motivation. We’re reigniting our purpose.”

“Motivation?” He ran a hand through his hair. “You just told four thousand employees to act like owners, right before we take away their ownership.” His tone shifted from anger to exasperation.

Anna stared at him, unshaken. “You’re overreacting. That is for James in HR to take care of, not you.”

He exhaled, defeated. “You’ve lost touch, Anna. They’re not founders. They’re people barely getting by these days.”

She looked back at him, a flicker of pity crossing her face. *He's softer than I remember*, she thought.

At that moment, Graham had a decision to make. If he were to remain CFO, he'd have to let go of the people's side of the business. Anna was right, his job was to make the numbers work, and he was damn good at that.

Outside, the buzz of office life carried on, but the inherent spark was fading quickly.

By the afternoon, the anonymous Reddit thread had already begun anew.

"Anyone else think that town hall was completely out to lunch?"

The comments lit up fast with sarcasm, frustration, and disbelief. Graham read enough to know where it was heading. Driftwell's own internal watercooler Slack channel began to mirror a similar sentiment. He sent a quick note to Comms: *"Let's temporarily pause executive access to the water cooler Slack thread until the temperature cools."*

There was no need for Anna to see the harsh truth. The delta of her perception and the workers' day-to-day reality was too far. Driftwell had already departed from the story she was still telling.

He closed his laptop and stared out the window, the city lights flickering as the sun began to set. The office noise had faded to a dull whirr, but the unease lingered.

Driftwell would show growth again on paper after the equity cuts, but Graham could feel the foundation shifting beneath them. He felt a widening gap between the story they told investors and the one their people were living on the inside. That gap, he knew, would eventually rear its ugly head.

By the time the first headlines would appear a year later—***"Private Equity Firm Calls for CEO's Removal"***—it wouldn't

come as a shock to him. The cracks had been there all along. He had just stopped pointing them out.

Commentary: The Refounding Illusion

What's happening within Driftwell isn't an outlier; it's a blueprint. In the months that followed the public debut of generative AI, I watched versions of this same story unfold across industries. Boards demanded AI roadmaps. CEOs announced "second foundings." Executives rebranded mature companies as startups overnight. Each believed they were reigniting their purpose, but what they were really doing was rehearsing Driftwell's script: mistaking pressure for passion and performance optics for truth.

Belief can be intoxicating, especially when you sit close enough to the power source to feel its heat. Every leader wants to believe their passion is contagious. That conviction will cascade down the hierarchy like sunlight through glass. But sunlight bends. By the time it reaches the lower floors, it's often filtered, distorted, or completely lost.

The Korn Ferry *Motivation Meter* makes that distortion visible.¹⁶ Eighty-one percent of CEOs say they're willing to go "above and beyond" at work. Among employees without management responsibilities, only 57% feel the same way—the lowest level recorded since 2019. Even middle managers, once the emotional bridge between vision and execution, have seen motivation slip from 76% to 73% in the past year. This may not sound like a lot on the surface, but it is.

The gap isn't just statistical, it's also psychological. Senior leaders operate with autonomy, access, and a sense of ownership that naturally fuels drive. They see the horizon. They have levers to pull. For many employees, those levers don't exist. They only experience metrics, mandates, and meetings that feel increasingly disconnected from meaning.

This is where the “refounding” illusion takes hold. From the C-suite, rebranding as a *startup* feels bold, visionary, heroic. From the workforce, it often feels tone-deaf to another demand for energy without equity. Leaders call it a reset; employees call it *déjà vu*.

Motivation isn’t a universal constant; it’s context-dependent. What sparks purpose for one group can spark resentment for another. When leaders talk about *acting like founders*, they’re drawing on experiences of agency, risk-taking, and ownership. Which, let’s be clear, are privileges not equally distributed across an organization.

It’s easy for leaders to confuse their *view* of reality with reality itself. It’s the empathy blind spot of modern business: assuming that belief at the top equals belief everywhere. But when the story you’re telling doesn’t match the story people are living, belief becomes performance, and performance eventually becomes delusion.

The result? Organizations that look energized from above but are silently eroding below. Charts rise, engagement falls. The narrative sounds triumphant; the hallway chatter tells another truth.

At Driftwell, Anna wasn’t wrong to seek belief; every leader needs a story to rally around. But she mistook her own performance narrative and energy for moral clarity. She thought motivation could be declared into existence without doing the harder work of changing the system itself.

