

AI ACTUALLY IMPORTANT

On Leading, Mentoring, and
Growing in the Age of AI

*"Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything."
"Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses."*

VIVIAN LOBO



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
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“Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses.”
- Vivian Lobo

Gratitude & Dedication

Fide et Labore.

Those two words were carved into the walls of St Joseph's before I fully understood what they truly meant. Faith and Toil. By the time I left, they were ingrained in me. And have become the invisible spine of this book and if you look closely at the pages that follow, you will find them on every one.

To my parents, Vincent and Winni, the first leaders I ever had the privilege of watching. You showed me that faith is not passive, and that no work done with love is ever wasted. To my brother Winson, and my twin sister Vivette — you have been beside me on every road, long before the roads had names. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

To my wife Ramona — your steadiness has been my shelter through every season this journey has produced. You never asked me to be less, and you never let me believe I was more than what my actions proved. That is the rarest kind of love, and the kind that produces real leaders. And to my son Matteo — you are the reason this book exists. Watching you discover the world reminded me that curiosity is not a childhood phase to be coached out of us. It is the engine. In the age of AI, in the age of everything moving faster than we can name it, the child who asks, “why” is still the most powerful force in the room. You are my greatest teacher.

To my uncle Leo — your faith in me has been unwavering, even in the seasons when my own faith in

myself was not. That kind of belief is itself a form of leadership. I have not forgotten it, and I never will.

In loving memory of my grandmother, Rosy Albuquerque. You were the cornerstone of my principles long before I had the language to name them. The values in these pages, the way I try to lead, the person I am still in the process of becoming — all of it traces back to you. This book is dedicated, in no small part, to your grace, your grit, and your enduring love.

To my uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, and niece — you are the whole reason this book was written. The pages that follow are full of lessons, but the lessons came from being surrounded by all of you. There are too many names and too much love to fit here without this becoming a second book entirely. If you are reading this, you are one of them.

I have been fortunate to have friends who became family along the way. To the many who have walked alongside me at different chapters — you know who you are, and I hope you know what you meant. A special mention to Goutham and Salmaan: at the stages of life where I needed it most, you were there. Not because you had to be, but because that is simply who you are. You have been more than friends. You have been steadfast companions, and I am eternally grateful.

And to anyone I have not named — if I have missed you, I am sorry. The omission is mine, not the gratitude. A life worth living tends to collect more people than a page can hold. You are valued. You are loved.

Fide et Labore.

Foreword

A Letter to the Reader Already Tired of AI Books

If you have wandered into a bookshop in the last twelve months, you will already have noticed what I have observed. Half the front table is a book about AI. The other half is a book about leadership. And a fair number of them, if you flip through honestly, are the different versions of the same book — a confident author telling you that the way they did it is the way you should do it now, and that if you do not, the future will leave you behind.

This is not that book.

I want to say that for starters, because if you came here looking for a ten-step program to become a better-known leader, or a checklist that will let you out-prompt your competition by Friday, I would rather you put this back on the shelf and find a louder book. There are plenty of them. Most of them are very well written. None of them are about you.

This book is.

I have spent more than two decades inside organisations of very different shapes — a global service centre in Bangalore, an oil-and-gas major in Brisbane, a retail floor working for one of the most recognisable technology brands on earth, registered training organisations, higher education start-ups built from a blank page, and now a software business that lives inside the AI conversation every working day. In every one of those rooms I noticed the same quiet pattern. The leaders who lasted, and the people they were lifting up, were not the ones trying to copy somebody else's playbook. They were the ones who had quietly decided that the thing they already had — the way they thought, the way they listened, the way they had been shaped by their own particular life — was not a deficiency to be fixed but a foundation to be built on.

* * *

Most leadership books, gently, want to talk you out of that. They want to make you a slightly more efficient version of the author. This book wants the opposite. I wrote it on the assumption that you, the person reading this tonight, are already carrying things that matter. A way of seeing a problem that nobody else in the room sees. A patience nobody trained you in. A tenderness somebody in your life made possible. A stubbornness about the right thing that has cost you something. Those are not soft skills. Those are your skills. The work of this book is to bring them forward, not to paint over them.

That changes what AI is for, too.

The title — AI – Actually Important — is doing two jobs at once. The first is honest: AI is, in fact, actually important. It is reshaping the rooms I walk into every week, the way teams write, the way decisions are sketched, the speed at which a draft becomes a document. To pretend otherwise would be unserious. The second job is the one most people miss. AI is actually important not because of what it can do for the version of you that someone else thinks you should be. It is actually important because, if used well, it gives you back the hours and the elbow room to become more of who you already are. It can carry the routine drafts so that you can carry the human conversation. It can hold the scaffolding so that your voice can stand up properly inside it. That is a very different promise from “AI will make you faster”. It is the promise that AI, when treated as a colleague rather than a master, can finally make space for the leader you have been quietly trying to be.

* * *

So, this book will not ask you to become me. It will not ask you to become anyone in it. The chapters tell stories; some of them mine, some belonging to people who walked beside me, some of them about Atlas, the AI co-thinker you will meet shortly, but the stories are not models for you to mimic. They are doorways. At the end of every chapter there is a Reflection Companion: a short, deliberately quiet set of questions that turns the chapter back toward you. What in this resonates with your own working life? What does not? What change, in your own context, is yours to identify, and yours to make? The honest leadership shift in the AI era is not a copy-and-paste of somebody

else's transformation. It is the shift you choose, with your eyes open, in the rooms only you stand in.

You will see one sentence repeated through this book like a heartbeat:

“Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything. Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses.”

The Prologue will explain where that line comes from and why it carries the spine of the book. For now, take it as the first thing I am promising you. I will not fake either Faith or Toil on these pages. I will write honestly about the seasons in my own life when I had run short of one and was leaning, sometimes badly, on the other. If this book ends up being useful to you, it will be useful in the way that a steady walking companion is useful, not the way an instruction manual is — present, willing to be wrong, willing to keep going.

* * *

So here is the contract.

Stories first. I will lead with what actually happened, in real rooms, with real people whose names I have either kept or carefully fabricated. **Principles second.** I will only draw a line under a story when it is fair to do so, and I will try not to dress a small lesson up as a large one. **Reflection always.** Every chapter ends with you, not with me. That is the right order. You are why the book exists.

If you are tired of AI books, I understand. I was tired of them too. I wrote this one because I think the era we are in deserves a quieter conversation than the one currently being grilled in our feeds — a conversation about what AI means for people who still want to lead with their own face on, who still want to mentor, who still want to walk into a room and see the human in front of them before the dashboard.

If that is the conversation you came for, you are in the right place. Pull up a chair. We have work to do, and we will do it together.

Prologue

Faith and Toil

I grew up in Bangalore in a family where there was not much spare money, and not much spare drama either. There was, however, a great deal of light. Some of it came from candles when the power went out, which was more often than anticipated. Most of it came from my mother's spelling drills and my father's quiet, unbreakable habit of getting up before the rest of us to go to a job he did not particularly enjoy, because the job was what kept the rest of our lives possible. Nobody in that house used the words "leadership" or "values" or "purpose". Those words are luxuries; they belong to people who are no longer worried about whether the rent is going to be there at the end of the month. What we had instead was something simpler, and stronger.

We had Faith. And we had Toil.

I did not name them at the time. I did not have to. They were the temperature of the house. Faith was the candle on the kitchen table that my grandmother lit before any examination, mine or my brother's, regardless of how prepared either of us actually were. Faith was the rosary my mother slipped into my pocket on the morning of an interview I was certain I had no business being at. Faith was my father refusing to accept that a door someone had closed in his face was a permanently closed one. Toil was everything else. Toil was the studying after the studying. Toil was the second shift after the first shift. Toil was the small, daily act of returning, again, to the desk or the workshop or the queue, on a day when nothing in your body wanted to. Together, in our small house, Faith and Toil were not a slogan. They were a load-bearing wall.

* * *

Years later — after I had finished a degree my parents had paid for in instalments, after I had moved across an ocean to a city that did not yet know my name, after I had sat across the table from senior

leaders who could not quite place my accent and senior leaders who could and chose to anyway — I found that one sentence kept assembling itself in my head whenever I needed it most. The first time I wrote it down was in a journal, late at night, after a day in which something had gone badly. The sentence was this:

*“Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything.
Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses.”*

It was not poetic. It was not original in the parts that mattered. It was, simply, when I read it back, the truest description I had of how my family had survived, of how my own working life had moved forward when there was no good reason for it to, and of why almost every time I had stalled — in a job, in a project, in a relationship, in myself — it had been because I had quietly let go of one of the two. When I let go of Faith, Toil became grim and small. When I let go of Toil, Faith became sentimental and useless. Together, they kept moving. Apart, they invented reasons to stop.

That is the line that carries this book.

It is doing more work in the chapters ahead than it looks. It is not advice. It is not a productivity hack. It is a description of the only durable engine I have ever seen for a working life that turns out to mean something at the end. You will meet it explicitly in some chapters and implicitly in most of the others. When you reach a passage where I am writing about a season that did not work, you will almost always find, if you look, that one of the two had quietly slipped. When you reach a passage where something is held — a team, a project, a marriage, a faith — you will find both, doing their unglamorous work side by side.

* * *

I should introduce myself to you honestly before we go any further, because you are about to spend a lot of pages with me, and you deserve to know who is talking.

I am not the most senior person who has written a book like this. I am not the loudest voice in the AI conversation. I am someone who has

walked the journey you may be walking now — sometimes well, sometimes badly, often both in the same week. I have helped people up after they have fallen. I have also, more times than I would like to admit, fallen myself. I have had ideas of mine taken without credit. I have watched dreams I had nursed for years be trampled by people in too much of a hurry to notice they were standing on something. I have sat alone, in more than one office, in more than one country, and quietly wondered whether I was worth any of the trouble I was clearly causing the people around me. I have come close, in the way most working people come close to stopping. I did not stop. The reason I did not stop is the reason this book exists. I want to make sure that the people behind me — the ones still wondering whether their own particular shape fits in a room — do not have to find that reason on their own.

* * *

You will also meet, very early, a character called Atlas.

Atlas is what I have come to call the AI assistant I work alongside most days. The name was deliberate. In the old myths, Atlas was the one made to carry the world on his shoulders — and that is, quietly, what AI is being asked to do for the rest of us right now. To take the weight of routine work, of scale, of the relentless first drafts the modern day demands, and to hold them up so that the people who used to spend their evenings writing them can spend those evenings on something else. Atlas, throughout this book, is not a god, not a threat, and not the hero. Atlas is a colleague. A useful one, sometimes; a wrong one, sometimes; an honest mirror, when I let it be. The way I think about Atlas — and the way I will invite you to think about your own version of Atlas — runs all the way through these pages. The relationship between a leader and a tool of this kind is, I will argue, one of the most important relationships a working person now has. It is also, at the moment, one of the most poorly handled. We will spend some real time on it.

* * *

Now, a word on how the book is built.

The book has four parts, and they are not arranged by topic. They are arranged by motion. The four parts move in alternating breaths between Faith and Toil — the same two pillars that held up our small house in Bangalore, scaled up to the size of a working life.

Part I — Faith: Foundations — is the inner climb. It is about who you are when no one is grading you, when the marks did not flatter you, when somebody once told you that you had no strengths. It is the part that asks you to take seriously the thing nobody else has told you to take seriously: that you, as you are, are already enough to lead with.

Part II — Toil: Building — is the craft. It is about teams, about service, about the unglamorous middle years in which a leader actually learns the trade. It is about learning to put people before the process without ever pretending that the process does not matter. It is about marks versus making. It is about work.

Part III — Toil: Leading in the AI Era — is where Atlas takes its proper seat. It is about leading through pivots that nobody trained anybody for — the pandemic, the AI shift, the next shift waiting in the wings — and about what it actually means to mentor, to verify, and to refuse to believe everything when the most confident-sounding voice in the room is now produced by a machine.

Part IV — Faith: Passing It On — is the long view. It is about compliance and conscience and compassion when they pull in different directions. It is about faith and family and the years that no quarterly report measures. It is about a leader's manifesto for the AI era, and a small request to the next generation walking into the room behind us.

In between, there is one constant. At the end of every chapter, the Reflection Companion turns the writing back toward you. The book is not a monologue. It is the start of a conversation in which I do most of the early talking and you, slowly, take the pen.

* * *

A short word, then, on what this book is not. It is not a book that will change your life because you started doing what I did. I do not

believe that is how change works, and I do not think it is fair to pretend it is. The chapters that follow are not biographical so that you can imitate them. They are biographical so that you have permission to take your own life as seriously as I have taken mine. The change this book is hoping to seed in you is not my change. It is yours. You will know what it is. By the time you finish, I hope you will also know, more clearly than you do tonight, what you intend to do about it.

That is what Faith and Toil are for. Faith that the change you are seeing is real and worth attending to. Toil, that the change will not announce itself; it will require something of you, on a Tuesday, when nobody is watching.

The candle on my grandmother's kitchen table has long since gone out. The desk in my home office, with Atlas glowing politely at the edge of the screen, is where the next part of the family story is now being written. The materials are different. The motto is the same.

If you are ready, turn the page. We will start at the beginning of my own staircase, in a room where someone once told me I had no strengths. It will turn out to be one of the most useful things anyone ever said to me. It is, in many ways, why we are here.

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PART I

FAITH - FOUNDATIONS

Who you are when the marks didn't flatter you

Chapter One

The Quiet Revolution

Why "AI - Actually Important"

"Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything. Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses."

- Vivian Lobo

It is half past nine on a Tuesday evening. The house has gone quiet - the sort of quiet that only arrives after the dishwasher's final rinse, when the dog has given up on a second walk and the children have argued themselves to sleep. I am in the small home office, the one whose door no longer closes properly because of a hinge I keep meaning to fix, and on the screen in front of me is a draft of a leadership note for a small staff team I am meant to send first thing tomorrow morning.

I did not write the draft.

Atlas did. Atlas is what I have come to call the AI assistant I work alongside most days. The name was deliberate. In the old myths, Atlas was the one made to carry the world on his shoulders - and that is, in its quiet way, exactly what AI is now being asked to do for the rest of us. To take the weight of routine work, of scale, of the relentless first drafts the modern day demands, and to hold them up so that the people who used to spend their evenings writing them can spend those evenings on something else. Atlas has no face, or desk, or opinion about weekends. But it does have, by any reasonable measure, a working relationship with me. I had given Atlas five bullet points, an old style guide, and an example of something I had written years ago. Forty seconds later it returned a tidy paragraph with all of my preferred turns of phrase, none of my

typos, and a closing line so warm it could almost have been mine. It even used my initials.

I read the note through twice. Then I deleted the most important paragraph, and I started writing it again.

That paragraph was about a person I have been quietly worried about - a colleague carrying a difficult few months at home - and Atlas's version of it was better than mine, in almost every sense in which a paragraph can be measured. It was clearer. It was more concise. It had the subject lines a manager-of-managers would prefer. It even, somehow, included a sentence about resilience that I would not have thought to write.

But Atlas did not know him. And so I wrote it again.

When I had finished, the new paragraph was less polished than Atlas's. It was longer than it needed to be. There was a redundant comma I noticed at the third pass and chose to leave in. But the paragraph carried, in its slightly clumsy way, the one thing the AI could not have given it: my eyes on him.

It is in moments like that - with the ceiling fan ticking and Atlas's offered draft glowing politely at the edge of the screen - that I have come to understand why I am writing this book.

* * *

Most of what is being said about AI in the rooms I work in falls into two camps.

In the first camp are the optimists. They have already worked out that AI will do more, faster, for less money, and they are racing to be the first organisation in their sector to install it everywhere it will fit. The metric that matters in this camp is leverage. Their slide decks have arrows that point upward. Their concerns, if voiced, are usually that someone else will get there first.

In the second camp are the pessimists. They have read the history of automation and are quietly bracing for a wave they assume will sweep them, or their children, off the island. The metric that matters in

this camp is loss. Their slides are full of warnings - about jobs, about meaning, about the slow erosion of skills that took a generation to build.

I have nothing against either camp. I have stood in both. But I want to make a case in this book that neither story tells the truth about leadership, and that a third story is the one we actually need.

The third story goes like this. AI is not actually important because of what it can do. It is not actually important because of what it might take. AI is actually important because of who we choose to become while it is doing it.

It is a small distinction. It is also the whole book.

* * *

I should tell you, before we go any further, that I am not the obvious person to be writing this.

When I was about to leave school, I sat for a paper-based aptitude test - the kind that asked young people a long list of questions, on a stapled booklet, with a pencil that kept needing sharpening, and which, when scored, was supposed to point you toward the kind of work you might be good at. I had not done particularly well at school. The marks on my report were not the marks anyone would have framed. I sat for the test, and afterwards a counsellor - a woman whose job it was to walk young people through the results - went through the answers with me. She looked at her sheet for a while. Then she looked at me, with what I now suspect was a sort of well-meaning professional honesty, and said: "I have to be honest with you. I can't really see any."

She meant strengths.

I walked home along a familiar street that suddenly felt unfamiliar. I have written about that walk before, in fragments, but I have never quite written about what happened during it. What happened is that I made a small, quiet, almost embarrassed bargain with myself. I decided that if the woman with the booklet could not see any strengths, then I would have to either find some, or build some. I did not, then, know which.

In the years that followed I worked at things. I was a customer-service executive on a BPO floor at Mphasis in Bangalore, with a headset that seemed to fuse to the side of my head and a queue of irate callers that never quite emptied. I trained people, then coached them. I was an HR business partner at Saipem Australia, in the high-stakes oil-and-gas sector, where a sloppy decision could cost a colleague his livelihood - or worse. I ran a national Google retail-training programme for Creative Activation across two states, with Tableau dashboards I had to learn to read in a hurry. I helped start Leaders Institute from a blank page in 2016, in the middle of regulatory frameworks I had never heard of, and watched it grow from \$300,000 of enrolments in its first year to \$2.1 million in its third - and, eventually, to a #1 ranking among Non-University Higher Education Institutions in the QILT survey of 2022.

I have sat on governing boards. I have sat on appeals panels. I have chaired a parish pastoral council and held a Justice of the Peace qualification. I have been named on an Australian innovation patent. As I write this, I am the Chief Executive Officer of TBP CODOT - a software company delivering AI tools to organisations across the Australasia region - and the Director of Operations for Ozford Australia's Brisbane campus, which means that during the day I help build the AI tools that other leaders are now learning to use, and in the evenings I help run a higher education campus through the standards every regulator we answer to expects of us. Alongside both, I am in the final stretch of a doctorate at Torrens University on the post-pandemic barriers international students face in sustaining online learning at Australian higher education providers - the academic question I have been quietly asking the same set of practitioner questions about for fifteen years.

I tell you all of that not to impress you. I tell you all of that because none of it was on the booklet.

The woman with the booklet was wrong about me. But she was not, to be fair to her, malicious. She was simply doing what the system she was working in told her to do - measuring against criteria designed for someone else's life. The measurement was the part that failed.

This is the beginning of why this book exists. Because if a single under-resourced aptitude test can write off a teenager whose contribution will, in time, run to thousands of students enrolled in courses he helped design, imagine what a global rollout of automated measurement is going to do to a generation of teenagers right now.

Imagine what it is going to do to your team.

Imagine what it is going to do to you.

* * *

The soil this book grew in

Before we go any further, I want to tell you about the people who put me in the chair that day.

The chair, the booklet, the woman who delivered the verdict - they were all in Bangalore, in the south of India. The home I grew up in was a small one, on a street whose dogs and tailors and grocers I knew by name long before I knew my own ambitions. Bangalore in those years was a city becoming something it had not been before. The IT economy was moving in. The English-language schools were filling up. The middle of the city kept reorganising itself around new offices and new accents. Underneath all of that, the things that made the city home for our family - the temple bells, the evening power cuts, the small shops still run by people who remembered the day my mother first walked past them - had not changed at all.

My parents had very little formal education between them. My mother, when our family began, barely spoke any English at all. They both knew, with the certainty that only people who have lived without something can know, that an English-medium education was going to widen their children's lives - even though, at the time, that meant going against the grain of nearly everyone around us. Members of our own extended family told my parents, in plain terms, that their children should not be sent to an English school. We would not cope. We would fall behind. We would be embarrassed.

My elder brother was the first one through the door. He went to St Joseph's Boys High School and carried, on his shoulders, the burden of

the doubters. Whatever ground he broke, he broke it for the rest of us. By the time my twin sister and I followed, the path was a little wider, the worry a little quieter. We had our own battles still - every kid does - but they were different battles, gentler ones, because of the work he had done first.

My mother taught me to read in the most beautiful way I have ever heard of anyone teaching anyone anything. The electricity in our part of the world used to fail often. So she would light two candles - one in the front room where we did our homework, and one in the kitchen where she was cooking dinner for the family - and she would call out spelling words to us through the doorway. She would say a word; we would call back the letters; she would correct us, gently, while her hands did three other things at once. She was learning English, in those moments, by teaching us to spell it. The candle on her side of the doorway was older than mine. Sometimes it would go out and the kitchen would go dark, and I would hear her humming and re-lighting it without breaking stride.

That is the soil this book grew in.

The motto I quoted at the top of this chapter - Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything; lack any one, and you will have endless excuses - is not, in the end, mine. The words came together in my own life over a long period of time, but the values they name were planted long before that. They were planted at St Joseph's, where Faith and Toil were not posters on the wall but the daily expectation of the place. They were planted at home, in candlelit rooms full of spelling. They were planted by a brother who walked through doors first, and parents who would not be told no by people who had never had to fight.

Today, many of the same people who told my parents we would not cope come to family gatherings and tell us, kindly, that they always knew we would do well. Their pride is a real thing, and I do not wish to argue with it. But it is not the thing that made us. The thing that made us is what happened in the years before they were proud.

That is one of the quiet lessons I want this book to carry. Do not forget your past. But do not carry it as a burden, either. Use it as the

reason to move forward - the proof, in your own hands, that someone before you fought a smaller fight so that you could fight this bigger one. It is not as easy as that one sentence makes it sound. None of this is. But it is the only frame that, in my experience, makes the impact you want to make possible.

I tell you about my parents, my brother, my sister, and the candles because I am about to ask you, throughout this book, to do hard things. I am going to ask you to refuse the verdicts other people pass on you, and to refuse to pass cheap verdicts on the people in your care. I am going to ask you to grow alongside a tool that is going to embarrass some of your former assumptions about your own usefulness. I am going to ask you to verify your own work, refine it, and put your name on it. None of that is easy. But none of it is, on the scale of human effort, as hard as what was done for me before I was old enough to know it was happening.

If a candle in a kitchen and a brother walking through a door first can produce three working adults out of a household of two-and-a-half languages and not enough money, then the rest of what I am going to ask you in this book is, by comparison, well within reach.

* * *

What this book means by 'AI'

Let me, before going any further, agree to some terms with you.

When this book uses the word AI, it means, very practically, the family of tools - large language models, image generators, predictive analytics engines, automated decision systems - that, by the time you are reading this, are arriving on every desk in every working organisation in the world. I am not going to spend any time arguing about whether they are 'true' intelligence or merely impressive statistics. That argument is somebody else's book.

What this book treats as fact is much more modest. AI is a tool that can produce a confident-sounding first draft of almost anything. It can summarise. It can translate. It can sift. It can rank. It can recommend. It can, in some cases, schedule meetings, write code, score

essays, draft policies, and quietly nudge every decision your team makes in a particular direction. It can - and increasingly will - sit beside every leader in every organisation, all day, like a junior analyst who never sleeps.

That is the tool we are dealing with. That is what we are choosing to grow alongside. The interesting question, then, is not what the tool can do. The interesting question is what kind of leader the tool reveals you to be.

What this book means by 'leadership'

When this book uses the word leadership, it does not mean what your job title says.

It does not mean strategy decks. It does not mean keynote speaking. It does not mean charisma, or executive presence, or whatever the LinkedIn algorithm is rewarding this quarter. Those things may or may not be useful - they are mostly useful when paired with something else.

Something else is what I mean by leadership. Three components, none of which are negotiable.

Judgement. The ability to weigh information you do not fully understand, against pressures you cannot fully predict, on behalf of people whose lives will be affected by your call. This is what an AI cannot do for you. It can spread the information out neatly. It can suggest options. It can even rank them. But it cannot bear the weight of the decision. That weight is yours, and bearing it is part of the work.

Character. The reliable pattern of small, witnessed choices that adds up - over months, over years, over a career - to a person other people are willing to follow. Character is what your team has watched you do when you thought no-one was watching. It is the thing AI cannot copy, because the thing AI is missing is precisely the thing character is made from: cost.

The development of others. The patient, often invisible work of helping another human being become more than they were when they joined your team. Some of this work involves teaching. Some of it

involves listening. A surprising amount of it involves not interrupting. None of it can be automated without becoming something else.

If a leader is doing those three things, I am willing to call them a leader regardless of their title. If a leader is not doing those three things, I am unwilling to call them a leader regardless of their title.

This is, I admit, a narrower definition than most leadership books offer. I think we are about to need that narrowness.

* * *

Why AI is actually important

We are about to live through a period of work in which a great many tasks that used to require leaders no longer will.

This will not happen evenly. Some industries will move faster than others. Some teams will move faster than others. Some leaders will move faster than the teams below them, and some will lag. But the direction of travel is not in serious doubt. Increasingly, the parts of leadership that were essentially administrative - drafting, scheduling, summarising, comparing, reporting - are being absorbed into machines.

Many leaders will read that sentence and feel the floor begin to slope. They will wonder, reasonably, whether anything is being left behind for them.

This is the moment in the conversation where most books reach for a reassuring slogan. I do not want to do that. I would rather tell you what I actually believe, which is more interesting.

What is being left behind for leaders is the work that always mattered most. It is not a consolation prize. It is the part of the job that we used to bury under email, hide inside meetings, and apologise for not having time for. It is the part of the job that - once the administrative scaffolding is taken away - is going to stand in the daylight all by itself.

It is the work of making good decisions when the data is incomplete.

It is the work of being trustworthy enough that people will tell you the truth.

It is the work of helping other people become who they are capable of becoming.

It is the work of standing alongside someone, in person or on a screen, when everything else has gone wrong.

It is the work - and this matters - of verifying. Of refining. Of putting your name on the result and meaning it.

This work was always important. The reason this book is called AI - Actually Important is that it is about to become impossible to hide from.

A word on Faith and Toil

I have a working motto that I find myself returning to in conversations with younger leaders, and I would rather introduce it to you now than later.

Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything. Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses.

As I said earlier, the words came together in my own life over a long period of time, but the values they named were planted at St Joseph's Boys High School. Faith and Toil were two pillars the school built into its students like a load-bearing wall - quietly, without ceremony, and over years. By the time I left, they had become something I could feel without having to think about. By the time I sat for that aptitude test, they were already, secretly, on my side. The woman with the booklet did not know about them. They were not on her sheet.

I should also say something, before we go further, about the word Faith.

I do not, in this book, mean a particular religion. The Faith I am writing about is the bigger, older thing that all of the world's wisdom traditions have tried, in their different ways, to point at. It is the conviction that there is more to you than your last result. It is the trust

that the long game is the real game. It is the willingness to commit to people, and to work, before either has been proven worth the commitment. Faith, in this book, is what allows you to grow yourself - and what allows you to trust other people.

My own Faith has a particular shape. I am Catholic. I chair a parish pastoral council in Brisbane, and I think a great deal about how the contemplative traditions of two thousand years inform the way I lead today. You will see that thread in places. But you do not need to share my tradition to use this book, any more than you need to share an author's nationality to be moved by a novel. Take what is useful. Translate the rest into your own language.

The motto says two things at once.

The first is that Faith is non-negotiable. Without Faith, the woman with the booklet's verdict is the verdict. Without Faith, the bad performance review is the truth about you. Without Faith, the algorithm's confidence interval is your future. Faith is the part of the work that nobody can do for you and nobody can take away.

The second is that Faith without Toil is fantasy. There is a kind of self-help culture at the moment that suggests believing in yourself is enough - that visualisation will sort it out, that the universe rewards intention. It does not. The universe, as far as I have been able to tell, rewards Toil. Toil is the slow, repetitive, often unglamorous work of proving - to yourself first, to others later - that the Faith was warranted. Toil is the maker's ledger. It is page after page of attempts. It is the calls you took on the headset, the policies you read line by line, the units you re-wrote because the regulator asked one more question, the conversations with international students at midnight because the visa had not arrived. Toil is what makes Faith honest.

Through this book, you will see Faith and Toil organised into the spine of the chapters. Parts I and IV are mostly about Faith - the inner climb, the long view, the question of who you are when no-one is measuring you. Parts II and III are mostly about Toil - the craft of building, leading, and verifying things in the AI era, when confident-sounding output is cheap and tested-and-trusted output is rare.

You will read both. They are, in the end, the same work seen from two sides.

* * *

A staircase, not a ladder

Most leadership books are written as if leadership were a ladder. You start at the bottom, you climb a defined number of rungs, and at the top you are A Leader. The rungs are usually labelled - first promotion, first hire, first product launch, first board seat - and the implication is that the ladder is the same for everyone.

I do not believe in the ladder.

I believe in a staircase. A staircase has landings. You arrive at one, you stand still long enough to see the view, and then - when you are ready - you climb to the next one. The view is different on each. The legs that climbed you up to one landing are not necessarily the legs that will get you up to the next. The point of a staircase is not the top. The point of the staircase is the climb itself, and the change you become as you make it.

Each chapter of this book is one landing.

In Part I - Faith: Foundations - the landings are the early years. The chair, the booklet, the woman who could not see strengths. The headset on a BPO floor. The first management role outside the headset world. These are the landings on which you decide who you are when nobody is paying attention.

In Part II - Toil: Building - the landings are the middle years. People before process, in a high-stakes industry. Marks versus making, in a world that keeps mistaking the first for the second. The bridging of academic and industry worlds. The crucible of a start-up. These are the landings on which you decide what kind of work is worth your name.

In Part III - Toil: Leading in the AI Era - the landings are now. The pandemic pivot. Mentorship multiplied by AI. The team-as-curriculum. The slow, careful art of not believing everything -

including the algorithm. These are the landings most readers are standing on as they read this. Welcome.

And in Part IV - Faith: Passing It On - the landings widen the camera. Compliance and conscience and compassion. Faith and family and the long game. The leader's manifesto, and what we pass on. These are the landings on which leaders decide whether what they have built is worth handing over.

You will not have lived through all of these landings. You may, like me at the bottom of the staircase, not yet be sure which ones are coming. That is fine. The book is built to be read straight through, but it is also built to be picked up where the landing is - to put a finger down on a chapter that names the question you happen to be carrying this month.

* * *

How we got here - a quick history of Atlas

Some readers will already know the story I am about to tell. Many will not. This section is for the ones who would like a brief, unhurried catch-up before we go further.

The dream of artificial intelligence is older than most people remember. In the 1950s, a small group of researchers, working at British and American universities, asked a simple question: could machines be made to learn? Their methods were primitive by today's standards. Their ambitions were not. They built programmes that could play chess, prove simple theorems, and translate sentences between languages. Then, for thirty years, the field went through what insiders now call the AI winters - long periods in which the promises ran far ahead of the technology, money dried up, and the dream went quiet.

It came back in pieces. In the 2000s, the spread of the internet meant the world was suddenly drowning in data, and the data turned out to be the missing ingredient. In the early 2010s, a new technique called deep learning let researchers train networks of artificial neurons on enormous datasets and produce results that astonished even the people who had built them. Computers learned to recognise images,

transcribe speech, drive cars, and beat the world's best players at games we had thought were beyond machine reach.

Then, in late 2022, a tool called ChatGPT was made publicly available, and the floor of the working world tilted. Within weeks, hundreds of millions of people had typed sentences into a box and watched a machine respond in something like fluent English. Within a year, similar tools were embedded in spreadsheets, email clients, customer service systems, classrooms, hospitals, and parliaments. By the time you are reading this book, what was novel in 2022 is utility. The line between 'an AI tool' and 'a tool' is, in most professional settings, no longer worth drawing.

That is the wave we are riding. It did not come from nowhere. It came from seventy years of patient, often unsuccessful effort, made possible in the end by data, by hardware, and by enough patience to keep working through several winters. Atlas, the assistant on my desk, is the youngest descendant of that long lineage.

The reason I tell you this short history is not nostalgia. It is to remind us, before anything else, that the technology now sitting in our inboxes is the result of human toil. People built this. People keep building it. The question for us, as the leaders standing on the receiving end, is whether we will use it with the same patience and care it took to build.

* * *

Meet your co-thinker

The naming, like most working naming, did not happen all at once.

There was a particular afternoon at the office, perhaps a year ago, when a colleague named Lovish Dhillon - who works in the AI implementation space and has the rare gift of being able to speak code to the agents and plain English to the rest of us - was sitting in my room. We had been talking about which AI tool I preferred. I had said ChatGPT, instinctively, because ChatGPT was what I had been using

and what had become part of my daily rhythm. He had asked, gently, whether I had tried Claude. I had said no. ChatGPT works for me.

Then he asked the question that, in retrospect, made everything that has followed possible. He asked: "Why?"

