A SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE POSITION PAPER

Human in the Lead

Why critical thinking is the one thing you can't delegate

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Sheffield Institute | Elite Human Skills Development

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INTRODUCTION

Why I Wrote This

I teach people how to communicate. I've done it for nine years on a podcast, in three books, and in classrooms full of executives and soldiers who have to be understood the first time.

So I get asked one question more than any other. Isn't AI going to replace what you do?

For a while my answer was serviceable but not good. I had a stock phrase for it, and people would nod, and we would move on. It took me longer than it should have to notice that the answer was too small for the question.

What changed is that I stopped answering in conversation and sat down to write the thing out. Not a marketing position. What I actually believe about professionalism, about judgment, and about where a person fits into work that machines can now do a version of. I read it aloud on the podcast this summer.[2]

Then something odd happened. Over the following weeks I watched some of the largest organizations in the world arrive at the same conclusion, in their own language, with their own money behind it.

This paper is what I've worked out since. It's written for the two audiences I spend most of my time with: leaders in the military and government who live with the consequences of unclear communication, and people in corporate settings who were already drowning in too much information even before the advent of AI. If you belong to neither, you'll still recognize the problem. Everyone does now.

One more thing, and I would rather say it here than have you wonder about it while you read.

I used AI to help write this. I drafted with it, argued with it, and then did exactly what I'm about to ask you to do. I printed it out, marked it up, and rewrote it until it sounded like me. If that seems like a contradiction, it isn't. It's the whole point. The tools are extraordinary. What they cannot do is be you.

Let's start with what has changed.

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[01] SECTION ONE

The Pendulum

For the past few years, the corporate story about AI was adoption. Companies were urging their people to use the tools. Use it or fall behind. That was the whole message.

Something shifted this year, and it's worth stopping on. At the end of August, the *Wall Street Journal* ran this:

> "Not too long ago, companies were doling out bonuses to encourage AI use. Now, at least one major firm is rewarding employees who demonstrate the very human skills needed to ensure all that AI use makes a difference."[1]

The firm is Ernst & Young. Its U.S. division is putting **$100 million** into employee rewards, not for using AI, but for showing "adaptability, innovation and judgment." Spot awards run to $500. Individuals and teams who make a material difference can earn $10,000 to $25,000, five times what the firm's recognition awards previously capped out at.[1]

"What we recognize signals what we value," said Ginnie Carlier, EY Americas' chief talent and culture officer.[1]

A Big Four firm just told its people, in the only language a firm really speaks, that judgment is what gets paid.

And this isn't one company having an idea. KPMG rebuilt its audit internship this summer around critical thinking and judgment. PwC rolled out a curriculum pairing AI skills with human traits like empathy and creativity.[1] Three of the Big Four, in a single year, moving the same direction.

But here's the detail I keep coming back to. In that same article, the *Journal* describes workplaces as "awash in AI slop."[1]

Not in quotation marks. Not attributed to a critic. Just stated, as a description of where we work.

Four weeks before that piece ran, I devoted a podcast episode to AI slop,[2] and I remember feeling like I was using a term that hadn't quite landed yet. It's landed. When the *Wall Street Journal* uses a phrase like that in its own voice, the problem has stopped being a worry and become a condition.

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So the market has reached its verdict faster than I expected. The technology isn't the scarce thing. Judgment is.

What none of them says is where judgment actually shows up. Not EY. Not the *Journal*. Not the research. Nobody tells you where to go looking for it, or how you would know if it had gone missing.

That's what this paper is about.

[02] SECTION TWO

Don't Delegate Critical Thinking

Earlier this year I sat down and wrote out what I actually believe about all of this. It's a statement I can articulate clearly in a room full of people who do serious work.

Here is the core of it:

> I've always believed that professionalism is ultimately about well-informed judgment. It means seeing clearly, thinking logically and reasonably, and taking responsibility for what you say and do. No technology tool or artificial intelligence can replace that.
>
> The technology can support you, challenge you, and sharpen you. But it never replaces you, and it never communicates for you. We never hand over our humanity. We embrace it more intentionally than ever.
>
> **I think. I communicate. I decide. I own the outcome.**[2]

I wrote that in early August, weeks before the *Journal* and *Forbes* pieces ran. What struck me afterward was how much company I had.

Deloitte's *2026 Global Human Capital Trends* puts the human edge at adaptivity, creativity, and judgment amid uncertainty and change, and lands on a sentence I wish I'd written: "Technology … is replicable. People aren't."[3]

EY pays cash for adaptability, innovation, and judgment,[1] and what the firm says it is really buying is the ability to stand behind an answer.