It can’t. Motivation isn’t built in the boardroom; it’s built in the spaces between people. It exists in trust, in fairness, in the daily proof that someone’s work still matters. When that proof disappears, the story collapses. And by the time leaders realize they’ve lost the plot, it’s too late because no one’s listening to it anymore.

Hot Take: A Startup Mindset Is an Excuse for Chaos

In the wake of the AI gold rush, nearly every company I knew went into what they called “startup mode,” even though most were well-established, publicly traded firms. Suddenly, seasoned executives began talking like founders. They adopted the vocabulary of hustle: speed, grit, disruption. Office lobbies displayed banners reading “Startup Mode,” and all-hands emails declared this “the company’s rebirth.”

I witnessed one of these movements firsthand. I was invited into a company to provide research advisory services and was deeply embedded in their culture. I’ll never forget the moment the CEO stood before employees and announced, “From this day forward, we act like founders and owners.” The promise was intoxicating: rebuild the company from the ground up, become an “AI-first organization,” and share in the wealth when the refounding succeeded.

At first, energy spiked. Long nights were celebrated, weekends blurred, and urgency became a virtue. But the enthusiasm wasn’t evenly distributed. Most employees held little or no equity, so “ownership” was purely symbolic. Within months, the glow faded. Projects stalled, talent left, and frustration crept into every town hall. Yet, instead of examining the system, leadership blamed the people. Behind closed doors, they began saying the quiet part out loud: *“Some just don’t care enough.”*

Turnover climbed to record highs. Entire departments were restructured and then restructured again as the CEO cycled through direct reports searching for believers. They were looking for those “wired” for the new AI era. The irony was almost painful. The company’s real problem wasn’t a lack of motivation. It was the culture itself. Over the course of six months, most had lost trust, clarity had eroded, and there was an absence of a shared purpose beyond chasing the next valuation narrative.

No one at the top paused to ask the deeper questions. Maybe it wasn't the people who'd lost their edge. Maybe it was the *system* that had lost its soul. Perhaps it wasn't apathy at all, but exhaustion from a leadership story that had lost its plot.

It was, in every way, a living example of the self-serving bias. Leaders interpret their own urgency as vision, and their employees' fatigue as a sign of failure. To be clear, a self-serving bias is not intentional deceit; it's how the mind works without self-awareness and guardrails. Our brains instinctively protect the self, crafting stories that keep us in the right.

The Research: What Causes the Drift from a Shared Reality?

The Mirror Problem I've spent years sitting in rooms with executives who are convinced their people just don't care as much as they do. Behind closed doors with me, leaders lament the lack of work ethic and drive in their workforce. The conversation usually starts the same way: "*We've got a motivation problem.*" The tone carries both frustration and disbelief, as if, somewhere along the chain of command, the organization's pulse simply stopped. We rarely start with a self-reflection on leadership, culture, or even organizational design.

When I ask these same leaders what keeps them motivated, the answers are almost poetic. "*I believe in our mission.*" "*I love building things that matter.*" "*I'm driven by purpose.*" "*I am a natural builder and leader.*" Then I ask what they think motivates their teams. Without hesitation, the responses are always extrinsic: "*Bonuses.*" "*Titles.*" "*Recognition.*"

That's the mirror problem. Leaders see themselves through a wide-angle lens, describing their own motivations as complex, purposeful, and deeply human. But they see others through a narrow frame of transactional incentives. They see anyone other

than a leader being motivated to work for that paycheck, for the time off, or the need for benefits.

That's when I started noticing something deeper than an organizational behavior problem. It wasn't just systems that were outdated (it certainly doesn't help), but I discovered it was the mental models leaders were using to understand their teams.

I play a clip of the movie *Office Space* in one of my keynote presentations, because one line captures the modern workplace better than most research papers. The main character, Peter, sums up his disengagement by saying, "It's not that I'm lazy. It's just that I don't care." It's both funny and tragic. Most employees aren't apathetic by nature. They've just stopped believing their effort changes anything. The underlying inequity between those who lead and those who don't seems too great to close. And without that equity compensation to financially align with going all out for shareholders, many employees choose to do what's needed to get by. It's ironically the most rational response.

It's what researchers call the *motivation perception gap*—the space between what leaders *think* drives people and what actually does. A large MIT Sloan study found that executives ranked compensation and performance incentives as the top motivators for their workforce, while employees placed purpose, flexibility, and recognition at the top of their lists. In other words, each group assumed the other valued what they themselves valued least. The result is a silent misunderstanding that slowly erodes trust.