I sat with that question for the rest of that afternoon, and most of the evening. The honest answer was that I had not tried Claude because I had not needed to try it. ChatGPT had become a sapling I had quietly grown comfortable with. While I had been protecting my sapling, an entire rainforest of AI tools had grown up around me - new models, new capabilities, new ways of thinking about work - and I had been so contentedly settled with my one tool that I had not noticed.

That afternoon I signed up for Claude. The next morning I caught myself talking about "the AI" the way I might have talked about "the printer" - as if it were a single device with a single purpose. The day after that, I started naming my tools. The name Atlas arrived a few weeks later, when a particular session with a leadership note had reminded me, again, that the assistant on my desk was being asked to do, at scale, the kind of work that the old myths had given to a particular figure. The name was the right shape for the relationship. It has been the name ever since.

* * *

Through the rest of this book, I am going to keep using the name Atlas.

Atlas is the working name I use for the AI co-thinker that sits beside me as I work. It is not a person. It is not a friend. It is not, in any meaningful sense, intelligent - at least not in the way you and I mean the word when we use it about each other. But it is, increasingly, a colleague: a tireless one, a fast one, a deeply imperfect one. It can be drafted. It can be summarised. It can challenge me when I ask it to. It can hold a thread of thought for me when I am too tired to hold one myself.

I name it for the same reason ship captains have always named ships: because the named thing is easier to talk about, easier to hold to

a standard, and easier to be honest with. When I write that 'Atlas drafted the paragraph,' I am drawing a line between Atlas's contribution and mine. When I write that 'I deleted Atlas's paragraph,' I am drawing it from the other side. The naming is doing work.

And Atlas is the right name. The myth is exactly the point. Atlas was the figure made to bear weight that the rest of the world could not bear alone - and that is precisely what AI is now being asked to do for working life. To carry the routine. To take the weight of the first draft. To absorb the labour that, until now, our weekends were paying for. The leaders who succeed in this era will be the ones who let Atlas carry what Atlas can carry, and who use the strength they have left over to carry the things only a human ever could.

I want to encourage you to do the same. Pick a name for your AI co-thinker. Use it consistently. Notice the difference it makes when, instead of saying 'the AI did it,' you say 'Atlas did it,' or whatever your equivalent is. Naming is the first step in not being controlled by what you have not named.

And - this is important - naming Atlas does not make Atlas safe. We will spend a whole chapter, later in the book, on the discipline of not believing everything Atlas tells me. The point of the name is not to humanise the tool. The point is to keep ownership of the work.

* * *

What this book will not do

This is not, I should warn you, an AI handbook. I will not teach you which prompt will get you the best haiku. I will not introduce you to the latest model. I will not predict the dates by which various jobs will be automated, because most predictions of that kind are made by people whose own job, somehow, is not at risk.

This is also not, I should warn you, a leadership-frameworks book. I have read enough of those to last me. I have worked under managers who could draw the framework on a whiteboard but could not lead a team across a car park. The frameworks were not the

problem. The forgetting that the framework was a tool - and not the work - was the problem.

What this book will do, I hope, is sit with you.

It will tell you stories from a working life - most of them mine, some of them other people's, some of them recognisable as yours. It will name principles that the stories teach. It will, at the end of every chapter, ask you three questions you can take into your own week, and will offer one small thing you can try before next Friday. It will not tell you what to think. It will, I hope, give you better questions than you came in with.

That is what good mentors do. That is what this book is.

* * *

A quiet revolution

Revolutions, in working life, are almost never as loud as the books later make them sound.

When I think back on the actual revolutions I have lived through - the move from paper files to databases at Mphasis, the move from desktop to cloud at Saipem, the move from in-person to online education at Leaders Institute, the move from individual call-centre work to AI-augmented service that is now reshaping every contact centre in the world - none of them announced themselves with trumpets. They each began with a single tool arriving on a single desk, used by a single person who wondered, quietly, whether they should mention it to anyone.

The arrival of AI on your desk is the same kind of revolution. It is quiet. It does not yet appear in the title of your role, on your performance review, or in the language your CEO uses on town hall calls. But it is in your inbox already. It is in your draft folder. It is, increasingly, in the documents you receive from other people, who may or may not know it is there.

What you do, quietly, in the next year or two, is going to settle into a habit. Not a strategy - a habit. The habit will determine whether

AI compounds you or hollows you out. It will determine whether your team becomes more thoughtful or less. It will determine, in time, the kind of leader you are still capable of being a decade from now.

This book is a long argument for one specific habit.

Use Atlas to get faster at the parts of your job that were never the point. Use the time you save to do more of the parts that always were. Verify what arrives on your screen. Refine what your team produces. Put your name on the result. Watch the people in your care like Atlas cannot. Mentor in such a way that AI multiplies the mentoring rather than replacing it. And - when an evening comes that finds you at the kitchen-office desk, with a tidy AI-drafted paragraph glowing on the screen, about somebody you actually know - be willing to delete the paragraph and write it again.

Even with the redundant comma.

* * *

Where this book starts you

In Chapter 2, we will go back to the chair, the booklet, and the woman who told me I had no strengths. We will sit with her for longer than I have ever sat with her before. We will look hard at what she was actually measuring, why she could not see what she could not see, and what it meant - for me, then, and for the leaders I work with now - to walk out of that office without believing her.

We will then walk together into the world where leadership starts. Not at the top of the ladder, but at the bottom of the staircase. With a headset, a queue of callers, and a metrics board on the wall.

But before that, sit for a moment. Let me ask you three things.

Reflection

- Whose verdict about you have you been quietly carrying - and how often does it still set the ceiling on what you let yourself try?

- What part of your job, if you are honest, is now better done by a tool? And what part is impossible for a tool to do - and how often do you actually do it?
- If an earlier version of you - the one who had not yet been measured by anyone - could see your week, what would they ask?

Try this week

For the next seven days, end every working day with a single sentence. Write it on paper, in a notebook, or in a private file on your phone. Do not show it to anyone.

Begin the sentence with the same five words: "The most human thing I did today was..."

Notice, by the end of the week, how often you have a sentence - and how often you do not. Notice which version of yourself you wrote it in. Notice whether the answer surprises you.

That sentence will become, over time, a small piece of evidence. The kind that no AI can fake. The kind that the woman with the booklet could not have written for you, no matter how long she had stared at the page. The kind your own team, if you have one, will begin to recognise - long before you have said a word.

Faith starts with one piece of evidence in your favour. Toil is the work of stacking up the next.

- Next: Chapter 2,

"You Have No Strengths" - and other lies they tried to tell me"

Chapter Two

"You Have No Strengths"

and other lies they tried to tell me

"Leadership is not about how far we have come, but how well we remember where we started."

- Vivian Lobo

There is a chair in my memory I have not finished sitting in.

It is not a special chair. It is a wooden chair, with a slightly wobbly leg, in a small office whose carpet was the colour of weak tea. The chair is on one side of a desk. On the other side, on a chair very like it, is a woman with a stapled booklet of test answers in front of her, a sharpened pencil resting on top, and a kind, careful expression on her face. The chair I am sitting in is the side reserved for school-leavers. Her side is the side reserved for adults who know what they are doing.

It is mid-afternoon. Outside, the heat of a Bangalore day is finally beginning to give in to the suggestion of evening. Inside, a ceiling fan turns slowly, the way ceiling fans do when the power supply is not entirely committed. I have just finished a paper-based aptitude test. It was an hour and a half long. I had answered every question I could see a way into and made the best of the others. I had then walked outside and sat for ten minutes in a corridor while the woman on the other side of the desk worked through my booklet with her pencil and her stapler and the small, patient mathematics of someone whose job is to identify potential.

She is now ready to walk me through the results.

In my version of the memory, she begins kindly. She asks me how I felt about the test, the way you might ask a child how they slept

the first night away from home. She lets me say my polite, vague things. Then she clears her throat, places both palms on the booklet as if to keep it from blowing away, and says, in a voice that has clearly delivered this sentence before to other people:

"Vivian, I have to be honest with you. I can't really see any."

She means strengths. She has been measuring my strengths. The booklet she has finished marking is the entirety of what she has been measuring my strengths against. And the answer the booklet has given her - the conclusion she is now, in good faith, conveying - is that the booklet cannot find any.

I do not say anything for a moment. I say something polite eventually, the way you do, because the woman is being kind and because nothing in my upbringing has prepared me to be impolite to a kind professional with a booklet. I thank her. I take the printed summary of my results, which she has helpfully highlighted with a pink highlighter. I shake her hand. I walk out of the office, down a flight of concrete steps that smell faintly of antiseptic, and out into the back end of the Bangalore afternoon.

And there I have stayed, in some quiet corner of my own head, for thirty years.

* * *

I am opening this chapter at that desk, in that chair, on that afternoon, because I have come to believe that a great deal of what this book is about is sitting in that small office still.

Most working adults I know have a version of this scene in their memory. Somewhere in their early life, a person whose job was to assess them - a teacher, a counsellor, a recruiter, a coach, a parent's friend who had read a book on personality types - delivered a verdict about what they were or were not capable of. The verdict came with the authority of an instrument: a test, a rubric, a set of categories, a printout. The person delivering the verdict was, in most cases, kind. The institution they represented was, in most cases, well-meaning. The

instrument they were using was, in most cases, the best instrument that institution had to hand.

And the verdict was, in most cases, wrong.

It was wrong because no instrument can see the whole of a person at seventeen, or twenty-two, or forty. It was wrong because the categories the instrument was looking for were almost never the categories the world would later reward. It was wrong because the things that were, in fact, the strengths sitting in front of the booklet - persistence, kindness under pressure, the willingness to be embarrassed in pursuit of a question - were not the things the booklet had been written to measure.

And yet the verdict landed. And the verdict stayed. And in the years that followed, you and I and the woman with the booklet all moved on with our lives, and the verdict came along too, in our pockets, like a small stone we did not realise we were carrying.

This chapter is about that stone.

* * *

The walk home

I have written about the walk home before, in fragments, but I have never quite written about what happened during it.

The walk was about thirty-five minutes. It went down the small concrete steps of the building, past a grocer who knew my mother by name and waved at me without quite making eye contact, past a tailor who was in the middle of an argument with a customer over the colour of a thread, past a temple bell ringing for an evening service I did not stop for, and then up the slight slope of a road I had walked five thousand times before. The trees on that road were familiar. The dogs on that road were familiar. The cracks in the footpath were familiar. None of it felt familiar.

I was not crying. I want to be honest about that, because the modern instinct is to romanticise these moments into a more cinematic shape than they had. I was not crying. I was not angry. I was not even,

really, sad. I was something quieter than any of those things. I was - if I had to put a word on it now, with thirty years of hindsight - I was being recalculated.

What I mean is this. Up until that afternoon, I had been carrying around a quiet assumption that, somewhere inside me, there was something the right person, with the right test, would one day find. The school report cards had not found it. The teachers had not found it. The cricket captain had not found it. But surely, surely, somebody whose actual job was to find this thing - some grown-up with a booklet and a system - would, eventually, find it. The whole exercise of growing up, in my head, was a kind of slow waiting room for that finding.

And then, that afternoon, the person whose job it was had finished her process, and her process had said no.

I want to be careful about what I say next, because what I am about to describe is, I think, the most important thing that happened in that thirty-five minute walk, and I do not want to make it sound more heroic than it was.

What I did, somewhere along that walk, was make a small, quiet, almost embarrassed bargain with myself. I decided that if the woman with the booklet could not see any strengths, then I would have to either find some that her booklet had missed, or build some she had never been looking for. I did not, then, know which of those two things I would do. I did not, then, even know that those were the only two options. I just knew that I was not going to spend the rest of my life arranging my future around a sentence she had said in good faith on a Tuesday afternoon.

That bargain sounds, written down, like a piece of resolve. It was not. It was something more tiring than resolve. It was the bargain of a young person who has run out of reasons to keep waiting and has decided, by default, to start walking instead.

That, I think, is what most people's resilience actually looks like up close. Not the heroic version that gets quoted on coffee mugs. The

default version. The version that arrives when waiting has stopped working.

* * *

What was she actually measuring?

I want to come back, now, to the woman with the booklet, because I have grown more interested in her over the years than I was that afternoon.

I do not know her name, and even if I did, I would not use it, because the point is not the woman. The point is the booklet. The point is the system inside which she was, in good faith, doing her job. The point is what she was actually measuring.

Aptitude tests of the kind I sat for that day were designed in a particular era, by particular people, in pursuit of a particular question. The question, in its essence, was something like this: among a population of school-leavers, which of them are likeliest to perform well in clerical, administrative, and basic-professional roles in a stable economy with predictable career structures? That was a real and useful question for the world that designed those tests. It is not a foolish question. It is just a small one.

The booklet had been designed to look for verbal reasoning of a certain kind, numerical reasoning of a certain kind, and the ability to follow instructions on a printed page in the time available. It had not been designed to look for resilience. It had not been designed to look for the ability to read a room. It had not been designed to look for kindness, or curiosity, or the strange quiet skill of getting twenty annoyed customers off a phone queue without anyone losing their dignity. It had not been designed to look for the ability to start a higher education institute from a blank page, sit on a governing board, hold a Justice of the Peace qualification, or chair a parish pastoral council. None of these things were on her sheet. They could not have been on her sheet. The sheet had not been written by people who knew that those would be the categories the world would later reward.

And so, when the sheet returned its result, the woman did the only honest thing she could do. She told me what the sheet had told her. She did not have any way of telling me anything else. The instrument was the limit of her vision.

That is a very important sentence. I want you to read it again.

The instrument was the limit of her vision.

Most of the verdicts you and I have ever received about ourselves have been of this shape. A person, in good faith, looking through an instrument, telling us what the instrument has to say. The instrument might be a school examination, a workplace performance review, a 360-degree survey, a Myers-Briggs printout, a credit score, an interview shortlist, a hiring algorithm, a recruiter's three-minute scan of our CV, an ageing parent's idea of what a good son does, or the comments section of a piece of work we put online. In every one of those cases, the verdict reflected the limits of the instrument as much as it reflected the truth of us. Often, in fact, the verdict reflected the limits of the instrument far more than it reflected the truth of us.

That is the first thing this chapter wants you to take with you. It is not that the verdicts you have carried are unreal. It is that the verdicts you have carried are also the verdicts of an instrument.

And instruments have shapes. And shapes have edges. And the most interesting parts of you have, almost certainly, spent your whole life living just outside those edges.

* * *

The new women with new booklets

There is a very practical reason this chapter exists in this book.

The world is now, all over again, in the business of building instruments to measure human potential. The new instruments do not have stapled booklets. The new instruments have neural networks. The new instruments do not require an appointment with a kind professional in a small office. The new instruments operate in milliseconds, behind glass, at scale, often without your knowledge.

If you have applied for a job in the last two years, an instrument has scored your CV before any human read it. If you have applied for a loan, an instrument has scored your application. If you have logged into a learning management system, an instrument has decided what to recommend you study next. If you have used a dating app, an instrument has decided who to show you. If you have lodged an insurance claim, an instrument has decided how suspicious it looks. If you have been a customer-service caller in any one of the last several years, an instrument has been listening to your tone of voice and rating, in real time, the likelihood that you are about to escalate.

Atlas, my AI co-thinker - the assistant I introduced you to in Chapter 1 - is part of this same generation of instruments. So is the AI on your phone. So is the AI inside your email client. None of them are evil. Most of them are useful. All of them are, at some level, doing what the woman with the booklet was doing on that Tuesday afternoon: looking through a designed instrument at a person, and producing a verdict shaped by the limits of the instrument.

This is, in one sense, nothing new. We have always been measured by instruments. The aptitude test in the small office in Bangalore was just a slower, friendlier version of what is now happening at internet speed.

But there are three things about the new instruments that change what leaders need to do in response.

The first is scale. The booklet on the desk could only score one school-leaver at a time, and only when one had been booked into the room. The new instruments score everyone, all the time, by default. There is no waiting room any more. The conversation has already happened, before you knew it had begun, and the verdict has already been issued, before you have stopped walking.

The second is opacity. The booklet had questions you could read, and a printed sheet you could take home. The new instruments are, often, black boxes. The data they used is not visible. The features they weighted are not disclosed. The verdict they produced cannot be appealed to any specific number on any specific page. You cannot,

when the algorithm has decided you are not the right candidate, walk to the recruiter's desk and ask which of your answers to which of her questions placed you below the line. There is no line. There is only the result.

The third is plausibility. The booklet, at least, looked like a booklet. You knew, going in, what kind of thing it was. The new instruments often arrive in the shape of a friendly conversation. An AI assistant suggested a reply. A chatbot finishing your sentence. A model recommending what to write. They feel collaborative. They are, in fact, also measuring you - quietly, continuously, against criteria you cannot see.

If a single under-resourced booklet on a Tuesday afternoon was enough to deliver a verdict that shadowed me for thirty years, imagine what a global rollout of automated measurement is going to do to a generation of teenagers right now. Imagine what it is going to do to your team. Imagine what it is going to do, quietly, every day, to you.

This is not a panic. The new instruments are not on their way to ruin us. The point is to be more careful than that. The point is that leaders who walk through the AI era without noticing what the new instruments are doing - to themselves, and to the people in their care - are going to make exactly the same mistake the woman with the booklet made on that Tuesday afternoon. Not from cruelty. From the limit of their vision.

* * *

A working rule

Out of all of this, I have arrived at a rule that I now offer to younger leaders when they ask me what to do with the verdicts that have shaped them. I want to offer it to you here, in plain English, because the chapter is going to need it.

The rule is this. The world is full of people whose job is to measure you. Few of them are qualified to define you.

Notice, before you read it again, what the rule does and does not say. It does not say that the people measuring you are bad people. Most

of them are not. It does not say that measurement is meaningless. Measurement is enormously useful. It does not say that you should ignore feedback. You should absolutely seek feedback. The rule says only one thing. It says that the act of being measured by someone, by something, on a particular day, against a particular criterion, with a particular tool, does not amount to a definition of who you are or what you are capable of.

There is a difference between being measured and being seen.

Measurement is a transaction. Someone, with an instrument, returns a result about a particular dimension of you, on a particular day. Useful. Not the truth of you.

Being seen is a relationship. Someone, over time, with sustained attention, and with their own humanity in the picture, comes to recognise the shape of you - including the parts the instruments have missed.

Most of us, in our working lives, get measured a great deal and seen very little. The leaders worth following are the ones who notice that gap, and who choose, deliberately, to spend more of their attention on seeing the people in front of them than on processing the readings the instruments have provided about those people.

That is the work. That is leadership in the AI era and every other era. AI just makes the gap between measuring and seeing larger - because measuring is now cheap, instant, and automated, and seeing remains expensive, slow, and human.

* * *

What the years did, after the booklet

I am not going to tell you that the woman with the booklet turned out to be wrong because I went on to do impressive things. That would be the wrong moral. The moral is not that I outscored her booklet by accumulating a longer printout.

The moral is that the years did things to me that the booklet had not been designed to look for.

The headset on a BPO floor at Mphasis taught me to listen to a stranger's anger without taking it personally. The booklet had not measured that. The Saipem oil-and-gas years taught me to write a workforce plan that protected people whose names I would never know. The booklet had not measured that. The first time I sat in a Leaders Institute board meeting and was asked to vote on something that affected eighteen members of staff and three hundred international students, I learnt that judgement under uncertainty is a muscle, and the muscle is built only by carrying weight you would rather not carry. The booklet had not measured that.

Neither had it measured the patient discipline of writing an English-language doctoral research design while still finishing my own PhD - on, of all things, the barriers international students face in sustaining online learning after a pandemic. The booklet had not measured the way a colleague named Lovish Dhillon could ask a single question - 'have you tried Claude?' - and shift the way I worked with AI for the rest of my career. The booklet had not measured the morning, decades after the office in Bangalore, when I caught myself rewriting an AI-drafted paragraph because the AI did not know the colleague I was writing it for. The booklet had not measured what it would feel like, on a Tuesday evening thirty years later, to be writing a book.

The booklet had measured the school-leaver who walked into the office. The booklet could not have measured the chair that the school-leaver was about to spend the next thirty years quietly getting out of.

If you are carrying a verdict somebody once delivered about you, I want you to consider, gently, that the same is true of you. The instrument that produced your verdict was looking at the version of you that had walked into its room that day. The instrument cannot have known what the years would later do to the person who walked out of that room.

The instrument did its job. You are not required to live inside its result.

* * *

What this means for you, as a leader

Most of this chapter has been a conversation about the verdicts you have carried. I want to close, before the reflection questions, with the conversation about the verdicts you are now in a position to deliver.

Because here is the thing about leaders: you are now the woman with the booklet.

Every time you write a performance review, you are passing a verdict. Every time you make a hiring decision, you are passing a verdict. Every time you choose someone to lead a project and quietly do not choose someone else, you are passing a verdict. Every time you set up an automated screening tool to filter your applicants, every time you adopt an AI-assisted assessment in your training program, every time you let an algorithm sort your team's outputs into a ranked list, you are extending and amplifying a kind of verdict.

Most of those verdicts are, in good faith, useful. We need verdicts. Organisations cannot run on infinite ambiguity.

But some of those verdicts, delivered by people who think they are passing on a measurement, will land in their recipient's pocket as a small stone they will carry for the next thirty years. You will not, most days, know which of your verdicts those are. You will not be told. The recipient may not even know themselves, in the moment, that they are picking up a stone.

So the leadership work is not to stop measuring. It is to stop confusing your measurement with the truth of who someone is. It is to leave deliberate room for the parts of them your instrument cannot see. It is, where you can, to be the second voice in their head - the one that comes back, hours after the verdict, and reminds them that no booklet has ever yet captured the whole of a human being.

That second voice is, in the end, much of what mentorship is. It is what good managers do for the people they manage. It is what good parents do for their children. It is what the best leaders in the AI era will do for the teams sitting around their tables, with the algorithms quietly humming under the floorboards.

And, if you are willing to do it, it is also what you can do for yourself.

Because, as we said in Chapter 1, the verdicts the instruments are now passing on you are continuous, opaque, and plausible. The first defence against being defined by them is not technical. It is the slow, deliberate practice of remaining the second voice in your own head.

* * *

Reflection

1. What is the harshest verdict anyone has ever passed on your potential - and what did you do with it? Notice the shape of the instrument they were holding, and the shape of the room it has taken up in you since.
2. Where in your week is an automated instrument currently passing a verdict on you that you have not consented to - in your inbox, on your performance dashboard, in the hiring system that is screening your CV, in the algorithm choosing what you read?
3. Who in your team needs, this month, to be told what you actually see in them - and not what their last printout said?

Try this week

Take half an hour this week, with a notebook or a private file on your phone, and write a one-page reply to the harshest verdict ever passed on you.

Do not send it. Do not even keep it where anyone else can read it. Write it for yourself.

Begin with the verdict, in the verdict-giver's own words, as best you remember them. Then write what you have learned, since that day, that they could not have known. Write the things their instrument was not built to measure. Write the chair they did not see you walk out of.

Read it the next time you are tempted, in the same week, to underestimate yourself or someone in your care. Then put it away.

Do that exercise once. You will not need to do it many times. The point of it is not the page. The point of it is the small, quiet rearrangement of the room in your head that happens when you sit down and write down, in your own hand, what the booklet was not built to see.

That rearrangement, repeated across a career, is what we will spend the rest of this book learning to do for other people.

- Next: Chapter 3,
"Lessons from the Headset"

Chapter Three

Lessons from the Headset

What the BPO floor taught me about leadership

"The true concept of empowerment does not require titles or offices; it requires your belief and your commitment."

- Vivian Lobo, 2019

Bangalore, May 2003. I am twenty years old. I have come from the office in the small concrete building on the slow road - the one we sat in the last chapter - through the years of waiting in between, and into the air-conditioned glow of an open-plan call centre on the third floor of a building whose corridors never quite get warm. I am wearing a brand-new shirt that does not yet know it is mine. I am holding a brand-new lanyard that says, in friendly print, that I am a Customer Service Executive at Mphasis.

There are about one hundred of us on the floor. Most of us are around the same age. Most of us are dressed slightly more formally than the work requires. There is a low, continuous murmur in the room - the sound of two hundred people talking, in slightly performed accents, into microphones an inch from their mouths. There is the periodic high beep of a queue alert. There is the occasional laugh from a cubicle three rows down. There is, behind everything, the hum of the air conditioning, which is set to the exact temperature at which a young person in a slightly thick shirt begins to feel cold around the wrists.

On the wall at the front of the floor is a board. The board is the kind of thing the modern office has replaced with a screen, but in 2003 it was still mostly literal - a whiteboard and stickers and felt-tip pens, updated by a team leader who had been promoted off the headset two years earlier and was now wearing the slightly tired expression of someone who knows what every number on the board is going to do tomorrow.

The board measured a small set of things. Average Handle Time, in minutes. First Call Resolution, as a percentage. Customer Satisfaction, in a tidy decimal. Wrap-Up Time, in seconds. Adherence, as a percentage of your shift. Quality Score, audited from a sample of recorded calls, expressed as a percentile against the floor. Below the rolling numbers there was a leaderboard. Five names, top to bottom, refreshed weekly. The names of the next five sat in italics underneath, like a horizon they were close to but had not yet crested.

My first week, I did not understand what most of the columns meant. By the end of my first month, I could read them like sheet music. By the end of my first year, I was on the leaderboard. By the end of my second year, I was a trainer. By the end of my fourth, I was coaching new joiners. By the time I left Mphasis in early 2010, after almost seven years on that floor, my title had become Senior Analyst, my circle of work had widened well beyond the queue, and I had, without quite realising it, served the most thorough leadership apprenticeship of my career.

This chapter is about that apprenticeship. It is about what the floor measured, what it did not measure, and what I now know about the gap between those two things - because that gap, more than anything else I have learned since, is what the AI era is asking leaders to look at honestly.

* * *

What the board measured

Let me describe a typical evening. The phone in front of me would beep, the headset would click, and a voice from somewhere on the other side of the world - a woman in a kitchen in Texas, a man in a car on a New Jersey turnpike, a small business owner in Perth who could hear my Bangalore voice through the long-distance crackle - would begin to tell me what was wrong with their service.

My job, in the next few minutes, was to do a small number of things in a particular order. Authenticate the customer. Identify the issue. Resolve the issue if I could. Escalate the issue if I could not.

Confirm the customer's understanding. Wrap up. Move to the next call. The whole choreography was meant to take, on average, fewer minutes than the human conversation would have taken if you had just let it breathe. The floor was set up to encourage us to make the choreography quicker, but not at the expense of the customer's satisfaction score, which would arrive on the board the next day if the customer chose to fill in the survey, and which we cared about because it determined whether we were on the leader-board or in the italics.

All of those measurements were, in their way, useful. They protected the customer from being kept on hold. They protected the company from paying for unnecessary minutes of agent time. They gave the team leader a way to spot which agent was about to burn out and which agent was about to be promoted. They gave new hires a way to see, almost in real time, whether they were getting better. The board was not the enemy of leadership. The board was, like the booklet on the desk in the small office in the previous chapter, an instrument.

The instrument was useful. The instrument was not, however, the truth of the work.

What the board did not measure

The board did not measure a great many things.

It did not measure the agent in the cubicle next to mine who, two minutes after a particularly difficult call had ended, took her headset off, walked across the floor to the desk of a new joiner whose voice had just cracked on a complaint, and quietly sat next to him for a minute without speaking - so he could collect himself before the next call landed. The board logged her wrap-up time as longer than ideal. The board did not log her hand on the new joiner's shoulder.

It did not measure the small group of agents who - all of them on the leader-board - had a quiet agreement that whoever went into the kitchen at break time would refill the water cooler if it was empty, even though refilling the water cooler was not anyone's job and the manager had not noticed it kept needing refilling. The board recorded their adherence as flawless. The board did not record the cooler.

It did not measure the senior agent who, when one of us was visibly upset after a bad shift, would sit at the dosa counter outside our office for an extra fifteen minutes, eating slowly, asking patient questions until we had said the thing that was actually bothering us. The board would have called those fifteen minutes break overage. The board could not have called them what they were.

It did not, in any meaningful way, measure leadership.

It measured throughput. It measured compliance. It measured a kind of synthetic productivity that, when properly tuned, was the closest thing the company could afford to having a human in front of every customer at the same time. All of those things mattered. None of them, on their own, made the floor work.

The floor worked because of the people who - quietly, unrewarded, often invisibly - did the work the board could not see.

* * *

Anita

I am going to call her Anita, although that was not her name.

Anita was three years older than the rest of us and had been on the floor a year longer. She was not on the leader-board. She was, by the metrics, in the upper-middle of the floor - reliably good, never spectacular, never alarming. She had short hair when short hair was unusual on our floor, a very calm voice, and a way of arriving on the floor a few minutes early to leave a folded scrap of paper on the desk of whichever new joiner had had the worst shift the previous evening. The notes were not long. They usually said the same thing in different ways. They said, in effect: I saw what happened. You handled it better than you think. Tomorrow will be a quieter shift.

New joiners cried in front of Anita more than they cried in front of anyone else. They cried in the way young adults cry when they have been holding it together at home and at the office and the dam has finally cracked next to the printer. Anita did not flinch. She did not give advice. She did not try to fix anything. She would say a small,

useful sentence - 'Get some water; you are not the first one to have a bad week; come back when you can' - and then she would let them cry.

If you had asked the company who was leading the team, the company would have pointed at the team leader on the dais at the front of the floor. If you had asked the team, half of us would, after a moment of thought, have pointed at Anita.

Anita was not paid more for any of this. She was not promoted faster for any of this. She was not, in any way the board could see, a higher performer than the people whose names were in the italics. The work she did was in the spaces the board did not look at. The work she did was, however, the work that made the rest of the work possible.

I have been a leader at every altitude of working life since then. I have sat on governing boards. I have signed off on workforce plans for hundreds of staff. I have had a CEO title twice over. I have sat in regulatory rooms with people who used to terrify me. I am willing to say, after all of that, that the most important leadership lesson I have ever learned was learned from Anita - and Anita would, if she read this paragraph, be politely amused that I had thought it was worth writing down.

The lesson is this. In every team you will ever join, in every team you will ever lead, there is at least one Anita. Your first job - before you do anything else, before you propose any strategy or roll out any system or restructure any reporting line - is to find out who the Anitas are, learn their names, and tell them, in person, that you have seen what they are doing.

Most of them will be quietly amused that you noticed. Most of them will pretend it is nothing. None of them will be unaffected.

That single act, repeated across a career, is most of what people mean when they say that someone is a good leader.

* * *

From the headset to the front of the room

After about a year on the floor, I was asked to step into a training role for new joiners.

This was a small promotion. I was still on the floor most of the day. I was still expected to take calls. But once or twice a week, for a few hours at a time, a group of fifteen or twenty new hires - some still in the slightly thick shirts and slightly performed accents of their first month - would assemble in a small training room with a whiteboard and a row of headsets, and I would be expected to teach them what I had learned.

The first time I taught a session, I was awful. I was awful because I had prepared for the session by listing all the things I now knew that I had not known a year earlier, and I had presented all of those things, in the order I had learned them, to a group of people who had not yet learned any of the things that came before. The session ran twice as long as the slot. Three of the trainees never came back to a second session with me. The team leader, when he reviewed my evaluations, said, kindly, that I might be 'over-explaining.'

It took me about three months to learn the basic art of teaching, which I will summarise here in case you have ever had to teach anything to anyone, and you may have, because every leader does.

The basic art of teaching is this. You do not teach the thing you know. You teach the question the person in front of you is currently asking. If you do not know what question they are asking, your first job is to find out, gently, before you say anything else. The teaching arrives in the gap between the question and the answer. The question is the more important half of the gap.

Most managers I have met since then make exactly the mistake I made in that training room. They have a question - the strategic question their seniority requires them to ask - and they answer it for the people in front of them. The people in front of them have, almost always, a different question. The question gets answered. The room nods. Nothing changes.

Atlas - my AI co-thinker, whom you met in Chapter 1 - is now extraordinarily good at answering whichever question you point it at. That is the thing AI is best at. Pointing AI at the wrong question is, in many ways, the central problem of the AI era. The leadership task is no longer to know answers. The leadership task is to find out, in the room you are standing in, which question your team is actually carrying - and then, if you are honest, to point Atlas at that question instead of the one you would have pointed it at by default.

That habit, by itself, transforms the difference Atlas makes for your team. The same tool, pointed at a sharper question, produces a different team.

* * *

From training to coaching

After another year or so, the training role widened into a coaching role.

Coaching, on a BPO floor in the early 2000s, meant something specific. It meant that for an hour a week, you sat next to one of the agents on the floor, with a second headset jacked into the same line, listening to their calls in real time. You wrote nothing down for the first ten minutes. You let them work. After half an hour or so, when there was a natural break, you would talk through what you had heard. You did not, ideally, tell them what they had done wrong. You asked them what they had heard themselves do. They almost always knew. The coaching was, more than anything, the gift of having someone listen to them with full attention for an hour.

Coaching was harder than training. Training, on a quiet day, could be reduced to a kind of performance. Coaching, by its nature, could not. Coaching required you to sit with another person's actual practice, and to be honest with them, and to be honest in a way that did not break them.

I was, I think, slightly better at coaching than I was at training. I was not naturally good at it. The thing that made me passable was that I had spent the first year on the floor as the worst-prepared trainer in

the room and had learned, the hard way, that the question was more important than the answer.

