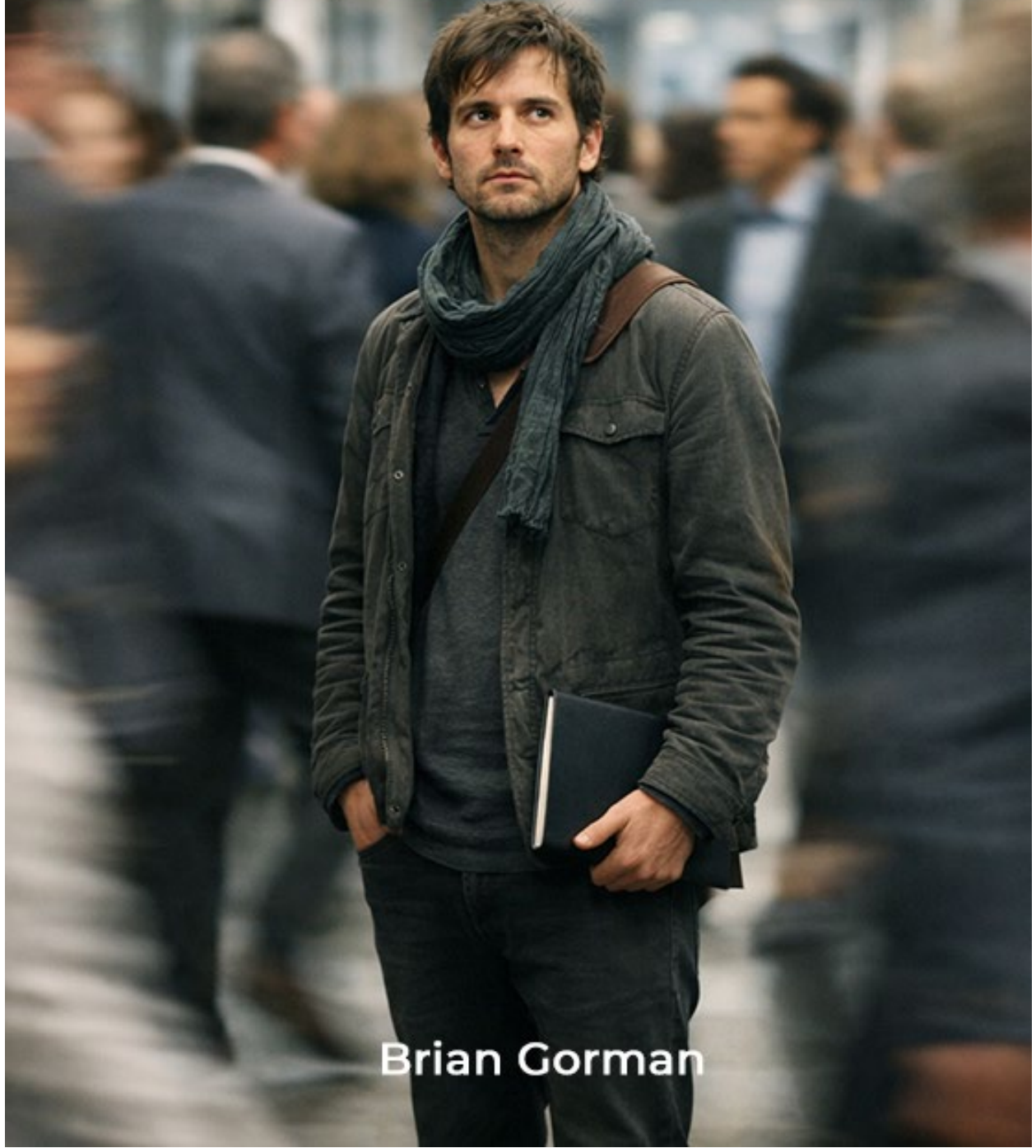


Optimizing Your Way Out of Innovation



Brian Gorman

AI can make your organization faster. It can also make it less creative.

You are not losing innovation because your people lack ideas. You are losing it because your organization is systematically removing the space those ideas require. And AI is accelerating that process.

Most leaders will not say that out loud. They will say they are improving performance. Increasing efficiency. Empowering their teams. And all of that is true. But it is not the whole truth.

Because at the same time, something else is happening. You are changing how thinking happens inside your organization. What gets asked. What gets explored. What gets ignored. Not through policy. Through pace.

Most leadership conversations about AI still sound like this. “How much faster can we go?” “How much more efficient can we become?” “How much cost can we remove?” These are reasonable questions. But they are incomplete. Because when speed becomes the goal, something else begins to disappear. Not suddenly. Not dramatically. Quietly.

Space.

The Tradeoff No One Is Naming

Optimization feels like progress. Reduce friction. Increase throughput. Eliminate inefficiency. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of that.