This gap doesn't just distort how leaders design incentives; it reshapes how they interpret behavior. When an employee hesitates to volunteer for a new project, a leader may assume disengagement, when in truth the employee is overwhelmed or doesn't find the project meaningful. When leaders celebrate profit milestones, employees may feel invisible if their personal contributions aren't acknowledged. Over time, this misalignment

compounds as leaders double down on metrics, while teams privately withdraw.

What's most striking is that this perception gap is not born of apathy, but of assumption. Leaders genuinely believe they're motivating their teams, just as employees genuinely believe their leaders are out of touch. It's a mirror of our own cognitive bias, which sees the world not as it is, but as we are.

A Self-Serving Power Paradox Psychology gives us language for what's happening beneath the surface of leadership, beyond just a perception gap. One of the clearest explanations is the *self-serving bias*, which is our brain's instinct to take credit for success, but shift blame for failure. When things go well, we attribute it to our intelligence, discipline, or strategic genius. When things go poorly, we blame the market, the team, or the timing. It's a subtle act of self-preservation, the ego's way of staying intact.

In leadership, this bias doesn't fade; it multiplies. As people rise, their decisions gain greater visibility, and their confidence deepens. Feedback grows more filtered, and power begins to dull self-awareness. Studies in organizational psychology show that status and authority amplify self-serving attributions, widening the gap between how leaders see themselves and how others experience their leadership.

Social psychologist Adam Galinsky and his colleagues once ran a deceptively simple experiment that revealed just how profoundly power reshapes perception.¹⁷ He and his team asked participants to imagine themselves in positions of authority and then perform a basic task: draw the letter E with their finger on their forehead so that another person could read it. Those primed with power overwhelmingly used their finger to draw the E in a way that made sense to *themselves*—not to the observer.

It was a small gesture, but it captured something massive about leadership: the more power we hold, the harder it becomes to see the world through someone else's eyes. Galinsky called this the "power and perspective gap." The people at the top aren't necessarily uncaring; they're just less likely to realize that their view isn't universal.

Building on that insight, researcher Nathanael Fast and his colleagues explored how power also changes how we interpret feedback.¹⁸ In one study, managers were asked to evaluate their employees' willingness to speak up. The more powerful the manager felt, the less likely they were to view employee feedback as valuable, and the more likely they were to see silence as alignment. Fast's follow-up studies found that power inflates self-confidence, dulls curiosity, and makes leaders less likely to seek input. Ironically, those who need feedback the most are the ones who stop asking for it.

Put together, these studies illustrate how leadership drift happens not in moments of failure, but in moments of certainty. The more confident we become in our own perspective, the less we notice when others stop sharing theirs. Very few leadership teams at the top receive and listen to feedback from those below them.

At Driftwell, this science came to life in real time. The leadership team wasn't made up of scoundrels; they were simply powerful people who had stopped realizing how their perspective had narrowed. Surrounded by affirmation, they mistook agreement for alignment. Feedback loops closed, empathy thinned, and overconfidence took root. The more convinced they became that they were leading with vision, the less they noticed the growing silence around them. You saw this when Graham determined the best path forward was not to give voice to areas outside his lane.

One of the most fascinating insights into this dynamic comes from social psychologist Dacher Keltner, who coined what he

calls *the power paradox*.¹⁹ His decades of research show that people often *earn* power through qualities like empathy, collaboration, and fairness—yet once they have it, those same qualities begin to erode. In other words, the very traits that helped someone rise become harder to access once they're at the top. Power literally changes how people think and behave, rewiring the brain to prioritize one's own perspective over others.

Keltner's team demonstrated this phenomenon through what became known as the "Cookie Monster Experiment."²⁰ In the study, three people were placed in a room and asked to complete a task together. Midway through, a plate of four cookies was brought in—one more than each person could take evenly. Time and again, the person randomly assigned as the "leader" of the group took the extra cookie. They not only claimed the additional reward but also often ate it more loudly and messily than the others. The finding was both comical and unsettling: even arbitrary power triggers a sense of entitlement and a loss of self-regulation.

This is the subtle drift of leadership. The same person who once stayed late to help a teammate now assumes others should sacrifice for the cause. The CEO who says, "*I'm working late because I care*" later concludes, "*They burned out because they couldn't keep up.*" Both statements feel true from the inside, and that's the danger. Bias doesn't feel like ego; it feels like clarity.

Over time, these small distortions add up. Leaders stop noticing when the story they tell themselves about their company no longer aligns with the one their people are living. The distance grows slowly, almost imperceptibly, until one day they look up and realize they've been leading from a completely different reality.