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At Bank of America, Bernard Hampton, who runs the bank's learning organization, says that "human skills like critical thinking, empathy, judgment, and trust will become more and more important."[4]

These three came at the problem from completely different directions. One is paying its own people. One studied hundreds of organizations. One is training a workforce the size of a mid-sized city. They aren't citing each other. They arrived at the same word.

I want to be careful here, because "humanity first" can sound like sentiment, a nice thing to say about people. It isn't. It's a structural claim about accountability.

Accountability requires someone who can be held to account. You cannot discipline a model. You cannot put a system in front of a board and ask it to explain itself. You cannot relieve an algorithm of its command. Whatever the tool produced, a person's name is on it, and that person answers for it. That isn't a philosophical preference. It's how organizations actually work.

There's one more thing worth noting, because it answers the objection I hear most often: that humanity-first is the cautious option, the thing you say when you're behind.

In research with 100 C-suite leaders, cited in this year's *Global Human Capital Trends*, Deloitte found that 59% of organizations are taking a tech-focused approach to AI. Those organizations were 1.6 times more likely to miss out on AI returns that exceeded expectations than the organizations taking a human-centric approach.[5]

Read that carefully. It isn't that human-centered organizations feel better about their AI. They are likelier to beat their own expectations for what it would deliver.

The technology is not the constraint. The capability of the people using it is.

AI is powerful, and it should make you powerful. It should make you better. Never absent. Never weaker.[2]

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[03] SECTION THREE

From In-the-Loop to In-the-Lead

For years, when people asked whether AI was going to replace what we teach, I gave the same answer: no, because you always need a human in the loop.

I said it on my own podcast this summer.[6] It's a good phrase, and it's the standard one. In aviation, in weapons systems, in software, "human in the loop" describes a process that requires a person before it completes. It puts someone in the path. That matters.

But I've come to think it isn't strong enough.

The language that changed my mind came from Bank of America. Bernard Hampton runs The Academy, the bank's learning organization, which serves 211,000 people across a catalog of roughly 8,000 resources. He describes their operating model this way: **human-in-the-lead**.[4]

Not in the loop. In the lead.

He breaks it into four responsibilities. "People set the intent, they validate the output, they handle exceptions, and they make judgment calls." And he states the accountability plainly: "Agents don't own outcomes. People do."[4]

I wrote my own version in four parts: I think. I communicate. I decide. I own the outcome.

I've never met Bernard Hampton. We work in different industries and we might disagree about a few things. But two people looking hard at the same problem ended up with the same shape of an answer, and when that happens it's usually worth paying attention.

Here is why I think that one-word difference matters.

A loop is a checkpoint. It's a place in a process where a person is present. Present, but not necessarily engaged. You can be in the loop and reviewing at a glance. You can be in the loop and clicking approve. You can be in the loop and still send out something you didn't write, don't fully understand, and couldn't defend if someone pushed back on it.

A lead is a different thing. Being in the lead means you set the direction before the work starts and you answer for it after it ships. You are not a checkpoint in someone else's process. The process is yours.

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I’ve watched capable people who are in the loop lose their own voice anyway. In the next section I’ll tell you about one of them, a man whose board of directors noticed it before he did.

Being in the lead isn’t a posture or a policy. It’s a set of things you do to a document, in order, before it goes out with your name on it.

That’s the part almost nobody is teaching. It’s the subject of the rest of this paper.

In the loop, you approve. In the lead, you author. Only one of those is a position you can defend when someone asks whether you actually meant it.

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[04] SECTION FOUR

Where Critical Thinking Becomes Visible

Every source in the last two sections agrees that judgment, or critical thinking, is missing and worth rewarding. Not one of them says where to find it.

That isn’t an oversight. It’s a hard problem. Judgment is a mental event. You can’t watch it happen. You can’t audit it directly, you can’t put a meter on it, and you can’t tell by looking at someone whether they exercised any this morning.

So how does an organization know whether judgment is actually present in the work?

There’s only one answer I’ve ever found. You know because of what the person wrote or said. That’s the entire surface area. A leader’s thinking reaches other people through documents and conversations and nowhere else. The memo, the brief, the update, the email, the five minutes standing at the front of a room. That’s where critical thinking becomes visible, and it’s the only place it does.

Which leads somewhere uncomfortable.

