

A person in a dark business suit stands with their back to the camera on a rocky outcrop. They are looking out over a vast valley at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the landscape. In the distance, a river winds through the valley, and a large, modern building complex is visible. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds, and the overall atmosphere is contemplative and serene.

THE REAL QUESTION LEADERS  
AREN'T ASKING ABOUT AI:

What Will This Decision Make Normal?

Brian Gorman

**The most important question about artificial intelligence isn't how fast we adopt it. It's what will become impossible to undo once it becomes embedded in how we work.**

Artificial intelligence is entering organizations faster than leaders can fully understand the consequences of the decisions they are making. Boards ask how quickly AI can be deployed. Investors ask when efficiency gains will appear. Competitors announce new capabilities almost weekly. The pressure is unmistakable. Move fast or risk falling behind.

Yet something deeper is happening beneath those conversations. AI does not simply automate tasks. Once it becomes embedded in how work is done—how decisions are framed, which options appear legitimate, which signals leaders trust—it begins quietly reshaping judgment itself. What begins as a tool gradually becomes infrastructure. And infrastructure, once normalized, becomes extremely difficult to question or reverse.

If you are responsible for significant decisions inside an organization today, you may already feel the tension this creates. On one side is competitive pressure: speed, efficiency, momentum. On the other side is a quieter responsibility: ensuring that the systems we build today do not quietly eliminate the human capacities future leaders will need tomorrow.

**Both pressures are real. Very few leadership conversations hold them together.**

## The Discipline of Seventh Generation Thinking

Some leadership traditions insist that the real responsibility of power is not measured by short-term performance but by long-term consequences. Indigenous governance systems captured this idea in what is often called the **Seventh Generation Principle**. Leaders are expected to consider how their decisions will affect people seven generations into the future.

This principle is often misunderstood as a form of prediction. It is not. It is a discipline of humility. The principle does not ask leaders to forecast the future. It asks a more practical question. *What conditions will our decisions create that others will be forced to live with?*

Once systems become embedded in daily life, the choices available to future leaders narrow dramatically. Culture hardens faster than technology evolves. And once culture hardens, leadership options shrink. The Seventh Generation Principle asks leaders to consider a different question than modern executive systems typically reward. Not: *What will this decision accomplish this quarter?* But: *What will this decision make normal?*

## A Quiet Leadership Question

Before any system becomes standard practice, there is always a moment when leaders still have leverage. A moment when choices are still visible. A moment when alternative paths remain possible. That moment rarely feels historic. It usually feels like a routine decision. Which raises a

question worth sitting with for a moment. *What decisions around AI are quietly becoming “normal” inside your organization right now?*

If you are responsible for significant decisions inside an organization today, this is a question that rarely appears in leadership conversations although it should.

## Where This Question Actually Appears

The decisions that shape the future rarely look historic when they are made. They look like implementation details.

- Should the AI system recommend actions or automatically execute them unless someone intervenes?
- Should human judgment remain visible in high-stakes decisions or should those decisions be optimized entirely for speed and consistency?
- Should efficiency gains from AI be captured immediately through workforce reduction or used to create transition pathways for people whose roles are changing?
- Should systems guide judgment or quietly replace it?

Each of these choices can be justified individually. Each appears pragmatic. Each can be explained in terms of competitiveness or operational efficiency. Yet taken together, these decisions shape something far larger than organizational performance. **They shape the conditions future leaders inherit.**

The arc is rarely dramatic. First leaders decide how AI will be embedded. Then those choices become daily practice. Over time practice becomes culture. Eventually culture becomes inheritance. **By the time consequences are visible, the original decisions are rarely remembered as choices at all. They feel inevitable.**

## Why Leaders Feel the Tension but Rarely Name It

In private conversations, many experienced leaders admit to feeling a subtle dissonance in current AI discussions. The questions dominating executive meetings feel necessary but incomplete. Conversations revolve around capability, cost reduction, and speed. These are measurable and defensible topics. They fit neatly into board presentations and financial forecasts.

Yet beneath those conversations lies another concern that rarely appears on meeting agendas. *What did we just normalize? What will become difficult to undo once this becomes standard practice?* These questions are rarely ignored because leaders lack courage. They are ignored

because modern organizations are optimized for acceleration. Markets reward speed. Wisdom requires reflection.

Raising deeper questions can feel like introducing friction without evidence. Leaders quickly learn which concerns are welcomed and which are quietly deferred. Over time the gap between what leaders privately worry about and what they publicly discuss begins to widen. This gap is not primarily a failure of leadership. It is a failure of structure. Modern governance systems rarely provide space where long-term consequences can be explored before short-term pressures drive decisions forward. Which raises a deeper leadership question. **Where does discernment occur before irreversible decisions are made?**

## Why Wisdom Cannot Be an Individual Burden

The pressures surrounding AI adoption are not purely technological. They are structural. Competitors move quickly. Investors expect efficiency. Boards demand progress. Deliberation can feel like hesitation. No individual leader, no matter how thoughtful, can carry the full weight of these pressures alone.

This is why the **Seventh Generation Principle** was never practiced individually. It was practiced collectively. In traditional governance councils, leaders were expected to argue not only for present needs but for those not present: future children, future communities, future conditions of life. Decisions were slowed intentionally so the consequences of power could be examined before they hardened into practice. The goal was not paralysis. The goal was stewardship.