The distance caused by power widens the gap between perception and reality, between intention and impact. At Driftwell, as in

many real organizations, the leadership team didn't wake up one day deciding to lose its way; they simply stopped seeing clearly.

None of us is immune. The human brain is wired for self-preservation. It filters information in ways that protect the ego, not the system. That's why even well-intentioned leaders can drift away from reality and why the first act of regaining the plot isn't a strategy, but a mindset shift.

Reflective Exercise: Returning to Curiosity

Start with this perspective: *Assume the story you're telling yourself might be incomplete.* It sounds simple, but it's the one habit that separates leaders who evolve from those who remain stuck.

The next time something goes wrong—attrition spikes, a project misses its mark, engagement scores dip—pause before you explain why. Write down your first instinctive explanation. Then ask: What if my view isn't the full story? What forces outside my control shaped this outcome? What part did the system play that I may be overlooking?

And if you have a trusted advisor, share your reflection with them. This is why coaching becomes essential the higher you go. Most leaders don't lack skill or competence. What they lack is self-awareness, the ability to see how their behavior ripples through the system and shapes the very outcomes they're trying to change.

If drift begins when leaders stop seeing clearly, then rediscovery begins when they start asking better questions. Curiosity is the simplest, most powerful way to reconnect with reality, and yet it's often the first thing to disappear as leaders rise. As I often tell leaders, curiosity is both the compass and the mirror of leadership. It points us toward what we don't yet know and reflects what we may have forgotten about ourselves.

So, before rushing into the next meeting or decision, pause and reflect on the following:

1. What am I no longer curious about?

Think about the areas of your business or team that you no longer question. What processes, assumptions, or relationships have become too familiar to notice? Curiosity fades where certainty grows too comfortable.

2. When was the last time I changed my mind?

Leaders who can't recall the last time they changed a perspective may be mistaking confidence for clarity. True curiosity invites the possibility of being wrong not as failure, but as a sign of growth.

3. What questions am I afraid to ask?

The best leaders know that curiosity often feels risky. What question, if asked honestly, might challenge your narrative, your metrics, or your comfort? Write it down. Then ask it.

4. Who tells me the truth, even when it's uncomfortable?

Every leader needs someone who's willing to say, "You're missing something." If you can't name that person, you may already be drifting.

5. What am I seeing only from my own vantage point?

Take Galinsky's experiment to heart—imagine how your decisions look from the floor, not the boardroom. Curiosity means putting the E on your forehead the right way for others to read.

Leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about staying awake to the questions that matter most. Curiosity keeps us tethered to our shared humanity. The part of us that still listens, still learns, still wonders. Before you can lead others well, you have to lead yourself back to wonder.

Curiosity is contagious. Leaders who cultivate curiosity and practice self-reflection begin to build cultures that do the same. Teams start speaking up earlier. Patterns surface faster. The work becomes less about defending positions and more about discovering reality. Over time, that's how organizations regain the plot with one honest reflection at a time.

So, ask yourself: *When was the last time I was truly curious about the people I lead?*

Scene 4: The Strategic Reset

**One week after the board meeting opening scene,
August 11, 2025**

The office was somber. Not just because it was 5 a.m., but because of *why* everyone was there.

Fifteen HR business partners and their legal counterparts sat around the long conference table, stuffing thick manila folders. Inside: outplacement service brochures, COBRA forms, and a stack of legal documents to sign away the noise. The folders landed in piles with soft, terminal thuds.

James stood by the window watching the city's skyline awaken. He had fought hard to advocate for a complete six-month severance package for those impacted, something decent that he could justify. But Graham's numbers had won. Only eight weeks. The spreadsheet had prevailed over clemency.

His thoughts drifted to Priya and her team. The acquisition promised to transform Driftwell into an AI-first company, where the sky was the limit. Instead, it had drained their cash, their credibility, and his patience. Her "Silicon Valley Visionary" energy clashed with the company's biotech roots, and her obsession with machine learning had alienated both investors and staff. *"AI is the future,"* she said. *"People are just slow to see it."*

Anna's voice replaying in his mind from last night's call, calm, almost maternal.

"James, people get laid off all the time. They'll land on their feet. Some even end up better off."

She meant to sound reassuring. It landed as callous.

He rubbed his eyes. The coffee had gone cold an hour ago.

"How many more folders?" he asked, voice low.

"Another hundred," someone replied. "We'll be done in thirty minutes."

He nodded, though he wasn't really listening. The clock ticked toward six. In less than an hour, an all-company email would hit inboxes announcing the "organizational reset." By seven, IT would send individualized emails to unaware employees. Some safe, some not. There would be no conversation or 1:1 to notify in person. Just an email with a subject line that changed lives.