If you hand over the expression, you have destroyed the only evidence of critical thinking. Maybe you did the thinking. Maybe you thought hard and well. Nobody can tell, because the artifact that would have shown it is now generic. And here’s the part

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that should worry you more: after a while, you can't tell either.

Several months ago I was sitting with a client, and he told me a story that was still bothering him.[6]

He was preparing to present at a board of directors meeting. He drafted the presentation himself, his work, his thinking. Then he handed it to AI and asked it to edit. He read the edits, decided they looked good, and took them. Then he stood up and presented.

His board called him on it. They said: hey, this doesn't sound like you.

And he told me: guess what, it wasn't him.

He looked at me with a pained expression. What happened? Did I do it right? Did I do it wrong?

"Hey, this doesn't sound like you."

Here is what I want you to notice. He was in the loop the entire time. He wrote the first draft. He reviewed every change. He approved all of it before a word reached that room. By any reasonable process standard, a human was involved at every step.

And his own board could hear that he wasn't in it.

Now move that into a setting where the stakes are higher than an awkward meeting.

If you write a SITREP, an assessment, or a decision brief and it doesn't sound like you, the problem isn't that it reads poorly. The problem is that the people acting on it cannot tell whose judgment they're acting on. In an organization where written products drive decisions, that isn't a style issue. It's a question of whether your intent is actually in the document, and whether the person who signed it can be held to what it says.

Deloitte names this problem directly in this year's research. AI, they write, is "blurring authorship and eroding confidence from both workers and organizations."[3]

Authorship is the word I would underline. When nobody can tell who wrote a thing, nobody can tell whose judgment is inside it.

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And look again at what EY says it's paying for. What they're buying is the ability to assess what the AI produced, and to explain a recommendation. Both of those are communication tests. You pass them with a document and your own mouth, or you don't pass them at all.

There's a personal cost here too, and I don't want to soften it.

I said something on the podcast this summer that I meant more bluntly than it may have landed: if it is AI speaking for you instead of you, then I don't need you.[6] Your identity erodes. Your value erodes. And eventually you have to ask where you fit.

The alternative sounds like everyone. I've called it beige, or that paint color called agreeable gray.[2] It goes with everything. It offends nobody. It isn't distinctive, it isn't authentic, and it isn't you.

Somebody will notice. His board did.

[05] SECTION FIVE

Your Role as the Editor-in-Chief

For most of your career, the hard part of communicating was production. Getting the thing written. Staring at a blank page, finding the first sentence, grinding out a draft that held together.

That part is over. AI writes a competent draft in seconds, and it's only getting faster.

So what's left?

The job didn't disappear. It moved. You are not the writer anymore. You are the editor-in-chief.

The trouble is, most organizations still train, evaluate, and reward people for the old job. We hire for writing ability. We coach on output. We measure how fast things ship. Almost nobody is building the skill that now decides whether any of it is any good.

Let me be specific about what the new role involves, because "be the editor" is useless advice on its own.

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At The BRIEF Lab we teach a writing method called TOWER: Think, Organize, Write, Edit, Rewrite.[6] We've taught it for years, long before mainstream AI could write anything at all. The method hasn't changed. What's changed is that one of those five steps can now be handed to a machine. Exactly one.

STEP	WHO OWNS IT
T Think	You. Always.
O Organize	You.
W Write	AI can draft here.
E Edit	You. Heavily.
R Rewrite	You.

Look at where the human work sits. Not in the middle. On both ends.

The first two steps are yours, and they happen before you open any tool. In our courses we use a DRAFT Card: desired outcome, relationship, audience mindset, format, and tone. Who am I talking to? What effect am I after? How do we relate to each other? What are they thinking and feeling right now, before I say a word? Should this be an email or should it be a meeting? Am I urgent, or encouraging, or direct?

None of that is writing. It's thinking about a person. AI can't do it for you, because AI doesn't know the person and doesn't have to work alongside them afterward.

Then you organize. We use a BRIEF Map. Main message. Background. Relevance. Key information. The end state you're driving toward. What you need next.

Only then does drafting make sense. And by that point the draft is the easy part, which is exactly why it's the step you can delegate.

Now go back to the man at the board meeting.

He did the thinking. He wrote the draft. Then he handed the editing to AI.

That's the inversion. He gave away the one step that carries his judgment and kept the one that doesn't. The draft was never where he lived. The editing was.

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I don’t blame him. The output looked good. It was grammatically perfect and it read cleanly, and when something reads cleanly it is very hard to argue with.

But clean isn’t the standard. The standard is: is this me, and is it true?