Most leaders never make the move from training to coaching. They get good at telling people things, in increasingly senior roles, in increasingly large rooms, and the rooms applaud. The making of a leader, in my experience, begins on the day they sit down next to one specific person and listen to that person's work, with their attention fully present, and resist the urge to talk for as long as the listening is doing the work.

AI is going to make this easier and harder at the same time. Easier, because AI can summarise the calls, surface the patterns, generate the prep work, and free up the minutes you used to spend on review. Harder, because once those minutes are free, you will be tempted to spend them on more output rather than more presence. The leaders who matter in the next decade will be the ones who use the minutes Atlas frees up to sit longer with their people. Not on Slack. In person. With full attention. The way Anita did, between calls, with new joiners on a floor in Bangalore in 2003.

* * *

The headset on the floor today

If you walk onto a comparable floor today - a contact centre in Manila, in Hyderabad, in Cape Town, in Brisbane - the architecture of the work is recognisable. The cubicles. The headsets. The board on the wall. The leader-board. The new joiners in shirts that do not yet fit them. The voices an inch from the microphone.

What is different is what is going on under the calls.

On most modern floors, an AI system is now listening to every conversation in real time. It is transcribing the call as it happens. It is reading the customer's tone of voice for sentiment shifts. It is suggesting the next answer to the agent's screen, as the customer is finishing their sentence. It is, behind the scenes, scoring the agent on a hundred dimensions the board behind their head does not advertise. When the call ends, the AI is generating the wrap-up notes the agent

used to type. It is filing the case. It is updating the customer record. It is, in some setups, answering the next call itself, with a synthetic voice trained on a hundred hours of agents like the ones still sitting at the cubicles.

If you spend an hour on such a floor, the question almost asks itself: where are the agents going?

The answer that the optimists give is that the agents are being elevated - they are doing the harder work, the more empathetic work, the work that requires judgement, while the AI handles the routine. The answer that the pessimists give is that the agents are being squeezed - that the routine, automated layer is growing every quarter, and the residual work left for human agents is the work nobody could automate, which is also the work nobody wants to do.

Both answers are partly correct. Both miss the point this chapter is making.

The point this chapter is making is that the BPO floor in 2003 already had agents being elevated and squeezed at the same time. The board on the wall already automated certain judgements about who was performing well, who was not, and who deserved promotion. The wrap-up time was already being measured in seconds. The new joiners were already buckling under the weight of measurements they did not understand. And under all of that, in the corners the board did not look at, Anita was already doing the work that made the rest of the work possible.

The lesson is not that AI changes the floor. The lesson is that AI makes louder a question the floor was already asking.

The question is: who is paying attention to the parts of this floor that the board cannot see?

If the answer in your organisation is no one, then no leadership of any kind is happening - regardless of how impressive the dashboards are.

If the answer is, quietly, here-and-there, then leadership is happening, and you have a duty to find out who it is and tell them you have noticed.

If the answer is you, then you are doing the most important work the modern workplace has on offer - and the AI era, with its endless capacity to measure, is going to keep tempting you to do something else with your time. Resist the temptation. There is more leverage in fifteen minutes of full attention to one person than in any dashboard you will ever build.

* * *

What the seven years made me

I did not realise, when I left Mphasis in early 2010 and walked out of that building for the last time, that I had completed a leadership apprenticeship. The title on my exit paperwork said Senior Analyst, which sounded technical and faintly grown-up. The reference my old team leader wrote for me was a single-page summary of throughput metrics, a quality score, and a mention of my reliability.

None of those things were what the seven years had actually given me.

What the seven years had given me, in retrospect, were these. The understanding that the people who hold a team together rarely have the title that says so. The understanding that listening is a more important leadership skill than speaking. The understanding that performance metrics are useful and not the truth. The understanding that the person who can sit calmly with someone else's distress is doing more of the actual work of an organisation than the person who can deliver the cleverest slide deck. The understanding that the question is more important than the answer. The understanding that empowerment is what you do, not what you say. The understanding that the most important things are usually the things the board does not measure.

I would spend the next decade and a half - through Saipem, through American College, through Creative Activation, through Leaders Institute, through Zenith and Lords and Global Leadership

Institute, through TBP CODOT and the AI software work, through a doctorate I am still finishing, through a Brisbane parish I now chair - relearning these same lessons in different settings.

Every chapter that follows in this book is, in some sense, a different room in which one of those lessons keeps being relearned.

None of the rooms is more important than the floor in Bangalore where the lessons were first taught.

* * *

Reflection

1. Who was Anita on the first team you ever joined - the person who held things together without a title? What did they do that you still carry, often without realising you carry it?
2. What does the board on the wall of your current team measure - and what is it not measuring? List the three most important things it cannot see.
3. Where in your week are you currently teaching when you should be coaching - answering questions instead of finding out which question your team is actually carrying?

Try this week

Pick one person on your team who is, quietly, an Anita. Not the loudest. Not the highest performer. The one who holds things together without being asked, in ways the dashboard does not flatter.

Find them this week. Tell them, in person if you can, what you have seen them do. Be specific. Name the exact moment you noticed. Do not turn it into a performance conversation. Do not promise them a promotion. Do not, on the way out, ask them to take on more.

Just tell them you have noticed. Then thank them. Then go away.

Notice what happens. Notice it in them, in the days that follow. Notice it in you. Notice how cheap the act was, in time and energy, against how rare it is for Anita to ever be told the thing you just told her.

That five-minute conversation, repeated weekly across a team and quarterly across a career, is most of what good leadership actually is. Atlas cannot do it for you. The dashboard cannot do it for you. The thing the BPO floor taught me, and the thing this book will keep coming back to, is that the most important leadership work has always been small, specific, and human. The AI era does not change that. It only makes the work more visible, by automating away the things that used to crowd it out.

- Next: Chapter 4,
"People Before Process"

PART II

TOIL - BUILDING

The craft of making things that count

Chapter Four

People Before Process

What a high-stakes industry taught me about HR

"True empowerment is when you allow that person to make decisions and support those decisions they make."

- Vivian Lobo, 2019

Between the floor in Bangalore and the office in Brisbane there is a long, quiet pause that does not appear on any of my CVs.

In the early months of 2010, I left Mphasis. I had carried a headset for almost seven years. My team leader, on my last day, gave me a small box of mithai and a card signed by people I had grown up alongside. I caught a flight to Australia not long after that, with two suitcases and a feeling I cannot, even now, put a clean word on. It was not exciting. It was not fear. It was something more practical than either - the feeling of a young person who has decided that the next stage of his life is going to require him to walk through a door he has never seen before, and is going to walk through it anyway.

I enrolled in a Master of Human Resources at the Queensland University of Technology. I did this because I had spent the last several years on a BPO floor watching how badly people-decisions could be made by organisations that had every other capability and no human one, and I had decided that the discipline that was supposed to make those decisions better was the discipline I now wanted to learn properly. The degree, when I sat down for the first lecture, was not what I had expected. The Australian classroom was not what I had expected. The Australian winter was not what I had expected. The Australian way of saying yes when they meant

maybe, and maybe when they meant no, was not what I had expected.

I want to be honest about the first six months. They were the hardest professional months of my life so far. I was an international student, on a student visa, in a city I did not know, in a country whose accent I had only ever heard on the other side of a long-distance line. I had no Australian work history. I had no Australian referees. I had a degree in progress, and a brand-new application of myself to a profession I had spent several years admiring from a distance, and that was about it.

Slowly, the shape of things became less unfamiliar. By late 2010 I had landed an early role at American College in Brisbane - a Registered Training Organisation - first as an Executive Manager and then as their HR Manager. The College was small enough that the people-work was not yet sectioned off behind a glass wall. It was the next step in the apprenticeship the BPO floor had begun. I learned, in the year and a half I was there, what compliance looked like in the Australian education sector, what an Academic Board did, what a Governing Board did, and what it meant for an organisation to take itself seriously enough that the people sitting around its table read the regulations carefully and meant what they signed.

In April 2012 - by which point I had finished my Master of Human Resources, and the country had begun to feel less like somewhere I had visited and more like somewhere I had moved to - I joined Saipem Australia as an HR Business Partner.

Saipem is one of the world's largest contractors in technology and engineering for the oil-and-gas sector. The Brisbane office, when I arrived, was a corner of a much larger international machine - a planet of FIFO crews, offshore platforms, subsea pipelines, drilling installations, hard-hat sites, project codes, and procedures the length of small books. The work being done by my new colleagues was the kind of work in which a single misstep, in a single workforce decision, could cost millions of dollars and, in the worst cases, could put a colleague in danger of his life.

I had walked into the deep end.

* * *

What the engineers taught me

The first thing I want to tell you about Saipem is that the engineers were the best teachers of leadership I had encountered to that point in my life - and I do not think any of them, if you had asked them, would have called themselves leaders.

They would have called themselves engineers. That is what their business cards said, that is what their qualifications said, that is what their professional habits said. They wore their identity in plain English. The leadership came along with the engineering, like air comes along with a bicycle pump - implicit, integral, mostly invisible to the user.

What I had not understood, until I sat in my first project review meeting in that Brisbane office, was the engineer's relationship with the process.

On the BPO floor, the process had been a thing the company had imposed on us. The wrap-up time, the call script, the escalation tree - all of it was, in some sense, the company's way of making sure that two hundred people on two hundred phones did not produce two hundred different outcomes. The process was friction. The process was disciplined. The process was, quietly, mistrust at scale.

In the engineering world I had now joined, the process was the opposite of mistrust. Process was the slowly accumulated wisdom of every previous failure the industry had survived, written down so that the next person standing in the same place did not have to fail in the same way. The process was the safety case on the rig that had nearly gone wrong in the North Sea in 1988. The process was the welder's qualification on a pipeline that ran through a populated valley. Process was the part of the workflow that ensured that, when a young engineer two thousand kilometres away made a calculation, two senior engineers - on different shifts, in different time zones, with different blind spots - had to confirm it before anything got built.

The engineers respected the process not because they enjoyed bureaucracy. Most of them did not. They respected the process because they had walked through enough refineries, climbed enough rigs, and read enough incident reports to know exactly what happened when the process was sloppy or absent. The bodies. The fires. The investigations. The grieving families. The companies that did not exist any more.

That perspective changed the way I thought about HR for the rest of my career.

HR is, in its essence, an engineering discipline. It is the discipline of designing the systems by which an organisation decides who it hires, who it promotes, who it disciplines, who it pays, who it lets go, and how. It is the discipline of writing down, on purpose, the rules of how a human will be treated by an institution at scale. The rules can be written sloppily, and people will be treated badly. The rules can be written well, and people will be treated well, even when the institution is too large for any single person to know all of them by name.

Process, when it is done well, is the architecture of care.

Process, when it is done badly, is the architecture of harm.

There is no version of an organisation in which the process is neutral. The Saipem engineers would have called this obvious. I had spent seven years on a BPO floor without ever understanding it. The day I understood it - somewhere in the middle of my second project review meeting, watching a senior project manager refuse to sign off on a procedure document because the fall-protection step had been moved one level deeper into the workflow than the previous version - the rest of my career began to make sense to me.

HR is the engineering of how an organisation cares for its people.

If you do not believe that sentence, the world will keep treating HR as a Tuesday-afternoon administrative function. If you believe that sentence, every action HR takes will start to feel - and to be - the most consequential work in the building.

* * *

The case I think about most

I want to tell you about a disciplinary case from those years, because it is the case I think about most when I think about what HR is for. The names and identifying details have been changed. The shape of what happened is true.

There was a long-serving employee, in a role I will simply call operations, who had done something he should not have done. The thing was not sinister. It was the kind of mistake a tired person makes, on a long shift, in a workplace where small mistakes are sometimes catastrophic and sometimes nothing. In this case, the mistake was caught early, by a colleague, and brought to the attention of his manager. The manager, in turn, brought it to me.

The manager wanted to know what to do.

There were three obvious paths. Path one was to terminate the employee. The contract allowed it. The conduct policy supported it. Other organisations, faced with the same fact pattern, would not have hesitated. Path two was to do nothing officially - to have a quiet conversation, accept the apology that the employee had already volunteered, and let everyone get on with their lives. Path three was the path the framework existed for: a properly conducted disciplinary process, with the employee informed, given a fair hearing, given a support person, given the right to respond, given a written outcome that was proportionate to the conduct, the context, and the long history that came before it.

The third path was, on the face of it, the most expensive. It would take time. It would make several people uncomfortable. It would require careful documentation. It would require us, the institution, to do the thing well that we could have done badly far more cheaply.

We took the third path.

The process took the better part of a fortnight. The employee was, by the end of it, given a formal written warning and offered an additional support arrangement that addressed the underlying issue. He stayed with the company for several years afterwards. The colleague

who had reported the conduct was thanked for doing so, in a way that did not single him out unhelpfully on the team. The manager was supported through a procedure he had not had to run before. The institution was, at the end, more sure of itself than it had been at the beginning - because it had done the hard thing in a way that protected everyone whose name had touched the file.

I did not feel proud of the case at the time. I felt tired. I had spent two weeks doing paperwork that, in any other working environment I had been in, would have been done in an afternoon. I had been quiet at home. The case did not produce a story I could tell at a dinner party.

I am proud of it now.

I am proud of it now because the framework we used was, in the end, the architecture of care. The framework allowed an employee to keep his dignity while being held accountable. The framework allowed a manager to do the right thing without having to invent the right thing on the spot. The framework allowed the institution to be the kind of place where the next person who made a mistake could expect, with reasonable confidence, that they would be treated fairly. The framework was the part of the work that protected people who were never told it was protecting them.

That is what HR is for. Not the policy library. Not the induction kit. Not the engagement survey. Not the org chart. Those are all instruments, in the sense Chapter 2 used the word. They are useful, and they are not the truth of the work.

The truth of the work is the disciplined design of the small, careful arrangements by which an organisation cares for its people, on the days they have done well and on the days they have not.

* * *

Numbers, properly looked at

Alongside the casework, I spent a great deal of time at Saipem on what would now, fashionably, be called HR analytics. At the time it had no fashionable name. It was just data.

I built reporting that surfaced employee retention and turnover, recruitment costs, labour costs, overtime usage, attendance, and engagement metrics, drawing the relevant streams together so that the leadership team could see, on a single dashboard, what the people-system of the organisation was doing in any given month. I worked with cross-functional managers to forecast workforce demand against project budgets. I built integrated reporting modules that reduced duplication of effort across the recruitment team and let senior managers see, in real time, where the bottlenecks in hiring were.

Most of that work was, in retrospect, a small-scale precursor of what AI is now doing for HR functions everywhere.

Modern HR systems can - by lunchtime on a Monday - tell a senior leader the predicted attrition risk of every employee, the engagement sentiment of every team based on the language patterns in a year of internal communications, the optimal salary band for any new role, and the personality fit of every applicant against every team in the company. I do not need to tell you, in 2026, that this is happening. You are aware. You are using a version of it. So am I, in the work I do at TBP CODOT and the campus I now run at Ozford in Brisbane.

The interesting question is not whether to use the analytics. The interesting question is the same question Chapter 3 asked about the BPO floor. What is the dashboard not measuring?

Modern HR analytics measure throughput, retention, sentiment, and risk. They do not measure whether a manager has, this quarter, sat with one of their direct reports for an hour, with full attention, and helped them think through whether the role they are in is the role they should be in. The dashboards do not measure whether a disciplinary case was handled in a way that left the institution more or less able to do the next one well. The dashboards do not measure whether the engineers in the building still respect the procedures, or have begun to mistrust them. The dashboards do not measure the candle in the kitchen of an employee whose mother is unwell, and whether their manager has noticed yet.

These are not romantic objections to analytics. These are practical observations about what analytics, by their design, are not built to see. The leader's job in the AI era is to use the dashboards seriously and to never, even briefly, mistake the dashboard for the truth of the people whose names are on it.

* * *

HR in the AI era

There is a quiet conversation happening, in many of the HR functions I now consult to, about whether HR will still exist as a profession ten years from now. The conversation is reasonable. AI can already do a great deal of what HR used to do - draft job descriptions, screen CVs, write performance review prompts, calculate compensation bands, summarise engagement data, generate the wording for difficult conversations, suggest the right policy from a library.

If HR is the production of those artefacts, then HR is going away. The artefacts are going to be cheap, instant, and good enough.

If HR is the design of the architecture of care, then HR is becoming more important than it has ever been - because the architecture of care, in an organisation that has automated most of its people-process, is now visible in a way it never used to be. The question is no longer whether the policy library is up to date. The question is whether the policy library, when used by AI to generate a hundred decisions a day, is producing the kind of organisation you would want your own daughter to work in.

Most organisations have not yet asked themselves that question. They are too busy savouring the productivity dividend of automation. They will, eventually, look up - some of them when an algorithmically generated termination letter goes to the wrong person, some of them when a hiring algorithm produces a class action, some of them when an internal sentiment-analysis dashboard is leaked to a journalist - and they will discover that the architecture they were running on autopilot

was not the architecture they would have signed off on if they had read it carefully.

The leaders who are paying attention now will be the ones whose organisations do not have to learn that lesson the hard way.

The Saipem engineers, if you had described modern HR analytics to them, would have nodded. They would have asked: 'Who signed off on the procedure?' They would have asked: 'What happens when the procedure is wrong?' They would have asked: 'Who is responsible when the system makes a mistake?' These are exactly the right questions. The fact that the system being asked about is now made of large language models and probability distributions, rather than valves and pressure gauges, does not change the questions. It only makes the questions more urgent.

* * *

The working rule

The principle this chapter has been working towards is a short one, and you have already half-heard it.

The process exists to protect people, not punish them. Build it the other way around and the whole pyramid wobbles.

In an AI era, the rule extends slightly. It now reads: process exists to protect people, not punish them; AI exists to scale that protection, not replace it; and the leader's job is to make sure neither the process nor the AI is allowed to forget who they are for.

That is harder than it sounds. Process, especially when it is automated, has a strong tendency to drift in the direction of whoever is auditing it next. Cost, throughput, compliance score, regulator inspection - all reasonable things to measure - all things that, slowly, can replace the actual people the process was originally designed to protect. The leader's discipline is to keep coming back to the original question. Who is this for? What does it cost them when we cut a corner? What does it give them when we hold the line?

If you are running an organisation - or a team, or even a single shift - that has a process you would not be willing to be on the receiving end of, you have a problem. Probably a fixable one. The fix begins with reading the process the way the engineers at Saipem read their procedures: line by line, in good faith, with the people the process exists for clearly in mind.

* * *

Reflection

1. Pick one process on your team that, if you are honest, is currently making people smaller rather than safer. What was it originally designed to do, and where did it drift?
2. Of the dashboards your organisation now runs on people-data, which one are you most tempted to mistake for the truth - and what is it not measuring?
3. If a regulator audited the most automated people-decision your organisation made last week, would you be willing to put your name on it? If not, what is your responsibility?

Try this week

Pick one recurring process you are currently responsible for - a hiring step, a probation review, a leave approval, a performance conversation, anything. Find a fifteen-minute window in your week.

Then ask the people who use the process - not the people who designed it, not the people who manage it, but the people on whose lives it lands - one question. The question is: 'What would make this ten per cent more human?'

Do not promise to fix anything. Do not turn it into a project. Do not bring AI into the conversation unless they do. Just listen. Write down, in their own words, the three or four things they say. Read the list at the end of the week. Notice how cheap it would be to do one of those things. Decide, deliberately, whether to do it.

That fifteen-minute habit, run quarterly across a career, is what HR used to be before it had a department. It is what the architecture of

care looks like, in practice, on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon. The AI era does not change it. It only makes it rarer, and therefore more valuable.

**- Next: Chapter 5,
"Marks vs Making"**

Chapter Five

Marks vs Making

Why the world keeps measuring the wrong thing

"AI doesn't replace understanding. It demands more of it."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

A few months ago, I had a conversation that has not left me alone since.

It was with an academician - someone whose entire career has been spent inside the discipline of teaching, who is good at it, who cares about it, who has been doing it for longer than most of the rest of us have been working at all. We were talking, as people in higher education are now talking everywhere, about AI in the classroom. The conversation began politely, the way these conversations usually do, and then took a small turn into something more honest.

The academician's view, plainly stated, was that AI had ruined education.

Students no longer wanted to study. They typed their assignments into ChatGPT, accepted whatever it produced, polished the surface, and submitted it. The exams on which the institution had relied for forty years no longer measured what they used to measure. The conversations in tutorials had thinned out. The academician said, "The students had stopped doing the work."

'Twenty-five years ago,' the academician told me, 'things were different. We all learnt properly.'

I did not argue. I asked a question instead. The question was this. Hadn't the curriculum from twenty-five years ago also evolved? Hadn't the process of how we study and learn always been in motion?

The academician did not say no, exactly, but the look that passed across their face suggested that the question had landed somewhere they had not yet been ready to look at.

I want to spend this chapter on what was sitting under that question.

* * *

We have been here before

The introduction of pocket calculators into mathematics classrooms, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was greeted by serious educators with a serious panic. Calculators, it was argued, would make children unable to do mathematics. Children who pressed buttons would not learn how to think with numbers. The discipline of arithmetic, the foundation of all higher reasoning, was about to be lost. Editorials were written. Curricula were debated. National-level reviews were commissioned. Professional bodies issued careful position papers.

The internet, in the mid-1990s, was greeted by serious educators with the same serious panic, in slightly updated language. The internet, it was argued, would make research meaningless. Children who could look up any answer in a few seconds would not learn how to investigate. The discipline of inquiry, the foundation of all higher reasoning, was about to be lost. Editorials were written. Curricula were debated. National-level reviews were commissioned. Professional bodies issued careful position papers.

Search engines and Wikipedia, in the early 2000s, were greeted by serious educators with the same serious panic, in slightly updated language. So, ten years later, were tablet computers. So, a few years after that, were smartphones in classrooms. So, in 2023, was ChatGPT. Each wave landed with a wave of editorials, curricula debates, national-level reviews, and careful position papers.

In none of those waves did the discipline that was being mourned actually disappear. Mathematics did not die. The inquiry did not die. Critical thinking did not die. What happened was that the discipline reorganised itself around the new tool. Calculators became a normal

part of mathematics. The internet became a normal part of inquiry. Smartphones became a normal part of attention - and, yes, an ongoing problem for it. ChatGPT and its successors are now becoming a normal part of writing, drafting, and reading.

The pattern is so reliable that I want to name it plainly here, because every leader currently in education or training or workforce development is going to have to recognise the pattern in their own organisation in the next several years.

The pattern is this. Every new tool that takes over an old skill creates an immediate, sincere panic that the underlying discipline is dying. The panic is rarely correct. What is dying is not the discipline. What is dying is the particular method by which the discipline used to be taught and assessed, in a world that no longer exists.

The discipline survives. The method has to evolve.

* * *

Education and marks are two different things

There is a confusion, in most modern conversations about education and AI, between two words that mean different things. The first word is education. The second word is marks. The confusion is so common, and so easy to make, that even experienced teachers and senior leaders make it - and pass it on, often without noticing, to the students and employees they are responsible for.

Education is the slow, expensive, deeply human process by which a person becomes capable of thinking, working, judging, and contributing more than they could before. It is largely invisible. It happens in tutorials and conversations, in late-night reading and arguments at dinner tables, in the gradual rearrangement of a young mind around the shape of a discipline. Education does not finish on graduation day. It does not, for most of us, ever finish at all. The best educated person I have ever known once told me that the more she knew, the more she suspected she did not know. That is what education sounds like from the inside.

Marks are something quite different. Marks are a measurement, taken at a particular moment, against a particular set of criteria, by a particular instrument. Marks are useful for many things - for selection, for placement, for accreditation, for the orderly running of large institutions that cannot afford to interview every applicant in person - and they are not, ever, the same thing as education.

It is possible to be highly marked and lightly educated. We have all worked with such people. They arrive in the room with glittering transcripts. They quote the right authors. They cite the right authorities. They produce, in conversations and in meetings, a continuous stream of plausible-sounding output. And six months in, you discover that no one wants to be on a project with them. They have not been making anything. They have been performing the marks they used to receive, applied to the new context. The marks were never the education. The marks were just the side-effect of an instrument the institution happened to be running.

It is also possible to be lightly marked and deeply educated. We have all worked with these people too, although we are slower to notice them, because the world has trained us to look at the marks first. They arrive without glittering transcripts. They are not the obvious choice for the job. They keep, over time, making things - small improvements to processes, small useful documents, small innovations in how work gets done. They become the person every department borrows from. They are, in the slow way that matters, the actual operating system of the organisation, even though no instrument has ever measured them as such.

The mistake is to think one of those people had education and the other did not. Both had education. The difference was what they did with it.

The mistake the world keeps making, in hiring and promotion and assessment, is to confuse the marks with the education. The first is a rough proxy for the second. Sometimes a useful proxy. Often a poor one. Now, in the age of AI, an even worse one - because AI, by its design, can produce work that is plausibly marked, on demand, in

seconds. The thing the marks were good at measuring is exactly the thing AI can now produce on autopilot.

The serious leadership question is what is left to measure when AI can produce the surface.

* * *

Priya and Karthik

I am going to describe, with the names changed, two people I have hired across a career - one of whom looked, on paper, like the obvious hire, and one of whom did not.

First I will call Priya. Priya arrived at her interview with a CV that any recruiter would have flagged as a probable yes inside the first paragraph. Top university, distinction grades, two awards in her postgraduate year, neat spread of internships at recognisable names, articulate reference letters from people whose own credentials made the letters worth more. In the interview, Priya was poised. She gave clean answers. She had read the published material about our institution. She had a question prepared for the end. She would, on every standard hiring rubric, have scored in the top decile of any candidate pool.

The second I will call Karthik. Karthik arrived with a CV that took longer to read because the items on it did not, at first glance, fit a tidy story. The marks were unremarkable. The institution he had graduated from was not a name that opens doors. There was a gap of nearly a year between his degree and his first paid role. The roles since then had been small, slightly varied, and from organisations the recruiters had not heard of. He had handed the CV to me, in person, with a small printed portfolio of three things he had built in his last role. The portfolio was the only thing he was visibly proud of. The CV he barely mentioned.

If you had told me, in advance, that I had to hire one of the two without speaking to either, I would have hired Priya. I think I am being honest with you about that. The recruiters in my own business would have hired Priya. The hiring algorithm we now use as an early screen

would have hired Priya. The world, by every available instrument, would have hired Priya.

I hired Karthik. And I want to tell you why.

It was not because the portfolio was perfect. It was not perfect. Two of the three things in it had small mistakes I had spotted in the first ten minutes. It was not because Karthik interviewed better. He did not, in any particular way that I could measure. The reason I hired Karthik was a smaller and harder-to-explain thing. It was that, when I asked him about each of the three items in the portfolio, he answered as someone who had made each of them with his own hands - had wrestled with them, had been frustrated by them, had finished them, had improved them, had decided which compromises to keep and which to fix. The portfolio was not the marks. The portfolio was the maker's ledger.

Priya, when I asked similar questions about her CV, answered as someone who had been measured well in each of the slots she had passed through. The slots had passed her on. She had not, in any deep sense I could see, made anything yet.

Five years later, Priya is doing well in a different organisation that prizes the kind of polish she has always had. There is no shame in that. Karthik is the person on my team that two other departments are now in a polite, ongoing argument over. He has built things. He has fixed things. He has trained other people to build and fix things. He has, in the slow way that matters, become the operating system of his small corner of the institution.

Both of them were educated. Both of them are intelligent. The difference between the two of them was not visible on any instrument the world routinely uses. The difference was visible only to a leader willing to read a portfolio more slowly than a transcript.

* * *

The maker's ledger

I want to introduce, in this chapter, a small idea I have come to use in my own work and have been quietly recommending to younger leaders. The idea is the maker's ledger.

A maker's ledger is a private list, kept somewhere by you and visible to no-one else, of things you have actually made. Not things you have completed. Not things you have been graded on. Not things that appear on your CV. Things you have built, with your own attention, that did not exist before you built them, and that hold up to your own scrutiny when you read them again later.

The ledger can include obvious things. A document. A unit of curriculum. A workflow. A piece of code. A short story. A garden bed. A meal you cooked from a recipe you wrote. A conversation you handled well. A coaching framework you devised for a teammate. A recovery plan you wrote for a difficult month.

It can also include less obvious things. The colleague you helped through their first management role, who is now thriving. The student whose visa problem you sorted at midnight, who has now graduated. The policy paragraph you redrafted because the previous one had a hidden cruelty in it. The Anita you noticed and named, in the way Chapter 3 suggested. None of these will appear on any transcript or any performance review. All of them are makings.

The discipline of the ledger is not to use it for self-promotion. The discipline is to use it as a private corrective to the marks-and-rankings world. The marks-and-rankings world, on any given day, will be telling you a story about your worth that is, almost certainly, partial. The ledger is the second voice in your head - the voice from Chapter 2 - that knows what you have actually made, and is therefore harder for any external instrument to mislead.

If you have not started a maker's ledger yet, I want to gently suggest that you do, this week. Five things, written down. Re-read whenever you are tempted to underestimate yourself. Add to it deliberately, across the rest of your career. The longer it gets, the more accurately it represents you - and the less power any single verdict

from any single instrument will ever have over the way you walk into a room.

* * *

What AI changes - and what it does not

Now we get to the harder part of the chapter.

AI changes the marks-versus-making question in three particular ways, and the leaders who notice the changes will design their teams, their hiring, their assessment, and their development practices differently from the leaders who do not.

The first change is that AI has dramatically lowered the cost of producing things that look marked. Confidently written essays, plausibly structured analyses, well-formatted reports, polished CVs, fluent emails, polite policy summaries - all of these are now available to anyone with an internet connection in seconds. The instruments the world used to rely on to measure people - written essays, multiple-choice exams, polished CVs - are increasingly measuring the AI tool the candidate had access to, not the candidate. We have not, as institutions, finished noticing this. Most of our hiring and assessment systems are still being run as if the polished output is evidence of the candidate. It is not.

The second change is that AI has not, in any equivalent way, lowered the cost of verifying things. To verify a piece of work - to check that its claims are true, that its figures are right, that its sources exist, that its reasoning holds, that its judgements are sound, that its tone is appropriate - still requires the time and attention of a person who actually understands the domain. The cost of production has fallen through the floor. The cost of verifying has stayed roughly where it was. The leverage in the new economy sits with the verifier, not the producer.

The third change is that AI cannot, by its design, take responsibility for the work it produces. It is not a moral agent. It cannot be ashamed of its mistakes. It cannot apologise. It cannot, in the way the Saipem engineers in the previous chapter could, sign off on a

procedure with their own name and stand by the consequences. The signature is the human's. The signature is becoming, in the AI era, the entire point.

Put those three changes together and the conclusion is uncomfortable for the marks-and-rankings world. The marks-and-rankings world was good at measuring people on what they could produce. AI has now made production cheap. The world is therefore, slowly but unavoidably, shifting to measuring people on what they can verify, refine, and put their name on - which is exactly what the maker's ledger has always measured. The making has become the mark.

It is in this shift that the title of this book lives. AI is actually important not because of what it can produce, but because of who we choose to become while it is producing. We can use AI to inflate the polished surface of a generation of people who have never made anything. Or we can use AI to free up enough of our time that we make more and verify better than any previous generation. The choice is not technical. The choice is who we decide to be while the tool is on our desk.

The leaders worth following in this era will be the ones who design teams, hire decisions, performance reviews, and learning systems around the second choice. The leaders not worth following will keep running the old marks-and-rankings systems on top of the new tools, will cheerfully publish ever-cleaner dashboards, and will, slowly and quietly, hollow out their organisations from the inside while the dashboards keep glowing.

There is no neutral position here. Doing nothing is not staying still. Doing nothing means letting the AI do the producing while the institution keeps measuring the production - which means measuring the AI.

* * *

What this means for your team next Monday

I want to bring this back from the level of principle to the level of practice, because the chapter is not useful if it stops at the level of the essay.

On your team next Monday, four things change if you have actually accepted the argument of this chapter.

The first is in hiring. You stop trusting the polish on the CV. You stop trusting the polish on the cover letter. You stop trusting the polish on the take-home written task. Polish is now the cheapest signal in the recruitment process. You start, instead, asking candidates to walk you through one or two things they have actually made - portfolio, work samples, a problem they solved that nobody else solved, the slightly clunky thing on their personal website that demonstrates that they have built something. You read the maker's ledger, even if neither of you uses that word.

The second is in development. You stop, in your one-to-ones, asking only what your direct reports have done this week. You start asking what they have made this week, and what they have learned from making it. The shift is small in language and large in effect. Doing is the language of the marked economy. Making is the language of the maker's economy. The conversation you are now having is a different conversation.

The third is in assessment. If you are responsible, in any way, for how your organisation evaluates anyone - whether as a manager, a faculty member, an HR partner, or a board member - you have to stop pretending that the old assessments still measure what they used to measure. The take-home essay is now a measurement of the candidate's prompt. The standardised test is now a measurement of the candidate's preparation provider. The polished interview answer is now a measurement of how much rehearsal they did with their own AI assistant. None of those tell you very much. The assessments that still tell you something are the ones that ask the candidate to make something, in front of you, with full disclosure of which tools they are

using and how. That is the new exam, and most institutions have not yet written it.