James had written that first draft himself. He stared at the email on his screen. It looked sterile, corporate. It had to be. Half the workforce was remote, so they'd done what leaders do when humanity doesn't scale: they automated it.

He'd set up war rooms across the building for his HR function to work from. Small teams huddled in conference rooms, ready to take calls, answer questions, and absorb the grief from the unfortunate souls impacted.

Every system was in place.

Every word had been reviewed by legal.

Every feeling had been scrubbed out.

He watched the clock turn. The building was too quiet for what was coming. He knew most of the names on that list. Some he'd hired. A few of them in HR didn't yet know they were on it. He told himself this wasn't cruelty. It was survival. But the lie didn't comfort him anymore.

Then, the sound of the door buzzing as someone swiped their key card. Priya. She looked out of place in her bright

sneakers and designer jacket, her energy almost jarring against the silence. She was flying to Davos that weekend. A trip, James thought, was a terrible idea. *Optics, Priya*, he wanted to say. *You don't talk about moonshots while people lose their mortgages.*

But he said nothing. He knew Anna had approved it. The company needed investors to believe in the AI story, so the trip was branding, selling high-visibility hope.

Outside, the sunrise hit the glass towers across the street. Inside, the printer spat out another severance packet.

The weight of it all sat heavily on James's chest. This wasn't his first reduction-in-force, but something about this one felt final. Like the company he'd joined no longer existed. Like the Driftwell name itself had drifted too far.

He knew this day would age him. He could already feel it in the lines around his eyes, in the hollowness behind his ribs. He tried to remind himself: this wasn't personal. But that was a lie, too.

By 5:58 a.m., he hit *Send*.



Date: Friday, August 11, 2025

Subject Line: Company Organizational Change

Dear Driftwell Employees,

I am writing to thank you for all that you are doing for the company. Your service and dedication as we continue in our refounding year are unmatched. We are beginning to see a turnaround in our profitability.

However, we are not growing at the rate we promised our investor community. We have sought to cut costs everywhere possible, but we have come to the difficult conclusion that we must conduct a workforce reduction. This will help us regain momentum in our refounding years.

I assure you; I have worked closely with James and his People team to make this transition as frictionless as possible. This is no doubt a big change and a reset. You will see about 25% of your colleagues transition out of the organization today.

I want those exited to hold their heads high and know your legacy will be honored. If you have been impacted, you will receive a separate email and call by 7 a.m. today. If not, I ask that you please resume your normal business activities.

I know it will be a difficult day, but we will come back stronger.

All the best,
Anna

The clock struck six. Across offices, kitchen counters, and coffee shops, inboxes began to ping in near-perfect unison. At headquarters, the sound was almost musical, a soft cascade of notifications breaking the silence.

In Chicago, a product manager refreshed her email while packing her kids' lunches. She froze when she saw the subject line: **Company Organizational Change**. In Seattle, an engineer opened the message on his phone before his morning run. His shoes never made it out the door. In Boston, a team on Zoom stared at each other, waiting for someone else to speak first. No one did.

At Driftwell HQ, James watched as the "sent" confirmation pinged on his screen, then multiplied into hundreds, then thousands. A blue wave of email deliveries pulsed through the company's internal network, digital envelopes carrying small heartbreaks.

On Slack, statuses changed one by one:

● "In meeting."

○ "Offline."

Then nothing.

On one of the lower floors, an HR partner walked into a glass conference room to deliver the news to her own colleagues, and realized, halfway through her script, that her name was also on the list.

By 7:03 a.m., the building had gone eerily quiet.

No one was crying yet. The shock had frozen everything.

James stood still, staring out at the horizon as the sun finally broke through the clouds, spilling gold across the towers. Somewhere, a printer jammed, spitting out half a severance packet.

He thought of Anna's promise—*We'll come back stronger*.

He wanted to believe her.

But as the first goodbye emails started appearing on the company feed, a heavy truth settled in his chest:

Driftwell hadn't just lost people today. It had lost its center.

Commentary: RIFs Can Make You Delirious

If you've ever been part of a reduction-in-force, you know how gutting it is—on *both* sides of the table. Getting that call, that email, that unexpected meeting where your job disappears in an instant—it's life-altering. But delivering that news can change you, too. It does something to your insides. You walk in as one version of yourself and walk out a slightly different one.

