WHITEPAPER

AI Is Not the Problem.
It Reveals What's Always Been There.

Why companies in the intelligence age get stuck inside their own organization — and how they start moving again.

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Executive Summary

AI has arrived in the daily work of companies, and it's changing how we work faster than we can keep up. The big payoff, though, still hasn't landed.

New tools every week. Pilot projects in every department. AI on the agenda of every leadership meeting. And still something nags that's hard to name: people are getting more productive, but the company as a whole isn't.

The numbers bear this out. According to the *Bitkom Study 2026*, AI adoption more than doubled in a single year, from 17 to 41 percent. Germany, by the count of Deloitte's *The ROI of AI*, is among the heaviest AI users in the world. The strategic payoff trails far behind.

Ask why, and the usual answers surface fast: budgets, skills, strategy. But what we keep seeing in our work with companies sits deeper. Most organizations meet the speed of AI with structures built for a different era — structures made for stability, clear lines of responsibility, central control. Structures that worked for decades, which is exactly why they're so hard to change.

What AI exposes here isn't a technology problem.

It's a problem of an organization's ability to move in volatile environments.

This whitepaper explains why that is — and what companies can do if they want to become not just more efficient, but genuinely able to act. Three core principles point the way: **Decision over Process. Ownership over Control. Connection over Hierarchy.** Together they build what we call dynamic robustness — the ability to keep moving in volatile environments.

Written for leaders who feel the widening gap between how fast technology moves and how their own organization actually works. Who sense that more tools won't fix it. And who are ready to ask the real question:

> **What kind of organization do we need to be for AI to work at all?**

Contents

1.

The great illusion

Not long ago, AI was fear number one. The headlines were about disruption, about jobs disappearing, about whole industries being torn down and rebuilt. Today, large language models are part of everyday life. Across fields and functions, people are trying things, feeling their way forward, gaining skills. Not being able to take in the whole picture, many people grabbed hold of something specific — and found a bit of solid ground there.

The flood of AI commentary has added to that sense of calm, and this whitepaper is part of the flood. The conversation feels more level-headed now, the handling more assured. And yet, even as we suspect we're only at the dawn of the intelligence age, it's presumptuous to think most companies are deep in an AI transformation.

At first glance, plenty suggests they are. Marketing runs its content through generative AI. R&D spins up its own analysis tool. Sales has AI pre-screen its proposals. Even in the executive suite, speeches are now written by Claude and its peers rather than staff. A lot is in motion, and companies aren't shy about investing, piloting, or bringing in experts. As a tool, AI is already making people more productive and processes leaner.

Just how far it has spread is clear from the *Bitkom Study 2026*. The share of companies actively using AI more than doubled in a year, from 17 to 41 percent. Another 48 percent plan to start. And yet most users still rank themselves as laggards. The ship is moving — but no one's steering it.

Deloitte's *The ROI of AI* tells the same story internationally. Germany is among the top AI users worldwide; in roughly four of ten companies, most of the workforce uses AI tools — the highest rate in Europe and the Middle East. The strategic payoff still trails far behind.

AI props daily tasks and rarely changes the business itself. The sum of a thousand small initiatives doesn't make the company perform any better. If anything, it gets more rattled.

This isn't a technology problem. It's something more basic. The world had already turned volatile, fast, and uncertain before AI showed up. Organizations have been under pressure to adapt for years — and that pressure isn't just a feeling, it's measurable. The *World Uncertainty Index*, compiled by the IMF and Stanford, roughly doubled between the end of 2024 and the end of 2025. In PwC's global CEO survey, confidence in a company's own revenue growth fell to its lowest in five years — even as more than four in ten of the 4,400-plus executives said they'd pushed into new industries in the past five. Living in a state of change, in other words, is still nowhere near routine.

In most places, old habits still run the show: analyze, cover your bases, sign off. In Dave Snowden's Cynefin framework, that's the logic of complicatedness — and it breaks down the moment cause and effect stop lining up in any predictable way. On structures like these, AI acts like an accelerant poured on a system that needed recalibrating in the first place.

Which pushes forward a question many companies rarely had to ask:

> **How apt is our own organization to act, when change never stops?**

Here's the great illusion: believing that technological motion already amounts to transformation. AI isn't so much a tool. It's a stress test for how organizations work in today's day and age.

This whitepaper puts that stress test to work. First we make it visible and look at the causes. Then we offer a way through, with three core principles that keep organizations moving amid constant change: Decision over Process, Ownership over Control, and Connection over Hierarchy.
That leadership must change along with them goes without saying — we will touch on it here and go into more detail in a separate white paper.

