AI Raises the Floor, Not the Ceiling.
How to Lift the Entire Game?

Change is exciting and frightening at the same time. It often becomes an addictive preoccupation blurring the fundamentals that stay. In this article we are going to look at the opposite of change. Universal patterns and critical constraints. And how to leverage them structurally to define success.

> *Obsessing on change is dangerous when the fundamentals hold the solution. Infrastructures such as AI get us halfway. The business lifeline is on another level.*

We have all smiled watching a cat chasing a light dot. Focused, fast, agile, relentless. Such buzzwords deflate with perspective. The eagle about to plunge on target literally illustrates what altitude means. Wind turns as it always does. Prey moves as it always does. Starving winter approaches as it always does. Doubt is acknowledged serenely. There will be a signal to plunge, a trajectory to correct, a speed to reverse, a risk to avert, a grip to sustain... In each phase, focus must be tuned. This will determine the outcome. Hunting, life, and business share this pattern. Perceiving with altitude is key.

The major waves of productivity infrastructure (railway, telephone, spreadsheet, internet, AI) improve interactions, speed, abundance. Business leadership has always been right to adopt progress promptly. But adoption is a trap unless it generates new perspectives.

THE TYRANNY OF THE SINGLE SCHOOL

With AI, more people can produce more work, faster. The entry bar across writing, coding, analysis, and design has been democratised upward. AI raises the floor. It also creates a trap...

The company that steps confidently onto the new elevated floor, without having first worked on what could push up the ceiling, finds itself compressed. The floor gets higher. The ceiling is static. The room becomes smaller. And the crowd inside grows larger. In the compressed room, decisions are generated from the same training data, and strategies are converging toward the same averaged answers that philosopher Amanda Askell identified as the default output of language models: 'the average of what everyone wants.' AI assists and amplifies the natural tendency of our brain to adopt shortcuts and to

suppress nuances. It averages, echoes, polarises and compresses to deliver impeccable sharpness. Useful yes, sufficient no.

In the process, our edge becomes brittle, heat overcomes truth, and we shorten the very lever that could have helped lifting the ceiling. The weak signals are brushed away as an inconvenient noise affecting the purity of mainstream. The spark of creativity is dismissed as a glitch in the established order.

The same polarising compression happens across many executive development journeys. As we build on our own education and experience, we get seduced by certain mental models — often those most aligned with our contemporary infrastructure (the floor) — and we tend to anchor convictions.

> *"Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies" — Friedrich Nietzsche*

Convictions in business are expressed through a familiar taxonomy of camps: the speed school, the data school, the agile school, the servant-leadership school, the execution-rigour school. Each has its literature, its consulting practices, its moment on the keynote circuit. Each camp is, individually, right in its own terrain.

The problem is the rigidity of affiliation. Roger Martin, the Canadian strategist, observed that leaders who are most dangerous to their organisations are not those who lack a theory — they are those who have one theory that they apply regardless of context.

To facilitate a systematic contextualisation and to depart from the single school approach, the discipline of Sensory Leadership encompasses a pattern of four simple phases...

FOUR PHASES, FOUR POSTURES

Every significant project and team journey moves through four recognisable phases. They are not a grand theory but a base rhythm that any practitioner eventually discovers through experience: Diverge, Converge, Implement, Sustain.

In the **Diverge phase**, the imperative is breadth. The team needs multiple maps, multiple interpretations, maximum perceptual richness (see our Article on perceptual mapping). This is not the moment for speed or rigour. It is the moment for curiosity, for tolerating dissonance, for allowing what seems out of place to remain in the room long enough to reveal its relevance. The leaders who impose convergence too early — who move to the answer before the full picture has emerged — will build their strategy on an incomplete map.

In the **Converge phase**, the imperative shifts. The work of perceptual divergence must now become decision. Not consensus — decisions. The skilled leader reads the shift in energy when a team has generated enough and needs the relief of direction. Moving too slowly here is as dangerous as moving too fast in the previous phase. This is also where empathy is tested. Without it, ill-feelings will most likely over-shadow decisions and ruin implementation.

In the **Implement phase**, execution is king — but execution of what was decided, not execution of what feels comfortable. This is where the backbrief matters (see our Article on enabling traction): the structured check that ensures the team has understood not merely the task but the intent behind it. This is where Bungay's mission command (in *The Art of Action*, 2011) and Chris McChesney's four disciplines of execution apply with full force.

In the **Sustain phase**, the risk is different again: the team has achieved its objectives and now faces the quiet erosion of why it assembled. This is the phase that management frameworks ignore most consistently, and that teams fail most predictably. Sustaining is not optimising. It is renewing the meaning that made the effort worthwhile and leveraging the bonds created across the team (see our Article on *Forward-Culture*).