But optimization is not neutral. Every system optimized for efficiency begins to favor:

- predictability over possibility
- consistency over exploration
- execution over imagination

At first, the shift is almost invisible. People respond faster. Work flows more smoothly. Decisions accelerate. Then something begins to tighten. Questions get smaller. Risk tolerance narrows. Thinking becomes reactive instead of reflective.

But the deeper shift is behavioral. People begin to pre-edit themselves. They stop raising ideas that feel incomplete. They avoid questions that might slow things down. They learn, often unconsciously, what kinds of thinking are welcome and what kinds are not.

No one tells them to do this. The system teaches them. Over time, the organization becomes exceptionally good at improving what already exists and noticeably worse at creating what does not.

This is the tradeoff. Not between good and bad. Between efficiency and possibility.

Where AI Accelerates the Problem

AI does not create this dynamic. It amplifies it. When AI is layered into an already optimized system, it reinforces the same priorities: speed, output, execution. The system becomes more efficient and less spacious.

This is why so many leaders feel a subtle tension right now. They are moving faster than ever. Producing more than ever. And yet something feels constrained. Because innovation does not emerge from speed alone. It requires something that optimization systematically removes.

Space.

But there is a second layer to this. AI does not just accelerate execution. It begins to shape what is worth thinking about at all. When answers are generated instantly, fewer questions are explored deeply. When options are produced quickly, fewer possibilities are imagined from first principles.

Intelligence expands. But discernment quietly contracts.

A Moment That May Feel Familiar

A product leader sits in a meeting reviewing a roadmap that has already been optimized three times. The team has used AI to accelerate analysis, generate options, and refine execution plans. Everything is tighter. Faster. Cleaner.

There is a pause.

Someone starts to ask, “What if we...” And then stops. Because the question does not fit the plan. There is not time to explore it. There is not space to follow it. There is not permission to slow things down. So the moment passes. The roadmap is approved. And whatever might have been different never gets named.

Nothing went wrong. And that is the problem. That is how innovation disappears. Not through failure, but through the absence of space to pursue what might have been.

What Happens When Space Disappears

Innovation is often described as a function of talent or culture. But underneath both is something more fundamental. Innovation requires:

- a culture of belonging
- time to think

- permission to question
- room to explore without immediate pressure to produce

Remove those, and innovation does not slow down. It stops.

Not in a way that triggers alarms. In a way that feels like progress. People still have ideas. But fewer are voiced. Fewer are pursued. Fewer survive the pressure of optimized systems. Because in a system designed for speed, anything that does not produce immediate value begins to feel inefficient.

And creativity, by its nature, rarely produces immediate value.

This is where the real risk begins. Not in what AI makes faster, but in what it quietly makes less likely to ever be thought at all.

Why Innovation Still Matters and Where It Actually Lives

Innovation is often talked about as a competitive advantage. A way to grow faster. Differentiate. Stay ahead. But in this moment, it is something more fundamental. It is how organizations adapt to conditions they do not fully understand yet.

Because the environment you are operating in is no longer stable enough to rely only on optimization. AI is accelerating change across every function: how decisions are made, how work is performed, how value is created. Which means the future will not be a cleaner version of today. It will be different in ways that are still emerging.

In that kind of environment, efficiency alone is not enough. Efficiency helps you execute what you already know. Innovation is how you discover what you don't. Without it, organizations do not just slow down. They become increasingly precise about solving the wrong problems.

The Hidden Assumption About Innovation

Most organizations still treat innovation as if it belongs somewhere specific. A team. A function. A set of people whose job is to “think differently.”

But that model was built for a different kind of world. A world where change was slower. Where strategy could be set at the top and executed below. That is not the environment you are in anymore. Because the most important signals are no longer centralized. They are distributed. They live in:

- the customer-facing employee who sees friction before it shows up in data
- the operations lead who notices a workaround becoming the norm
- the manager who senses disengagement before it becomes attrition

- the individual contributor who asks a question no one else has thought to ask

Innovation, in its most practical form, does not begin as a breakthrough. It begins as a deviation. A question. An observation. A moment of curiosity that does not fit the current system.

And those moments happen everywhere.

What Gets Lost When Space Disappears

When space disappears, it is not just big ideas that are lost. It is these small signals. The early questions. The incomplete thoughts. The “this feels off” moments that do not yet have data behind them.

In an optimized system, these get filtered out quickly. Not because they are wrong. Because they are inefficient. They slow things down. They complicate decisions. They introduce uncertainty into systems designed to reduce it. So they get ignored.

Over time, the organization loses something critical. Its ability to notice. And once that happens, innovation does not just decline. It disconnects from reality.

The Misuse of AI

This is where many organizations are making a critical mistake. They are using AI to eliminate effort. But they are not deciding what that reclaimed capacity is for. In some cases, it is removed entirely through workforce reduction. In others, it is quietly filled. More work. More expectations. More output. The space never actually becomes space. It becomes capacity to be consumed.