2.

AI meets a Taylorist reality

AI is making something visible that was there long before it arrived. What we see again and again with our clients is painfully familiar. Decisions that drag on for weeks even though everyone agrees action is needed. Responsibility shuffled between departments, or quietly dropped. People told to be flexible while they stay boxed into fixed remits and slow approval chains. All of it is the mark of a heavy, slow-moving organization — and none of it is really about AI.

The roots run deep. Most companies still operate on templates inherited from the industrial age. Work was carved up, responsibility neatly bounded, knowledge concentrated among a few at the top. That logic was wildly successful — especially in Germany, where precision and process reliability became the hallmark of economic strength. Which is part of why the patterns cling on so stubbornly.

You can still see it every day. Departments think along their own functional lines. Responsibility stops where the org chart stops. Processes exist mainly to reduce risk and guarantee reliability. Even where the talk is of innovation, the work itself stays wrapped in approvals and cover-your-bases caution.

So two logics collide. The outside world demands speed, connection, constant adaptation. The Taylorist organization runs on the opposite: separation — between functions, remits, pockets of knowledge. It was built for stability and out of stability. When decisions need to move closer to the reality they're meant to affect, those internal borders begin to buckle. Companies can look modern and still be far too rigid for the conditions they now face. And however fast technology moves — as fast as any of us has ever seen — the operating logic underneath stays put.

AI doesn't relieve that tension. It gets folded into the existing structure. Central decisions stay central, silos stay intact, processes just run faster. What you get is more speed inside the same old logic.

Markus Reuter lived this pattern as head of e-commerce at Karstadt, then as Chief Digital Officer at MediaMarktSaturn. Today he advises managing directors on building a workable AI strategy.

> *"Back in the day at Karstadt, getting an email address was a bureaucratic act. A whole line of people had to sign off on whether the cost per employee was justified. Today you show up and get your email address, no problem. But show up today and you still won't get your Copilot license — because the thing costs 30 euros."*[1]

It's not about the 30 euros. It's about an organization that runs everything new through its old cost-and-control logic, and in doing so stalls the very thing it needs. When you don't understand a tool, you ask what it costs before you ask what it changes.

When the underlying logic stays the same, AI mostly just amplifies the patterns already there.

3.

Catalyst and mirror

At the team level, AI shows results fast. Meetings are better prepped, content is produced quicker, reports are richer and easier to pull into shape.

Company-wide, it gets harder. Individual tasks get done faster, but the way people work together — the decision paths, the lines of responsibility — stays exactly as it was. Projects run in parallel; teams chase their own priorities. Sometimes they're working on the very same thing without knowing it, never pooling their angles. Urgent decisions dissolve into rounds of alignment, get "kicked upstairs," or simply never happen. The organization becomes more efficient and, as a whole, no more able to act.

Which confirms something: AI takes its effect from the conditions it's implemented in. Where responsibilities are clear and decision paths short, it thrives. Where processes are murky and responsibilities diffuse, it mostly speeds up whatever's already there. Bad workflows run faster. Silo thinking and silo behavior go digital. Extra tools increase complexity without making collaboration any better or solving customers' problems any faster.

In most cases, AI works better than organizations can absorb it. So it acts as catalyst and mirror at once: it accelerates the patterns already in place, and it shows, plainly, how a company actually works.

What that looks like on the ground is heard most clearly where the tools are built. Thorsten Heilig, founder of *paretos*, a Heidelberg platform for AI-based decision-making, recalls a client who warned him before rollout.

> *"If we take what your system can do and just switch it on as an improvement, sooner or later I'm going to get the question: so what exactly was I doing before?"* [2]

That's the flip side of the mirror. The moment AI makes a better decision visible, it puts the old decision up for negotiation too. In an operating model built to cover itself, that question is threatening. So instead of a careful rollout, you get a stalled one.

Digitize a bad process and you don't get a better process. You get a bad process that is quicker. Whether that turns into real progress depends less on the technology than on whether the organization can keep acting amid constant change.

4.

When knowledge loses its monopoly

Since the industrial age, organizations have rested on one stable principle: knowledge was unevenly held. A few people had the information, the experience, the expertise that everyone else depended on. Out of that grew hierarchies, remits, decision paths.

In many companies, that logic still runs today. Leadership is often justified only by knowing more. Know more, and you decide. Know less, and you execute. Knowledge wasn't just a resource — it was the basis of power. That's now changing at the root.