The fourth is in your own work. You start running your own week through the same lens. What did I make this week? What did I verify? What did I put my name on, in the way the engineers at Saipem put their name on the procedure - knowing that, if it failed, the failure would carry my signature? Most weeks the answer will be one or two specific things, and the rest of the week will turn out to have been spent on outputs that, in retrospect, the AI could have produced and nobody would have noticed.

That second category is not nothing. Every week has its share of routine work. The point is to stop letting the routine work crowd out the making. The point is, when Atlas finishes the routine work for you in twenty minutes instead of two hours, to spend the free time on something you can put on your maker's ledger. Not on more dashboards. Not on more meetings. On making.

That habit, repeated weekly, is what compounds across a career. It is also, not coincidentally, the habit my parents were teaching me, in candle-lit rooms in Bangalore, before any of us had a word for it. Calling out spelling words from the kitchen while the dinner cooked was a kind of making. The marks our school report cards eventually returned were, at best, a partial echo of the work.

The making was always the point. AI has only made that finally undeniable.

* * *

Reflection

1. What is the most valuable thing you have made in the last year that no one has ever given you a mark for? Write it down. Notice what it costs you that no instrument has ever measured.
2. Who on your team is currently being underestimated because their numbers are unimpressive? What have they actually been making that the dashboard cannot see?

3. If you removed every output from your last quarter that AI could now produce in twenty minutes, what would be left of your contribution? Look at what is left honestly. That is the work the world will pay you for ten years from now.

Try this week

Start a maker's ledger.

Open a private file - on paper, on your phone, anywhere no-one else will read it. Write down five things you have actually made in the last year. Not things you completed for a grade. Not things you wrote on your CV. Things you built, with your own attention, that did not exist before, and that you would still be willing to put your name on if a regulator audited them.

Be honest. Some of the things will be small. The colleague you helped through their first management role. The paragraph in the policy document you rewrote so it would not embarrass anyone. The conversation you handled well when it would have been easier not to. The unit of curriculum you re-built after the first version did not work. The portfolio of three small things, like Karthik's, that you would hand to a future leader as evidence that you had been at work.

Read the list once. Add to it deliberately as the year goes on. Re-read it the next time the marks-and-rankings world is busy telling you a smaller story about your worth than the one your hands have been quietly writing.

That ledger, kept across a career, is the answer the booklet in Chapter 2 was never going to be able to write for you. It is also the only piece of measurement that will hold up, in the AI era, against any instrument that mistakes the polish for the work.

**- Next: Chapter 6,
"Bridging Worlds"**

Chapter Six

Bridging Worlds

When industry meets the classroom

"The future isn't AI vs people. It's AI + people done right."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

A while ago I sat down for a coffee with a man named Pav Thind.

Pav is the founder and director of Enfork Group, and we had been introduced through the small overlapping circle of leaders in Brisbane who keep finding each other at events about strategy, technology, and the future of work. The conversation, when we sat down, was not particularly remarkable. It began with the usual courtesies, found its way to what each of us was currently building, and settled, eventually, on the subject of marketing.

I had been operating, by then, with the quiet assumption that traditional marketing was on its way out. AI tools were generating content. AI tools were designing visuals. AI tools were suggesting campaigns. The instruments of marketing - the things a marketing team used to be hired to do - were being absorbed, in front of all of us, into software. I was not bitter about it. I was, if anything, a bit excited about it. I had AI tools running through TBP CODOT every day, doing in twenty seconds the kinds of things a small marketing team used to do in twenty hours. The future, as far as I could see, was an automated marketing function with a thin layer of strategy on top.

Pav let me finish. He stirred his coffee, in the patient way of someone who has heard this argument many times before from intelligent people. Then he said something that has not left me alone since.

'AI can write content,' he said. 'AI can generate images. AI can even suggest strategies. But AI doesn't truly understand intent.'

He went on to explain what he meant. The real value of marketing, he said, was not in the production of content - which had indeed become almost free. The real value of marketing was in knowing where to place the message, when to place it, and how to reach the right audience. That kind of judgement was not produced by a model. It came from sitting with a business long enough to understand what it was trying to become, from listening to its customers in conversations the analytics could not capture, and from having seen, across a career, what kinds of small decisions made big differences over time.

'AI is not your replacement,' Pav said. 'AI is your amplifier. The future isn't AI versus people. It's AI plus people done right.'

I want to spend this chapter on what was sitting under that conversation, because Pav had named, in two coffees' worth of time, something that I had been doing for fifteen years without ever quite finding the language for it.

* * *

What I was doing without a name

Between 2015 and 2019, I lived a working life that did not, on paper, fit a single neat description.

I was, on the formal side of my employment, the HR Manager and Business Analyst at American College in Brisbane - a Registered Training Organisation in the vocational education space. The work involved building HR strategy, designing learning and development programmes, ensuring that the institution complied with its regulatory obligations under the relevant Australian frameworks, and program-managing the Advanced Diploma and Diploma in Management and Business courses. It was, in its own right, full-time work.

Concurrently, I had been asked - by the same CEO, Rev Dr Bernard Malik who had headhunted me back to American College - to lead the strategic planning for a new institution. That institution, in time, became the Leaders Institute. The work of starting an accredited Australian higher education provider from scratch is not something

most people have ever had to think about. It involves regulators (TEQSA, in this case). It involves frameworks (the Higher Education Standards Framework). It involves accreditation submissions, course design, governance design, financial modelling, market analysis, premises selection, technology stacks, faculty recruitment, and a few hundred small documents that have to be exactly right or the whole project does not happen.

Then, in early 2018, I left American College to take on a year-long programme manager role with Creative Activation - the leading retail partner across Australia and New Zealand - running a Google sales and service training programme for retail partners across Victoria and Queensland. The work was operational, fast, and quietly data-heavy. I had to learn Tableau dashboards in a hurry. I had to design training that worked equally well for a Sydney consumer-electronics chain manager and a regional Queensland retail floor staff member. I had to translate Google's global brand framework into the specific cadence of Australian retail life.

And throughout the whole period, the Leaders Institute project kept moving in the background - until, in 2019, after I had finished the Creative Activation programme, I returned to it formally as Director, working alongside Dr Malik and our small team to actually launch the institution we had been building on paper for several years.

If you had asked me, in any one of those years, what I did for a living, I would have given you a different answer depending on which week you caught me in. I was an HR person. I was a programme manager. I was a strategic planner. I was a regulatory specialist. I was a trainer. I was an analyst. I was, at one point, in three rooms in the same week with three completely different vocabularies, and the rooms barely knew the other rooms existed.

I did not, at the time, have a name for what I was actually doing. I was uncomfortable with the way my CV was getting harder to summarise. I worried, occasionally, that I was a generalist drifting between specialisms because I could not commit to any one of them.

Pav's coffee, fifteen years later, gave me the language I had been missing. I had been a translator.

* * *

The dashboard that told the truth

Of all of those years, the one that taught me the most about translation was, oddly, the year at Creative Activation - because that was the year I had the least domain expertise on paper, and the most reliance on data.

The Google retail programme involved tracking the performance of training across stores in two states. We measured a lot of things. The training participation rates of staff. The pre- and post-training assessment scores. The customer satisfaction surveys associated with the stores. The sales performance of the relevant product lines, week on week, against the targets the brand had set.

Most of the data was uplifting. Most of the stores improved. Most of the trainees scored better on their post-training assessments than on their pre-training ones. Most of the customer satisfaction trends moved in the right direction. The dashboards were, week after week, the kind of dashboards a programme manager loves to present to a sponsor on a Friday afternoon.

And then, somewhere in the middle of the year, a number on one of the Tableau views started telling a story none of us wanted to hear.

In one specific region of Queensland - which I will not name, because the people involved did nothing wrong and were, in fact, quietly admirable - the post-training assessment scores had climbed nicely, the participation rates were good, but the actual sales performance for the relevant Google products was not moving. There was no statistical reason it should not have been moving. The training was working. The staff knew the material. The brand awareness in the region was reasonable. And yet, the sales just sat there.

The first thing I did was assume the data was wrong. I checked the integration. I checked the source feeds. I cross-referenced two different reporting tools. The data was right.

The second thing I did was assume my training had failed in some subtle way. I went and re-watched my own session recordings. I asked the trainees in that region for honest feedback. I sat in on store conversations. The training was fine. The staff were fine.

The third thing I did, which took the longest, was to walk the floor of three stores in that region in a single week and just watch. Not as the programme manager. Not as the auditor. Just as a person trying to understand what was happening in the actual rooms where the actual customers were making actual decisions.

What I learned, on those visits, was something the dashboard could never have told me. The local customer base in that region had a quietly persistent preference for a competing brand - not because Google's products were inferior, not because our training had failed, but because the competing brand had been part of the local working life of that town for thirty years. People bought what their cousins bought, what their workplaces stocked, what the local repair shop knew how to fix. The trained staff could give a beautiful explanation of the Google product set. The customers were not, in that town, in the market for a beautiful explanation. They were in the market for something familiar.

There was no fixing that with more training. There was no fixing it with a better script. There was, in some sense, nothing to fix - the dashboard was not telling us our programme had failed, it was telling us something about the town that the brand needed to hear.

The story I had to write, when I went back to the brand sponsor, was not the one anybody had been expecting. It was not 'the training is broken.' It was not 'the staff are underperforming.' It was 'this town is not currently in the market for what we are selling, and no amount of training will move that. If you want different sales numbers, you need a different intervention - and that intervention is not one your training partner can deliver.'

That was an awkward thing to say, on a Friday afternoon, to people whose KPIs depended on the training partnership being the answer.

I said it anyway. The brand, to its credit, listened. The intervention they ran the next quarter was not training. It was something else, addressing the actual lever the dashboard had pointed at. The numbers in that town moved.

That was, in retrospect, the moment I learned what data is actually for.

* * *

What data is actually for

Most organisations now have more dashboards than they have decisions. The dashboards measure participation, throughput, revenue, retention, sentiment, satisfaction, conversion, and a hundred other dimensions a previous generation of leaders would have killed to have visibility into. The dashboards are technically beautiful. They are updated continuously. They are accessible from anywhere. They are, mostly, ignored.

They are ignored because nobody on the team has the time to actually sit with the numbers, ask better questions, and walk the floor that the numbers point toward. The dashboards have become the work, instead of the input to the work. The dashboards are, in the language of Chapter 5, marks. The walking of the floor, the writing of the awkward report on Friday afternoon, the slow accumulation of stories about the towns the dashboard cannot see - that is making.

Data tells you the truth only if you ask it the right questions. The dashboard cannot ask the questions. The dashboard can only show you the answers to questions that have already been asked - usually some quarters or years ago, by somebody whose job it was to set the metric up in the first place. If those original questions were the wrong ones, the dashboard will keep producing reassuring numbers that are answering the wrong question. The leader's job is to keep auditing the questions, not just the answers.

AI changes this picture in a way that almost nobody is yet talking about clearly. AI is extraordinarily good at generating plausible answers from data. Any leader, today, can paste a Tableau extract into

Atlas and get back a confident-sounding analysis of what the data shows, with a recommendation, in two or three minutes. Most of those analyses will be roughly correct in the way the dashboard is roughly correct - they will tell you something true about what the metric is doing, and nothing true about whether the metric is the right thing to be measuring.

The translation work is in the second part. The translation work is asking, on behalf of the people whose lives the data is about, whether the question being measured is the question that needs to be asked. AI cannot do that work for you, because AI does not know which town the data is from, what the local repair shop is stocking, or which cousins influence which buying decisions. AI can only see the data. The translation back to the actual world is yours.

The leaders worth following in this era will be the ones who use AI for the analysis layer and refuse to use AI for the translation layer. The leaders not worth following will let the analysis layer become the entire conversation, because the analysis layer produces clean PowerPoint slides and nobody on the executive team has time to walk the floor.

* * *

Two languages, one student

The American College years had given me, by then, a different version of the same lesson.

In the world of vocational and higher education in Australia, two languages run in parallel and rarely meet cleanly. One is the language of the regulators and the academic boards: Threshold Standards, Australian Qualifications Framework, learning outcomes, course accreditation submissions, the careful, ordered taxonomy of what the regulator considers a unit of learning to be. The other is the language of industry: skills shortages, hiring pipelines, productivity, what employers actually need their new staff to be able to do on Monday morning. Both languages are useful. Both languages are largely incomprehensible to the speakers of the other one.

My role, sitting between an Academic Board and a Governing Board on the one side, and the working employers we had to convince to take our students on placements on the other, was to translate. I had to be able to write an accreditation submission that would survive the regulator's scrutiny - in the regulator's vocabulary, in the regulator's expected structure, in the regulator's preferred mood and tone. I had to be able, on the same afternoon, to sit with a small business owner from the Bank of Queensland or a Queensland Government agency, in their conference room, and explain in plain commercial English what our students could actually do for them. The accreditation document and the conversation with the employer were about the same students - but the words for those students lived on opposite sides of a wall I had to keep walking around.

The translation work was almost never appreciated by either side. The regulators did not particularly thank me for getting the industry partners on board. The industry partners did not particularly thank me for getting the regulators across the line. Each side, in good faith, considered their own work the harder half. The translation between them was invisible labour - until something went wrong, at which point both sides would notice that there had not been a translator, and would assign the cost of the failure to the other side.

This is, I now believe, the underestimated work of most modern leadership. Every organisation worth leading sits at the intersection of multiple worlds whose vocabularies do not match. The C-suite and the front line. The engineers and the marketers. The regulator and the customer. The board and the team. The strategy deck and the daily stand-up. The leader's job, more than anything else, is to be the person in the building who can hold both vocabularies in their head at the same time, without flinching, and translate between them honestly.

The translation has to be honest. That word matters. A translator who softens the awkward bits in transit is not a translator - they are a bureaucrat managing optics. The translation has to carry the inconvenient parts. It has to bring the regulator's actual concern back to the executive team intact. It has to bring the industry partner's actual frustration back to the academic board intact. It has to bring the

dashboard's awkward number, the one nobody wanted, back to the brand sponsor on a Friday afternoon - and let the silence sit for as long as it has to.

That kind of leadership does not flatter anyone. It is also, in my experience, what every organisation that survives the difficult years needs more of, not less.

* * *

AI as translator - and what AI cannot translate

There is a small irony in the chapter we are now in, which I want to name plainly.

AI is, at one level, the most extraordinary translation tool human beings have ever built. Atlas, sitting on my desk this evening, can take a regulator's compliance document and produce, in two minutes, a plain-English summary that an industry partner can read on a phone. Atlas can take an industry partner's casual paragraph about what their team needs and produce, in two minutes, a structured curriculum-mapping document a regulator might find acceptable. Atlas can take a dashboard extract from a Tableau view and produce, in two minutes, an executive briefing in three paragraphs. The volume of translation Atlas can do, in a working day, exceeds what any single human translator could ever do in a working life.

And yet.

There is a layer of translation that Atlas cannot do, no matter how fluent the output. Atlas does not know which town the data is from. Atlas does not know that the regulator's last audit found a particular failing in a particular institution that everyone in the room, except Atlas, remembers. Atlas does not know that the industry partner you are translating for is also the partner whose son is graduating from a competing programme next year, and that this conversation is therefore not really about training, it is about something quieter that has to be addressed in person before the formal conversation can happen at all.

In other words, Atlas can do the linguistic translation. Atlas cannot do the contextual translation. Atlas can move the words across

the wall. Atlas cannot tell you what the wall is made of, or which side of it has the louder enemies, or which of the listeners will hear the same sentence in completely different registers depending on who said it last.

That work - the contextual translation - is the leader's actual job. It is the work that does not appear on the dashboard. It is the work that does not appear in the AI's output. It is, in the AI era, becoming both more important and more invisible at the same time, which is a dangerous combination - because invisible-but-important work is exactly the kind of work institutions stop budgeting for, until they need it back, by which time the people who knew how to do it have left.

The leaders worth following in the next decade will be the ones who use AI to take the linguistic load off, and who spend the time freed up doing the contextual translation more deliberately than anyone has done it before. The leaders not worth following will use AI to flood every wall with translated text, will declare the translation problem solved, and will be quietly puzzled, three years later, when the strategy is technically perfect on paper and unmistakably failing in practice.

* * *

The translator-in-residence

If I were sketching, on a whiteboard, the role this chapter is making the case for, I would call it the translator-in-residence. The translator-in-residence is the person on a leadership team whose job, more than anyone else's, is to keep the languages of the organisation talking to each other. They translate the strategy into the team's daily reality. They translate the team's daily reality back to the strategy. They translate the regulator into the executive's vocabulary. They translate the customer's frustration into the policy team's reform proposal. They translate the dashboard back to the floor that the dashboard came from.

Most organisations have such a person, but rarely on purpose. Usually they are the senior leader who keeps being asked to step into rooms they were not formally invited to, because the rooms cannot

understand each other without them. Their value to the organisation is enormous and almost never measured. They are usually quietly tired.

The recommendation this chapter makes, to any organisation reading it, is to make the translator-in-residence role explicit. Name it. Resource it. Recognise that the person doing it is doing leadership work, not administrative work, and pay accordingly. The alternative - the unmarked translator who is silently absorbing the cost of the organisation's communication failures - is a model that will not survive the AI era, because the AI era will tempt every organisation to declare the translation problem solved at exactly the moment the contextual translation is becoming most important.

If you are the translator-in-residence in your own team and have not been told that you are, please consider this paragraph an unofficial recognition. The work you are doing is the work that holds the room together. It is invisible to most of the people you do it for. It is what the rest of us mean when we talk about leadership. It is, by the way, exactly the kind of work that goes on a maker's ledger - even if it appears on no formal dashboard anywhere.

* * *

Reflection

1. Which two worlds are you currently translating between, in your working life, that do not naturally talk to each other? Name them. Notice that the translation is most of what makes you valuable - and notice that nobody is paying you for it directly.
2. What is the last piece of data that changed your mind? If you cannot recall one in the last six months, you are probably reading dashboards rather than asking them questions.
3. When was the last time you delivered a piece of translated truth to a senior leader on a Friday afternoon - and let the silence sit afterwards? If you cannot remember, ask yourself why your career has not yet required that of you, or whether you have been quietly avoiding it.

Try this week

Identify, this week, one wall in your organisation - one boundary between two vocabularies that do not naturally talk to each other. Pick a small one. The Friday-afternoon-wall between the executive deck and the customer support queue. The Tuesday-morning wall between the regulator's email and the operations team's standup. Whatever wall is most alive in your week.

Then spend an hour, with no project deliverable in mind, doing one piece of translation across it on purpose. Write a short paragraph in language A explaining what is happening on side B. Send it to one person on side A who you trust to read it carefully. Then write a short paragraph in language B explaining what is happening on side A. Send it to one person on side B.

Do not turn it into a project. Do not commission a working group. Do not wait for permission. Just translate, once, on purpose, in front of one person on each side.

Watch what happens over the next few weeks. The wall does not vanish. The wall remains. But the conversations on either side begin, in small ways, to include the other side. People on side A begin to use phrases from side B. People on side B begin to ask questions that previously belonged to side A. You have, with one hour of deliberate translation, started a small migration of vocabulary across a boundary that has been blocking work for years.

Atlas can help you draft both paragraphs. Atlas cannot send them. Atlas cannot decide which person on each side is the right reader. Atlas cannot choose the moment that the silence after the email is most likely to land. That part is yours.

**- Next: Chapter 7,
"The Start-up Crucible"**

Chapter Seven

The Start-up Crucible

Building Leaders Institute from a blank page

"Faith in yourself, in your people, in the vision - without it, every obstacle becomes a reason to stop."
- Vivian Lobo, 2026

There is a particular kind of fear that arrives in your chest the first time you sit at a table in front of a senior regulator and realise, all at once, that the institution you are there to defend does not yet exist.

It is not the fear of failing in public. It is not the fear of saying the wrong thing. It is the quieter, more private fear that the thing you have committed yourself to building is, at this exact moment, an idea on a piece of paper and that the next several years of your life are going to be the slow, expensive, deeply un-glamorous business of converting that idea into something the regulator can sign off on, the staff can be paid by, the students can graduate from, and the rest of us can later look at and call a real institution.

That fear, in my case, arrived sometime in 2016. I was thirty-two. I had finished my year at Saipem. I was sitting alongside a CEO, Rev Dr Bernard Malik, who had asked me, several years earlier, to lead the strategic planning for what would become Leaders Institute. The institution had been on paper for a while. The application was now ready to go to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency - TEQSA, the Australian regulator that decides whether a higher education provider deserves the right to call itself one. The application was the size of a small phone book. Every paragraph in it had to survive the kind of scrutiny that, when it goes wrong, is reported in newspapers.

It is going to take me the rest of this chapter to tell you about the eight years that followed - through the registration, through the launch, through the COVID pivot we will spend the next chapter on, through the QILT survey of 2022, through Sydney, through the day in early 2024 when I left the Director's chair I had occupied since 2016 and walked out of the building for the last time. It would take me a separate book to do it properly. The version I want to give you here is the version that mattered most, in retrospect, for what this book is trying to argue.

That version begins with a man called Harvinder.

* * *

The pillar – Professor Harvinder Singh

I met Professor Harvinder Singh in the early stages of the Leaders Institute application, when I was at the point in any new project at which a person discovers, for the first time, that they cannot do this alone.

Harvinder is one of those academics whose authority does not arrive in the room before he does. He does not announce his credentials. He does not lean on his title. He sits with you, listens longer than most people would, and then says, in a quiet voice, the one sentence that you needed to hear, structured in the precise way you needed to hear it, and frequently with a small dry humour around its edges that lets you laugh at yourself a little before getting back up.

In 2016 I did not know any of this about him. I knew that he had agreed, kindly, to be a sounding board for me on the Leaders Institute work. I knew that he was already deeply experienced in the Australian higher education sector, and that the questions he was going to ask me about the application were the questions the regulator was eventually going to ask in some form. I knew, in other words, that his time was a gift and that I had been given access to it for reasons I had not yet entirely earned.

What I did not know was the more important thing. I did not know that, over the next decade, Harvinder was going to become what

I have since come to call a pillar of strength for the work I was doing - and, by extension, for me as a person trying to do it.

I want to say something plainly here that I think has been left out of most of the leadership writing of the last twenty years. You cannot do work of consequence on your own. I know we live in a culture that prizes the lone-founder narrative. I know the mythology of the entrepreneur has been told, over and over, as the story of one person staring into the night and willing the institution into being. The mythology is romantic and it is largely fiction. The actual people I have met who have built actual institutions of consequence - not the ones who tell the story of having done it, but the ones who have actually done it - had pillars. They had two or three or four particular humans whose belief in them, whose patience with them, and whose steady willingness to ask the awkward question at the right moment is what carried them through the parts of the work that nothing else would have carried them through.

Harvinder was that for me on the Leaders Institute project. He has continued to be that, in different ways, in the years since - including, by the way, as one of the supervisors of the doctorate I am still finishing. I am writing this chapter, in part, because younger leaders sometimes ask me how I kept going during the harder stretches of the start-up. The honest answer is that I kept going because Harvinder kept showing up. The longer answer is that the work would not have been finished without him, and several other people whose names belong to the parts of the book where they earned them, but the short answer is the truer one.

If you are setting out to build something difficult, you need at least one Harvinder. You need someone who has seen what you are trying to build before, who is willing to think alongside you without taking ownership of your work, and who will tell you the truth on the days when telling the truth is the gift you most need. That kind of person is rare. They are also, in my experience, more available than most people fear - if you are willing to ask, willing to listen, and willing to be the kind of person worth giving time to in return.

Faith, as I have said earlier in this book, is non-negotiable. So is Toil. There is a third thing I have come to, in the years since I met Harvinder, to think of as their quieter cousin, and it does not appear on the cover of this book because the cover would not have held all three. The third thing is companionship. The willingness to be carried, briefly, by another human being, on the days when your own faith and toil have not yet gathered themselves up. That third thing, in my life, has had Harvinder's name on it for the last decade.

* * *

The eight years

I am going to compress eight years into the next several pages, and apologise in advance to any of the very many people who deserve a longer paragraph in this book than they will receive in this chapter.

Leaders Institute was, in 2016, a registered company, an empty office, a stack of policy drafts, and a small team of people willing to bet that the work would eventually be worth the years of unpaid evenings we were about to spend on it. The TEQSA application was submitted. The registration was awarded. The first courses - a Bachelor of Accounting and a Bachelor of Agribusiness, with nested Diplomas of Business and Commerce - were accredited. The first cohort of students was enrolled. We launched, formally, in the 2017-18 financial year, with three hundred thousand dollars of student enrolments and a team of fewer than ten people, most of whom were doing two and a half jobs each.

By the third year, the enrolments had climbed past two million dollars. The team, by then, was over thirty. The course library had widened to include the Master of Agricultural Information Management, the MBA in Agribusiness, the Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate variants of both, and a small but growing portfolio of postgraduate management qualifications. We had taken on a second campus in Sydney. We had begun the much larger operational lift of meeting the requirements of the Education Services for Overseas Students framework, so we could enrol international students under the CRICOS register. We had built a Course Advisory Committee that

bridged industry and academia, and we had begun the slow, careful work of integrating IT and AI considerations into our curriculum design - work that was, by 2024, formally approved by TEQSA in the form of an online MBA program.

By the time I left in early 2024, after almost eight years on the project and in my role as Director of Administration, Marketing and Student Recruitment, the team had grown to forty-eight full-time employees. The institution had been ranked, in the 2022 QILT survey, number one among Non-University Higher Education Institutions in Australia for overall course experience. The students who had enrolled in our first year had, by then, mostly graduated. Some of them were already in roles that the booklet on a desk in a small office in Bangalore would never have predicted for them, either.

Those numbers tell a particular kind of story. They are useful and they are partial. The story they do not tell is the story of what those eight years did to the people who lived them - and, more importantly for this book, the story of what those eight years revealed about who those people had always really been.

* * *

The other side of the start-up

There is a particular paragraph I want to write here that I have been quietly putting off for several drafts of this chapter, because the people in it deserve more space than I am about to give them, and because the kind of work I am about to describe is the kind of work that is mostly invisible to the outside world.

My wife, Ramona, has been, throughout these years, the reason any of the rest of this is possible.

Ramona has carried our home through periods in which I was, by any honest measure, more useful to a TEQSA submission than to the people who actually shared a kitchen table with me. She has made the family the steady centre of a life whose work pulled hard in the other direction. She has held the perspective on the days I was losing it. She has, more often than I have admitted in writing before now, been the

second voice in my head that Chapter 2 spent so long trying to describe - the one that quietly reminded me, in her own words and at her own moments, that the most polished version of any external dashboard was not the truest measurement of who I was, who we were as a family, or what the work was actually for.

Our son, Matteo, is five years old as I write this. He arrived in the middle of the start-up years, into a household in which a great deal of leadership writing was happening at midnight at a small kitchen-office desk and a great deal of love was happening, day by day, in the rooms his mother held together. He has not yet read this book. By the time he is old enough to read it, the AI era will look very different from how it looks tonight. The single hope I have for him, in writing all of this down, is that he grows up understanding that the most important thing he can be in any room he ever walks into is himself - and that the booklets that try to measure him on his way through life will, like the booklets that have come before them, have edges that the most interesting parts of him will spend his whole life living just outside.

Most of what I have learned about leadership across these eight years, I have learned because Ramona was holding the rest of life still long enough for me to learn it. I do not know how to write that fact more honestly than that. The institutions get the credit, on the brochures. The families do the work that makes the institutions possible.

* * *

What scale exposes

The serious lesson of the eight years is the one I want to leave you with most clearly, because it is the lesson I see being relearned, the wrong way around, by every fast-scaling AI start-up in Australia and overseas at the moment.

The lesson is this. You do not, in any meaningful sense, become a leader at scale. Scale does not produce a new version of you. Scale only reveals, with brighter lights, the version of you that already existed before the scale arrived.

If you cut corners on a small team, you will cut corners on a large team. The corners will just be more expensive. If you treat one student badly when you have thirty, you will treat hundreds badly when you have three thousand. The systems will just amplify the harm. If your decision-making at five staff is sloppy, your decision-making at fifty staff will be sloppy in the exact same patterns - except now the consequences will reach further, the regulators will be more interested, and the recovery will be longer.

The reverse is also true. If you are careful with people when you have nothing, you will be careful with people when you have everything. If you sit with the inconvenient question at five staff, you will sit with it at fifty. If you tell the difficult truth on a Friday afternoon when the team is small, you will tell it when the team is large. Scale, for those people, is a multiplier rather than a revealer. The character is what scaled. The numbers came along behind.

This is the part of start-up life that most of the public conversation gets wrong. The conversation likes to talk about strategy, market timing, technology stacks, and product-market fit. All of those things matter. They are not, in my experience, what determines whether the institution survives long enough to have a story worth telling. What determines that is whether the founders had character of a particular sort before scale was real - and whether the people they hired, in the early years, shared enough of that character that it travelled with the company as the company grew.

The Saipem engineers in Chapter 4 had an instinct about this. So did the Anitas in Chapter 3. So, in his quieter way, has Harvinder. Character is not a soft factor in start-up life. It is the thing the spreadsheet cannot model and the regulator cannot directly measure, and which determines, more than any other variable, whether the institution will be standing in ten years.

* * *

Start-ups in the AI era

I now sit, day to day, at TBP CODOT, on the other side of this conversation. I am, this time, the founder-leader at the desk where the Tableau dashboards meet the strategy decks, where the AI tools are not theoretical but products we are building and selling, and where the speed at which a small team can produce work in 2026 is not comparable to the speed at which a small team could produce work even in 2018.

The AI era is, for start-ups, the most extraordinary tail-wind in living memory. A team of three people can now produce, in a week, what a team of fifteen would have spent a quarter on in 2016. Documents that would have taken six weeks of legal review can be drafted, in solid first form, in twenty minutes. Customer research that would have required a research firm and a six-figure budget can be generated, in an exploratory pass, in an afternoon. Code that would have required a senior engineer can be assembled, with care, by a junior with the right AI tooling. The cost curve of building a serious product has fallen, in five years, in a way that no previous decade can match.

The temptation, in such an environment, is to mistake the speed for the work. To run, because you can. To ship, because you can. To scale, because you can. To take in money, because you can. The market, at the moment, is rewarding all of those instincts.

The lesson from the eight years at Leaders Institute is that speed without character produces the wrong company at warp speed. The faster you can build something, the more dangerous it is to build it without first having decided who you intend to be while building it. The AI era has not changed that. The AI era has only made it more urgent. Every start-up that uses AI to ship faster, without doing the harder, slower work of deciding what it stands for, is now able to spread its wrong choices across more customers, more markets, and more years - in less time - than any previous generation of start-ups could.

If I am honest about what I do every day at TBP CODOT, the most important part of it is not the technology decisions. The technology decisions are mostly correct, because Atlas and the team and our partners at Flowtion and Vectrail and Enfork are extraordinarily good at what they do. The most important part of my day is the slower, less visible work of holding the small set of character commitments I would not break, even if breaking them produced a faster quarter. Pricing decisions that are honest. Customer commitments that are kept. Promises to staff that are recovered when they are missed. Conversations with regulators that are conducted in the regulator's actual interest, not in optics. None of that work is glamorous. None of it earns a press release. It is the only work that matters.

* * *

The working rule

Out of the eight years, here is the rule I would offer to any leader who is currently trying to build something.

You do not become a leader at scale. You reveal who you already were before the scale was real.

That sentence sounds, on first reading, like a kind of fatalism. It is not. It is, in fact, the most useful piece of leadership news the start-up era has on offer, because it tells you exactly what to spend your time on while the institution is still small.

The work, while you are still small, is to become the leader you intend to be when you are not. To practise, on five staff, the patience you are going to need on five hundred. To make, on five customers, the honest decisions you are going to need to make on fifty thousand. To find your Harvinder while you are still able to call him from a small office without anyone else asking why you needed to. To bank the trust deposits, the relationships, the disciplines, the small character habits, while the deposits are cheap and the audience is forgiving. By the time

the institution is large, the deposits will be expensive and the audience will not be forgiving at all.

If you are at the start of something difficult right now, this is the only thing I want you to remember from this chapter. The version of yourself you are practising, this Tuesday, on the small team you currently have, is the version of yourself the institution will have when it is twenty times the size. Choose, with care, who you are practising. Nothing else you do this year matters as much.

* * *

Reflection

1. Who is your Harvinder - the person whose belief in you, whose patience with you, and whose willingness to ask the awkward question at the right moment carries you through the parts of the work that nothing else would carry you through? If you cannot name them yet, that is the most important relationship you are not currently building.
2. If your organisation tripled in size in the next eighteen months, who would crack first - your systems, your people, or you? Look honestly at the answer. The cracks you can predict are the ones you can prepare for.
3. What is one corner you cut in the last year, in the small version of your team, that you would be embarrassed by if the team were ten times bigger and the same corner were cut at the same proportion? That is the corner that scale is going to expose.

Try this week

Write down, on a single sheet of paper, the three character commitments you intend to keep no matter how fast your work scales. Not three values. Three commitments - small, specific, behavioural things you will or will not do, regardless of the pressure of the quarter.

Tape the sheet of paper to your monitor or to the inside cover of the notebook you carry to work.