There's a line I hear often from executives: "*We had no choice*." And sometimes, that's true. Markets change. Technology evolves. Strategy demands it. But too often, "no choice" is just another story leaders tell themselves to avoid feeling the full weight of their decisions.

The problem is that we've built an economic system that mistakes movement for progress. The same system that told us

AI will save the world is the one replacing the people who built it. We call it efficiency. We celebrate it on investor calls. But when you strip away the jargon, what's left is a quieter truth: we've made it normal to discard the very humans we depend on to innovate.

When leaders lose sight of that belief, they lose more than people. They lose moral authority. They lose the ability to inspire. They lose the story that made others want to follow them in the first place. And while a layoff may feel like a short-term win in a game of chess to offset costs, it becomes a losing move that will be seen with time.

Hot Take: HR Protects the Business

I've always been drawn to business, especially the people side of it. Early in my career, I saw something most business textbooks only hint at: companies don't succeed or fail because of strategy. They do it because of the people. Mismanagement, lack of communication, and disengagement weren't side issues. They were *the* issues. The things that made or broke everything else.

So, when I landed my first HR business partner role, I was thrilled. Finally, I thought I could help build healthier cultures, stronger leaders, and better workplaces. I had just finished my first graduate course in organizational behavior and was armed with theories I was certain could change the world—or at least the company I worked for.

My young, idealistic Millennial self thought I could fix culture with good intent and an action plan. I sigh now, looking back. The problem wasn't just my naivety. It was my first assignment.

At the time, well before AI became the technological obsession of the century, an unnoticed revolution was already underway. Robotic process automation (RPA) had entered the scene. It could handle repetitive back-office work faster, more accurately,

and at a fraction of the cost. It didn't get tired. It didn't need benefits. It didn't have a mortgage or kids in daycare.

The financial services company I'd joined saw RPA as the future. It made sense on paper: greater efficiency, fewer errors, better customer outcomes. But there was a cost that couldn't be modeled in Excel. To implement it, the back-office operations team—225 people—would be reduced to 25. Overnight.

That meant 200 people, most of whom had built their careers around precision and reliability, would be gone by morning. So much for developing leaders and building culture. Instead, my first HR assignment was a layoff.

I told myself this was the hard part of business. That HR existed to protect the company, not individual jobs. But as we drove to the regional office at dawn, the weight of that logic pressed hard against my ribs.

The senior HR leader riding with me must've sensed my unease. She gave me a look over her coffee and said, flatly,

"The people who get into HR to help people don't last long. They're the worst kind."

I wanted to tell her that was exactly why I had gotten into HR, to help people. But I stayed silent, and my silence was taken as agreement.

We arrived before sunrise. Only the janitorial crew was there. The building was dark except for the flicker of fluorescent light in the HR conference room. We spent hours assembling severance packets—envelopes thick with COBRA paperwork, release forms, and check stubs. It all felt sterile. Bureaucratic.

I was still in my late twenties, eager to prove myself, so I checked and double-checked everything. Still, I made a mistake. A math error. I miscalculated two weeks of severance for an entire group. I wouldn't know until the next day, when employees, shaken and angry, stormed back into my office demanding

answers. They thought the company had lied to them. I felt sick. We corrected it immediately, but the damage was done. Trust, once broken, doesn't repair neatly.

That day changed me.

Looking into the eyes of 200 people and telling them their jobs are gone will do that. By noon, I could feel the idealism draining out of me. By sunset, I had aged a decade.

Story after story chipped away at me. I hear about parents who didn't know how they'd tell their kids, employees who'd just bought homes, and one man who broke down because he'd finally paid off his debt and thought this was his "fresh start."

They weren't just worried about the paychecks. What really broke them was the offense to their identity. The sense that they'd been *useful*. That their work meant something.

And that was the hardest part: these weren't underperformers. These were people who took pride in their spreadsheets, their reconciliations, and their accuracy. The quiet craft of doing things right. To them, RPA wasn't innovation; it was erasure.

They weren't being replaced because they'd failed. They were being replaced because they'd succeeded so well that a machine had learned how to imitate them.

A day later, one woman who I'd describe as soft-spoken, probably in her late fifties, came back to the office. She said she just needed to "tie up a few loose ends." She still had her keycard, and for a few minutes, she slipped in unnoticed. She was sitting at her desk when security found her, finishing out a report no one had asked her to complete.

They told her she had to leave.

She stood up slowly, collected her things, and, before walking out, turned to me and said, her voice trembling but clear:

"I thought my work mattered."

That sentence still echoes. It was so simple, but it carried the weight of everything wrong with how we had built work.