The Elixar *OlfaTeam*™ programme is structured precisely around these four phases where the sensory opening of each session — a scent for each phase, before any framework is opened (see our Article on perfume as an accelerator) — anchors the importance of recalibrating to context. The phases (diverge – converge – implement – sustain) are sequential and contextual. They apply in parallel streams of activities at many levels of the business.

So, phases cannot harden into a rigid plan. The team must simply be able to commonly define and name the phases to stay alert and transition collectively. It must be a deliberate trade-off…

THE TRADE-OFF: BANDWIDTH AND NOISE

Just like a radio wave, our channels of communication are governed by two things. Frequency and bandwidth. On different frequencies we hear different stories and interpretations. Multiple frequencies can bring confusion. A broader bandwidth carries more information but can bring noise and interferences. There is no perfect channel. It is always a trade-off about the density and clarity of the signal we seek.

The leaders who lock their stance on 'be short and sharp with me' will most likely collect sterilised mainstream signals compounded from the rising floor and not many of the weak signals capable of

unlocking insights that elevate the ceiling. Conversely, the leaders who broadcast wide will dissipate energy through white noise and will face interfering messages.

The skill of the leader is then not to communicate through every channel simultaneously. It is to modulate: choosing to centre onto a frequency or another and expand its bandwidth according to the phase of the relationship or project in play.

Some exchanges need divergence and texture — a walk, a meal, a conversation without a slide deck. Others need convergence and clarity — a phone call, a tight agenda, a decisive meeting where empathy and assertiveness need balancing. The Implement phase, without negative judgment, shall allow stiffer and shorter interactions that leave maximum space for action. A narrower bandwidth for deliberate focus.

The elite team, in business as in sport, is not the team that has eliminated error and doubt. It is the team that can read the game as it is happening — not as it was prepared for — and adjust in real time. That capacity is built through practice such as *Sensory Leadership* that structures perspective and engages the senses across the full spectrum of human bandwidth.

Locking onto one channel only, however efficient, is ignoring the rhythm of the business. Context guides the posture. Attuned perception is never optional. It is the dimension that analytical sharpness alone cannot provide.

THE ART OF IMPACT

Many schools implicitly assume that the plan or the style will control the context. In fact, control resides only in how much of the context we sense.

Embracing multiple theories. Adopting a sequence. Adjusting posture. The connector across all of this is perception. Not data. Not process. Perception: the prior act of sensing where we are before deciding what to do.

> *AI optimises process. The senses open what cognition alone would keep closed.*

This is the starting point of *Sensory Leadership*: the structured discipline of expanding the perceptual field before engaging the analytical one. It does not replace frameworks. It creates the conditions under which frameworks become genuinely useful rather than comfortingly familiar.

Absolute clarity, impeccable planning, and removal of doubt are appealing — and limiting. Today, AI is undeniably an elevator toward new heights, but headroom must simultaneously emerge. This

headroom is flexible mentality and critical thinking. Not only in the head of a leader but also in the hands of a team, such headroom rebalances the intoxicating polarisation engendered by compression and sharpness.

Olivier Hamant's work on the robustness of living systems offers a counterintuitive lesson here: the most resilient biological structures are not the most optimised ones. They are the ones that preserve productive variability — the ones that maintain enough internal noise to remain reactive to unexpected signals and situations in an environment that never stops changing.

Perception is imperfect by nature, often neurologically biased, and sometimes unsettling. Combined with method and shared across a team, perception slowly accumulates as mastery. That accumulated mastery is what pushes up the ceiling and lifts the entire game.

The compressed room is not a future risk. For most industries, it is the current condition.

If you recognise your organisation in any of these elements, the next step is a conversation.

Discover the full framework at **sensoryleadership.org** · Contact Elixar at **projects@elixar.eu**

#SensoryLeadership #ArtOfImpact #StayingHuman #FutureOfWork

About the Elixar services

Elixar is the sole provider of comprehensive Sensory Leadership programmes — delivered in-presence, anywhere in the world, in English, French, and Italian. Programmes range from the full Sensagy™ journey (24 hours, six modules, spanning sensory awareness, direction-setting, and execution) to the focused OlfaTeam™ format (10 hours, five modules, anchored in olfactory practice and project management application) to keynotes and half-day interventions in retreats and seminars.

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About the Founder of Elixar

Jeremy Leroux is a Managing Director and Strategy Advisor (Cert. MCI, California) with more than twenty years of international leadership experience in B2B industries spanning beverages, food ingredients, and pharmaceutical applications before deepening his practice into the world of perfumes (Cert. Olfactive Design, Politecnico di Milano). Having lived and worked across France, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Italy, he graduated in France as an Engineer and MSc in Food Processes and obtained an MBA in California. He founded Elixar on the conviction that sensory experience is and will be a foundation for the performance of humans and businesses.

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