When the next opportunity arrives to make a decision that would let you grow faster by breaking one of them, look at the sheet, deliberately, before you decide. Most weeks the sheet will not be needed. Some weeks it will save you from a choice you would have regretted in five years. Across a career it is the difference between an institution you want to be associated with and one you do not.

If you do not yet know what your three commitments are, that is itself useful information. Spend the week working out what they are, before the next quarter pretends to ask you for them under pressure. The practice of writing them down, on purpose, in advance, is what turns vague intentions into the kind of character that survives growth.

This is the smallest, most useful start-up exercise I know. It cost me nothing to learn. It has saved me, more than once, from choices I would not have wanted to defend at a TEQSA audit, in a board meeting, or, more importantly, at a kitchen table at the end of a long week.

- Next: Chapter 8,
"The Pandemic Pivot"

PART III

TOIL - LEADING IN THE AI ERA

Where the work is now

Chapter Eight

The Pandemic Pivot

Leading when the floor disappears

"When people feel seen and backed by someone who truly believes in their potential, fear loses its grip."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

On the morning of Wednesday, 11 March 2020, the floor of the modern world began, very quietly, to give way.

In Brisbane, where I was sitting in my office at Leaders Institute that morning, the day looked, on the surface, ordinary. The students were on campus. The lecturers were preparing classes. The admission team was processing new student documents. The kitchen on the ground floor was running short on biscuits, the way kitchens always are. The newspapers had been running headlines about a virus in another country for weeks. The headlines had begun, in the previous fortnight, to feel slightly closer than they had before, but most of us had read them with the polite, slightly distracted attention that Australians reserve for distant disasters happening to other people.

By the end of that day, the World Health Organisation had declared a pandemic. By the end of that week, the conversations in our small executive meetings had stopped being about strategy and started being about logistics. By the end of that fortnight, our students - many of them international students, far from home, on visas that depended on continuous enrolment in physical classes - were sitting on their rental accommodation beds and on their family-shared video calls, looking at the same set of questions all of us were now looking at. What happens to my course? What happens to my visa? What happens if I cannot get home? What happens if I can get home and cannot come back?

By the middle of March, the floor we had spent four years building underneath them had, in any meaningful operational sense, given way.

* * *

The first seventy-two hours

I want to describe the first seventy-two hours honestly, because most of what I have to say in this chapter about leadership in a crisis is invisible if you compress those hours into the smooth narrative organisations later put on their websites.

The first seventy-two hours were not orderly. They were a small group of people, working in a building that had stopped feeling like a building, making a series of decisions in less time than any of those decisions deserved. The decisions were of three kinds. First-order decisions about the safety of staff and students. Second-order decisions about the operational continuity of teaching. Third-order decisions about regulatory compliance, which would not stop being important just because everything else had stopped being normal.

On the first day, we made the call to move all teaching online, effective immediately, while we still had access to our campus. We did not wait for the regulator to tell us we could. We did not wait for a national directive that arrived in some form a few days later. We did not wait for our peers in the sector to set the precedent. We made the call because we had spent four years arguing, on smaller days, that decisions about students should be made by people who knew the students - and the students, that morning, needed a decision.

On the second day, we wrote to every enrolled student. The letter was not from the institution. It was from a person, signed with my name, telling them what we had decided, what they could expect, and what we did not yet know. We told them, plainly, that we did not have all the answers. We told them what we did know. We told them when the next update would arrive. We promised them, as the only honest promise we could make, that we would not leave them to work it out alone.

On the third day, we began the slower work that the first two days had not had time for. We mapped every unit of every course onto a digital delivery format. We did not have a learning management system that was ready for what we needed. We bought one, configured it in days rather than months, and trained the lecturers on it across two long evenings. We worked with our industry partners, including the relationships we had built carefully with the Bank of Queensland and various Queensland Government agencies and small employers across the state, to keep work-integrated learning placements going in whatever modified form was now possible. Some of those placements survived. Some did not. Most of the partners stayed with us, because the relationships had been built before the relationships needed to be tested.

None of that work was particularly heroic. All of it was the kind of work that, if it had not been done, the institution would not have survived intact. Most of it was done by exhausted people, in their own homes, on laptops their employers had hurriedly couriered to them, with their own children doing online schooling at the same kitchen table.

* * *

What was actually being spent

There is a thing I now believe about crises that I did not know in the same way before March 2020. The thing is this. A crisis is not when leadership begins. A crisis is when leadership stops being optional - and what gets spent, in the first hours and days of the crisis, is the trust that was banked over the years before.

I had spent the four years before the pandemic doing what now looks, in retrospect, like preparation for a storm I did not know was coming. I had been telling staff, in their performance conversations, the truth they needed to hear instead of the optics they wanted. I had been making decisions about students, in small meetings the regulators would never see, on the basis of what was right rather than what was cheapest. I had been writing to industry partners on Friday afternoons with the awkward sentences Chapter 6 talked about. I had been

building, without thinking of it that way, a small reservoir of trust with the people we would, four years later, need to move through a pandemic with.

In March 2020, that reservoir was spent. Staff who, on a normal day, would have asked for written confirmation of every operational decision moved at the speed I asked them to move at, because they had reasons - accumulated over four years of small Friday afternoons - to believe I would not waste their effort. Students who, on a normal day, might have escalated their visa concerns in twenty different directions at once kept their concerns inside our system, because they had reasons to trust that we would, in fact, look after them. Industry partners who could have walked away from the burden of supporting our placements during a crisis stayed with us, because the partnerships had been real partnerships when they had not been required to be.

None of that trust would have arrived in the first seventy-two hours of the crisis, if it had not been banked in the four years before. There is no version of leadership in which you can build trust on the day you need it. The trust either exists, by then, or it does not.

This is why I do not believe in the modern fashion of writing about crisis leadership as if it were a separate skill. Crisis leadership is the cumulative effect of every small choice you have made on every ordinary Tuesday for the previous five years, encountering its first audit. The crisis does not produce a leader. The crisis reveals the leader who was already there.

* * *

The other side of distance

There is a personal layer to the pandemic story that I have not yet given enough space to in this book, and that this chapter is the right place for, even briefly.

My family of origin - the people I had grown up with in the candle-lit rooms of Bangalore that Chapter 1 described - was not in Australia in March 2020. My elder brother, Winson, who had walked through the English-school door first and made the path for the rest of

us, was on the other side of the world. My twin sister, Vivette, who had walked it alongside me, was on the other side of the world. My uncle, Leo, whose patient confidence in me through my growing up had been one of the quiet engines of every academic and professional risk I had taken since, was also far away. My parents were far away.

In ordinary years, that distance is something a migrant family lives with, by long habit, the way you live with the small ache of an old injury. You write. You video-call. You count the time difference. You make plans for the next visit. You tell yourself, on the harder days, that the distance is the price of the wider lives the previous generation fought to make possible.

In March 2020, the distance stopped being ordinary. International borders closed. Airports emptied. The trip you had been thinking, vaguely, of making in the next year became, overnight, a trip you might not be able to make for years. People you loved became, in the most literal way, unreachable in person, perhaps for the first time in your adult life.

I want to say, briefly, what that did. It did not break me, because Ramona was here, and Matteo, in time, would arrive into our small home, and the work was demanding enough that the days passed quickly. But it sharpened, every single morning, my understanding of what our international students were going through. Their families were also far away. Their video calls were also at odd hours. Their parents were also worrying about them. Their visa anxiety was not abstract. Their isolation was not theoretical.

That sharpened understanding became, for me, the thing that decided how I led. The students were not, in those months, an enrolment number on a TEQSA reporting line. The students were a younger version of the same migrant story I had been living for a decade. The work of supporting them was not, in any meaningful way, separate from the work of being who I had been raised to be by people on the other side of the world.

I tell you this not to claim a particular nobility. I tell you because I want, in this chapter, to disrupt the unhelpful idea that crisis leadership

is a separate function from the rest of life. It is not. It is the same life, intensified. The leaders who held their teams and their students together through 2020 and 2021 were the leaders whose private lives - whose families, whose faiths, whose long migrations and longer marriages - had taught them, before the crisis, what it felt like to be far from a person you loved. The crisis was, in that sense, a public version of a small, private thing many of us had been carrying for years.

* * *

Living the question I was about to research

In the middle of all of this, I made a small, slightly absurd decision. I enrolled in a PhD.

I want to be honest about the timing. The decision did not feel, in 2020, like a strategic career move. It felt like the only honest response to what I was now living. The Australian higher education sector was being asked, almost overnight, to sustain online learning for international students whose lives had become more complicated than any policy framework had imagined. I was running, in real time, an institution trying to do exactly that. I had questions I did not have time to answer with the rigour they deserved. I was, day by day, watching what worked and what did not, and writing it down on the back of meeting agendas because I had no other place to put it.

Professor Harvinder Singh, whom you met in Chapter 7, became one of my supervisors. The doctoral question, as it has settled over the years since, is something like this. What are the enduring barriers and the emerging opportunities for higher education providers and international students in sustaining effective online learning in the post-pandemic era? It is the kind of question that does not get asked properly until you have lived inside it. I have been living inside it since 2020. The PhD is, in some sense, the formal write-up of a leadership apprenticeship the pandemic forced on every leader in the sector at the same time.

I am still finishing the doctorate as I write this. I am, by the standards of academic timelines, slow. The reason I am slow is that I

have spent the last several years actually trying things, in real institutions, with real students, and waiting until the lessons were stable enough to be worth writing down. The doctorate, when it is done, will say a small set of things plainly. It will say that the emergency pivot was reactive, and that many providers, after the urgency passed, quietly returned to the in-person structures simply replicated on screens - and that this replication has not worked and is not sustainable. It will say that the post-pandemic hybrid era requires real digital pedagogy, designed for the medium, with cultural and linguistic inclusion built in from the start. It will say that the international students at the heart of so many of our institutions cannot be served by frameworks built around a presumption of physical presence and English as a first language.

None of those conclusions are heroic. All of them are, I think, true. I am writing them down because the next pandemic - or, more pertinently, the next AI-driven dislocation - will not give the sector time to learn the lessons in real time. The leaders who paid attention in 2020 owe the leaders who will lead through the next disruption a clean record of what we learned. That is, in a small way, what the doctorate is for.

* * *

The number that came back

In 2022, after two years of the work I have been describing, the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching survey - the QILT, which is the principal student-experience survey across the Australian higher education sector - returned its results for the previous year. Leaders Institute was ranked number one among Non-University Higher Education Institutions in Australia for overall course experience.

I want to tell you the truth about that result, because the truth is more useful than the press-release version.

The result was earned. It was earned by people whose names will not appear in this book - lecturers who held office hours from their kitchen tables, support staff who returned phone calls from across time

zones, administration staff who made decisions about international student welfare on weekends because the welfare problem had not waited for Monday. The result was the cumulative effect of thousands of small, careful acts of attention, applied to a few hundred students, over two extraordinary years.

It was also, I want to say plainly, a slightly embarrassing result. We had not been trying to win a ranking. We had been trying not to lose anyone. The ranking was a measurement, returned by an instrument, of a particular dimension of our work. The result was not, in itself, the truth of the work. The truth of the work was the staff member who had made a difficult phone call to a student in Lahore at three in the morning, and the student in Lahore who had answered. The truth of the work was the lecturer who had restructured a unit assessment, twice in a semester, because the first restructure had not yet served the students who were behind. The truth of the work was the policy paragraph that had been redrafted, five times, until it stopped being a barrier to a student whose situation was difficult.

The number on the leader-board was the visible side-effect of all of that. It was not the work. The work was the work.

I tell you this because the leadership lesson of the QILT result is not, in any useful sense, a lesson about rankings. It is a lesson about the relationship between the visible measurement and the underlying work - which we have already met, in different forms, in Chapter 3 (the BPO floor), Chapter 4 (the Saipem dashboards), and Chapter 5 (the marks-versus-making argument). The pandemic did not produce a new lesson. It produced, very loudly, the same lesson the rest of the book has been making in slightly quieter rooms.

* * *

The next floor that disappears

If you are reading this chapter, in 2026 or beyond, the pandemic has become the defining shared crisis of the recent past. Most working leaders have a version of the March 2020 story I have just told. The shared experience of a floor disappearing under a sector, a company, a

school, a hospital, a household, has shaped the leadership instincts of an entire generation.

I want to suggest, in this chapter, that the AI era is the next floor-disappearing moment - and that the leaders who paid attention in 2020 already know most of what they need to know to lead through it.

The shape of the AI shift is different. The pandemic arrived in days. The AI shift is arriving over years. The pandemic was a public emergency. The AI shift is a private accumulation, happening one inbox, one decision, one team at a time. The pandemic forced a single shared response across most institutions at once. The AI shift is encouraging individual responses across institutions on different timelines. The two are not, on the surface, the same.

Underneath the surface, the leadership requirements are recognisably the same. In both cases, the floor that the institution had been standing on becomes unreliable. In both cases, the work that had to be done in the months and years before the disruption - the trust deposits, the relationships, the disciplines, the small character habits - is what determines whether the institution makes it through. In both cases, the institutions that survive are not necessarily the ones with the best technical response. They are the ones whose leaders had banked the right things, with the right people, in the years before the floor began to give way.

If you are leading anyone through the AI era, this is the most useful thing the pandemic has to teach you. Trust is the only currency that holds value during a disruption. AI cannot be told, on the day, to produce trust on demand. AI can only amplify the trust that already exists or expose the trust that does not. The work, while the disruption is still arriving slowly, is to bank deposits with your team that are not about performance - the small, quiet acts of attention that, in eighteen months or three years, when something on the AI side breaks unexpectedly, will be the reason your team holds together rather than scatters.

That work is not exciting. It does not appear on the dashboard. It is, in my honest experience, the only thing that matters.

* * *

The working rule

Out of the pandemic years, the rule I would offer to any leader currently building anything is this.

Leaders are not made in calm seas. They are revealed in the first three days of the storm. What is revealed is the leader the calm-sea years have, quietly, been making.

If you are in a calm-sea period right now, this rule has a particular instruction. It tells you what to do with your time. The time is not, as the productivity literature would have you believe, an opportunity to optimise your output. The time is an opportunity to bank trust deposits, with the specific people you will need on the worst day of the next storm, in ways that look, from the outside, like ordinary kindness on ordinary Tuesdays. Most of those deposits will never be cashed. Some of them, on the day a floor gives way, will be the reason your institution holds together.

If you are in the middle of a storm right now, the rule has a slightly different instruction. It tells you that the response you are making, in real time, is being recorded - silently, accurately - in the memory of every person whose work you depend on. They are not, in the storm, asking you to be perfect. They are asking you to be present, honest, and human. The storm forgives a great deal of imperfect technical decision-making. The storm does not forgive absence.

And if you are reading this chapter from inside the next storm - whatever shape it takes, whatever decade you are reading this in, whatever new floor has just begun to give way under whatever institution you happen to be holding together - the rule has a final instruction. It tells you that the work you are doing this week, in the small ways nobody is yet thanking you for, is the work the next decade of your career is being built out of. Keep doing it. The trust will compound. The institution will, in some form, survive. And the version of yourself you are practising, in the storm, is the version of yourself the calm-sea years that follow will be lived by.

* * *

Reflection

1. When was the last time your team saw you make a decision in real time, with imperfect information, and own it afterwards? If you cannot recall one, the next storm has not yet rehearsed you, and the rehearsal is most of the preparation.
2. What 'trust deposits' are you making this quarter that nobody is yet thanking you for? Name three by name. If you cannot, you are running on the trust other people banked for you, and that account will eventually empty.
3. If the AI floor shifts under your team in the next eighteen months - a tool retired, a vendor bought, a model regressed, a regulator reversed - who will steady them on the first morning? Who is the equivalent of the staff member who answered the call to Lahore at three in the morning, on your team, today?

Try this week

Make one trust deposit this week that has nothing to do with performance.

It does not need to be large. The deposit might be a five-minute call to a team member who has been quiet, with no agenda except to ask how they are. It might be a hand-written note to a partner who has stayed with you through a difficult quarter. It might be the deliberate choice not to send the slightly-too-honest email you had drafted in a frustrated moment, because the relationship is more important than the moment.

Notice that the deposit feels like a small thing. It is. The small things, repeated weekly across years, are the only things that compound into the kind of trust a future storm will be able to draw on. Most weeks, you will not see the return on the deposit. Some weeks, much later, the return will be the difference between an institution that holds together and one that does not.

Atlas can draft a polite message for you. Atlas can remember whom on your team you have not checked in with for too long. Atlas cannot make the call. The call is yours.

- Next: Chapter 9,
"AI as Mentorship's Multiplier"

Chapter Nine

AI as Mentorship's Multiplier

Working alongside Atlas - your co-thinker, not your replacement

*"AI cannot look a person in the eye and
genuinely want to see them succeed."
- Vivian Lobo, 2026*

It is twenty past seven in the morning. I am at the same kitchen-office desk we have been visiting since Chapter 1 - the desk with the hinge I keep meaning to fix - and Atlas is already awake.

My calendar tells me I have a one-to-one in two hours with one of the people I am currently mentoring. The mentee is good at what they do, and is also currently sitting in the slow middle of a career decision that they have not yet made out loud. I know this because I have been listening, in our last several conversations, more than I have been talking - which is a discipline I do not naturally come to, and which two decades of leadership work have slowly taught me is the most important thing a mentor does in a room.

I opened Atlas. I did not ask Atlas to give me advice for the meeting. I did not ask Atlas to write me a script. I asked Atlas, instead, to do something more careful. I paste in a small set of notes - the last three conversations, anonymised, with the specifics scrubbed and only the patterns left - and I ask Atlas the following question. 'Given what is in these notes, what are the three questions you would expect me to ask in this meeting that I am most likely to forget under pressure?'

Atlas is, by 2026, very good at this kind of question. It returns three suggestions in about thirty seconds. None of them is brilliant. Two of them are obvious. The third one is a question I have not been asking, partly because I have been quietly avoiding the discomfort it would create. I read the third question twice. I close Atlas. I make

coffee. I walk into the meeting two hours later carrying the third question on a small folded piece of paper in my back pocket, which I do not need to look at again.

That paper is the version of mentorship the AI era has made possible, and the version of mentorship the AI era is now asking every leader who claims the word to learn how to do.

This chapter is about that practice.

* * *

The principle, plainly

AI compounds the leader you already are.

If you mentor well, AI will help you mentor more people, more carefully, more consistently, with more memory of what they have told you and more discipline about which questions you owe them. If you cut corners, AI will help you cut more corners, faster, with cleaner outputs that conceal the cutting. The amplifier itself is neutral. The leader is not.

This is the central principle of the chapter, and of the rest of this book in some quieter ways. Atlas is not a substitute for the relationships you build with the people in your care. Atlas is the lever that lets you build deeper relationships with more of them than you could without it - if you decide, on purpose, that the lever will be used in that direction. Most leaders, in 2026, are using AI to produce more output. A small minority are using AI to mentor more carefully. The difference between the two groups will be the most important leadership variable of the next decade.

I want, in the rest of this chapter, to do three things. I want to describe, concretely, three practices I have come to use with Atlas in my own mentoring work. I want to tell you about two leaders whose mentoring has shaped my own life and whose example, more than any framework, has taught me what mentorship is for. And I want to leave you with a small, practical exercise you can do this week, with or without an AI tool at your elbow.

* * *

Three practices

The three practices I want to describe are not framework names. They are habits. They are small enough to be done in fifteen minutes a day. They have, between them, transformed the depth and consistency of my own mentoring work since I began doing them in earnest in 2024. None of them, taken alone, is a complete answer to the question this chapter is making the case for. Together, they are most of what I now mean when I say AI is the multiplier.

Practice one: pre-reflection

The first practice is the one I described in the opening of this chapter. Before any one-on-one or mentoring conversation that matters, I spend ten minutes with Atlas - not to outsource the conversation, but to surface the questions I am most likely to forget under pressure.

The pattern is consistent. I paste in anonymous notes from previous conversations. I describe, in two or three sentences, what I think the person in front of me is currently navigating. I ask Atlas to act as a careful colleague who has read the same notes, and to suggest three questions I have not been asking. Sometimes Atlas's suggestions are obvious. Sometimes they are off the mark. Sometimes - perhaps once a month - Atlas surfaces a question I have been avoiding without noticing, because the question would change what I have to be willing to hear in the conversation.

That third question is the one I take into the room. The other two I usually ignore. The point of the practice is not the volume of suggestions. The point is the small quiet rehearsal of asking better questions than the version of myself who walked into the previous conversation. Across a year, that habit has measurably changed the quality of my mentoring. Across five years, I expect it to compound in ways I cannot yet predict.

Practice two: parallel coaching

The second practice is the one I find most uncomfortable, and therefore the one I make myself do most often.

Before a difficult conversation - one I am dreading, or one I know I am underprepared for, or one in which my own emotions are likely to get in the way of my listening - I rehearse the conversation with Atlas. I do not give Atlas the other person's voice. I give Atlas mine. I describe the situation, the temperature, the specific thing I think I want to say, and I ask Atlas to push back on me as if it were a more experienced mentor watching me prepare.

The Atlas push-back is not, in any sense, equivalent to a real mentor. The Atlas push-back is, on a difficult morning, the difference between walking into the room with my own first instincts ringing in my ears and walking into the room having been forced, by a tireless rehearsal partner, to consider that my first instincts might be wrong, performative, or self-protective rather than useful to the person in front of me. The rehearsal is not for the conversation. The rehearsal is for the leader I want to be in the conversation.

I want to be clear about a critical thing, because it has been a quiet failure mode I have watched in other leaders. Atlas rehearses me. Atlas does not rehearse the other person. The temptation to feed Atlas a description of the person you are about to meet and ask for their likely responses is, in my view, a small but serious ethical line. The other person has not consented to being modelled by a language model. The model, in any case, will produce a flattering or hostile composite that has more to do with statistical defaults than with the actual human you are about to sit with. Use Atlas to rehearse you. Leave the other person un-modelled. Walk into the room and meet them.

Practice three: post-meeting recall

The third practice is the simplest, and the one I have found has the largest cumulative effect over time.

After every mentoring conversation, I spend five minutes capturing - in a private, secure file - the small specifics that I will not remember a fortnight from now. The thing they mentioned in passing about a family member. The colleague they were quietly worried about. The book they had just started reading. The career step they were considering but had not yet named. I do not paste any of this into

Atlas. I keep it in a file on my own machine, written in my own words, with no AI processing of any kind.

Then, before our next conversation, I ask Atlas a different question. I tell Atlas, in general terms, what we last talked about, and ask: 'What are the kinds of follow-up questions a good mentor would ask, given that summary?' Atlas suggests several. I do not use most of them. I use the practice, however, as a rehearsal of memory. I am training myself, with Atlas's help, to walk into the next conversation already remembering the small specifics from the last one - which is what every good mentor I have ever had has done for me, and which I had, until recently, been embarrassingly inconsistent at doing for the people in my care.

Across a year of these three practices, the people I mentor have, more than once, said to me - in the polite Australian way of half-saying it - that they feel, in our conversations, more attentively held than they used to. They are correct about the experience. They are mistaken about the cause. The cause is not me having become a better person. The cause is me having decided, on purpose, to use Atlas to be slightly more like the person I always intended to be, more often, with more of the people who deserved that version of me.

That is, in a single sentence, the entire promise of this chapter. AI is the multiplier of intention. Decide what you are intending. Use the multiplier in that direction.

* * *

Harman

I want to tell you, before this chapter ends, about two leaders whose mentoring of me has shaped the kind of leader I am still trying to be. The first you have already met. Professor Harvinder Singh, in Chapter 7, is the pillar I leaned on through the start-up years. The second is the more recent of the two, and the one whose example is most current for what this chapter is making the case for.

In the back end of 2025, I began working alongside a man called Harman Sidhu - the founder of Amtech Education, a group offering vocational and higher education across Australia.

I want to be careful with the preposition. I did not begin working for Harman. I began working alongside him. The distinction matters more than it sounds. It is the distinction this chapter is, in some sense, the entire articulation of.

The story of how Harman came into my working life is short and, in the most useful way, ordinary. He was looking, at the time, for a senior partner to think alongside him on the work Amtech was building. There were several other names on the list. Several of those other names came with the kind of CVs that the booklet on the desk in Chapter 2 would have rated highly. Mine, by certain conventional measures, did not stand out among them.

Harman did something most leaders, in my honest experience, do not do. He set the CVs aside and arranged to meet me in person. He spent time, on a series of unhurried conversations, getting to know me as a person. He asked me about my values. He asked me about my family. He asked me about my failures. He asked me about the things I had built that I was proud of, and the things I had built that I was not. He listened more than he spoke. He did not tell me, at any point in those conversations, what he had heard about me from other people. He looked, with what I now understand to be a particular and rare kind of attention, at the version of me that was actually sitting in front of him.

At some point in that process, Harman decided that he was willing to invest his own time in me. Not in my CV. Not in the version of me that other people had described to him. In me. The investment was not money. The investment was time, attention, and the small public risk of vouching for someone whose value he had decided to weigh on the basis of his own assessment rather than on the basis of what was already on a piece of paper.

That is what, I now believe, real mentorship is.

Real mentorship is the small public act of choosing to see a person for who they are, and then investing time in helping that person become more of who they are - not a copy of you, not a reflection of you, not the version of them that fits the institution's existing categories more tidily. Harman's gift to me, in the back end of 2025, was that he saw me. He chose to see me. He is, in the relationship that has developed since, a leader I work alongside - rather than for - because the relationship was built, from its first conversation, on the kind of trust that this chapter is making the case is the only currency real mentorship runs on.

That is what a true leader does. He makes an impact and he invests in people. None of that work shows up on a dashboard. None of it appears on the brochures. None of it can be done by an AI tool, no matter how sophisticated. Atlas can suggest three follow-up questions for the meeting. Atlas cannot decide to see a person.

If you, reading this chapter, are in a position to do for one other person what Harman did for me - to set the CVs aside, to spend the time, to look at the version of them that is actually sitting in front of you, and to invest your own attention in helping them become more of themselves - I would invite you to do it this year. The world has more polished CVs than it has people willing to see past them. It is a quiet kind of leadership, mostly invisible to the institutions that benefit from it, and it is one of the very few things AI cannot multiply on your behalf, because the seeing is the entire point.

* * *

The other invitation

I want to tell you about a second leader, briefly, because his decision shaped the seat I now occupy in the AI software space.

Goutham SV is the founder of TBP CODOT. The company exists because of his vision. The technology platform we now bring to organisations across the Australasia region, built on cutting-edge AI tools and deployed in service of optimising operational efficiency for our clients, exists because Goutham saw, before most of us did, what

could be built. The early years of the company were his. The risk he took to start it was his. The technical decisions that shaped the platform were his.

In 2025, Goutham asked me a particular kind of question. He had built the company. He wanted, now, to diversify the company's geography - to build an Australian base for the work, to extend the platform into the Australasia region, to bring an Australian-resident leader into the team who could anchor that work locally. He had several options for who that leader could be. He could have hired someone with a more obvious AI-platform CV than mine. He chose, after a series of conversations not unlike the ones I had with Harman, to invite me to take the role of CEO for the Australian operation.

I want to be exact about the structure here, because the structure matters. I am not the founder of TBP CODOT. The company is Goutham's. I am the CEO of its Australian operation - the leader he asked to help diversify a vision he had been quietly building for some time. The seat I sit in, in that part of my working life, exists because Goutham invited me into it.

The reason I tell you this, in this chapter on mentorship and AI, is that Goutham's invitation is itself a small case study in principle. Goutham did not need a list of credentials. He needed a leader he could trust, alongside him, in a region he could not be in every day himself. He chose, on the basis of the same kind of careful assessment Harman would later make from the other direction, to take a quiet personal risk on me. The role he invited me into has been, for the last year, one of the most generative parts of my working life. The chapter you are now reading would not have been possible to write without the AI work that has put me in the middle of every single day.

Two leaders, both of whom invested time in seeing the version of me that was actually in front of them, both of whom decided to act on what they saw, both of whom changed the trajectory of my working life in the back end of 2025. Neither investment was AI-mediated. Both investments are now AI-amplified, every day, by the work the platforms and tools and disciplines we build together let us do at scale that we could not have done five years ago. The mentorship and the

multiplication are running, side by side, in the same year. That is the texture of work in the AI era, properly lived.

* * *

Don't make them a copy of you

If I could leave one further sentence on the page, before the reflection questions, it would be the line I have written about mentorship in different forms over several years and have not yet found a better way to say.

Don't make them a copy of you.

This is the most important rule of mentorship I know. The rule applies whether or not AI is in the room. The rule applies to every leader who is in a position to influence the development of another human being. The rule says, in the simplest terms, that the work of mentoring someone is not the work of producing a smaller version of yourself in the next generation. The work is to help the person you are mentoring become the best version of themselves - which will, almost certainly, look nothing like you, and will sometimes make choices you would not make, and will sometimes leave for opportunities you would not have taken, and will be, at the end of it, exactly the kind of person the world needed who you could not, on your own, have been.

AI makes this rule both easier and harder to keep. Easier, because AI can help you see, with more discipline, the patterns in your mentee's thinking that are not your patterns - and to honour them rather than overwrite them. Harder, because AI is, by its design, a producer of plausible defaults. If you are not careful, the questions Atlas suggests will trend toward the average advice the language model was trained on, which is more like a generic professional than like the specific person you are mentoring. The leader's discipline is to use Atlas's suggestions as a rehearsal of attention, not as a script. The mentee in front of you is not a generic professional. They are the specific human you have been given the responsibility of seeing.

* * *

The working rule

AI is the multiplier of intention. Decide what you are intending. Use the multiplier in that direction.

If your intention is to mentor more people, more carefully, with more memory and more presence, AI will help you do that at a scale you could not have managed without it. The three practices in this chapter - pre-reflection, parallel coaching, post-meeting recall - are a working starter kit for that intention. Adapt them. Refine them. Make them your own. The version of these practices you are running in five years should look very different from the version I have just described, because by then both Atlas and you will have evolved.

If your intention is to look like a mentor without doing the underlying work, AI will help you do that too. Atlas can produce, on demand, the polished email that mimics careful attention. The mentee will, in time, notice the difference. The institution will, in time, notice the difference. The career you are building will, in time, notice the difference. The optics will work for a while. The trust will not.

Choose, this year, which version of the multiplier you are using. The choice is not technical. The choice is who you are deciding to become while Atlas is sitting on your desk.

* * *

Reflection

1. Who, in your working life so far, has been the version of Harman or Goutham for you - the leader who saw past your CV to the person sitting in front of them, and invested time in you on that basis? If you can name them, when did you last thank them? If you cannot name one yet, the first practice of becoming a leader yourself is to look more carefully for the people who have, in fact, done that for you.
2. Who in your team or your network is, currently, in the position you were in when you most needed someone to see you for who you actually were rather than what was on your

CV? Could you do for them, this quarter, what was once done for you?

3. Of your AI uses this week, which ones make you a better mentor - and which ones make you faster at output that does not, in the end, deepen your relationships with anyone? Which of the two categories is growing in your week, month on month?

Try this week

Pick one person you mentor - formally or informally. Before your next conversation with them, spend ten minutes with whichever AI tool sits closest to your hand. Do not ask the tool to write you a script. Do not ask it to predict what they will say. Ask it, instead, the single question this chapter began with.

'Given what I have just told you about this person, what are the three questions I am most likely to forget to ask in this meeting under pressure?'

Read the three suggestions. Discard two of them. Walk into the conversation carrying the third. Notice, afterwards, whether the conversation went somewhere it would not have gone without the rehearsal.

If the practice helps, do it again the next week with a different person. After a month, you will not need to write the prompt out from scratch any more. After a quarter, the discipline will have become a habit. After a year, the people you mentor will - politely, in the half-saying Australian way - tell you that they feel more attentively held than they used to. The cause will be the same as the cause for me. You will not have become a better person. You will have decided, on purpose, to use the multiplier in the direction of the leader you always intended to be.

That, more than anything else, is what AI is actually for.

- Next: Chapter 10,
"The Curriculum of Curiosity"

Chapter Ten

The Curriculum of Curiosity

Designing your team like a course

"It is the process that we must support and not just the outcome."

- Vivian Lobo, 2023

There is a particular kind of room I have spent a great deal of my working life sitting in, and which I have come to believe is the most under-appreciated room in any organisation that takes its people seriously.

It is the room in which a curriculum is designed.

If you have not been in such a room, let me describe what one looks like. There is a long table. There are unit outlines printed on A4 paper, with margins covered in handwritten notes. There is, somewhere on the table, a copy of whichever regulatory framework the curriculum has to live inside - in our case, the Australian Qualifications Framework, in a printed booklet that has been read so often that some of its pages are slightly soft at the corners. There are subject experts arguing, politely, about whether the third-week assessment is testing the right thing. There is a learning designer reminding everyone, gently, that the fourth-week reading load is unrealistic. There is a chair - that has often been me - trying to keep the conversation moving, the framework respected, the students at the centre of every decision, and the clock vaguely visible.

Most of what happens in such a room is invisible to the people the curriculum will eventually teach. The students will see the unit outline, but not the eight versions of it that came before. They will sit for the assessment, but not the three afternoons of arguing about whether the assessment was the right one. They will graduate, eventually, with a qualification whose architecture they will mostly not have noticed - in

the same way most of us walk through a building without noticing the load-bearing walls.