I didn't have the language for it then, but looking back, that was the first time I truly saw the drift. The slow, faint separation between human value and business value. That was the day I learned that losing your job isn't what breaks you. It's realizing that the thing you devoted your life to might not have mattered at all.

The Research: A Changing Social Contract

Her words—*I thought my work mattered*—still echo years later. She was mourning a belief that doing good work meant something that the organization would hold sacred. They surface for me every time I hear a CEO say, “we’ll come back stronger”; every time a press release tries to turn a layoff into a story about resilience. Because what’s often left unsaid is the quiet devastation that lingers long after the headlines move on.

Driftwell wasn't unique. It was just the latest chapter in a much larger story, one that's been playing out for decades. The constant “right-sizing,” “streamlining,” and “refounding” are all polite euphemisms for a business model that treats human beings like levers on a spreadsheet.

And the cost isn't just financial. It's psychological. Cultural. Generational.

Gallup's latest global trust survey revealed a striking shift: for the first time, a majority of employees say they *don't trust businesses* to tell them the truth. Only 30% believe their company leaves the workforce better off than when they started.²¹ That's not just disengagement, it's disillusionment. The social contract between employers and employees has fractured beyond repair.

Business Insider journalist Aki Ito has written extensively about the perception of loyalty shifting. Her reporting captured the

exhaustion of a workforce that's been through endless waves of layoffs, reorganizations, and empty promises. Workers have stopped seeing companies as partners in their success. They've learned that loyalty, once prized, is now a liability.

In a recent *Business Insider* article, Aki captures what so many workers have been feeling but rarely say out loud:

*"Loyalty at work is at an all-time low as workers and companies feel like they no longer owe each other anything."*²²

That sentence reads like an obituary for the social contract that once defined work. For decades, people believed that if they stayed loyal, if they worked hard, delivered results, and kept faith in the organization, the company would, in some way, be loyal back. That belief has been shattered.

Ito's interviews with younger workers show just how deep that fracture runs.

*"I'm a millennial, and when I talk to Gen Z workers, I'm often struck by how un-naïve—even cynical—they are about work," she writes.*²³

They've seen too many "refoundings," too many reorganizations labeled as "strategic resets," too many headlines about visionary CEOs cutting thousands while chasing the next shiny object. In this generation's eyes, Driftwell isn't fiction but rather it's the modern workplace in microcosm: the glossy talk of innovation masking a deeper erosion of trust.

Where loyalty once meant partnership, now it's a risk signaling something employees can't afford to give too freely. Because they've learned the hard way that in the corporate world's new calculus, loyalty isn't rewarded; it's exploited.

That line could've come from any floor at Driftwell. It's the sound of people detaching not from the work itself, but from the illusion that the company was a haven for their identity.

The Hidden Consequences of Layoffs We often talk about layoffs as if they're isolated events, describing them as a tough quarter or a course correction. But research shows their effects linger for years. Economists at Stanford and MIT call it *the scarring effect*: workers who lose their jobs in mass layoffs earn, on average, 20% less over the course of their careers.²⁴ Their trust in institutions never fully returns.

And the employees who *remain* don't escape unscathed either. Studies show that "survivors" of layoffs experience a 41% drop in job satisfaction and a steep decline in engagement.²⁵ They start playing defense. Creativity contracts. Risk-taking disappears. Everyone's body might be at work, but their hearts are not.

Even the leaders aren't immune. Delivering those conversations, watching colleagues disappear one badge swipe at a time, leaves an invisible bruise. The people who stay behind often rationalize it as a business necessity, but inside, something hardens.

And while a layoff may feel like capturing a piece in the moment, in the larger game of business, it often sets the board for defeat. That was Driftwell's mistake. Anna believed she was buying time when she was just trading trust for survival, and once trust is gone, the game is already lost. You can't cost-cut your way to loyalty. You can't spreadsheet your way back to belief.

Because, in the end, numbers don't build culture, people do. And when leaders start treating their workforce like expendable pieces on a board, they forget the most important rule of the game: you only win if your team still wants to play.

Make it Make Sense: Coaching Corner with Executive Coach Kim Fazio

Before we cross into Act II, I want to pause with you. I've invited my executive coach, Kim Fazio, to weigh in on this first act. Kim has advised me for years as I navigated corporate life, and I've invited her to share her insights with you.

Let's Break It Down Before It Breaks Us

As an executive coach and organizational psychologist, I work with senior leaders navigating complexity, change, and high stakes. Whether you're leading a team, aspire to lead a team, or simply feel stuck in familiar loops, coaching offers a rare space. A space grounded in reflection.