Which means the organization becomes more productive, but not more innovative. And over time, the gap between the two begins to matter. Because productivity compounds what exists. Innovation changes what exists.

What It Looks Like When Leaders Choose Differently

There is another path. It is less common. But it is already visible.

At Shopify, AI has not been positioned simply as a tool for efficiency. It has been positioned as a shift in expectation. In an internal memo later reported publicly, CEO Tobi Lütke wrote, “Reflexive AI usage is now a baseline expectation.”

That line is easy to misread.

It is not a call for people to move faster. It is a signal that certain kinds of work no longer require human effort at all. Which raises a more important question. If AI handles the predictable, what should humans be doing instead?

At Shopify, the answer is becoming clearer. Teams use AI for first drafts, coding assistance, and analysis. Not as the final output, but as a starting point. The human role shifts upward toward:

- judgment
- originality
- product thinking
- creative problem-solving

The expectation is not that people produce more. It is that they produce something different. Something that cannot be automated.

A Contrasting Path

Now consider a different environment. Highly optimized. Operationally excellent. Driven by speed and precision. This is the model perfected by Amazon.

In these systems, every movement is measured. Every process is refined. Every inefficiency is targeted. AI extends this even further. Routing improves. Forecasting tightens. Execution accelerates. The results are extraordinary. But the system is designed for a specific outcome. Efficiency at scale.

Within that system, there is very little room for deviation. Very little room for exploration. Very little room for reimagining the work itself. Again, this is not a failure. It is a choice. But it reveals something essential. AI does not create innovation. It amplifies the system it enters.

The Leadership Decision

This is a decision most leaders do not realize they are making. Not whether to adopt AI. But how it will shape the organization once it is embedded. Because once AI becomes infrastructure, it stops feeling like a choice. It becomes how work gets done. And whatever patterns are established early become normal.

This is where leadership responsibility becomes most significant. Not in the adoption of AI. But in the normalization of its use. Because normalization determines what gets questioned, what gets challenged, and what gets left alone. And over time, that becomes culture.

Reclaiming Space

If AI is going to expand innovation rather than constrain it, leaders have to do something counterintuitive. They have to protect space. Not all of it. But enough for:

- Reflection
- Experimentation
- thinking that is not immediately tied to output
- conversations that do not begin with efficiency

Because the default pull of most organizations is toward utilization. If time is freed, it gets reassigned. If effort is reduced, expectations increase. Without intervention, the system closes the space as quickly as it opens.

Protecting space is not a productivity decision. It is a leadership decision.

The Deeper Shift

AI is not just changing what we do. It is changing how we think.

When answers come instantly, we stop sitting with questions.

When outputs are generated immediately, we lose the habit of developing them.

And what is not practiced does not develop.

This is the deeper risk.

Not that AI replaces human thinking. But that it reshapes the conditions under which thinking happens. Intelligence becomes abundant. But wisdom requires practice. And practice requires space.

Closing

There is a deeper implication here. If innovation lives throughout the organization, then its loss is not a strategic issue. It is a systemic one. It does not show up in one place. It shows up everywhere. In smaller questions. Narrower thinking. Fewer challenges to what already exists. And by the time it becomes visible at the top, it has already been disappearing for some time.

AI will make your organization faster. That is not in question. What is in question is whether it will make your organization more innovative, or simply more efficient at doing what it has always done.

The leaders who matter in this moment will not be the ones who move fastest. They will be the ones who decide what speed is for. Because in the end, this is not a technology decision. It is a decision about what kind of thinking your organization will protect. And what kind it will quietly allow to disappear.

Questions for Reflection

How would you answer these questions? How would others throughout your organization?

- Where has optimization in your organization begun to narrow thinking?
- If AI is creating capacity, where is that capacity actually going?
- What kinds of ideas no longer feel welcome not because they are wrong, but because they take time?
- Where have you personally stopped asking “What if?” because the system keeps moving?
- What would change if you protected space as deliberately as you pursue efficiency?

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Brian Gorman

Age of Wisdom Publishing
Hoboken, New Jersey

Brian@TransformingLives.Coach
917.653.5198
TransformingLives.Coach

Brian Gorman is a change leadership expert, trusted advisor, coach, speaker, and circle keeper to executives and organizations navigating disruption. With decades of experience guiding leaders through transformation, he integrates neuroscience, storytelling, and collective wisdom practices to help organizations thrive in complexity. He has coached hundreds of leaders globally and is known for his ability to blend head, heart, and gut in practical ways that inspire action and sustain change. Brian is a coach, advisor, speaker and author. His publications include:

[Leading into the Age of Wisdom: Reimagining the Future of Work](#)

[Lessons from the Steam Engine: AI, Leadership, and the Future of Work](#)

[The Real Question Leaders Aren't Asking About AI: What Will This Decision Make Normal?](#)

[Optimizing Your Way Out of Innovation](#)