I have spent eight years of my working life - across the Bachelor of Accounting and Bachelor of Agribusiness, the Diploma of Business and Diploma of Commerce, the Master of Agricultural Information Management, the MBA and its Agribusiness specialisation, the Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate variants of those, and the AI-integrated MBA programme that was finally approved by TEQSA on the 20th of June 2024 - sitting in versions of that room. I have read, and helped write, more curriculum-design documents than I can usefully count.

This chapter is the small, important argument that all of that work pointed me toward, and which I am still working out in real time.

The argument is that every leader is a curriculum designer, whether they have ever entered such a room or not.

* * *

Every team has a hidden syllabus

Here is the proposition. Every team a person joins has a curriculum. The curriculum is what the person learns from being on the team. The curriculum is partly explicit - the role they were hired into, the project they were assigned, the training plan their manager wrote - and largely hidden. The hidden part is by far the larger part. It is what the new joiner observes, in their first ninety days, about how their team behaves when nobody is in charge. It is what they learn, by watching their manager handle a difficult Friday afternoon. It is what they pick up, at the kitchen counter on a Wednesday, about which questions are welcome and which questions are quietly avoided. It is what they internalise, by repetition over months, about what gets rewarded, what gets ignored, and what gets quietly punished.

Most managers do not think of their teams as having a curriculum. Most managers think of their teams as having objectives, deliverables, and KPIs. The objectives, deliverables, and KPIs are real - and they are the smaller part of what their teams actually teach the

people on them. The hidden syllabus is what the team is teaching by existing the way it does, day in and day out, in the absence of anyone deliberately writing down what the syllabus is.

If you are leading a team right now, your team has a hidden syllabus. The syllabus exists whether you have authored it or not. The syllabus is being taught to every person who has joined your team in the last twelve months, every person who is currently considering joining, and every person who recently left and is now teaching, in their next role, the patterns they learned in yours. The question is not whether the syllabus exists. The question is whether you have read it lately, and whether the syllabus is the one you would have chosen to write.

This is, in my experience, the most useful piece of leadership reframing the curriculum-design world has on offer. It is also the one most leaders have never been asked to do.

* * *

Reading the syllabus your team is teaching

There is a small audit I have come to recommend to leaders of teams of any size, and which I run on my own teams roughly every six months. It is not a framework. It is a set of questions, and the discipline is to sit with each one for long enough that the answers stop being the optics-friendly version and start being the honest one.

Question one. What does a person learn, in their first ninety days on this team, about how decisions actually get made? Not how the org chart says they get made. Not how the policy document says they get made. How they actually get made.

Question two. What does a person learn, on this team, about which kinds of mistakes are expected and which kinds are punished? The answer is rarely written down. The answer is always being learned.

Question three. What does a person learn, on this team, about who is allowed to disagree with whom? Notice the verb. Allowed. The

hidden syllabus is, more than anything else, about the unwritten rules of permission.

Question four. What does a person learn, on this team, about whose voice carries weight in a difficult meeting - and is the answer the same as the answer the formal hierarchy would have predicted?

Question five. What does a person learn, on this team, about the relationship between the dashboard and the work? Whether the people in the room are treating the dashboard as the truth, or as a small part of the truth, or as a thing to be performed for. The student of the team will pick this up within a fortnight.

Question six. What does a person learn, on this team, about how the team handles a member who is going through a difficult period? The answer is one of the most powerful pieces of the hidden syllabus, because it teaches everyone on the team what they can expect when, in due course, their own difficult period arrives.

If you have not read the answers to those six questions for the team you are currently leading, your team has a hidden syllabus you have not authored. You are still the chair of the curriculum-design room. The room is just running without you.

* * *

Atlas as the patient tutor

There is a particular use of AI that this chapter is making the case for, which most organisations have not yet found a clean way to think about, and which I want to describe carefully.

AI is, by its nature, the most patient tutor most teams will ever have access to. Atlas, on my desk, will explain a concept to me at midnight in the form I asked for it in. Atlas will, if I ask, explain the same concept to a colleague tomorrow morning in a different form, calibrated to the way that colleague learns. Atlas will, the next afternoon, explain it to a student in a third form, with a worked example chosen for that student's prior knowledge. Atlas does not get tired. Atlas does not lose patience. Atlas does not make a person feel stupid for asking the same question twice.

Used well, that capacity is the most extraordinary individualisation of learning the modern workplace has ever had. The Master of Agricultural Information Management programme my colleagues and I designed at Leaders Institute was built, deliberately, to take advantage of exactly this capacity. The students did not all learn the same thing in the same order. The curriculum was a structure of objectives and assessments. The path through the curriculum, with AI assistance properly integrated, was personalisable in a way no curriculum could have been ten years ago. Each student, in principle, could be met where they were, accelerated where they were ready, and slowed down where they were not.

That same capacity, transferred from the formal classroom to the leadership context, is what makes the team-as-curriculum argument finally operational. A leader, with Atlas at their elbow, can now do something that a leader of a small team in 2010 could not have done. They can write a personalised development plan for every direct report, calibrated to that report's actual situation, with appropriate stretch goals, weekly check-in prompts, and reading suggestions, in less time than it used to take them to write a single generic learning-and-development memo.

The temptation - and this is the temptation this chapter wants you to resist - is to do exactly that, and stop there. To produce, with Atlas's help, fifteen tidy individualised plans, distribute them, and consider the work of curriculum design done.

That is not the work. That is the appearance of the work. The actual work begins after the plans have been written.

The danger - everyone good at the same things

The risk of using AI poorly in team development is not that the development plans will be bad. The plans, in 2026, will be roughly fine. They will be polished. They will be plausibly individualised. They will be, on the surface, exactly what a competent learning-and-development function would have produced if it had had unlimited time.

The risk is that the plans will be drawn from a statistical centre of gravity that the language model has been trained on, and will produce, across an entire team, a slow drift toward a shared average of what AI thinks competent professionals look like in 2026. The team will, over a year, become quietly more similar to each other than they were when they joined. The unusual ones will be quietly nudged toward the centre. The eccentrics will be diagnosed as needing more structure. The people whose strengths did not come out of the standard professional template - the Anitas of the world, the makers of small things that the dashboard does not measure, the translators-in-residence between worlds the institution had not noticed it spanned - will be quietly developed away from their actual contribution and toward a flatter version of professional competence.

That is, on the AI era's largest scale, an alarming outcome. It is also the outcome that will happen by default, in any organisation that hands its people-development function to an AI tool without active leadership curation on top.

The defence against this drift is not to refuse to use AI. The defence is to use AI deliberately, with active counter-pressure from a human leader who knows the team well enough to push back on the language model's averages. The leader has to read the plan AI produced and ask, on every direct report's behalf: is this plan going to make this person more themselves, or less? Is this development going to amplify the eccentric strength I hired them for, or develop it away?

The chapter on mentorship - Chapter 9 - had a sentence that should appear in this chapter as well, because it is doing the same work in a wider register. Don't make them a copy of you. Don't make them a copy of the language model's professional average, either. Both shapes of mistake produce the same outcome, which is a team less interesting than it should have been.

* * *

The curator's chair

The role this chapter is making the case for, more than anything else, is the role of the curator.

A curator, in a museum, is the person whose job is to decide which works appear in which rooms, in which order, with which framing, and in conversation with which other works. The curator does not, usually, paint the paintings themselves. The curator's contribution is the slow, careful, deeply judgement-based work of deciding what the visitor will encounter, and in what order, and in what relationship to everything else they have already encountered.

The leader of a team, in the AI era, is the curator of that team's learning life. Atlas can produce the materials. Atlas can suggest the development paths. Atlas can write the polished development plan. The leader's job is to decide which of those materials appear, in which order, with which framing, in conversation with which other experiences this person is having and which others on the team they will learn alongside. The curatorial work is the work the language model cannot do, because the curatorial work is rooted in the leader's own knowledge of the specific human in front of them.

If you are a leader and you have not seen yourself, before now, as a curator of your team's learning, this is the chapter where the role becomes available to you. The role is not new. It was always part of leadership. The curatorial part of leadership has, for most of the last century, been buried under the operational and administrative parts of management. The administrative parts are now being absorbed by AI. The curatorial part is being exposed, possibly for the first time in your career, as the actual centre of the work.

That is, in a single sentence, what makes leadership in the AI era both more demanding and more meaningful than it has been in any of our living memories.

* * *

The working rule

Every team has a hidden syllabus. The leader's job is to make it visible - and worth taking.

Visible, because if the syllabus is not visible to you, it is being authored by accident, and the people on your team are receiving an education you have not chosen. Worth taking, because the test of any curriculum is not whether it was technically correct - the test is whether the people who completed it are more themselves on the way out than they were on the way in.

Atlas can help you see the syllabus, write it, and personalise it. Atlas cannot decide what it is for. The deciding, as in every chapter of this book, is yours.

* * *

Reflection

1. If your team were a course, what would the unit titles be? Write them down. Notice which titles you would proudly send to a regulator and which you would quietly soften before showing anyone outside the team.
2. What is one thing your team is teaching - quietly, repeatedly, in ways no manual ever describes - that you would not, on reflection, choose to teach? That is the syllabus item that needs your authorship most.
3. Of your direct reports, who is currently being developed away from the eccentric strength you originally hired them for? What would it cost you to stop doing that?

Try this week

Sit down this week, with a blank page and a forty-five minute window. Write, in your own words, the syllabus for what someone would learn in their first ninety days on your team.

Be honest. Do not write the syllabus you wish your team taught. Write the one you think your team is currently teaching. Include the

things the team is teaching by accident. Include the things you suspect the team is teaching when you are not in the room.

Read the syllabus when you have finished. Notice which items make you proud and which make you slightly uncomfortable. Pick one item that does not belong in the syllabus you intend your team to be teaching, and decide, this quarter, what one small change would begin to remove it.

Atlas can format the syllabus for you. Atlas can suggest items you may have missed. Atlas cannot tell you which items are the ones you would be embarrassed by in three years. That decision, like every decision worth making in this book, is yours.

Run the same exercise once a year. The syllabus you are teaching, ten years from now, will be the cumulative product of the small revisions you made annually with this discipline. There is, in my experience, no other way to author the team you actually intend to lead.

- Next: Chapter 11,
"Don't Believe Everything"

Chapter Eleven

Don't Believe Everything

Verifying your way forward in an AI-saturated world

"Curiosity is not naivety. It is how we evolve."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

Last Tuesday morning, between half past seven and eleven o'clock, I caught three nearly-convincing wrongs.

The first arrived in a draft policy paragraph. Atlas had produced it, in the polite way Atlas produces things, in response to a fairly ordinary request. The paragraph was about a particular regulatory obligation in the Australian higher education sector. The paragraph was beautifully written. The paragraph was, in its third sentence, subtly wrong. It cited a section of a framework that had been superseded eighteen months earlier. The replacement section said something quite similar to what Atlas had cited, but not the same thing. A lawyer, reading the paragraph carefully, would have caught the error. A regulator, reading it carelessly, would have noticed. A junior member of staff, reading it as if it were authoritative, would have built a process around the wrong rule, and the process might have run for months before anyone discovered the foundation it was sitting on.

I caught the error because I had been the person who watched that section change eighteen months earlier. Atlas had not. Atlas was working from a model trained on a snapshot of regulatory text that, while plausible, was no longer current. Atlas did not know that. Atlas had no way of knowing that. Atlas had produced the paragraph with the exact same confidence with which it would have produced one that was correct. The confidence was the dangerous part.

The second wrong arrived in a confident comment on a LinkedIn article. A colleague I respect had written something thoughtful, and a

commenter had replied with a quote attributed to a recent academic study, including a number, a percentage, a year, and a journal name. The quote was useful. The quote made the commenter's argument look strong. The quote, when I checked, did not exist. The journal existed. The year existed. The author's name did not exist in that journal in that year. The number was, on closer reading, plausible-sounding nonsense, generated by a tool that had read enough academic prose to imitate the genre, and not enough of it to know the difference between a real citation and a confabulated one.

The third mistake arrived in an internal report. A chart had been generated by a tool that had pulled data from a dashboard and produced a clean, polished visualisation. The chart was technically accurate. The data underneath the chart was wrong - because the dashboard's filter had quietly defaulted to a partial view on the morning the data was pulled. The error was not the tool's fault. The error was the silent-default fault of every modern data system, magnified by an AI summary layer that had not noticed that the underlying view was filtered.

Three nearly-convincing wrongs in three and a half hours. I am not unusual in this regard. Anybody reading this chapter, in 2026 or beyond, has had a comparable morning more than once already. The volume is now too high to talk about a single incident. The volume is the point.

This chapter is about the discipline that lets a leader, a team, and an institution survive a working day in which three plausible wrongs arrive before lunch. The discipline is an old one. The conditions in which it has to operate are new.

* * *

The Chernobyl analogy

There is a useful piece of recent history that I want to put in front of you before we go further. The history is the history of nuclear energy after Chernobyl, and the lesson it taught the world about the

difference between a technology and the way humans choose to deploy it.

Before April 1986, nuclear power was widely regarded as a clean, scalable alternative to fossil fuels. After Chernobyl, public confidence collapsed. Several countries reversed entire energy policies. Moratoriums were imposed. Investment fled. The reactor design that had failed was a particular Soviet model with known flaws, but the lesson the public drew from the disaster was the broader one - that nuclear power was, somehow, intrinsically dangerous.

The careful technical literature drew a different lesson. The Chernobyl disaster was not, in its essence, a failure of nuclear physics. It was a failure of safety culture. It was a failure of training, process, oversight, openness, and the willingness of people inside the system to question authority when authority was making a mistake. The reactor was deployed, on the night of the accident, by operators following an unsafe procedure that the institution had been quietly tolerating for years. Technology was the medium. The culture around it was the cause.

The countries that, after Chernobyl, kept investing in nuclear energy with rigorous safety frameworks did not have a second Chernobyl. France, which kept building, generates today nearly 70 per cent of its electricity from nuclear plants and is the largest net energy exporter in Europe. The countries that walked away in fear became more dependent on fossil fuels, not safer.

The lesson is exact. Powerful technologies are not made safe by avoidance. They are made safe by the patient, ongoing discipline of the humans who deploy them. The discipline does not eliminate risk. The discipline contains it within the boundary of what humans can reasonably manage.

AI is at a Chernobyl moment. Not because AI has melted down. Because, without proper education, governance, and verification frameworks, it could - and the cost of the failure, when it happens, will be borne by the institutions that did not invest in the discipline before it was needed. The leaders who walk away from AI in fear will not be

safer. They will be absent from the conversation in which the rules of the game are now being written. The leaders who walk into AI without the discipline will be the operators on the night of the accident.

Curiosity is not naivety. It is how we evolve. The discipline of verification is the safety culture of the AI era - and like every safety culture before it, the discipline will be invisible on the days nothing goes wrong, and the only thing that matters on the day something does.

* * *

Source. Scope. Sanity. Signature.

I want to give you, in this section, the working verification habit I now use on any AI-assisted output that crosses my desk and is going to leave it again under my name. The habit is four steps. Each step takes thirty seconds to a few minutes, depending on the stakes of the document. Together, they take less time than a single careful re-read of the same document by a senior colleague, and they catch most of the errors a senior colleague would catch.

Source

The first step is source. For every claim in the document that has the shape of a fact - a date, a number, a citation, a regulatory reference, a study, a quote attributed to a real person - I ask the question, where did this come from? If the answer is 'Atlas produced it,' the claim is unverified. If the answer is 'Atlas produced it from a search of the institutional knowledge base I gave it access to,' the claim is partly verified. If the answer is 'I checked the original source myself,' the claim is verified.

Most days, the first source check will surface at least one claim in the document that is unverified - frequently a regulatory citation or an attribution. Most days, the unverified claims will turn out, on inspection, to be approximately correct. Some days, they will not. The discipline is not to assume the average day. The discipline is to check on every day, because the day on which the claim is wrong is unpredictable, and the cost of a wrong claim that left the building

under your name is asymmetric. The good days do not compound. The bad days do.

Scope

The second step is scope. AI tools are very good at producing documents that sound comprehensive. They are not, by their design, good at noticing what they have left out. The scope check is the question, what is missing from this document that the audience will need? It is a different kind of question from the source. The source asks whether the words on the page are correct. Scope asks whether the words on the page are sufficient.

Scope is, in my experience, where most AI-assisted documents fail in regulated environments. The document Atlas produced will be technically correct on every claim it made. The document Atlas produced will, in the same breath, fail to mention the one consideration that, when the regulator asks for it next month, will be the only consideration the regulator cares about. Atlas does not know what is missing. Atlas only knows what was statistically present in the training data. The shape of the silence in the document is your job to notice. The audit is run by the leader, not the tool.

Sanity

The third step is sanity. This is the cheapest of the four checks, and the one most leaders skip when they are tired. Sanity is the question, does the document, taken as a whole, make sense in the world I actually work in?

The number on the chart - is it of an order of magnitude that matches what I know to be true about my organisation? The recommendation in the strategy memo - is it consistent with what is happening on the floor of my campus this week, or does it sound like the recommendation a generic management consultant would have made to a generic university? The advice in the customer-facing communication - does it sound like it was written by someone who knows the customer, or by someone who has read other letters to other customers and produced a polished average?

Sanity catches a particular error AI is structurally prone to making. The error is the production of a document that is locally plausible at every paragraph but globally implausible across the document. Each individual sentence will pass scrutiny. The document, read as one thing, will not match reality. Sanity is the read-the-whole-thing-out-loud check. Five minutes. Catches the global errors. Saves you, on the day the error would otherwise have shipped.

Signature

The fourth step is signature. This is the most important of the four checks, and the one most leaders are tempted to skip when they are busy. Signature is the question, am I willing to put my name on this and stand by it if everything in it is questioned?

If the answer is yes, the document is ready. If the answer is no, the document needs another pass - and it is your job to do the pass, not Atlas's. The signature is what makes you the author of the document, even when the words were produced by a tool. The signature is what the regulator is going to read, the customer is going to read, the staff member is going to read. The signature is the leader. The text on the page is an artifact.

If you are not willing to sign the document, do not send the document. Most of the embarrassments and disasters of the AI era will be caused by leaders who sent documents they were not actually willing to sign, on the assumption that no-one would read them carefully enough to notice. People always notice. The document signed reluctantly is the document that comes back, in three years, to defend itself in a meeting nobody wants to be in.

* * *

Dr Sajan George

I want to step away from the technical layer of verification, briefly, and tell you about a man whose example has shaped the human side of this discipline for me more than any framework has.

Dr Sajan George is a humanitarian and an activist, based in India, whom I first met during my tenure at American College. The relationship has continued, to this day, into something that is more like family than friendship. Dr George has spent his life working on behalf of people who do not, in any reliable way, have the resources to advocate for themselves. The work has often been thankless. The work has often involved standing up, in rooms where the comfortable people in the room would have preferred he sit down, and asking the hard question that needed asking. The work has frequently produced grief for him personally - not because he was wrong, but because being right, in those rooms, was inconvenient for the people whose interests benefited from the matter being shoved under the carpet.

Dr George has never gone after accolades. He does the work because the work needs doing. He stands up for the needy because he wants to, not because he has to. He has paid a personal cost for that pattern of behaviour, more than once, and he has continued to behave that way anyway. He has, in his quiet but firm way, been one of the most important examples of leadership in my life - and the kind of leadership that, in the AI era, is going to be more important than ever.

Here is why he belongs in this chapter.

The four-step verification habit I just described to you - source, scope, sanity, signature - is the technical layer of the discipline. The technical layer is necessary. It is not sufficient. The technical layer protects you from accidental errors. It does not, on its own, protect you from the deeper failure mode of the AI era, which is the failure to ask the hard question that the room would prefer you not ask.

AI does not produce hard questions. AI, by its design, produces plausible answers to questions that have already been asked. The hard questions are still the human's job. The hard question is the one that, if asked, would oblige the room to face an inconvenient truth and act on it. The hard question is the one whose verbal price - the discomfort of asking it, the awkwardness of the silence afterwards, the political cost of being the person who insisted on it - is enough that most of the people around the table will, by quiet consensus, agree not to ask it.

Dr George has spent his life asking those questions. He does not, as far as I can see, do it from a place of self-righteousness or theatre. He does it because he understands, more clearly than most people I have met, that the silent question is the corrosive one. The question that nobody asks is the question whose absence rots the institution. The room that systematically avoids the hard questions becomes, over time, a room in which people speak in code and avoid each other's eyes.

Dr George once shared with me a line that he attributed to St Mother Teresa, and that has stayed with me since. 'When you give, give till it hurts.' He used it most often in the context of charitable work - the willingness to keep contributing even when it cost you, even when nobody was thanking you, even when the giving itself had stopped being convenient. I have, over the years, come to read it as something broader than charity. I have come to read it as a description of what real leadership feels like from the inside.

Real leadership gives until it hurts. It gives time, and attention, and the willingness to ask hard questions, and the willingness to absorb the personal cost of having asked. It does not give for gratitude. It does not give recognition. It gives because the giving is the thing the work was for. The leaders worth following do not appear, on most days, to be giving heroically. They appear, on most days, to be doing the small, unglamorous, quietly costly work of standing for the truth in rooms where the truth is inconvenient. Across years, that pattern compounds into the kind of leadership we recognise when we see it - and which is rarer, in any era, than the literature would suggest.

The verification discipline this chapter is making the case for is, in the end, an extension of that same posture. Every time you check a source, you are giving a small amount of your time on behalf of a future reader who will never know you did. Every time you ask the hard-scope question, you are absorbing a small amount of social cost on behalf of a meeting that would have preferred to skip it. Every time you refuse to sign a document you are not willing to defend, you are choosing, in a small way, to give till it hurts. Verification is, at its root, a moral discipline as much as a technical one. Dr George's example is

the most useful one I know for keeping that root visible while the technical layer does its work.

If you have ever, in your career, had a colleague who insisted, against the room's preference, on asking the hard question - thank them. The cost they paid is invisible to most of the institution. The benefit you and the institution received from their willingness to pay it is the reason you are still in the business of being able to defend the work.

* * *

Atlas as draftsman, not oracle

There is a single distinction I want to leave with you, before the chapter closes, that contains most of what this book has been trying to argue from Chapter 1.

Atlas is an extraordinary draftsman. Atlas is a dangerous oracle.

Used as a draftsman, Atlas produces a first version of work for you to verify, refine, and sign. The work is faster than you could have done alone. The work is, after your verification, better than you could have shipped alone. The relationship is collaborative. The signature is yours. The discipline scales.

Used as an oracle, Atlas produces an answer that you accept and ship. The answer is plausible. The answer is sometimes correct. The answer is, increasingly often, partly wrong in ways that look right. The signature is, technically, still yours. The defence, when the wrong answer is challenged, is that Atlas said so. That defence does not survive contact with anyone whose job is to hold you accountable.

The leaders worth following in the AI era are the ones who keep using Atlas as a draftsman and refuse to use Atlas as an oracle. The leaders not worth following will progressively let the line drift, will produce more output by treating Atlas as the source of truth, will look, for a quarter or two, more productive than the careful leaders, and will be quietly outed - by a regulator, a customer, a board, or a slow-moving lawsuit - when the cumulative effect of unverified outputs

catches up with them. The market is already sorting, on this distinction, in real time.

* * *

The standard you set

There is a phrase I want to leave with you that I have been using in my own writing, that I think gets cleaner the more carefully it is read.

The standard you set is the standard you are held to.

If your team sees you verify your AI-assisted documents on the days when no-one is watching, they will verify theirs on the days you are not watching. If your team sees you sign documents you have not actually verified, they will do the same. If your team sees you ask the hard scope question in a meeting, they will ask the hard scope question in their own meetings. If your team sees you skip the question because the room would prefer you skip it, they will skip it on your behalf when they are running their own rooms.

This is not a metaphor. This is, after twenty years of leading teams, the most reliable behavioural rule I know about how teams calibrate their own standards. The team copies the leader. The team copies the leader on the day the leader thought no-one was watching. The standard you set, in those moments, is the standard the team will be held to in three years - and the standard you, by extension, will be held to in five.

Verification is not, in this sense, a private discipline. Verification is the public demonstration of the standard you intend the team to operate at. Atlas can amplify the standard. Atlas cannot set it. Setting it is yours.

* * *

Why this is the toil that makes the making trustworthy

Chapter 5 made the case for the maker's ledger - the private list of things you have actually built, kept across a career, as the truer

measure of your worth than any external instrument. This chapter is the chapter where that argument acquires its second half.

A maker's ledger filled with unverified work is not a ledger. It is a brochure.

The toil that makes the making trustworthy is, in 2026, almost entirely the verification toil. Anyone with an internet connection can produce a portfolio of polished output by Friday afternoon. The portfolio that holds up - the portfolio that survives a regulator's audit, a customer's escalation, a board's scrutiny, a future self's re-reading - is the portfolio whose every item has been through some version of the source-scope-sanity-signature discipline. The verification is the toil. The toil is what turns produced output into a maker's ledger entry.

This is the part of the AI era that the productivity literature is missing. Output is no longer the bottleneck. Output is now infinite. Trust is the bottleneck. The leaders who make the trust will be the leaders of the next decade rewards. The leaders who only produce will be progressively, quietly, displaced by tools that produce more cheaply than they do. The making, in the AI era, has to include verifying. The verifying, in turn, has to include the human courage to ask the hard question that no tool will ask on your behalf.

Faith and Toil. Faith in the discipline. Toil in the verification. The motto holds. The chapter is, in a way, the operational manual for what Toil now means at a desk where Atlas is also working.

* * *

Reflection

1. What is the last AI-assisted document you sent that you cannot, today, fully defend if every claim in it were challenged? Find it. Read it again. Notice what you would change. Decide whether the lesson is worth more than the inconvenience of acknowledging it.
2. Which hard question, in your last several meetings, did you not ask because the room would have preferred you not ask it? What would it cost you to ask it, in a smaller room, this week?

3. Of your team members, who would currently be willing to ask the hard question on your behalf in a room you were not in? If the answer is no-one, the gap is the most important hire of your next year - and may not be a hire so much as a permission you have not yet given to people who already work for you.

Try this week

Pick the next AI-assisted document you would normally send without a second pass. Run it through the four-step check before it leaves the building.

Source. Check every fact, citation, date, number, attribution. Note which ones came from Atlas without independent verification, and verify the highest-stakes ones.

Scope. Read the document with the audience in mind. Ask: what is missing that they will need? Add the most important missing piece in your own words.

Sanity. Read the document out loud, all the way through, in your own voice. Listen for the parts that sound locally plausible and globally implausible. Fix them.

Signature. Decide, deliberately, whether you are willing to sign the document and stand by it if everything in it is questioned. If yes, send it. If no, do another pass - and notice, on the pass, what the unwillingness to sign was warning you about.

That four-step pass takes ten minutes for a small document and an hour for a large one. The cumulative effect, across a quarter, is the difference between a leader whose work earns trust and a leader whose work consumes it.

Atlas can help with three of the four steps. Atlas cannot, in the meaningful sense, sign. The signature, like every other decision worth making in this book, is yours.

- Next: Chapter 12,
"Compliance, Conscience, and Compassion"

PART IV

FAITH - PASSING IT ON

What did all of this make me?

Chapter Twelve

Compliance, Conscience, and Compassion

Standards as a love language

"The standard you set is the standard you are held to."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

There is a particular kind of professional life I have lived in parallel with all of the others described in this book, and that I have not yet given a chapter to.

It is the life of a person who has spent twenty years at the edges of regulated industries, signing his name to documents that other people will, in due course, audit.

The list, by now, is longer than I expected it would be when I started. The Higher Education Standards Framework. The Education Services for Overseas Students Act. The CRICOS register. The Australian Qualifications Framework. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, which everyone in the sector simply calls TEQSA. The Australian Standard for pipelines, which I encountered through Saipem and again through more recent industry partnerships. The Code of Responsible Conduct of Research, which my doctorate is now operating under. The Justice of the Peace certification I have held since 2021, which has its own quiet tradition of standards I have learned to take seriously. The board governance frameworks that sit underneath every Academic Board and Governing Board I have ever sat on.

I have sat for many hours, across those years, in rooms where other people - regulators, auditors, board members, lawyers, accreditation panellists - have asked careful questions about documents that had my name somewhere on them. The questions have, for the most part, been respectful. The questions have, for the most part, been

answerable. The questions have, in every single case, been about whether the standard the document claimed to meet was actually the standard the document was meeting.

This chapter is about that distinction, and what the AI era is now doing to it.

* * *

Standards as a love language

There is a phrase I have come to use about regulatory work that surprises people the first time they hear it. The phrase is that standards are a form of love at scale.

Most people, when they hear that, react in one of two ways. The first reaction is the cynical one. Standards, the cynic thinks, are the bureaucratic dressing institutions wear to look serious for regulators. They are forms to be filled in. They are pages to be signed. They are theatre. The second reaction is the indifferent one. Standards, the indifferent person thinks, are an inevitability of working in a regulated environment, the indifferent things, neither lovable nor hateable, simply present, in the way the office air conditioning is present. You work around them. You comply with them. You do not think about them.

Both reactions are wrong, and both reactions are widely held even by people who have spent decades working with standards. They are wrong in the same way the BPO floor in Chapter 3 was wrong about the process. The standards are not the cage. The standards are the architecture of care.

Consider, for a moment, what a standard actually is. A standard is the carefully written-down expression of what a particular community has decided is the minimum acceptable treatment of the people, materials, and risks that the community's work touches. The standard for pipeline integrity in Australia - the AS 2885 series - exists because, somewhere, on a date now mostly forgotten by the public, a pipeline failed and people died. The standards that govern higher education exist because somewhere, on dates now mostly forgotten, students

were taken advantage of by institutions that prioritised revenue over their welfare. The standards that govern construction safety exist because workers were killed in entirely preventable ways. The standards that govern medical research exist because participants were deceived. The standards that govern child protection exist because children were not protected.

Every standard is a piece of writing that contains, at its origin, the memory of a harm. The standard's job is to ensure that the harm is not repeated. The leader's job, when they sign that they have met the standard, is to keep the original promise the standard was written to keep.

Read that way, standards stop being bureaucratic and start being moral. They are a way for one generation of leaders to communicate to the next, in a form that survives turnover and personality and fashion, which we have learned about the cost of cutting corners. A leader who signs a standards document carelessly is not, primarily, in trouble with a regulator. A leader who signs a standards document carelessly is, primarily, breaking faith with the dead. That is a stronger sentence than the bureaucratic framing supports, and it is the sentence I have come to believe is closer to true.

Standards are how leaders care for people they will never meet - including their own future selves, and the future selves of everyone whose name will eventually be on the document the standard governs. That is what I mean when I say standards are a love language. Love is not in the form. The love is in the careful keeping of the form's original promise, on a Tuesday afternoon, when no one is watching, with the actual document in front of you.

* * *

Kemal

I want to tell you, in the most operational part of this chapter, about a man whose example is the cleanest illustration of standards-as-care I currently know.

Kemal Coutinho is the founder of three Australian businesses I have come to know well over the last few years - PipeBoss, VacLift, and Blue Water Engineering. The three companies sit in a part of Australian industry that most people in the leadership and education space know very little about. They build, sell, and support equipment that is used in the deeply unforgiving environments of construction, civil infrastructure, and utilities work. Concrete pumping. Tunnelling. Pipe-laying. Vacuum lifting. The kind of jobs in which a single sloppy decision, made on a tired Friday afternoon by someone whose mind was on something else, can kill a person.

Kemal does not pretend that the work is anything other than what it is. He is precise about it. The first time I sat with him for any length of time, what struck me was that he talked about standards in the same tone of voice that a parent talks about their child's safety. The standards were not, to him, a compliance requirement. They were the operational form of the promise he had made, by becoming the person who built and sold this equipment, that he would not let anyone be hurt by any failure of attention on his part.

PipeBoss exists, in Kemal's framing of it, to reduce the risk of pipeline failure during concrete pumping - failures of the kind that can produce blockages, surges, manual-handling injuries, or, in the worst cases, the kind of catastrophic event that ends careers and lives. The product complies with the relevant Australian Standards. That fact, in Kemal's view, is the floor of the work, not the ceiling. The ceiling is the daily, unglamorous discipline of treating every job site as a place where a worker has a family who expects them home, and engineering the equipment so that the family's expectation is more reliably met. That is the love at scale this chapter is making the case for. Kemal does it as a matter of operational instinct. I find his example useful because the principle is so cleanly visible in his work - and because his industry is far enough from mine that I cannot pretend the principle is a higher-education-specific one.

VacLift and Blue Water Engineering carry the same instinct into adjacent territory. Different equipment, different sites, different specific risks. The same orientation. The same insistence that

compliance is the floor. The same daily practice of treating safety as the architecture of care for people Kemal will never meet.

If you have ever worked alongside someone like Kemal, you will recognise the texture of his work. The standards documents in his office are read carefully, not filed away. The discussions about a near-miss are taken seriously, even when no harm was done. The supplier who is nearly meeting the standard is, in his hands, asked to actually meet it - not because the regulator has not yet caught the gap, but because he, Kemal, knows the gap is there. The personality is unfussy. The practice is exact. The sum of the two, across years, is the kind of company I would let a family member work for without anxiety, and which - in a market where most of his competitors are competing on price rather than on care - succeeds because the people who have to actually trust the equipment know where the trust came from.