Knowledge today is available almost everywhere. This didn't start with AI: mass education and mass media set it up, the internet sped it along, search engines made hyper-specific knowledge accessible in a matter of seconds. AI is only the latest wave — though a striking one. It condenses more, surfaces connections faster, puts knowledge within reach in real time. Expertise now lives across networks, teams, roles, and contexts. It's no longer reliably tied to a particular function or rung.

Knowledge hasn't disappeared. But its exclusivity keeps shrinking. Knowledge is becoming a commodity.

For organizations, that's a deep cut. Build your authority on owning knowledge, and you lose a lever of control. Justify your hierarchy through knowing more, and you'll need a new justification.

In their book *Decision Intelligence*, Thorsten Heilig and Ilhan Scheer come to a nearby conclusion from a different angle. Both work with companies wrestling with AI, and they see early where it fails: an organization that truly puts AI to work can't, at the same time, cling to an operating logic built on the value of someone knowing more.

What fills the gap isn't a new control model — it's a different precondition. Psychological safety, the term coined by Harvard's Amy Edmondson, becomes an organizational requirement. Not because it's softer than control, but because without it the decisions AI points toward never actually land inside the organization.

When everyone can reach the same data and the same analysis, it no longer matters who knows most. What matters is who can decide at the right moment, make the call, and stand behind it.

The value of human work shifts accordingly. The bottleneck is no longer access to information — the information is right there, in quality and in volume. What counts is the ability to read situations, make decisions under uncertainty, and connect different perspectives. That work remains in the human domain.

These aren't traits you can delegate to a single role. They have to be present across the whole organzation. Otherwise the decisions that now have to be made far more often, and far faster, keep getting made only "at the top" — right where they always were.

That reshapes the job of collaboration itself. The decisions that matter no longer come from one department. They come from where perspectives meet. Organizations get steered less by passing knowledge along; they need shared direction, shared ownership, and clear decision rights. Many are only half-ready for that shift. They keep running on patterns where control, cover, and formal remits count for more than judgment and joined-up work.

Knowledge isn't becoming unimportant. But the edge will come less from holding information than from knowing what to do with it. And that ability has to reach everywhere — not just the top.

5.

The decision bottleneck

When projects stall, attention jumps to the tangible: knowledge, data, technology. And to the people involved. The reflex is to optimize a process — or optimize a person.

But the information is usually there. The analysis is done. Teams have generated ideas and mapped the options. And still the delays pile up: decisions loop through committees, get re-aligned, get postponed "to be safe." Responsibility spreads across level after level without ever producing clarity.

Organizations rarely choke on missing knowledge. They choke on decisions they make too slowly, or never make at all.

Thorsten Heilig sums it up in one line:

> *"We don't really have a technology problem in Europe. We have a decision vacuum. At every level — including politics."*[2]

The line stays with you. Keep talking to people and you'll hear a dozen versions of the same pattern. The data's there. The tools are there. The use cases are written up. What's missing is the moment someone picks an answer and stands behind it.

Decision bottlenecks aren't an invention of the AI era. They show up wherever markets move faster than the organizations trying to keep up. AI turns up the pressure: it multiplies the decisions that need making and makes their context harder to read. It raises the bar on quality, too, because now you need speed and judgment at the same time. Hierarchy and long alignment chains are less and less up to it.

For a lot of companies, the result is a slow overload. Employees are told to take ownership but have very little room to make decisions. Leaders are told to give direction — the very direction they wish came down to them from above — while still believing every call has to be theirs.

What you get is a pattern everyone recognizes. Everyone sees that something needs deciding. Nobody actually decides.

Uncertainty can't be managed away. Deloitte's *Global Human Capital Trends 2026* documents this on a broad base: 88 percent of the leaders surveyed say the ability to shift responsibility and resources dynamically is important. Only 7 percent actually do it.

Just how structurally lodged the bottleneck is shows up most sharply around AI itself. Per the *ROI of AI* survey, the AI agenda in German companies sits with the CIO a third of the time. It sits with the CEO in just two percent of cases — the lowest of any market studied. AI decisions are made where technology is scaled, not where the business model is owned.

That's what marks a future-ready organization. Not maximum stability, but the ability to ride market movement instead of being dragged under by it. Gerhard Wohland calls this capability dynamic robustness ("Dynamikrobustheit"). It grows wherever decisions stay possible under uncertainty and responsibility isn't forever handed further up the line.