Modern organizations rarely build such pauses into their governance structures. Which means some of the most consequential decisions of the AI era may be made under conditions least suited to wisdom. Acceleration becomes the default. Reflection becomes a private activity rather than a shared discipline. **And when reflection is private, its influence on decisions is limited.**

## The Re-Emergence of Collective Discernment

Some organizations are beginning to recognize that discernment cannot be left to chance. It must be designed. Before major decisions harden into systems, leaders need places where deeper questions can be explored openly. These conversations are not strategy meetings. They are not brainstorming sessions. They are disciplined dialogues designed to surface judgment before momentum takes over.

One form of such dialogue is the **Wisdom Circle**. In a Wisdom Circle, leaders step out of operational urgency long enough to examine the broader implications of decisions they are about to make. The goal is not consensus. It is clarity. Participants explore questions that rarely appear in standard governance processes.

- *What assumptions are shaping this decision?*
- *What consequences might be invisible right now?*
- *Who benefits first?*
- *Who absorbs the cost later?*
- *What will this make normal?*

Wisdom Circles are not the only structure capable of holding such conversations. But they illustrate an emerging recognition. Intelligence alone is no longer sufficient for leadership in complex systems. Discernment and the broader application of collective wisdom must become a practice. **Without practices that make reflection possible, acceleration inevitably wins.**

## What Must Not Be Lost

Across generations, certain human capacities prove extraordinarily difficult to reconstruct once they are eroded. They rarely disappear dramatically. They fade through disuse.

**Judgment is one such capacity.** When decisions become pre-framed by systems, people gradually shift from deciding to confirming. Recommendations arrive before reflection. Alternatives narrow before debate begins. Responsibility thins because the path appears already chosen. Over time the habit of discernment weakens not because people lose wisdom, but because the system quietly does more of the interpreting for them. Leaders may still approve decisions, yet the deeper act of judgment—interpreting context, weighing values, recognizing when efficiency itself may be the wrong goal—occurs less frequently. The result is subtle but consequential: a growing distance between human wisdom and the decisions that ultimately shape action. Organizations begin to rely on processes they no longer fully question, and societies inherit systems whose underlying assumptions few remember examining.

**Agency is another capacity that erodes quietly.** Agency is not simply autonomy. It is the felt experience that one's judgment meaningfully shapes outcomes. Systems optimized for speed and output gradually weaken that experience. Decisions arrive pre-structured, workflows narrow discretion, and individuals increasingly operate inside parameters they did not design. Work continues to function, often efficiently, but the relationship between action and responsibility becomes blurred. People execute processes more than they shape them. Over time this changes how leaders lead and how citizens participate. Organizations become operationally capable but psychologically detached, and institutions begin to depend more on compliance than commitment. When agency weakens, the distance between those who design systems and those who live inside them widens, a pattern that historically precedes both institutional fragility and social distrust.

**Wisdom itself must remain distributed.** Wisdom rarely emerges from isolated intelligence. It forms through dialogue, disagreement, memory, and lived consequence. When judgment gradually concentrates inside algorithms, expert elites, or opaque processes, cultures lose one of their most important stabilizing capacities: the ability of many perspectives to test and refine decisions before they become action. Distributed wisdom allows organizations to recognize weak signals, question flawed assumptions, and adapt when conditions change. Without it, systems may become highly efficient but increasingly brittle. This is why the loss of distributed wisdom is not simply an organizational concern but a civilizational one. When fewer people participate in the formation of judgment, fewer people feel responsible for its consequences and the distance between decision and responsibility grows. Once that distance becomes normal, rebuilding the practices that sustain collective wisdom becomes extraordinarily difficult.

These practices are often the first to disappear in the name of efficiency. They are also the practices that allow societies to adapt when conditions change. **Once lost, these practices are difficult to rebuild.**

## Inheritance, Not Legacy

*Legacy* is how leaders hope to be remembered. *Inheritance* is what future generations must live with. Leaders cannot control legacy. They can control decisions, and thus inheritance.

Artificial intelligence will outlive today's leadership teams. The question is not whether it will shape the future. It already is. The question is whether the systems we build today will leave future generations room to exercise judgment of their own.

There is always a moment when stewardship is still possible before repair becomes necessary. That moment rarely feels dramatic. It appears as a choice between speed and reflection. Between optimization and responsibility. Between efficiency today and resilience tomorrow. This is that moment. The defining measure of the AI era will not be how effectively intelligence was deployed. It will be whether wisdom remained in charge of it.

The question for leaders now is not how powerful intelligence will become, but whether wisdom will remain responsible for guiding it. As intelligence becomes more powerful? where will we ensure wisdom still has the authority to decide?

## Questions for Reflection

### For Business Leaders

1. Which decisions in your organization are quietly shifting from human judgment to system defaults and who is still responsible for their consequences?

2. Where might AI be increasing efficiency while simultaneously weakening the practice of judgment within your leadership team?
3. If your current AI systems became permanent infrastructure, what human capabilities inside your organization would gradually fade through disuse?
4. Who in your organization has both the authority and the space to question the assumptions embedded in your AI systems?
5. Seven generations from now, what aspects of human agency and responsibility would you hope your organization helped preserve rather than automate away?

### For Policy Makers

1. Which decisions about AI governance today will quietly shape the social and economic conditions future generations must live within?
2. How might current policy frameworks unintentionally widen the distance between those who design intelligent systems and those whose lives are shaped by them?
3. What human capacities (e.g., judgment, agency, civic responsibility) must remain protected even as intelligent systems become more capable?
4. Where should society deliberately preserve human oversight, even when technological systems appear more efficient?
5. What structures of public dialogue or collective discernment are needed to ensure that AI development reflects societal wisdom rather than technological momentum alone?

# The Real Question Leaders Aren't Asking About AI

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WHAT WILL THIS DECISION MAKE NORMAL?

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

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