Kemal's example sits in this chapter for a reason. The AI era is going to be very tempting for organisations whose standards work has, until now, been an unloved compliance task. AI tools will produce policies, audit responses, training materials, and documented procedures at a speed that no internal team can produce by hand. The temptation will be to use the speed to thin the work - to produce more documents, faster, with less attention each. The temptation will look, on the dashboard, like productivity. The temptation will be, in the careful sense Kemal would recognise, the slow erosion of the architecture of care.

The leaders who, in 2030, are running organisations the rest of us trust will be the leaders who use AI to deepen their standards of work, not to diminish it. They will use AI to surface the implications of standards more clearly than they could before. They will use AI to draft training materials that are then, importantly, read carefully by a human who knows the actual job site. They will use AI as a draftsman in the sense Chapter 11 made the case for, and they will sign each piece of work themselves, in the sense the architecture of care requires.

Kemal is, in his own quiet way, doing this work right now. He is, in his own quiet way, making the case for what compliance, conscience, and compassion together can look like in an Australian

industry that depends on people not getting hurt. I am writing this chapter, in part, because I want more leaders to look like him in the next decade than have looked like him in the last.

* * *

Why all three Cs

This chapter's title is not arbitrary. The three words - compliance, conscience, and compassion - describe three different layers of the same work, and the work goes wrong, in distinctive ways, when any one of the three is missing.

Compliance is the first layer. Compliance is the writing-down, the procedure-following, the auditing, the signing-off. Compliance is what regulators are formally asking for. An organisation that is compliant is one whose paperwork is in order, whose audits return clean, and whose external auditors can produce reports that tick the boxes. Compliance is necessary. Compliance is not, by itself, sufficient.

Conscience is the second layer. Conscience is the willingness, of the individual leader signing the document, to ask whether the document is actually true - not just whether it appears to satisfy the form. Conscience is the difference between an institution that knows its compliance is real and an institution that knows its compliance is theatre. Most regulators, in my experience, can tell the difference within five minutes of a serious conversation. The dashboards that look identical from the outside diverge sharply in the room. Conscience is the part of the work that determines which side of that divergence the organisation falls on.

Compassion is the third layer. Compassion is the orientation, in every standards-related decision, toward the people the standard exists to protect - the students whose visa depends on us getting their CRICOS records right, the workers whose safety depends on the pipeline equipment being designed for the worst day rather than the average day, the research participants whose consent depends on the protocol actually meaning what it says. Compassion is what stops compliance and conscience from becoming a private moral exercise

unrelated to the people the standards are about. Compassion keeps the human at the centre of the form.

An organisation can have any one of the three and not the other two, and the result is recognisable to anyone who has worked in regulated industry.

Compliance without conscience produces theatre. The forms are filled in. The auditors are managed. The standards are met on paper. Nobody believes them, including the people filling them in. The institution is, by definition, vulnerable to the next regulator who reads carefully, the next journalist who looks, the next disaffected staff member who decides to write the email.

Conscience without compliance produces wasted goodwill. The leader cares deeply about the right thing. The leader does not, however, do the patient work of writing it down in the form the regulator and the auditor and the future board can verify. The good intent is invisible to the institution. The institution does not benefit, durably, from the leader's conscience. When the leader leaves, the conscience leaves too, and there is nothing on the page to carry the practice forward.

Compassion without compliance produces well-meaning failure. The leader cares about the people. The leader has not done the engineering work to translate the care into a procedure that scales beyond their own attention. The first time the leader is unavailable, the standard is not kept. The second time, somebody is harmed. The third time, the regulator arrives.

All three together produce the kind of institution that, on the day a regulator audits it carelessly, comes through clean - and on the day a regulator audits it carefully, also comes through clean. The cost of running an institution that way is higher than the cost of running an institution on compliance alone. The benefit, across a decade, is incalculable.

* * *

How AI tempts the standards function

There is a particular failure mode the AI era is now creating in regulated industries that I want to name plainly, because it has a recognisable shape and is going to be the cause of several public scandals in the next five years.

AI tools make it possible, for the first time in industrial history, to produce documents that meet the technical letter of any standard at almost no cost. A policy document can be drafted by Atlas in three minutes that satisfies, on its face, every clause of the relevant framework. A training module can be generated in twenty minutes that ticks every box of an accreditation requirement. A risk assessment can be produced in ten minutes that, on the page, addresses every category the regulator expects.

The temptation is to use the time saved to produce more documents. The temptation is widespread. The temptation is being yielded to in many institutions right now.

The failure mode is that the documents satisfy the letter and quietly violate the spirit. The training module ticks the box without changing the behaviour. The risk assessment names the risks without addressing them. The policy document is, by 2026, in the file folder that no one reads, technically compliant, practically useless.

In the regulated industries Kemal works in, the failure mode kills people. In the regulated industries I work in, the failure mode harms students. In the regulated industries you work in, the failure mode harms whoever your standards exist to protect. There is no version of the AI era in which this failure mode is acceptable. There is, however, a version of the AI era in which the failure mode becomes endemic - because the dashboards look fine, the audit responses look polished, and the spirit of the standard has quietly bled out underneath.

The defence against this failure mode is not, in any meaningful sense, technical. The defence is a leader who reads each AI-generated standards document the way Kemal reads his pipeline manuals - as the operational form of a promise, made to specific humans, that the leader is now signing on behalf of.

* * *

The signature test

There is a single daily-practice rule I have come to use, in my own work and in conversations with leaders I mentor, that captures most of the discipline this chapter is making the case for.

Before signing any document that operates inside a regulatory framework, ask yourself: would I stand by this if my name were the only signature on the page, with no institutional shelter, in a room with the people the standard exists to protect?

If yes, sign. If no, do not.

That rule has a particular property. It strips away the institutional comfort that makes most compliance theatre possible. The institutional comfort is the assumption that, if the document is wrong, the responsibility will be diluted across a committee, a board, a chain of countersigners, a complex chain of approvals. The assumption is, in some legal sense, true. The assumption is, in every meaningful moral sense, a way of pretending that the signature is not what it actually is.

The signature is what it actually is. The signature is the leader saying, on behalf of the institution, that the standard is met. If the leader signing is not, in their own private assessment, willing to defend the document on their own, then the document is not ready to be signed. The institutional shelter is real. The leader's personal accountability is more real.

The signature test is, in my experience, the single most useful tool a leader has against the AI era's temptation to flood the system with documents that meet the letter and miss the spirit. Atlas produces. The leader signs - or does not. Atlas can be sloppy. The leader cannot. The signature is the load-bearing piece of the architecture of care.

If you are a senior leader in a regulated industry and you are not currently using a version of the signature test, this chapter is asking you to start. The cost of starting is the slight increase in time each signature takes. The benefit, accumulated over a career, is the kind of institution your name is associated with five years and ten years from now - and the kind of person you have, by then, become.

* * *

The standard you set is the standard you are held to

The closing thought of this chapter is the same line that closed Chapter 11, because it is doing the same work in a wider register.

The standard you set is the standard you are held to.

The institution you build will be held to the standards you signed, and to the implicit standards you demonstrated, and to the standards your team learned by watching you on the days you thought no-one was looking. There is no version of leadership in a regulated industry in which you set one standard for the regulator and a quieter, weaker one for daily work. The two converge, slowly, over years. They converge upward if you have been careful. They converge downward if you have not.

The leaders worth following in the AI era will be the ones who set their standards as if every document they signed would, eventually, be read in a room with the people the standard exists to protect. The leaders not worth following will set their standards as if the regulator were the only audience that mattered. The market - and time - will sort the two groups, and the sorting is already underway.

* * *

Reflection

1. Pick one regulatory framework or standard you currently sign documents under. When was the last time you read its origin - the harm or hope that gave rise to it - rather than just its current text? What does it change to read the standard as a love letter to people it was written to protect?
2. Of the standards-related documents your organisation has produced in the last quarter, which ones could you defend in the room with the people the standards exist to protect, and which ones would you quietly want to revise before that conversation? What is the actual cost of the revision - and is it smaller than the cost of the silence?
3. Which of compliance, conscience, and compassion is currently the weakest of the three on your team? Which

would you have ranked weakest five years ago? The change is itself useful information about the leader you have been becoming, by accident or by design.

Try this week

Pick one standard document you are currently the named signatory on - a policy, a course accreditation document, a workplace safety procedure, a data handling protocol, a child-protection register, anything that carries your name and operates inside a regulatory framework.

Read it again, this week, with the signature test in mind. Ask yourself, paragraph by paragraph: would I stand by this in a room with the people the standard exists to protect? Mark the paragraphs that, on honest reading, you would not.

Pick the most consequential of those paragraphs. Make the small repair this week. Do not announce it. Do not write a memo about it. Just fix it. Then sign the document again, with the small repair in place, and notice the small change in how you feel about the document afterwards.

Across a year of that habit, your standards will quietly catch up with the leader you intend to be. Across a decade, your institution will earn the kind of trust that, in the AI era, is becoming the only durable competitive advantage anyone has.

- Next: Chapter 13,
"Faith, Family, and the Long Game"

Chapter Thirteen

Faith, Family, and the Long Game

Sustaining the leader's life

"What you carry into work each Monday is the result of how you spent the weekend before - and the decade before that."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

It is a Sunday morning in Brisbane. The light is the slightly thin, slightly hopeful light that Brisbane has on weekend mornings before the heat decides what kind of day it is going to be. I am sitting on the back step of our house with a coffee. Matteo, who is five, is somewhere between the kitchen door and the lawn, in the middle of an argument with himself about whether or not he is going to put on shoes. Ramona is inside, in the small careful way she has of being inside, doing the things that hold a household together on a Sunday morning, none of which appear on any dashboard.

In an hour and a half I will be at the parish, where the Lutwyche pastoral council meeting has been quietly scheduled at a time that, by long agreement, does not interfere with anybody's family lunch. After that I will come home. We will eat. Matteo will have new opinions about shoes. The afternoon will be ordinary in the way that good afternoons mostly are. By Sunday evening I will have spent more hours of my weekend at home and church than at work, and I will, on Monday morning, walk into a working week that is going to demand things from me that the working week alone cannot replenish.

This chapter is about arithmetic. It is about why I do not, in any real sense, write the rest of this book on weekdays alone. It is about the long-game work that gets done in the small rooms - the kitchen, the parish hall, the silence at the back step on a Sunday morning - that the

working week, on its own, can never get done. It is about the people whose names do not appear on the cover of this book and without whom the book could not have been written.

It is, in particular, about my parents - Vincent Lobo and Winni Lobo - and the small line of theirs that has been quietly running underneath every chapter you have read so far.

* * *

Vincent and Winni

My father is Vincent Lobo. My mother is Winni Lobo. They are the people who, before anyone else in the world, said the sentence that the rest of my working life has been a long expansion of.

The sentence was, in its essence, simple. Forget the doubters. We can get this done our way, even if it is not something we have done before.

They did not have a script for the kind of life they were building for our family. The English-medium education they were determined to send three children through was not the education either of them had received. The middle-class climb they were betting on was not a climb either of their parents had taken. The small, patient, decade-long work of equipping three children for a wider world than the one they themselves had walked into was, by any reasonable assessment, beyond what their own resources should have supported. They did it anyway. They did it because they had decided, before the conversation with the doubters had even begun, that the doubters were wrong and that they were going to act on that decision regardless of how loud the doubt got.

The doubt was not abstract. The doubt came, frequently, from extended family members and well-meaning neighbours who pointed out, with what they considered to be good sense, that we would not cope. That an English school was beyond our means. That the boys and the girl would fall behind. That we would be embarrassed. That my parents had not gone to such schools themselves, so what made them think they could navigate one on behalf of their children. That the

wider world they were trying to give us access to had its own customs which we did not know and could not learn. That we should, in short, stay where we were and be grateful.

Vincent and Winni listened to those arguments politely. They went home. They sent the children, regardless. They worked extra hours to make the fees possible. They held the house together through years that, in retrospect, must have been more financially fragile than they ever told us at the time. They taught us to read by candlelight in evening power cuts, in the way Chapter 1 described. They asked, every single Sunday evening, to see our school books and our marked work, even when they could not always read every page of it themselves. They paid attention. They kept paying attention.

Most of what I now believe about leadership, I believe because of the daily, unglamorous example my parents set in those years. They were, in the practical sense, the first leaders I ever observed. They were the leaders who taught me that the existence of doubters does not constitute evidence about the merit of the work. They were the leaders who taught me that you do not need familiarity with a destination to begin the journey toward it. They were the leaders who taught me that the long game is the only game worth playing, and that the long game is mostly composed of small, patient, faithful Sunday evenings repeated across decades.

If you want to understand why this book is called what it is - if you want to understand the Faith and Toil that the spine of the book turns on - you only need to spend half an hour with my parents. The principle is so visible in them that it does not require translation. They were not handed Faith. They built it, alongside Toil, in a part of Bangalore that had not given them many reasons to expect either to pay off. They paid off. We are still living, in our generation, on the dividend.

I dedicate this chapter, more than any other, to them.

* * *

The siblings and the uncle

My elder brother, Winson Lobo, who walked through the door at St Joseph's first, set the tone for everything that followed. He carried, alone, the burden of being the one the doubters were watching most closely. The harder days at school, in those years, were his. The doors he opened were doors my twin sister Vivette and I were able to walk through more easily because of the work he had done first.

My twin sister, Vivette Rego, walked the same path alongside me. There is a particular kind of relationship that twins have, which has not been written about very well in the management literature, because the management literature does not really know what to do with it. Vivette and I are not the same person. We argue about things, sometimes loudly. We disagree about things that, on paper, identical-DNA siblings would not be expected to disagree about. The disagreement is, however, the gift. Across forty years of being in the world at the same time, in different places and on different paths, the existence of a person who has known me at every age and who is willing to push back on me without flinching is one of the steadiest forces in my life. The version of me that arrives at any room, on any day, has been formed in part by the long, careful, occasionally-shouty companionship of a sister who has not, at any point, been willing to indulge my self-importance. I am better for it. The work I do is better for it.

My uncle, Leo Lobo, has been the patient encourager whose confidence in me, expressed quietly across decades, made several risks possible that I would not, on my own, have taken. Uncles are sometimes underestimated in family writing. They occupy an interesting space - close enough to know you, far enough to be free to say things your parents would have softened. Uncle Leo's confidence in me was not the boastful kind. It was the kind that arrives in small remarks, made on long-distance phone calls, that I did not always realise I was internalising at the time. The cumulative effect of that kind of confidence, over twenty years, is the difference between a young person who decides to try the harder thing and a young person who quietly does not.

Family writing, when it is done well, names the people who shaped the leader that the public eventually meets. I am naming Winson, Vivette, and Uncle Leo here because the leader the public eventually meets - the one signing TEQSA documents and chairing parish councils and speaking at industry forums - was made, in part, by them. The making is invisible to anyone who reads only the CV. The making is everything that the CV is the residue of.

* * *

Ramona

My wife, Ramona Rangel, is the person without whom the rest of this book would not have been written, and the person whose place in it has been the hardest part of the chapter to draft.

Ramona has carried our home through every period in this book that has been more demanding of me than I had any right to ask of anyone. She has done it without seeking credit for it. She has done it without ever framing it as sacrifice, even when, by any honest reading, it was. She has been the steady centre of a household whose father was, in many seasons, more available to a TEQSA submission or a board meeting or a doctoral chapter than to the people who shared his kitchen table.

She has also been my single most reliable corrective. When the working world has been telling me a flattering story about myself, Ramona has, in her own quiet way, told me the more accurate one. When the working world has been telling me a deflating story, she has done the same in the other direction. She has not been impressed by my dashboards. She has not been frightened by my doubts. She has been, across the years, the person whose perspective I trust most to be free of the institutional flattery and the institutional fear that distort almost every other reading of who I am at any given moment.

If you are a leader, and you are reading this chapter, and you have a person in your life who plays the role for you that Ramona plays for me, I want to ask you to do one small thing in the next week. Tell them. Specifically. Not in general terms. Find one moment, in the last

quarter, when their reading of you was more accurate than yours and they kept you from making a worse decision. Name it. Thank them for it. Do this even if your relationship is not the kind in which such conversations are easy. Do it because the person whose perspective has been the load-bearing piece of your career deserves, at least once a quarter, to be told that you know what they are doing.

I write this paragraph in the same spirit. Ramona, if you read this chapter before any other reader does, this paragraph is for you. Thank you. The book exists because you let it exist, and because every page of it has been quietly underwritten by the perspective you have spent twenty years giving me, often at considerable cost to yourself, and almost never with any thanks at all.

* * *

Matteo

Our son, Matteo, is five years old as I write this chapter. By the time he is old enough to read it, I will have aged into the kind of slightly tired father whose sentences take a little longer than they used to. The AI era, in his lifetime, will look very different from the way it looks tonight. The institutions he will work in have not been built yet. The technologies he will work with have not been named yet. The conversations he will have to have with the version of Atlas that exists when he enters the workforce will be conversations I cannot, sitting here, predict the shape of.

There is, however, one thing I can write down for him, and which I want to record in this book so that, in the worst case, if I am not around to say it to him in person at the right moment, he can read it later in his father's voice.

Matteo, the most important thing you can be in any room you ever walk into is yourself. There will be booklets. There will be aptitude tests. There will be algorithms. There will be teachers and managers and AI tools that, at various points in your life, will try to tell you what kind of person you are and what you are capable of. Some of them will be partly correct. None of them will know the whole of you. Listen to

them with respect. Take from them what is useful. But please, when the time comes, walk out of the rooms they were measuring you in carrying yourself - all of yourself - with you. The most interesting parts of you will, in my honest experience, spend your whole life living just outside the edges of the instruments the world will measure you with. That is not a problem. That is the point.

Your grandfather and grandmother bet, before you were born, on a future they could not see. They were right to bet. The version of you that I see in our kitchen on Sunday mornings is part of what their bet bought. Your job, in your generation, is to make a similar bet for the people who come after you. I do not know yet what shape that will take. I do know - because Vincent and Winni knew - that the bet is worth making, even when the doubters are loud and even when the path is unfamiliar.

This book is, in some quiet way, my contribution to the bet.

* * *

Piyush

There is a category of person, in any working life, that the institution does not have a job title for and does not really know what to do with. The category is the friend who is family. The category does not appear on any organisational chart. The category does not get mentioned in the literature on leadership. The category is, however, the load-bearing piece of any leader's life across a long career, in a way that the literature on leadership does not yet seem ready to admit.

My friend Piyush Jaiswal, who died in 2025, was that kind of person for me.

Piyush had a working theory about other people, which he held quietly and consistently and never made a great show of, that I would like to record here because it is one of the small inheritances of his that I am still trying to live up to. The theory was that the most useful thing you can do, when you meet another human being, is look for the good in them. Not the impressive part. Not the credential. Not the part the institution would have hired them for. The good - the small, often

unguarded part of them that, on a careful day, is visible to a person who has decided to look. Piyush had decided to look. He looked at me, at our other friends, at strangers in the kinds of settings strangers usually pass through unobserved, and he routinely came back with something to report that no-one else had bothered to notice.

The corollary of the theory, which Piyush practised even more consistently than the theory itself, was that you should live your own life and not waste any of it dwelling on what other people were thinking of you. He said this to me, in different words, on more occasions than I can count. He said it on phone calls. He said it across coffee tables. He said it in the quiet way friends say important things to each other - half as advice, half as observation about how he himself was choosing to operate. He was right. The long working life this book has been in has, on more than one stretch, been steadier than it should have been because Piyush's voice was in the back of my head telling me to stop measuring myself against verdicts I had not commissioned and would not have asked for if I had.

He was, in the technical sense of the word, my confidant. There are not many of those in any working life. The institution does not provide them. They are not on the org chart. They are the people you call when the dashboard is glowing in a way it should not be glowing, or when an interview has gone the wrong way, or when a draft of a chapter is not working, or when the working week has been heavier than the working week should be permitted to be. Piyush was on that list for me. The conversations were, on the surface, casual. The work the conversations did was anything but.

In 2022, Piyush was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He fought the long fight for over three years and eventually succumbed to it in 2025. The diagnosis was the kind of diagnosis that, by the world's reasonable expectations, would have permitted him to step away from the kind of person he had spent his life being, and to step into a smaller, more guarded version of himself for the time he had left. He did not. Across the months that followed, what struck the people around him - all of us, in our different ways, watching - was that the person Piyush was at his diagnosis was the person Piyush continued to

be at every check-in, every hospital visit, every conversation in which the prognosis got harder. He kept his sense of humour. The humour was, by nature, dad jokes - the kind of jokes that other people tolerate and that Piyush told with full commitment, as if the joke were funnier than it was, because the telling of it was the point. He told them. He smiled. When the conversation arrived, as the conversation in those months kept arriving, at the question of what he was going to do about all of this, his answer was the same answer every time. I will deal with this.

The four words have stayed with me. I think they are one of the most important working sentences any leader, in any era, in any working life, in any conversation about how to bear what arrives, can carry. I will deal with this. The sentence is not bravado. The sentence is not a denial. The sentence is the calm, accurate decision to not be the cause of additional drama at a moment when the situation already has plenty of drama of its own. The sentence is leadership in its simplest form. There is something in front of me. I have decided to take it. I am not asking the room to feel sorry for me. I am asking the room to keep going, and I will, with whatever Faith and Toil are left to me, keep going alongside it.

Piyush, in the months I am describing, was more of a leader than most of the leadership literature has ever managed to describe. The leadership did not happen at a podium. The leadership did not happen in a meeting. The leadership happened across phone calls and hospital rooms and the small kitchen-table conversations in which our friend was demonstrating, by the way he was carrying his own situation, what carrying anything looks like when the carrier has decided the job is theirs to do.

I am writing this section, in the chapter on Faith and Family and the Long Game, because Piyush belongs in the long game even though the years did not turn out the way I would have wanted them to. The friends who shape a leader are not always the friends who walk the whole length of the working life. Some of them walk a stretch of it. Some of them step out of frame earlier than the leader is ready for them to. The shape they leave in the leader is not, in any sense I have been

able to identify, smaller because the years were fewer. If anything, the shape is sharper - because the loss has clarified, in a way that the slow accumulation of years could not, exactly what the friend was contributing all along.

If you are a leader, and you are reading this section, and you have a friend in your life who plays the role for you that Piyush played for me, I want to say one thing to you with as much directness as the page will let me carry. Tell them. Now. Not in three months when the year settles down. Not after the project ships. Not on the next round trip when you happen to be in the same city. Now. Pick up the phone, write the email, send the message - in the medium your friendship has used for years - and tell them, by name, what they are to you and why. If they are confused by the message, they can be confused by it. If the message is awkward, the message can be awkward. The awkwardness is a small price. The alternative is to be the person, somewhere in your future, writing a paragraph like this one and wishing you had said it earlier.

Piyush, if there is any version of this book that finds its way to wherever you are now, this paragraph is for you. Thank you for the way you read other people. Thank you for the line about not dwelling on what other people were thinking. Thank you for the dad jokes. Thank you for the four words. The torch you carried is, in its small way, also being passed on. The book is, in part, the passing on.

* * *

Three rooms

There is a working frame I have come to use, when I think about the practices that sustain a leader's life across a long career, that I want to leave with you in this chapter.

The frame is three rooms. The leader who lasts is the leader who keeps three rooms maintained, week in and week out, regardless of how busy the working week is. The three rooms are home, community, and silence. Each of them does a particular kind of work that nothing else can do for it. Each of them deteriorates if it is not visited regularly.

Each of them, in the AI era, will be quietly under attack by the productivity dividend the AI era now offers.

Home is the room you have already met in this chapter. The kitchen table. The Sunday morning back step. The conversation about shoes. The evening meal. The unhurried hour in which the day is allowed to soften. The home room is where the public version of you is allowed to set itself down for a while and rest. It does not happen by accident. It happens because someone, somewhere, decided that the home room would be defended this evening from the work that could have absorbed every minute of it.

Community is the second room. For me, it is the parish - the Catholic Parish of Lutwyche, where I have chaired the parish pastoral council since 2016. For other readers, the community will be a different room. A neighbourhood association. A volunteer group. A weekly sport. A book club. A regular coffee with the same three friends. The specific shape does not matter. What matters is the existence of a room in your week in which you are not the leader-of-something, in which the people around you do not know your CV, and in which your role is to contribute as one human being among other human beings, none of whom has the right to assess your performance for the institution that pays you. That kind of room is rare, in modern life, and is the most important antidote to the way professional life slowly trains us to mistake our title for ourselves.

Silence is the third room. Silence is the quietest of the three, and the most easily skipped. Silence is the discipline of being alone, without input, for long enough that your own thoughts can rearrange themselves without help. For some readers, silence is contemplative prayer. For others, silence is meditation. For others, silence is a long walk without a podcast. For others again, silence is the hour at the back step on a Sunday morning before the household wakes up. The form is less important than the practice. The practice is the deliberate creation of time in which Atlas is not consulted, the phone is not consulted, the news is not consulted, the work is not consulted, and the only thing being consulted is whatever you find when the noise stops.

All three rooms together produce the leader who walks into Monday morning replenished. Any one of them missing produces a leader who walks into Monday morning slightly more brittle than they were the week before. Three weeks of brittleness compounds into a quarter of fatigue. Three quarters of fatigue compounds into a year of the kind of decision-making the institution will, in due course, regret. Most of the leadership disasters I have seen across a career have, in retrospect, been preceded by the slow erosion of one or more of these three rooms in the leader's life.

* * *

Faith, plainly

I have said earlier in this book that the Faith I am writing about is universal, not denominational. I want to expand that, briefly, in this chapter, because the chapter has now spent enough time at the parish that the personal particulars are visible.

My own Faith has a specific shape. I am Catholic. I have been Catholic since childhood. The contemplative traditions of the church - two thousand years of patient teaching about how to live a life that does not collapse under the weight of its own ambition - inform the way I lead at work, the way I am with my family, and the way I think about what I am responsible for in the world. I do not, in any given chapter of this book, force the reader to accept any of that. I write because I want to be honest about what is sustaining the practice this book is trying to teach.

If you are not Catholic, the practice does not require you to be. The wisdom traditions of the world - Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Indigenous, secular humanist, philosophical - have all written, in different vocabularies, about the same set of disciplines. Stillness. Prayer. Examination of conscience. The reading of texts older than this morning's news. The patient practice of being present with another human being. The willingness to ask, on any given evening, whether the day's work was worth the day's attention. These are not Catholic disciplines. They are human disciplines that the Catholic

tradition has taught me, and that other traditions have taught other people, in their own languages, for their own communities.

If you do not have a tradition, the most useful thing this chapter can suggest to you is to find one - or to make peace with the version of one you grew up with - and to begin practising. The leader who has no tradition to lean on, in the AI era, is a leader who will be quietly more exposed to the unprecedented pressures of the era than the leader who does. The traditions are the accumulated wisdom of every generation that has lived through a disruption. We are now in another disruption. The wisdom is, by design, available.

I chair the parish pastoral council not because the role looks good on a CV. It does not. I chair it because the parish is one of the rooms in which my leadership is replenished, in a community of people who do not need me to be impressive, doing work that will not appear in any annual report I ever write. The council meeting on the Sunday at the start of this chapter is one of the load-bearing pieces of my Monday morning. Most weeks, no-one outside the room knows the meeting happened. The institution I work in is, however, the better for it. So am I.

* * *

What you spend the dividend on

There is a particular AI-era question that this chapter is making the case for, and that I want to leave with you before the reflection.

The AI era is going to give you back time. The amount of time depends on how seriously you adopt the discipline this book has been describing. For most of you, the time will arrive in the form of small recurring windows - the twenty minutes Atlas saves you on a draft, the hour Atlas saves you on a report, the half-day Atlas saves you across a week. Across a quarter, the time will compound into a meaningful amount. Across a year, into a substantial amount. Across a decade, into something approaching a second working life.

The question this chapter is asking is what you intend to spend that time on.

If you spend it on more output, your dashboards will look better and your home room, community room, and silence room will deteriorate. If you spend it on the three rooms, your dashboards will look the same as they would have looked, and the leader walking into Monday morning will be the leader the institution actually needed.

I do not believe this is, in the end, a difficult choice. I do believe it is a choice that has to be made, deliberately, on purpose, repeatedly, because the default in the AI era will be to do the first thing. The ambient pressure of every productivity tool, every dashboard, every quarterly review, every comparison to faster-moving competitors, every exhortation from the literature of success, will push you toward more output. The pressure will be quiet. The pressure will be continuous. The pressure will, if you do not deliberately resist it, win.

The leaders who last in the AI era will be the leaders who decided, on purpose, to spend the productivity dividend on the three rooms. Their institutions will be no less productive than the institutions of the leaders who burned out. Their lives will be more recognisably worth living. Their teams will, after a few years of the visible pattern, begin to copy it - which is how the wider working culture eventually changes. One leader at a time.

* * *

The working rule

What you carry into work each Monday is the result of how you spent the weekend before - and the decade before that.

There is no working week so demanding that it cannot be made better by a properly maintained weekend, and no weekend so restorative that it can rescue a leader who has spent a decade ignoring the three rooms. The arithmetic is cumulative. It is also, for any leader willing to look honestly at it, encouraging - because it tells you exactly what to do this Sunday, this week, this quarter, regardless of how the rest of your career is going. Maintain the rooms. Defend the rooms. Spend the AI dividend on the rooms. The leader who walks into

Monday morning will, across years, become the leader the institution remembers.

* * *

Reflection

1. Of the three rooms - home, community, silence - which one is currently the weakest in your life? When did it begin to weaken, and what would it cost you, this week, to repair the smallest version of it?
2. Who in your life plays the role Vincent and Winni played for me - the people who, before anyone else, said forget the doubters, we can get this done our way, even if it is not familiar? When did you last thank them in writing, by name, for the bet they made on you?
3. If your child or younger relative or younger colleague were to read, in twenty years, the version of you that the AI era is currently producing - the version visible on your dashboards, your inbox, your weekend availability - would they recognise the person you intended to be? If not, what is the smallest decision this Sunday that begins the repair?

Try this week

Pick one of the three rooms - home, community, or silence - and defend one hour of it this week against the working week's claim on it.

Put the hour in the calendar. Treat it as you would treat a meeting with a regulator. Do not let work, Atlas, the inbox, or the dashboard relocate it. Spend the hour in the room you chose, with the people or in the silence the room is for, with full attention and no productivity goal.

At the end of the hour, write one sentence in a private file. The sentence is about who you became during that hour and how that person is different from the one who would have used the hour for output.

Repeat the same hour, in the same room, the following week. After three months, the hour will have become a habit. After three

years, the habit will have become a feature of the leader you are. After three decades, the feature will have become the leader your family and your colleagues and your wider world remember.

Vincent and Winni, in their own way, were defending these hours for our family fifty years ago. The defence is the inheritance. Pass it on.

- Next: Chapter 14,
"AI - Actually Important - A leader's manifesto"

Chapter Fourteen

AI - Actually Important

A leader's manifesto

"The future will not be defined by those who avoid AI but by those who understand how to use it meaningfully."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026

It is, again, a Tuesday evening. The house has gone quiet in the same way it went quiet in Chapter 1, although the dog is older now and the children are arguing themselves to sleep about a slightly different cartoon. The hinge on the home-office door is still not fixed. The redundant comma in the paragraph I rewrote, three hundred pages ago, is still in the version of the leadership note that is now archived somewhere on a server that, in due course, will no longer exist.

Atlas is, again, awake. There is a draft on the screen in front of me. The draft is, this time, the closing chapter of a book.

Atlas's version is fluent. The structure is right. The tone is mostly right. There is one paragraph that, in the AI's confident, generic style, has tried to land the closing of the book in the way the language model thinks closing chapters land. The paragraph is plausible. The paragraph is not the closing the book deserves. The book deserves a closing written in my own voice, knowing the people who have walked through these chapters with me, addressed to the reader who has earned, by getting to the last chapter, the right to a closing that has not been smoothed by a tool that does not know who they are.

So I am going to delete that paragraph. I am going to write this chapter, in its closing form, by hand. Atlas can come back for the next book, and the one after that. This one finishes in a voice the reader and I have, by now, established together.

The chapter has two pieces of work to do. The first is the manifesto - ten plain commitments a leader can make about how they intend to grow in this era. The second is the small, careful return to the staircase metaphor, and the invitation onto the next step. After that, this book hands you over to an Epilogue, and to your own life, and to the work the rest of the week is going to ask of you.

Let us begin with the manifesto.

* * *

The manifesto

The ten commitments below are not framework names. They are not value statements. They are not the kind of sentences that look good on a slide deck or above a desk. They are working promises - the kind a leader can keep, on an ordinary Tuesday, in a room where nobody is watching, on the days the working week is otherwise winning.

Each commitment is short. Each commitment is followed by one paragraph that describes, plainly, what keeping it looks like in practice. None of the ten is, on its own, the whole of leadership. All ten of them together are, in my honest experience, most of what leadership in the AI era will ask of any of us who intend to do it well.