The capacity to act doesn't show up in strategy decks or vision statements. It shows up wherever people can make effective decisions in service of the organization's Puropse.

6.

How organizations avoid themselves

Watch how a company handles AI and you get a clear read on how much it's unconsciously avoiding itself.

If your first thought is "I'm not avoiding anything — I'm prioritizing under real constraints," you're right. Tight budgets, an empty labor market, tangled compliance: none of it just evaporates. Self-avoidance here isn't personal. It means the organization, as a system, is built to see only half of itself. Which half becomes clear from a simple picture.

Digitalization has two sides. A technical one — tools, systems, processes. And a human one — the ability to decide, to take ownership, to work together. Only when the two mesh do you get real impact and genuine room to shape what comes next.

In practice, almost all attention flows to the first side. And even there, the movement is timid. *The ROI of AI* shows that 41 percent of German companies put a tenth or less of their tech budget into AI. A study by the German Economic Institute (IW) finds that just 2.2 percent of more than 1,000 surveyed companies use — or plan to use — AI across all their relevant areas. Even the technical build-out is half-hearted and patchy.

The second side never even reaches the budget. Investing in the ability to decide, in a culture of ownership, in the muscle to handle change — none of it is easily measured, so none of it is organizationally visible. And what isn't easily measurable rarely gets pursued.

Where the neglect of the human side shows most is around strategy. Nearly every company has a strategy or a vision. In daily life, most of it quickly loses its grip. It's presented and communicated but barely shapes real decisions. Usually not because people don't understand it. Humans can read the gap between strategic ambition and lived reality with painful accuracy. The talk is of ownership and speed while, on the ground, decision paths stay long, approvals rule, and work is still carved up by function.

The result is a quiet conflict. The strategy describes one kind of organization; daily life delivers another. People rarely push back openly — they respond with caution, adaptation, or retreat. And the conditions around them usually reward something other than the strategic story.

The pattern around strategy repeats with AI. Worn down over time by the gap between the promise and the reality, people fall back on whatever works right now. When no workable AI approach comes from above, they source the tools themselves and boost their own effectiveness.

The organizational fallout — from data protection breaches to missed opportunity — lands somewhere else entirely. A lot happens; no one owns the direction.

Markus Reuter puts a concrete number on this from his advisory work.

> *"We know that a huge share of the ChatGPT logins being used inside companies — 80 percent is the last figure I heard — run on private accounts. Which means these are personal accounts people are doing company work in."*[1]

While leadership debates the compliance question, the workforce has long since taken on the compliance risk just to keep working. Withhold licenses out of caution and you haven't removed the risk. You've only made it invisible.

When the outside world becomes increasingly unstable, clarity on the inside begins to matter. Who are we as an organization? What do we stand for? How do we decide when the ground keeps shifting? In the intelligence age, those questions sharpen. Machine intelligence is on tap. What makes the difference is human intelligence — which Taylorist structures spent a long time neither asking for nor developing.

7.

It starts with your assumptions about human nature

Every organization runs on a set of assumptions about people — usually without knowing it. Even where it spots those assumptions and reaches for better ones, the old ones keep working away in its social wiring.

In most companies, "people" are mainly an HR topic. That's where the language of ownership, agility, and entrepreneurial thinking lives. What employees actually experience — the room they get to decide, how hierarchy really behaves, how mistakes are treated — often tells a different story. Conditions don't change, people are rarely equipped to work differently, and yet the demands on them keep climbing.

Underneath sits a tension deeper than any single process or leadership tool. How people work, decide, and deal with uncertainty was mapped by Douglas McGregor back in the 1960s, in two contrasting pictures: Theory X and Theory Y. We've added one dimension that matters especially now — how people handle uncertainty.

Theory X		Theory Y
People don't like work and will avoid it wherever they can.	**Attitude**	People need work and want to find meaning in it.
People have to be pushed or bribed into any real effort.	**Self-Direction**	People steer and regulate themselves toward goals they accept.
People would rather be told what to do than take responsibility — which they gladly dodge.	**Responsibility**	People seek and accept responsibility when the conditions are right.
People are motivated mainly by money.	**Motivation**	People are motivated by the chance to grow into their own potential.
Most people aren't very creative.	**Creativity**	Creativity and imagination are widespread — and rarely fully tapped.
Uncertainty paralyzes people and has to be cushioned with firm structures and clear orders.	***Handling Uncertainty***	*People can navigate uncertainty when they share reference points and trust.*

Most organizations aren't a pure case of either. But they lean. And the lean shows up not in the mission statement but in daily practice — in how control is exercised, how approvals flow, how trust is handed out.