So here’s the practice, and I’ll warn you it isn’t comfortable.

Print it out. Buy a red pen. Redline it.

I do this myself. I did it on a flight recently. Printed a draft, marked it up, prompted, changed, corrected, adjusted. The whole time I kept saying the same thing: this isn’t me until it’s me.[6]

Heavy editing is painful. It should be. If the process feels easy, something is wrong. Click, click, send, submit. That ease is the sound of your critical thinking going quiet. Your decisions get dull. You stop noticing what you’ve stopped noticing.

When you take up this role, your job gets momentarily harder. That difficulty is the evidence that you’re doing it right.

Here’s what you get for the trouble.

The technology stays in its place. It works for you. You don’t work for it.

And what goes out with your name on it is actually yours. Which means when someone asks you about it six months from now, in a hallway or a hearing or a follow-up meeting, you can answer. Not because you remember the document. Because you made it.

Heavy editing is painful. It should be. If the process feels easy, something is wrong.

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[06] SECTION SIX

The Skill Nobody Is Funding

For most of my career, writing quality was a reliable signal. If you gave me a tight, well-organized executive summary, I could infer a few things about the person who wrote it. They had thought it through. They knew what mattered and what didn't. They could hold an idea steady long enough to put it in order.

Sloppy writing told me something too.

That signal is gone.

AI has made it essentially impossible to write badly in the mechanical sense. The grammar is correct. The transitions are smooth. The paragraphs are the right length. As I said on the podcast recently, it is the best first draft you have ever written.[7]

Which means a clean document no longer tells you anything about the person who sent it. The filter that used to separate careful thinkers from careless ones has been removed, quietly, from every organization at once.

So where did the filter go?

It moved to reading.

My colleague Grace Aldridge Foster wrote a piece for *Forbes* this summer arguing that English majors are becoming exactly the people you want to hire in the age of AI.[8] Grace is one of our instructors at The BRIEF Lab. She teaches BRIEF Essentials and BRIEF Writing Essentials, and she helped develop our SITREP Storytelling course. I studied English too, and for the first few years of my career I wondered what it was good for.

Now I know.

The skill she names is "close reading." Her definition: sustained attention to a text, combined with critical thinking about it.[8] Not skimming. Not checking. Sitting in the words long enough to work out whether they actually say anything.

That's the skill that tells you whether a document has a thought in it.

And here's why almost nobody has it right now.

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Close reading is an attention problem before it is anything else. It asks you to sit still with a page longer than feels comfortable, on a day with forty things going on, and a phone in your pocket. I've written two books about this problem. *NOISE: Living and Leading When Nobody Can Focus*[9] is about everything competing for your attention. *Quiet Works: Making Silence the Secret Ingredient of the Workday*[10] is about doing deep work without distraction. Neither was about AI. Both turn out to be about this.

Most people read in a hurry. They skim the top and move on. And skimming is precisely the behavior AI-generated text is best at surviving.

Because it sounds good. It really does. It sounds like music. Then you slow down and notice there are no lyrics. The song doesn't say anything.[7]

Just because it sounds good doesn't mean it is good. You can't scan. You've got to critique.

Now let me focus on anyone who owns a training budget:

Look at where the AI money is going in your organization. Prompt libraries. Tool licenses. Workshops on how to generate more, faster. Every line item points the same direction: production.

Where is the line item for reading?

Nobody has one. Nobody ever needed one, because reading was something we assumed adults could already do. That assumption held right up until the moment machines started producing more text than any of us can absorb.

AI created a volume problem: more documents, more summaries, more drafts, all of it plausible at a glance. And the only thing that manages that volume is a skill AI cannot perform on your behalf. You cannot delegate the reading to the thing that did the writing.

You cannot delegate the reading to the thing that did the writing.

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If you want to become a better reader, a close reader, start where Grace and I both started. Read good writers slowly and pay attention to their decisions. Why that word? Why that order? Why is that sentence structured that way? (E.B. White, if you want a place to begin. Hemingway. Whoever you already think is great.)

Do enough of it and you develop an eye for excellence, and an eye for what's missing. In a year when most people are passing along text that sounds good and says nothing, that eye is going to be worth a great deal.

Some people learned to write. Very few learned to read.

[07] SECTION SEVEN

Four Things for Leaders to Know

None of that is free, and most of it lands on the person who sets the standard. So let me talk to leaders directly.

Most AI policy I see asks one question: which tools are approved?

That's the small question. Approving a tool tells your people nothing about how to use it well. It tells them the legal department signed off.