My role isn't to give advice or solve clients' problems. Instead, I help them rethink their challenges, with greater creativity and intention. Drawing on behavioral science, leadership research, and neuroscience, I partner with leaders to uncover insights. These insights shift perspectives and unlock behavior change.

If you've never worked with a coach, consider it a structured thinking partnership. One that challenges assumptions, strengthens self-awareness, and supports action aligned with what matters most.

In my experience, when leaders begin to veer off course, it rarely looks dramatic in the moment (although it certainly can). More often it shows up in small relational slights that are easy to miss amid the noise.

Here are some of the most common drifts I've observed across organizations:

- 1. Reality stops getting named.** Truth becomes optional. Relationships begin to feel illusory instead of grounded. Unspoken stories fill the silence where honest conversations used to live.

2. **Curiosity slowly collapses into assumptions.** As teams stop asking questions, they begin defending answers. Inquiry is replaced by inference and human connections weakens.
3. **Emotional bandwidth begins to erode.** Leadership defaults to preservation over presence. Listening begins to feel costly. Empathy becomes too heavy a load to carry.
4. **Shared purpose is lost.** Without a clear North Star, people aren't moving together; they're simply surviving side by side. Partnership gives way to parallel efforts to stay above the surface.
5. **People conserve their efforts.** When relationships no longer feel reciprocal, people naturally stop giving more than what's required.

The above aren't character flaws, they're human defaults. Predictable responses to sustained pressure, ambiguity, and fear. Each one is a warning sign indicating that something important has gone unattended for too long.

Cupcakes in the Cafeteria I want to share a real story about Adrian, a rising executive in a manufacturing business. He had built his career on the factory floor, a place where problems couldn't be ignored. Working in plants, you learned to call things as they are. When a machine is jammed or a process fails, you don't sugarcoat it; you document the friction, fix it fast, and improve the process moving forward.

So, when Adrian earned his promotion to Vice President of Operations, he expected that same type of clarity at the leadership level. Instead, he walked into his first executive summit and was greeted not with data or tensions, but with cupcakes. Literally. There were pastel-frosted cupcakes on trays, polite laughter, and colleagues seemingly playing their part.

As he listened to the conversations, he realized that no one was talking about reality. No one mentioned the real issues of fragile systems, stalled projects, or the recent exodus of key talent. Each leader took their turn sharing upbeat updates, talking about “momentum” and “synergy,” all while not mentioning their obstacles.

When it was his turn to speak, Adrian surprised even himself. He played along. He offered a polished report that made his division sound strong, glossing over the breakdowns he knew were costing them hours each week. He didn’t recognize himself in that moment.

He left the room uneasy and asked himself: *When did corporate leadership become so afraid of the truth?*

That moment stayed with him. Over time, he realized that many leaders feared that transparency might break confidence in their leadership capabilities, never recognizing that silence was doing far more damage. The irony is that the courage to name what’s broken is what actually keeps a company alive.

A Way Back: The Repair Pathway

When drift happens, and it always can in high-pressure environments, the question becomes whether leaders can find their way back. Repair is the real work of leadership, and it begins with radical truth: naming where things have missed the mark and choosing, openly, to get them back on track.

The Repair Pathway outlines a clear, meaningful sequence to help leaders find their way back to fostering trust, openness, and shared intention.

THE REPAIR PATHWAY

A structured process for rebuilding connection after relational drift

1. CLARITY: Name what is real.

“Something feels off. . .”

“Here’s what I’ve been noticing. . .”



2. CURIOSITY: Surface the stories you’ve created.

“What I’ve been telling myself is. . .”

“How did that land for you?”



3. COURAGE: Reveal the needs beneath protective patterns.

“What I actually was hoping for was. . .”

“I pulled back because I felt. . .”



4. CONNECTION: Rebuild shared purpose.

“What are we working toward together?”

“What does support look like for you?”



5. CONSISTENCY: Anchor change in small daily actions.

Perform daily check-ins or acts of appreciation.

Avoid making assumptions.

The Repair Pathway offers leaders a way back when drift shows up in relationships, teams, and cultures. The goal: reconnection, renewed trust, and sustainable performance cultures. But naming what's real, staying curious, and choosing courage are no longer just interpersonal challenges; they're increasingly cognitive ones. Today's leaders are trying to repair trust, meaning, and connection inside systems that reward speed over sense-making, data over discernment, and automation over understanding. And as complexity accelerates, even the most well-intentioned leaders can lose their footing because making sense has become harder than ever.