Plenty of people have spent years learning to succeed inside these patterns. They take ownership routinely — for their area, their tasks, their expertise, their results, even their weak spots. The one thing they can't take ownership of is whether the organization as a whole actually works.

AI sharpens the tension. Per the *Global Human Capital Trends*, 80 percent of the leaders and employees surveyed worry that colleagues — or whole teams — are using AI to look more productive than they really are. That distrust isn't confined to one level; it runs right through the organization. Meanwhile companies invest almost nothing in the kind of enablement that would let trust take hold. According to *The ROI of AI*, only about a third of German organizations make AI training mandatory, and nearly one in five offers none at all. Organizations expect fluency with a technology they barely invest in mastering. How a company sees its people shows less in its strategy papers than in its training budget.

Notably, companies do see the problem. In the German Economic Institute's survey, 61.9 percent name the need to upskill the workforce as one of the biggest barriers to using AI. So the diagnosis is on the table. It just isn't being acted on.

When the basic read on people is built on control rather than trust, AI doesn't create new behavior. It speeds up the old.

> **What assumptions about people makes room for the contribution an organization is going to need?**

8.

What kind of organization must we be?

With AI, different parts of the same organization start moving at very different speeds. Some teams try new applications, automate steps, rack up quick, visible wins. Other units guard stability, manage risk, keep the existing machinery reliable. Both have their place.

The trouble starts when parts fall out of sync. You end up with organizations with one foot on the accelerator and one on the brake. What shows up as a productivity gain for an individual often never reaches the level of the whole. The structures that would link one to the other simply aren't there.

Many leaders feel this tension within themselves. On one side, the sense that technology is causing a fundamental shift. On the other, the sense of their own organization not carrying that shift at the same pace. It starts to feel like more is happening outside than in.

Which is how the question changes. It's no longer just "how do we deploy AI?" It's what kind of organization we have to be for AI to work at all?

The technology matters less than whether the organization can keep moving in volatile environments. Dynamic robustness is the name for that capability. It's about holding your bearings in motion, connecting different speeds, and treating constant change as the default rather than the exception.

Acceleration alone won't get you there. More tools create options, not clarity. More information doesn't necessarily lead to better decisions. More motion is no substitute for a shared sense of direction.

AI isn't a self-contained tech topic. It changes the conditions under which people connect and make decisions. And with that, the character of the organization itself. Roles become more fluid, collaboration crosses departmental lines, learning becomes constant. The role of leadership shifts too.

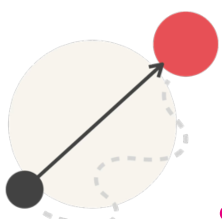
9.

Three core principles for dynamic robustness

The chapters so far have shown where organizations hit their limits with AI. They rarely fail on the technology. They fail on structures built for a different world. Decision paths too long. Responsibility that never lands. Collaboration that won't take hold, because people are slotted into functions while real value is created across functions.

The reflex is one of two answers. Buy tools, and hope for technology to fix what the structure won't. Or train and optimize people, so individuals can bridge by hand what doesn't fit by design. Both have a place. But where the pattern is systemic, addressing tools or people alone won't cut it. Both levels have to move together, and the change has to reach the pattern itself.

What organizations need now boils down to three core principles. They're not methods — they're directions of movement. Each works on its own. Together they build dynamic robustness: the ability to keep acting under change. There's no set order. Start where it hurts most.



9.1 Decision over process

Processes promise reliability. They multiply wherever uncertainty is felt, and they show up as more alignment, more approvals, more documentation. The pattern holds as long as the environment is mostly stable. When change speeds up, the decisions slow down — the environment doesn't.

The principle "Decision over Process" flips the order. Ability and willingness to decide should take precedence over the security of a defined process. — even though both have their place. Where process stands in for decision, an organization loses the speed, the volume, and the quality of decisions that our rapidly changing world demands.

In practice, for organizations built to stay robust under change, that means:

— Decisions are made where the expertise and the experience sits, which means closer to where value is actually created. The organization trusts the people on the ground to judge it and solve it, as long as the direction is clear.

— Escalation becomes the exception. Plenty of companies and departments escalate upward by default. A dynamically robust organization asks which decisions should genuinely be made at the top, and lifts everything else out of the alignment loop.

— Decision rights are made explicit. People and teams know what they're allowed to decide, without having to ask. This goes beyond delegation. It's a deliberate handover of authority and responsibility.