The better question is: which responsibilities cannot be handed over?

Before I answer that, let me be clear about what I am *not* arguing.

I am not telling you to slow down on AI. Look at the organizations in this paper. EY reported that its AI-related revenue rose 30% year over year in 2025, and 95% of its partners have completed in-person sessions on how AI changes their business.[1] Bank of America built an AI tool that lets people rehearse difficult conversations privately, and it gets used hundreds of thousands of times a year.[4] None of them is stepping back.

What they've worked out is that the return on AI is capped by the capability of the people using it. That is what Deloitte's number measures.[5] The technology is not the constraint.

So. Four things to require.

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1. The thinking happens before the tool opens. Desired outcome, relationship, audience mindset, format, tone. If someone's first move is a prompt, they've skipped the only step that was ever theirs.

2. The human owns the edit, not the draft. This is the inversion that caught my client. Drafting is delegable. Editing is where judgment enters, and it stays with a person.

3. Anyone who sends it can explain it, unaided. No notes, no document open, no going back to look. If a person cannot defend the reasoning in their own words, they didn't make the argument. They forwarded one.

4. Voice is a quality standard, not a preference. If it doesn't sound like the person who signed it, it isn't finished. Beige is a defect and should be treated like one in review.

All four are enforceable. You can put them in a style guide, a review checklist, a pre-brief. You can ask about them in a one-on-one.

Now, let's briefly talk measurement, because this is where most organizations get AI wrong.

The instinct is to measure cost saved and hours removed. Bernard Hampton frames it better: "The benchmark is not just about cost saved, but value created and time returned."[4]

Time returned is the interesting part. If AI gives a person four hours back and they spend those hours generating more text nobody reads, you have bought volume. If they spend one of those hours on close reading and heavy editing, you have bought judgment. Same four hours. Very different outcomes at the end of the year.

Finally, a word about what this takes.

Ginnie Carlier at EY said something I would rather not quote, because I sell training. She said: "This isn't a problem that can be solved with a training course or a single program; it's going to take a sustainable, radical change."[1]

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She’s right. A workshop doesn’t build this. What builds it is practice on real work, over time, with the standards actually enforced. Anyone who tells you otherwise, including anyone selling you something, is describing a product rather than a solution.

[08] SECTION EIGHT

What We’re Building

I’ll close where I started.

Professionalism is well-informed judgment. Seeing clearly, thinking reasonably, taking responsibility for what you say and do. No tool replaces that, and the tools are now good enough that a lot of people are going to learn this the hard way.

Two things about how we’re working on the problem at The BRIEF Lab, offered as evidence rather than as an ask.

The first is our courses. BRIEF Essentials and BRIEF Writing Essentials teach the methods in this paper: TOWER, the DRAFT Card, the BRIEF Map. We’ve added a course called BRIEF Communication with AI for exactly the problem described here. A class is where you learn the standard. Ginnie Carlier is right that a class is not where you build the habit.

The second is what we’re building for the habit.

For months now I’ve been developing a prototype called BriefBot, a digital brevity and clarity companion. It is not a productivity tool, and it is not a replacement for whatever AI platform you already use. It’s an applied learning platform. You bring real work into it, a meeting agenda, an email, a SITREP, a QBR, and it walks you through our frameworks, then helps you evaluate how the thing actually went.[2]

The distinction I care about is this. There is AI that produces your work, and there is AI that builds your capability. They look similar. They are not the same thing.

I take some comfort in not being alone on that. Bank of America built an AI tool that lets people rehearse hard conversations privately, as many times as they want, before anyone is watching. Hampton described the shift this way: instead of waiting for your leader to catch you doing something wrong, you practice the reps yourself.[4]

That’s the category. Practice, not production. With you, never for you.[2]

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BriefBot is still in testing. You can join the waitlist at briefbot.ai. Our courses are available at thebrieflab.com and thequietworkplace.com, and if your organization is working through any of this, we'd like to hear about it.

We never hand over our humanity. We embrace it more intentionally than ever.

I think. I communicate. I decide. I own the outcome.

ABOUT JOE MCCORMACK

Joe McCormack is the founder of the Sheffield Institute, The BRIEF Lab, and the Quiet Workplace. He is the author of three books: *BRIEF*, *NOISE*, and *Quiet Works*. He is an internationally recognized expert in concise communication and leadership clarity, advising corporate, military, and government leaders worldwide. He is the host of the *Just Saying* podcast. He helps professionals think better, communicate clearly, and lead without authority through disciplined preparation and intentional communication.

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