If you take only one thing from this book, take this list. Tape it to your monitor, the way Chapter 7 suggested for the three character commitments of the start-up years. Read it on the morning of any quarter that has begun to feel as if the working week is winning. Adapt it. Make it yours. Pass it on.

The ten commitments

1. I will use AI as a draftsman, not as an oracle.

I will let the tool produce first versions, suggestions, summaries, and rehearsals. I will not let the tool produce my decisions. I will sign only the work I have read carefully, verified where it mattered, and understood enough to defend. The signature is mine. Atlas is part of how the work gets done. Atlas is not the author.

2. I will keep a maker's ledger and add to it.

I will write down, privately, the things I have actually built - regardless of whether anyone has graded them. I will add to the list deliberately. I will read it on the days the marks-and-rankings world is telling me a smaller story about my worth than the one my hands have been writing. I will help the people in my care begin their own ledgers.

3. I will see the people in my care for who they are, not for the booklets they sat on.

I will read past the CV. I will set aside the ranking. I will spend the time required to see the human in front of me. I will refuse to let any instrument - human or algorithmic - replace the slow work of recognition. I will remember, on every Tuesday afternoon I spend in front of someone, that the most important parts of them probably live just outside the edges of whatever the institution measured them by.

4. I will defend the three rooms - home, community, and silence.

I will spend the AI productivity dividend on a fuller life rather than on more output. I will defend at least one hour of one room each week against the working week's claim on it. I will let those rooms shape the leader I bring to Monday morning. I will not let the institution mistake my Sunday evenings for its property.

5. I will bank trust deposits on the days no-one is yet thanking me for them.

I will write a small note. I will make the unrequired call. I will offer the patient explanation when the meeting did not require it. I will check on the person who has been quiet. I will notice the person who is holding the team together without a title. I will tell them, in person, what I have seen them do. I will do this knowing that most of these deposits will never be cashed - and that the small percentage that are will be the reason the institution, on its hardest day, holds together rather than scatters.

6. I will not make my mentees a copy of me.

I will help the people I mentor become the best version of themselves, not the polished version of me they have been quietly tempted to imitate. I will honour their eccentric strengths. I will refuse to develop their differences away. I will let them disagree with me, even loudly, when their thinking has earned the right to. I will be glad, in due course, when they take paths I would not have taken.

7. I will sign only the work I would defend with my own name in front of the people it affects.

I will run the signature test on every standard document, every public communication, every regulatory submission, every policy that operates in a regulated framework. I will do another pass when the test fails. I will treat the institutional shelter as real and the personal accountability as more real. I will not send what I am not willing to defend.

8. I will ask the hard question that the room would prefer I not ask.

I will bear the social cost of asking. I will absorb the silence afterwards. I will take the small political price of being the person who insisted on the question. I will do this not from self-righteousness but from the slow understanding that the silent question is the corrosive one - the question whose absence rots the institution, the team, and, in the end, the asker who chose comfort over truth.

9. I will translate honestly between worlds.

I will be the leader-as-translator-in-residence between the vocabularies my organisation needs to keep talking. I will carry the regulator's actual concern back to the executive team intact. I will carry the customer's actual frustration back to the policy team intact. I will carry the dashboard's awkward number back to the brand sponsor on a Friday afternoon, and let the silence sit. I will refuse to soften the inconvenient parts of the translation. I will trust the institution to do better when it knows the truth.

10. I will keep growing. Faith without Toil is fantasy. Toil without Faith is exhaustion.

I will keep the inner work and the outer work in the same week. I will hold my conviction lightly enough to learn and firmly enough to act. I will pay attention to my own growth, the growth of the people in my care, and the growth of the institution I serve. I will remember the staircase, and the next landing, and the legs that climbed me up to the last one. I will pass on what was given to me. I will give till it hurts. I will be, on as many ordinary Tuesdays as I am given, the leader the people in my care have a right to expect me to be.

* * *

The question AI has handed back to us

There is a particular thing this book has been trying to argue, in different rooms, with different stories, that I want to put in front of you in its plainest form before we close.

AI is actually important, in the end, for one reason and one reason only. AI is actually important because it has handed us back the question every generation has had to answer for itself, and which most of us, for the last several decades, have been able to avoid. The question is what leadership is for.

For the better part of the last century, leadership was about producing output. The output was material. The output was measurable. The output was, in due course, automated, and then automated some more, and then automated some more after that. We did not have to ask the question of what was left for us to do, because there was always more output to chase. The dashboard kept growing. The slide deck kept lengthening. The race kept the question quiet.

AI has finally made the output cheap. The output is, by the time you are reading this, nearly free. The dashboards still glow. The slides still lengthen. The race continues. But every leader paying honest attention can now feel the floor underneath the race beginning to thin,

and the question we had been able to avoid for a hundred years rising up through the floorboards. What is leadership actually for?

This book has been a long, story-shaped attempt to answer that question. The short form of the answer is that leadership has always been for the people. The output was the means. The people are the end. The work the AI era is now exposing as the actual work of leadership is the work that has, in fact, always been the work - the slow, patient, unmeasurable work of seeing people, developing people, defending the standards that protect people, asking the hard questions on their behalf, and giving the dividend back to the rooms that sustain a life worth living.

AI has not changed what leadership is. AI has, finally, made it impossible to pretend that leadership is something else. That is the gift the AI era is offering. The gift, like every honest gift, is also a demand.

* * *

The staircase, one more landing

In Chapter 1 I described leadership as a staircase rather than a ladder, and the chapters since have each been a particular landing on that staircase. The chair in the small office. The headset on the BPO floor. The Saipem project review. The Bangalore-to-Brisbane crossing. The marks-and-making argument. The Pav Thind coffee. The blank page in 2016 and the eight years that followed. The first seventy-two hours of the pandemic. The morning Atlas was named. The hidden syllabus on your team. The four-step verification. Kemal's standards manuals. Sunday morning at the back step.

The staircase has, by this chapter, climbed through every part of a working life I have lived so far. It has, I hope, climbed through the part of yours you have brought with you to the reading.

There is one more landing, and it is the landing this book is now leaving you on.

The next landing is not in the book. The next landing is whatever you choose, this week, this month, this year, to do with the manifesto on the previous page. The next landing is whichever of the ten

commitments you pick first to begin practising. The next landing is whoever, on your team, you are going to see, this Tuesday afternoon, in a way the institution has not yet seen them. The next landing is the small repair to the standards document that has been quietly failing the signature test. The next landing is the hour you are going to defend, this Sunday, against the working week's claim on it.

The staircase does not end at the cover of this book. The staircase ends, for each of us, at whatever shape our final landing takes - and the only thing that matters, between now and then, is the version of the climb we choose to make, on the ordinary Tuesdays that are coming.

* * *

The motto, returned

Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything. Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses.

The motto opened this book in Chapter 1. It has run, like a low drumbeat, underneath every chapter since. I have, over the course of writing the book, become more rather than less convinced of its truth. There is no version of leadership in the AI era - and there has never been a version of leadership in any era - in which Faith without Toil is anything other than a flattering self-portrait, or in which Toil without Faith is anything other than the slow road to exhaustion.

Faith is what allows you to keep going on the days the booklets and the dashboards and the algorithms are telling you a smaller story than the one you intend to live. Toil is what makes the Faith honest. Faith is what allows you to bet, like Vincent and Winni did, on a future you cannot yet see for the people you love. Toil is what makes the bet pay off across the decade that follows. Faith is the inner climb. Toil is the outer climb. The staircase, properly climbed, requires both.

If you have read this book through to this chapter, you have been doing both for the time it took. Thank you for the time. The time, in 2026, is a particular kind of gift.

* * *

Reflection

1. Of the ten commitments, which would cost you the most to keep over the next twelve months - and why? The answer to that question is, in some quiet sense, the diagnostic for which part of the leader you are still becoming.
2. Who in your life will hold you to the manifesto, if you let them? Tell them, this week, that you have made it. Ask them to call you on the days you appear to be drifting from it.
3. What will you say, in five years, to the leader behind you when they ask whether the work was worth growing through this era for? Begin practising the answer, by the small choices you make this Tuesday afternoon.

Try this week

Write your own one-page manifesto.

Take the ten commitments from this chapter as a starting point. Strike out the ones that do not feel like yours. Rewrite the ones that need to land in your own voice. Add the ones this book did not name but your particular working life requires. Keep the list short. Make every line a working promise rather than a values statement.

Read the page once you have finished. Read it to one person who matters before you put it away. The reading aloud does something the silent reading does not - it commits the page to a witness, which is the smallest unit of accountability the manifesto requires to begin working.

Then put the page somewhere you can see it. Read it in the mornings; the working week is otherwise winning. Read it in the quarters the institution is asking more of you than the manifesto has space for. Read it on the days you have signed something you are not sure you should have. Read it, occasionally, on the Sunday mornings that find you at a back step with a cup of coffee and a small careful thought about what kind of leader the next week is going to require.

Across years, the page will be the part of your working life that does not change while everything else does. The page will be, in some quiet sense, the version of yourself you have decided to keep

practising. AI will speed up the world around you. The page will keep you yours.

* * *

Back at the desk

Atlas is, as I write this, still awake. The closing paragraph of this book has been written, by hand, in a voice the language model could not have produced, even though the language model could have produced something that read like it. The hinge on the door has not been fixed. The dog has come back from a late walk. The kitchen, in a few minutes, will be where Ramona is making the kind of small final preparation for tomorrow that she has been making, every Tuesday evening for years, with no audience but the household.

The book ends here. The reader continues. The staircase continues.

If, in three years, you and I meet at a conference, in a parish hall, in a coffee queue at an airport, or at the end of a difficult board meeting, and you tell me that one of the ten commitments has been kept by you across the time between this paragraph and that conversation, I will count the book a success. The whole book has, in some sense, been written for that one conversation. There will be many such conversations, I hope, over the years to come. Each one will be a small completion of the climb.

Thank you, again, for the time.

Faith and Toil. The staircase is yours.

- Next: Epilogue,
"Pass the Torch, Plant the Tree"

Epilogue

Pass the Torch, Plant the Tree

A letter to the leader who comes after me

Dear friend,

This letter is for you. I do not, in any specific sense, know who you are. You may be a colleague I have not yet met, in an institution I have not yet heard of, working on a problem I cannot yet imagine. You may be a younger version of someone I already know. You may be one of the people I currently mentor, reading this on a quiet evening after a long working day. You may be Matteo, in twenty years, finding this book on a shelf and wondering whether his father's chapters still hold up. You may be a stranger who picked up the book because the title caught your eye on a Wednesday afternoon, and who is now, against your own better judgement, still reading thirteen chapters in.

Whoever you are, I want to write to you, in this last letter, as if you were the only reader the book ever had. Everything else in the manuscript has tried to be useful to many readers at once. This letter is just for you.

* * *

There are several things I have learned, across the working life this book has been the long form of, that I want you to know without having to live every chapter to discover them. They are not framework names. They are not a list. They are the small, slightly inconvenient truths that, in my experience, the working world will keep trying to soften on your behalf, and that you will, in due course, have to do the work of remembering on your own.

The first thing I want you to know is that the booklet is not the whole of you. Whatever instrument the world has used to measure you most recently - the test, the report, the algorithm, the recruiter's three-minute scan, the manager's review, the institutional ranking - has

measured a partial version of you, on a particular day, against a particular criterion, with a particular limitation. The result was useful information. The result was not the truth. The most interesting parts of you, almost certainly, live just outside the edges of whatever the measurement was looking for. Carry that knowledge with you when the next verdict arrives. Carry it for the people you will, in due course, be the verdict-giver of.

The second thing is that the world rewards making, not marks. The marks are useful credentials, especially early in a career. The world the AI era is building, however, is one in which output of every conventional kind has become almost free. The making that will compound across your career is the patient, often unmeasured work of building things - documents, decisions, relationships, teams, institutions, traditions - that hold up to scrutiny and bear your name. Keep a maker's ledger. Add to it deliberately. Read it on the days the marks-and-rankings world is trying to tell you a smaller story than the one your hands have been writing.

The third thing is that AI is your draftsman, not your oracle. Use the tool to produce first versions, suggestions, and rehearsals. Sign only the work you have read carefully and would defend with your own name. The signature is what makes you the author of the work, even when the words were produced by a tool. The signature is the part of leadership that AI cannot do for you. The signature is the part the next decade will reward.

The fourth thing is that the people in your care are not measurements. They are humans you have been given the responsibility of seeing. Read past their CVs. Set aside their rankings. Spend the time required to recognise the eccentric strengths the institution did not know to hire them for. Help them become more of themselves, not copies of you. The leaders worth following are the ones who, across a career, leave behind a small group of other leaders the institution did not predict could exist. Be that kind of leader. The work will not appear on any dashboard. It will be the only work that, in the end, mattered.

The fifth thing is that standards are how you care for people you will never meet. The procedures, the policies, the regulatory frameworks, the safety manuals, the codes of conduct - they are not bureaucratic overhead. They are the architecture of the promise the institution has made to the humans whose lives the institution touches. Treat them as that. Sign them carefully. Update them honestly. When the institution is tempted to use AI to flood the system with documents that meet the letter and miss the spirit, be the leader who refuses to sign what would not survive the test of being read in a room with the people the standard exists to protect.

The sixth thing is that the hard question is yours to ask. AI does not produce hard questions. AI produces plausible answers to questions that have already been asked. The hard questions - the ones whose asking would cost you something, the ones the room would prefer you did not ask, the ones whose silence is rotting the institution from inside - are still the human's job. Ask them. Bear the social cost. Sit with the silence afterwards. The leaders who are quietly remembered, twenty years on, are the ones who asked the hard questions when nobody thanked them for it. Be that kind of leader. The world has more polite questioners than it needs. It has too few honest ones.

The seventh thing is that the three rooms - home, community, silence - will keep you from becoming a hollowed-out version of your own LinkedIn profile. Defend them. Spend the AI productivity dividend on them rather than on more output. Maintain them across decades, not just across difficult quarters. The leader who walks into Monday morning with the three rooms intact is the leader the institution actually needed. The leader who has let one or more of them collapse is, in due course, the leadership disaster everyone will be quietly puzzled by.

The eighth thing is that you cannot do work of consequence on your own. There will be a Harvinder somewhere in your career - a quiet, careful person whose belief in you and whose willingness to ask the inconvenient question at the right moment will carry you through stretches of work that nothing else would carry you through. There will be a Kemal somewhere - the kind of leader whose practice of

standards-as-care is a daily example that you will not find in any leadership book. There will, if you are very fortunate, be a Harman or a Goutham - someone who sees you for your values, not for what others have heard about you, and invests their time in you on that basis. There will, if you are very lucky, be a Piyush - a friend whose unforced practice of looking for the good in others, and whose insistence that you live your own life and not dwell on what others are thinking of you, will quietly recalibrate you on the days when the working world is pressing too hard, and whose four-word answer to the worst news a person can be given - I will deal with this - will outlast every leadership book on your shelf. There will be a Dr Sajan George - a person whose courage to ask hard questions, even at personal cost, will set the calibration for your own conscience. Find these people. Recognise them. Tell them what they are to you while they are still alive to hear it. Then become one of them, in turn, for someone else.

The ninth thing is that family is the soil. Whatever working life you build will be built on the soil of the home, the parents, the partners, the siblings, the children, the uncles and aunts, the friends-who-are-family, who will hold the rest of life still long enough for you to do the working part. They will not appear in your CV. They will appear in every decision you make. Honour them. Thank them. When the working world has been telling you a flattering or deflating story about yourself, trust their reading more than the institution's. They have known you longer. They will know you longer. They are right about you in ways the institution will, by design, never be.

The tenth thing is the motto. Faith and Toil will help you achieve anything. Lack any one, and you will have endless excuses. I have written about this in the book. I have lived inside it for decades. I will not, in this letter, say much more about it than this. The motto is not advice. The motto is a description of how working lives turn out the way you would have wanted them to actually turn out. Faith without Toil is fantasy. Toil without Faith is exhaustion. Together, they are the only working theory of leadership I have come across, in any decade, in any room, that has not at some point disappointed me. Hold them together. Pass them on.

* * *

Two pieces of imagery, before I stop writing this letter.

The first is a line from a tradition older than this book. The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now.

Whatever it is you are currently thinking of starting, but have not started because you are not ready, the people are not ready, the institution is not ready, the technology is not ready, the funding is not ready, the timing is not right, or any of the other plausible reasons that working life will offer you for delay - plant it now. The tree you plant this year will not be a fully grown tree for many years. The tree you do not plant this year will not be a fully grown tree, ever. The arithmetic is clear. The hesitation, while it lasts, is the cost. Plant the tree.

The second piece of imagery is the torch. There is a particular kind of leadership that has carried the world through every difficult era, including this one, and the leadership has always taken the same shape. Somebody, an older generation back, carried something heavy - a value, a tradition, a discipline, a body of practice, a small careful institution - through a difficult stretch of years, and then they handed it on to somebody younger, often without saying very much about it, and that younger person carried it for another stretch, and handed it on, and so the line continues. The torch is not glamorous. The torch does not appear in the leadership literature. The torch is, in the AI era and in every era before it, the entire reason any of the leadership we now respect was possible at all.

Take the torch. Carry it for as long as it falls to you to carry. Hand it on, in turn, to whoever you will, in due course, be in a position to hand it on to. They may not, on the day you hand it to them, fully understand what they have been given. That is fine. They will understand it twenty years later, when they are writing their own version of this letter, to their own younger reader.

* * *

This is, in the end, the only thing the book has been trying to give you.

AI is going to keep changing the world around us, in directions that will surprise both of us, in time-frames neither of us can predict. The institutions you and I work in will be reshaped, in the next decade, more dramatically than they have been reshaped in the previous half-century. The dashboards will keep glowing. The output will keep getting cheaper. The pace will not slow. None of that is in our hands.

What is in our hands is the version of ourselves we choose to bring to the work, the people we choose to see along the way, the standards we choose to keep when nobody is watching, the trees we choose to plant, and the torches we choose to carry. That is the part the AI era has handed back to us. That is the part we have been given the privilege of taking on.

If you and I never meet, but you carry one of the ten commitments from the previous chapter through the next decade of your life, the book will have done its work. If you and I do meet, somewhere, and you tell me which commitment it was, I will count the conversation among the most important of my career. There will be many such conversations, I hope, across the years to come. Each one will be a small completion of the chain that this letter is, in the end, just one small link in.

Thank you for reading.

Thank you for the time. The time, in 2026, is a particular kind of gift, and I have been honoured to spend yours.

Faith and Toil.

Plant the tree. Carry the torch. Pass it on.

With every good wish for the staircase still ahead of you,

Vivian Lobo

Brisbane, 2026

* * *

In memory

Piyush Jaiswal, my friend, died in 2025, after this book had been begun and before it was complete. He was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2022 and met the diagnosis the way he had met every other room he had ever walked into - by looking for the good in the people around him, by refusing to spend any of his remaining time dwelling on what other people might be thinking of him, by telling dad jokes well past the point at which dad jokes were socially required, and by answering, every time the question was put to him, with the same four words.

I will deal with this.

The four words are, in the end, the working sentence I would like to leave you with at the close of this book. They are not bravado. They are not in denial. They are the calm, accurate, leader's decision to take what arrives without making the room carry it for you. Piyush carried his humour, with grace, and with a steadiness that will, in his absence, continue to instruct the rest of us across the years he did not get to walk through.

This book is dedicated, in part, to him. The torch he carried is, in its small way, also being passed on. The book is, in part, the passing on.

Quotes Used

Themed for the publisher's review

This section gathers the chapter epigraphs and motto into one place, organised by theme. Each entry includes the chapter it opens.

* * *

Faith and Toil - the spine of the book

*"Faith and Toil will help you
achieve anything. Lack any
one, and you will have endless
excuses."*

*- Vivian Lobo - Motto /
Prologue / Chapter 1: The
Quiet Revolution*

*"Faith in yourself, in your
people, in the vision - without
it, every obstacle becomes a
reason to stop."*

*- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
Chapter 7: The Start-up
Crucible*

*"What you carry into work
each Monday is the result of
how you spent the weekend
before - and the decade before
that."*

*- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
Chapter 13: Faith, Family,
and the Long Game*

* * *

Leadership and character

"Leadership is not about how far we have come, but how well we remember where we started."

- Vivian Lobo - Chapter 2:
'You Have No Strengths'

"The true concept of empowerment does not require titles or offices; it requires your belief and your commitment."

- Vivian Lobo, 2019 -
Chapter 3: Lessons from the Headset

"True empowerment is when you allow that person to make decisions and support those decisions they make."

- Vivian Lobo, 2019 -
Chapter 4: People Before Process

"When people feel seen and backed by someone who truly believes in their potential, fear loses its grip."

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
Chapter 8: The Pandemic Pivot

* * *

AI as colleague, not oracle

*"AI doesn't replace
understanding. It demands
more of it."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -

Chapter 5: Marks vs Making

*"The future isn't AI vs people.
It's AI + people done right."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -

Chapter 6: Bridging Worlds

*"AI cannot look a person in
the eye and genuinely want to
see them succeed."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -

*Chapter 9: AI as
Mentorship's Multiplier*

*"The future will not be defined
by those who avoid AI but by
those who understand how to
use it meaningfully."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -

*Chapter 14: AI - Actually
Important: A Leader's
Manifesto*

* * *

Standards, curiosity and verification

*"It is the process that we must
support and not just the
outcome."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2023 -

*Chapter 10: The Curriculum
of Curiosity*

*"Curiosity is not naivety. It is
how we evolve."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
*Chapter 11: Don't Believe
Everything*

*"The standard you set is the
standard you are held to."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
*Chapter 12: Compliance,
Conscience, and Compassion*

* * *

Living and leading - the four words from the Epilogue

"I will deal with this."

- Piyush Jaiswal (d. 2025) -
*Epilogue: In memory; quoted
in Chapter 13*

*"Plant the tree. Carry the
torch. Pass it on."*

- Vivian Lobo, 2026 -
*Epilogue: Pass the Torch,
Plant the Tree*

* * *

Reflection Companion

*All 42 questions in one place - for journalling, leadership-team discussion,
or as a 14-week study guide*

Each chapter ends with three questions. They are gathered here together so you can return to them, take them to your team, or use them as the spine of a small study group. The book reads cover-to-cover; the questions read in any order.

* * *

Chapter 1 - The Quiet Revolution

1. Whose verdict about you have you been quietly carrying - and how often does it still set the ceiling on what you let yourself try?
2. What part of your job, if you are honest, is now better done by a tool? And what part is impossible for a tool to do - and how often do you actually do that part?
3. If an earlier version of you - the one who had not yet been measured by anyone - could see your week, what would they ask?

Chapter 2 - 'You Have No Strengths'

1. What is the harshest verdict anyone has ever passed on your potential - and what did you do with it? Notice the shape of the instrument they were holding when they made the call.
2. Where in your week is an automated instrument currently passing a verdict on you that you have not consented to - in your inbox, on your performance dashboard, in the algorithm sorting your CVs?
3. Who in your team needs, this month, to be told what you actually see in them - and not what their last printout said?

Chapter 3 - Lessons from the Headset

1. Who was Anita on the first team you ever joined - the person who held things together without a title? What did they do that you still carry, often without realising you carry it?
2. What does the board on the wall of your current team measure - and what is it not measuring? List the three most important things it cannot see.
3. Where in your week are you currently teaching when you should be coaching - answering questions instead of finding out which question your team is actually carrying?

Chapter 4 - People Before Process

1. Pick one process on your team that, if you are honest, is currently making people smaller rather than safer. What was it originally designed to do, and what would it cost you to repair its purpose this quarter?
2. Of the dashboards your organisation now runs on people-data, which one are you most tempted to mistake for the truth - and what is it not measuring?
3. If a regulator audited the most automated people-decision your organisation made last week, would you be willing to put your name on it? If not, what changes between now and the next audit?

Chapter 5 - Marks vs Making

1. What is the most valuable thing you have made in the last year that no one has ever given you a mark for? Write it down. Notice what it costs you that the dashboards do not see.
2. Who on your team is currently being underestimated because their numbers are unimpressive? What have they actually been making that the dashboard cannot represent?
3. If you removed every output from your last quarter that AI could now produce in twenty minutes, what would be left of your contribution? Look at what is left without flinching.

Chapter 6 - Bridging Worlds

1. Which two worlds are you currently translating between, in your working life, that do not naturally talk to each other? Name them. Notice that the translation is most of what makes you valuable - and notice that nobody is paying you for it directly.
2. What is the last piece of data that changed your mind? If you cannot recall one in the last six months, you are probably reading dashboards rather than asking them questions.
3. When was the last time you delivered a piece of translated truth to a senior leader on a Friday afternoon - and let the silence sit afterwards? If you cannot remember, ask yourself why your career has not yet required that of you, or whether you have been quietly avoiding it.

Chapter 7 - The Start-up Crucible

1. Who is your Harvinder - the person whose belief in you, whose patience with you, and whose willingness to ask the awkward question at the right moment carries you through the parts of the work that nothing else would carry you through? If you cannot name them yet, that is the most important relationship you are not currently building.
2. If your organisation tripled in size in the next eighteen months, who would crack first - your systems, your people, or you? Look honestly at the answer. The cracks you can predict are the ones you can prepare for.
3. What is one corner you cut in the last year, in the small version of your team, that you would be embarrassed by if the team were ten times bigger and the same corner were cut at the same proportion? That is the corner that scale is going to expose.

Chapter 8 - The Pandemic Pivot

1. When was the last time your team saw you make a decision in real time, with imperfect information, and own it afterwards?

If you cannot recall one, the next storm has not yet rehearsed you, and the rehearsal is most of the preparation.

2. What 'trust deposits' are you making this quarter that nobody is yet thanking you for? Name three by name. If you cannot, you are running on the trust other people banked for you, and that account will eventually empty.
3. If the AI floor shifts under your team in the next eighteen months - a tool retired, a vendor bought, a model regressed, a regulator reversed - who will steady them on the first morning?

Chapter 9 - AI as Mentorship's Multiplier

1. Who, in your working life so far, has been the version of Harman or Goutham for you - the leader who saw past your CV to the person sitting in front of them?
2. Who in your team or your network is, currently, in the position you were in when you most needed someone to see you for who you actually were rather than what you had been measured as?
3. Of your AI uses this week, which ones make you a better mentor - and which ones make you faster at output that does not, in the end, deepen your relationships?

Chapter 10 - The Curriculum of Curiosity

1. If your team were a course, what would the unit titles be? Write them down. Notice which titles you would proudly send to a regulator and which you would quietly hope no-one ever audited.
2. What is one thing your team is teaching - quietly, repeatedly, in ways no manual ever describes - that you would not, on reflection, choose to teach?
3. Of your direct reports, who is currently being developed away from the eccentric strength you originally hired them for? What would it cost you to stop?

Chapter 11 - Don't Believe Everything

1. What is the last AI-assisted document you sent that you cannot, today, fully defend if every claim in it were challenged? Find it. Read it again. Notice the gap.
2. Which hard question, in your last several meetings, did you not ask because the room would have preferred you not ask it? What would it cost you to ask it next time?
3. Of your team members, who would currently be willing to ask the hard question on your behalf in a room you were not in? If the answer is no-one, the gap is yours, not theirs.

Chapter 12 - Compliance, Conscience, and Compassion

1. Pick one regulatory framework or standard you currently sign documents under. When was the last time you read its origin - the harm or hope that gave rise to it?
2. Of the standards-related documents your organisation has produced in the last quarter, which ones could you defend in the room with the people the standard exists to protect?
3. Which of compliance, conscience, and compassion is currently the weakest of the three on your team? Which would you have ranked weakest five years ago, and what changed?

Chapter 13 - Faith, Family, and the Long Game

1. Of the three rooms - home, community, silence - which one is currently the weakest in your life? When did it begin to weaken, and what would it cost you, this week, to repair the smallest version of it?
2. Who in your life plays the role Vincent and Winni played for me - the people who, before anyone else, said forget the doubters, we can get this done our way, even if it is not familiar? When did you last thank them in writing, by name, for the bet they made on you?
3. If your child or younger relative or younger colleague were to read, in twenty years, the version of you that the AI era is

currently producing - the version visible on your dashboards, your inbox, your weekend availability - would they recognise the person you intended to be?

Chapter 14 - AI - Actually Important: A Leader's Manifesto

1. Of the ten commitments, which would cost you the most to keep over the next twelve months - and why? The answer to that question is, in some quiet sense, the work the manifesto is asking you to begin.
2. Who in your life will hold you to the manifesto, if you let them? Tell them, this week, that you have made it. Ask them to call you on the days you appear to have forgotten.
3. What will you say, in five years, to the leader behind you when they ask whether the work was worth growing through this era for? Begin practising the answer now.

About the Author

Vivian Lobo did not arrive at this book by the obvious route.

He started his working life at a customer-service operation in Bangalore, on a headset, taking calls for people on the other side of the world who customarily could not always pronounce his name and mostly did not always want to. He spent close to seven years as a Senior Analyst at Mphasis, learning, before he had any of the words for it, that leadership is mostly the small craft of paying attention — to a customer who is angry for reasons that are not really about you, to a colleague who is quietly underwater, to your own voice on a long shift when the easiest thing is to stop sounding like yourself.

From there the road bent through three continents and several industries. He partnered with managers in the oil-and-gas sector at Saipem Australia as an HR Business Partner, and developed the reporting and analytics tools that turned people-data into something leaders could actually act on. He built and embedded HR strategy and workforce plans at American College, sat on its Academic and Governing Boards, and quietly began the work that would become Leaders Institute. He ran a national sales-and-service training program at Creative Activation for one of the most recognised technology brands on earth, working across Victoria and Queensland with retail teams who taught him as much as he taught them.

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He then helped lead Leaders Institute Pty Ltd as Director — HR, Student Recruitment, and Business Administration, an Australian higher-education start-up that he and a small team grew from a blank page through TEQSA registration into a profitable, multi-campus institution offering first-of-its-kind programs to students from around the world. He navigated that business through the COVID-19 pivot, growing the team to twenty-five full-time staff and embedding the HR systems, governance, and partnerships that allowed it to keep teaching

when the world stopped moving. Today he is the Chief Executive Officer of TBP CODOT, a software business delivering AI-powered solutions across the Australasia region, and Director of Operations (Brisbane) at Ozford Australia, where he leads a campus through the quiet daily work of compliance under TEQSA and ESOS, student support, and care.

He is undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy from Torrens University Australia, holds a Master of Business in Human Resources from the Queensland University of Technology, and a Bachelor of Science from Bangalore University and St Joseph's College of Arts and Science. Along the way his classroom contributions earned a Vice-Chancellor's Commendation in the Three-Minute Thesis competition and recognitions for postgraduate participation and contribution to university life. He chairs the parish pastoral council of the Catholic Parish of Lutwyche, serves as a Justice of the Peace for Queensland, and writes regularly on LinkedIn about leadership, AI, and the long game.

That is the resume version. It is true, but it is not the version that wrote this book.

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The version that wrote this book has walked alongside people on their hardest mornings, watched some of them fall, and quietly walked them back up the staircase one step at a time. He has also, more often than is comfortable to put on a page, been the one doing the falling. He has had ideas of his own taken without credit and presented as somebody else's. He has watched dreams he had nursed for years — for an institution, for a team, for himself — been trampled by people in too much of a hurry to notice what they were standing on. He has sat in offices, at desks in two different countries, and quietly wondered whether he was worth the trouble he was clearly causing the people who loved him. He has come close, in the very ordinary way that working people come close, to deciding that he was not. He did not stop. The reason he did not stop is the reason this book exists.

He is also aware that the journey he has walked is not unique. Every reader of this book has come through hardships of one kind or another — the kind that make their way into a story years later, and the kind that never do. He believes, deeply, that the work of a leader in the AI era is not to pretend those hardships did not happen, or to file them under “things to be coached out of you”. The work is the opposite. It is to help the people behind us see that the very thing the world told them was a limitation — the accent, the gap year, the unfashionable degree, the fall, the second-language thinking, the long road — is, in the end, the engine. It is the strength. It is the motivation. It is the part that no AI assistant, however clever, can replace.

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He likes the way John C. Maxwell put it:

“Teamwork makes the dream work, but a vision becomes a nightmare when the leader has a big dream and a bad team.”

He has been on both sides of that line. He has watched dreams turn into nightmares because the wrong people were in the wrong seats, and he has watched ordinary plans turn into extraordinary outcomes because a small group of the right people decided to walk together. He wrote this book while siding with teamwork. None of us, he believes, do this alone. The journey is shared. The dream, when it works, is shared too. This book is one of his ways of saying so — a small attempt to support the new journeys, the new aspirations, and the new leaders quietly stepping into the rooms behind him.

If there is a single sentence behind why he wrote it, it is this. He wanted to leave something on the bench beside the next person sitting in the seat he once sat in — the one who is wondering whether they are worth it, whether their idea is worth it, whether their hardship has disqualified them from something or quietly equipped them for it. He believes, with all the Faith and all the Toil he has put in, has equipped them. He hopes this book is a small, steady hand on their shoulder while they discover that for themselves.

He lives in Brisbane with his wife Ramona and their son Matteo. They are, in the most accurate sense of the word, the team behind every page of this book.

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