What this can look like in practice: a mid-sized industrial manufacturer we worked with over several years. After a change at the top, they redrew the operating logic. A newly created steering committee took on operational responsibility for the running business, while the executive board focused on medium- and long-term strategy. The two are linked by an annual strategy cycle that brings them into rhythm without blurring them together.

They also introduced one simple rule: the overflow principle. Anything that can be decided on the spot, is. Only what the roles below the board genuinely can't cover "overflows" upward. That inverts the usual escalation logic. The default is to decide on the spot, not to route it up. Escalation becomes the exception. Decisions became faster, because the paths got shorter — and sturdier, because they were made where the expertise lived.

In another engagement, a financial-services firm, the same move played out on a smaller scale. Instead of covering decisions with chains of sign-off, the leaders worked out decision premises with us — shared criteria that made decisions repeatable and traceable without spawning new processes every time.

What carries both moves is, not least, a shared identity. It gives direction where no rule applies, and keeps decentralized decisions from scattering in different directions. In both cases, the ability to decide came not from more structure — but from clearer structure.

Processes still matter. They just can't stand in for the ability and willingness to make decisions.

Questions for your own organization:

— *Where, and why, are decisions escalated that could be made on the ground?*

— *Which of our approval loops actually improve quality — and which just cover our backs?*

— *Do our people and teams know, without asking, what decisions they're allowed to make?*

9.2 Ownership over control

Management reviews, directs, signs off. People take their cues from rules, remits, and approvals. Behind it sits the belief that control produces stability. In steadier times, it did.

When things speed up, that belief turns on its head. Control slows things down and quickly locks in the wrong thing. Where trust is needed, distrust turns up instead, and the friction gets worked out in the break room. Think back to our assumptions about human nature — that very distrust is one of the tells.

This principle sets ownership beside control. It works through direction, not oversight. Both have a place. But where control crowds out ownership, the organization loses the one thing it needs most: people leaning in.

Ownership over control means three things in practice:

- Ownership doesn't come from delegation alone. It needs influence, resources, and direction. Ask someone to own an outcome without letting them really decide, and what they end up owning is the risk, not the outcome.
- Trust is a structural choice, not a character trait. Through their structures, organizations decide whether they make trust possible or block it. Clear expectations, mandatory enablement, and room to make mistakes are the tools.
- Control gets pulled back to what matters. Safety, compliance, risk stay under control. Much of the rest runs better on direction and trust.

How that shift plays out in practice shows in an enablement format we're currently running across several larger engagements — the Systems Architect Program. "Over several months, leaders work on a single, demanding shift: away from "my area, my responsibility" and toward "what conditions do I need to shape for people to take ownership where it matters?" They learn to read their organization as a system rather than a pile of remits. And they practice setting the frame instead of managing straight down the line. The guiding line behind it quickly becomes shared vocabulary: conditions shape behavior. If you want ownership, you don't appeal for it — you first change the conditions under which it can be taken.

Across our engagements, the same lessons keep surfacing. The most important: separating role from person.. Personalities don't decide, roles do. Anchor that, and you take the personal sting out of conflict — and it's easier to see who's accountable. A second recurring theme is leadership itself. When leadership teams go through the program together, it gives them the tools to make changes to the system and builds relationships within the team. Ownership as an operating principle can't be ordered or delegated. It starts with each person. But it can't hold unless the organization moves too. A shared identity does two things: it keeps decentralized decisions pointed the same way, and it gives them legitimacy. Once that's there, the real question is what conditions ownership needs to stand on."

This is a structural matter. Leaders can only hand over ownership — and make it stick — when roles are clear, when the room to decide between teams and units is settled, and when expectations are talked through openly and traceably. Where that doesn't happen, or happens weakly, leaders end up absorbing more risk. Or they retreat into control steady themselves against uncertainty in the short term. Over the long run, the capacity to act appears only when taking ownership is made possible — personally and structurally — at many points across the company. That expressly includes bodies like the supervisory board and the works council. The usual reflex casts them as brakes on change. In fact they're among the most effective structures for getting the coming shifts onto the table early and carrying them with every relevant voice on board.

> ***Questions for your own organization:***
>
> — *Where do we control out of habit rather than necessity?*
>
> — *Do our people carry ownership — or only the fallout when something goes wrong?*
>
> — *Which conditions (how roles are cut, how much room there is to decide, what's expected) would we have to shape so ownership gets taken up where decisions are actually made?*

9.3 Connection over hierarchy

Work today rarely stays inside neat functional lines. Teams form and knowledge spreads fast. The questions that matter — usually the complex ones — are solved best where different perspectives meet and people actually hash out the answers together. Yet most organizations still run hierarchically. Fixed remits, information moving along formal lines, collaboration organized around the structure and only secondarily around the value being created. Under constant change, a system like that bleeds friction.

Hierarchy isn't wrong, and it isn't going away. But complex questions demand that units talk to each other and that collaboration follows the work, not the chart. Decisions come together where skills and viewpoints meet — not only where the org chart says they should.

The principle opens hierarchy up to connection — and by connection we don't mean formal reporting lines but the real thing: what happens between people when the line isn't dictating the path. Structures that form across the line and are carried by the people within them produce better solutions, and better shots at the market, across departments, functions, roles, and contexts.

In practice, that means:

— Teams form around the value question, as the need arises. Who has to come together — org chart aside — for this to move forward?

— Information travels by relevance, not by rank. Whoever needs it gets it. Whoever has it passes it on, no formal instruction required.

— Leadership connects. It makes sure the parts link up — line and temporary teams, unit and unit, strategy and operations.

When decisions fall to the front line and ownership is taken locally, that needs a tie back to the whole. Otherwise the organization fragments into pieces that act smartly on their own but stop being effective together.

What this can look like: a German automotive group we worked with over several years. We enabled more than twenty cross-functional teams to grow up alongside the line organization, each working a concrete value-creation question. Their makeup didn't follow the org chart. It followed the question of who had to be in the room for the thing to move. By the end of our work, the structures were embedded enough that our support was no longer needed. That was the actual goal — not a special format bolted onto the day job, but simply how the work gets done.

How far an organization can take this, another case shows. A managing director we've worked with on exactly this question for years describes the shift in his company like this:

> *"We're living in a time that's anything but linear. The old way — thinking at the top, doing at the bottom, information handed up and down the pyramid— just won't hold anymore. The principle we've worked out together is this: we want to make decisions where the information and the competence already are. Not carry the information up through the company and back down again."*

His company swapped the classic staff-and-line chart for a honeycomb model: the customer at the center, the service offerings around them, and in the outer ring the functions that support them. A structure that looks different from a pyramid because it organizes a different kind of movement.

But across the engagements, one recurring difficulty shows up too. Cross-cutting structures — boards, steering committees, committees — are already routine for many companies. The formats exist. The connection — the genuinely strategic part — doesn't come to life by itself. What connects things is people wrestling with a shared question across the line, and leadership that tends that connection on purpose rather than leaving it to the daily grind.

The *Human Capital Trends* backs this up: organizations that get connection right are more than twice as likely to report better financials and more meaningful work. Yet needs-based, dynamic teamwork beyond the formal committees is practiced by barely a third of companies — even though six in ten call it decisive for the next three years. The gap between knowing and doing is wide.

Who's formally in charge matters less and less. It's this, once again: how does the organization facilitate connection under constant change — and, with it, keep itself able to act?

Questions for your own organization:

— *Which of our most important topics do we solve across units — and which drift along inside silos?*

— *Where do we see information failing to land, because day after day it takes the wrong path?*
— *Can teams form for a task and dissolve again when it's done? Or is the organization pinned to the org chart?*

The three core principles together

The three core principles work on different layers of the same question: how an organization becomes, and stays, able to act under change. **Decision over Process** creates the capacity to act where a lot has to be decided, fast. **Ownership over Control** decides whether people lean in or pull back. **Connection over Hierarchy** links up wherever different parts of the organization and different human strengths have to meet.

Each principle moves something on its own. Together, they build dynamic robustness.

None of them work through structure alone. A cleaner decision logic only holds if people carry it. Ownership comes alive through the actions of the people who take it on, not through their job description. Connection — real collaborative work — happens between people genuinely wrestling with a shared question, not between committees that merely meet.

An organization where people decide, take ownership, and work across boundaries is faster, more accurate, and more competitive than one that denies them the chance.

Where to start

Three core principles build dynamic robustness. But nobody pulls all three at once. The start is smaller than the program that ends up around it. It rarely begins as an initiative — more often as a single decision. Take a topic that's currently being handled too slowly. Look at what's holding it back. Move authority to where expertise sits. And watch what happens.

What you learn from that one move carries further than any annual plan. Which structures need to follow. Who takes ownership, and who hands it back. Whether the organization really carries the shift.

First moves must be small, because they have to be real. A pilot kept at a safe distance from the line won't change the line. An intervention in the live business will.

All three moves ask leadership to lead differently — and to change in the process. That's the subject of the next chapter.

10.

From managing to shaping: what leadership must do now

When the organization changes, leadership has to change along with it. Decisions move closer to where value is created, ownership gets genuinely carried, connection reaches across boundaries. What that asks of leadership is something other than anything Taylorist structures ever expected of it.

For a long time, leadership was mostly management: decide, run the processes, keep control. That worked while the work was plannable. Today, complexity can't be fully controlled. Decisions are made under uncertainty, and the landscape keeps shifting while you're still deciding. Management alone no longer covers it. Leadership becomes a shaping role: less about the processes themselves than about the conditions they run under. Instead of handing out certainty, it creates direction — and lets decisions happen where the competence and the information actually sit.

That shift isn't just structural. It's personal. Someone who succeeded for decades on management alone drew their standing from knowing more and their job security from staying in control. Both were real; both count for less now. When decisions move to where the expertise is, a leader gives up the very thing that long defined the job. That's not a switch you flip. In our work we see that this step takes time, and takes some reckoning with oneself. It takes a willingness to let others decide what you'd once have decided yourself. What changes, in the end, is the measure: leadership is no longer measured by how much you personally control, but by whether the organization stays able to act.

This isn't a soft skill. It's the real work behind every transformation. Exactly how leadership changes in the doing is material for a paper of its own — one we'll turn to separately.

In the intelligence age, leadership becomes less a question of individual strength. It becomes the skill of making it possible to act at all.

11.

Conclusion

> **AI is not the problem. It reveals what's always been there.**

It reveals what has quietly held organizations back all along. Slow decisions. Responsibility that never lands. Collaboration that stops at the department line. Structures built for a different world.

Most companies answer with acceleration. More tools, more pilots, more efficiency in the day-to-day. That generates activity. It doesn't touch the underlying patterns.

Future readiness comes from somewhere else. From putting the ability to decide ahead of the comfort of process. From letting ownership do the work instead of control. From making connection happen across units instead of stalling in committees. Together, those three moves build dynamic robustness — the ability to keep acting through change.

Technology, in all this, is a real multiplier for value. But a multiplier only amplifies what's already there. Point it at people who decide, take ownership, and work across lines, and it multiplies their impact. Point it at the opposite, and it multiplies the standstill. That's why digitalization only pays off when its two sides come together: the technical and the human, thought through and built together. This isn't a matter of mood or culture. It's a matter of hard performance.

So in the intelligence age, the real shift doesn't begin with the question of which technology comes next. It begins with a genuine perspective shift — and a different question: what kind of organization do we have to be for AI to work at all?

CK:
In our work, we actually talk about AI surprisingly little. We talk about what people need to be effective inside complex systems. Get that right, and an organization carries AI with ease. Get it wrong, and AI just amplifies what already wasn't working. The real question isn't how much technology we can afford. It's whether we dare to give people back the room to genuinely think and act. That's where impact begins. And it begins with each of us.

AL:
My eyes are on what's ahead. We're not in a race about risk — we're in a race about opportunity. Everything that can be digitized will be. And everything that can't will become priceless. Listening, connecting, taking ownership, being in relationship — that's exactly where the human edge lies, the real VORSPRUNG. And that's where we build the future, together.

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Editorial closing remarks

You've read all the way here. That gives us hope that the content and the style reached you in equal measure.

For the sake of transparency: we worked on this whitepaper with LLMs, too. They analyzed studies and sorted findings. The writing, cutting, and shaping we did ourselves — by hand, over many rounds. By mid-2026 we probably don't need to tell you that anymore. After all, this whitepaper is about exactly that: how humans and machines can create together, and create it well. We believe the intelligence age only delivers on its promise when the technical and the human are thought through and built together. And, honestly — knowing how to ride a bike doesn't make anyone less glad to take the car when they need to haul something heavy.

And a word on the intellectual debts. Some of this will feel familiar here and there. Good. We stand on the shoulders of thinkers like Frederic Laloux, Gerhard Wohland, Niels Pfläging, Douglas McGregor, Dave Snowden, Amy Edmondson, and many more. Change turns real when good ideas make it into practice. That's our work: we bring these ideas into the daily reality of our clients and think them further there. We don't have to reinvent the wheel everytime we do it. Sometimes it's sufficient to get it rolling. Our thanks to everyone who thinks and talks it through with us — in books, in podcasts, and here in our office. The exchange is what drives the change.

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