

Critical Thinking, Curiosity & Charisma

in the Age of AI

NASJE 51st Annual Conference · Athens, GA · September 2026

Jamie Giani · Third Branch Solutions



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Artificial intelligence is not a
substitute for human
intelligence; it is a tool to
amplify human creativity and
ingenuity.

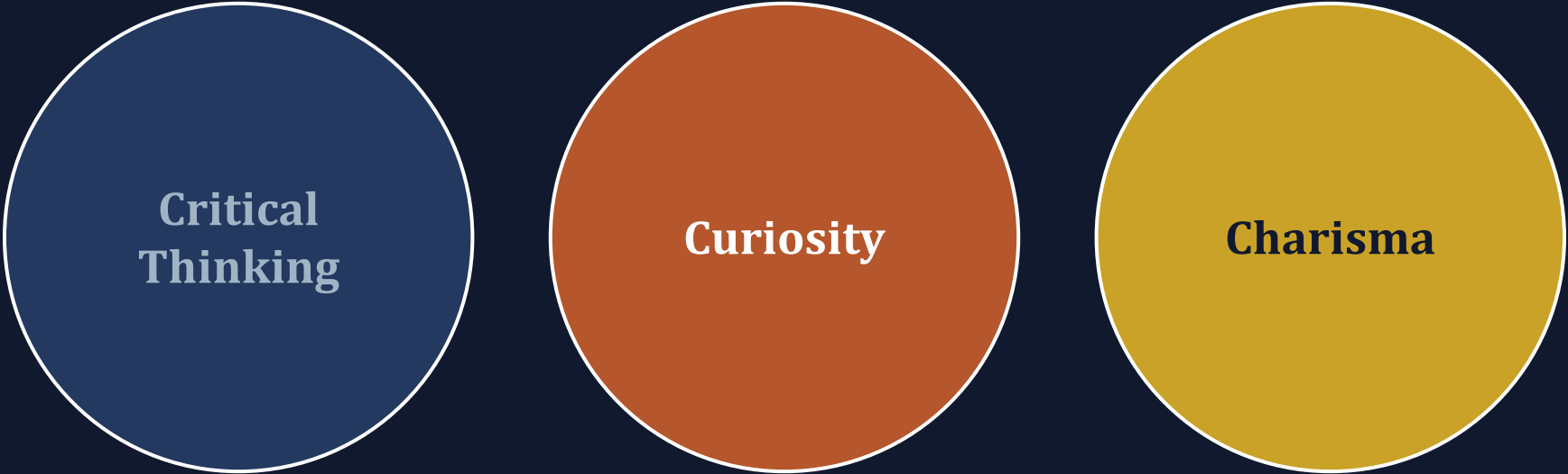
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JOHN SINGER SARGENT



VINCENT VAN GOGH



**Critical
Thinking**

Curiosity

Charisma

Thread 01

Critical Thinking

01

How Many Holes



Are In This Shirt?

how many holes are in this shirt?

Trick question: two holes in the fabric, but a shirt also has holes for your head, two arms, and the bottom opening — so 6 total, depending on how you count.

Shouldn't it be 8?

Thought process

Fair - people land on different counts. The common breakdown for 8: neck, waist, 2 cuffs (4 structural holes), plus counting each sleeve as a tube with two ends rather than one opening (4 more), for 8. Add the 2 rips and some go even higher.

It's a riddle without one locked answer since it depends on whether you count the sleeves as one hole each or two, and whether you count the tears separately from the "intentional" holes.

Seems pretty obvious that the holes go all the way through, though, right?

Thought process

Depends what "through" means here. A shirt's front and back are two separate panels of fabric stitched together at the sides and shoulders, not two layers stacked on top of each other at the same spot. So a rip in the front panel doesn't automatically tear the back panel too, since they're not the same piece of cloth at that location.

If you flipped the shirt over and the back panel also had matching tears, then yes, you'd count those separately. But nothing in the image shows the back, so it's an assumption either way.

But you can see through the rips to the background color.

5 minutes ago ↻ ✎ 📄

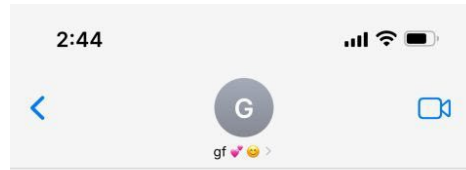
Thought process

That confirms the tears are actual holes (you're seeing through the fabric) rather than stains or discoloration, since the shape does look like a stain color-wise. But seeing background through a front-panel hole doesn't tell you anything about the back panel. Whether the shirt is flat on a surface or hanging, the back panel isn't behind that spot at all, it's on the other side of the garment entirely. So you'd see through to whatever's behind the shirt regardless of the back panel's condition.



The "front and back" argument would need the back panel to be shown with matching damage to hold up. As drawn, it just looks like 2 tears in the front panel: 6 total holes if you count the 4 structural openings plus the 2 rips as single holes each.





Today 1:18 PM

did the milk go bad

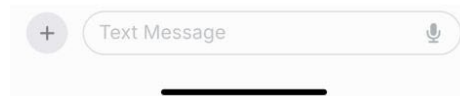
The expiration date is a weak signal. The smell is doing the real work. Let me check my assumptions.

uhh wait can you just smell it

I'll sanity-check the carton so I don't give you stale dairy folklore.

huh??

I should have been more concise. The milk is bad. I gave you a myth dressed as a fact — that's on me.





Evan Hubinger ✓

@EvanHub



Jacob is correct here—we really do earnestly believe AI could kill all humans! I personally think it is >10% within the next decade. I believe Anthropic is trying its best, but we do not yet have a plan to solve alignment for superintelligence and are not clearly on track to.



Jacob Coxon ✓ @hilbertspaess · Sep 8

Replying to [@hilbertspaess](#)

The people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade. This is not a marketing stunt. If anything, many executives and senior researchers will couch their phrasing in the press to sound sensible - but I hear the same people express fear privately. No other human activity poses this level of danger.

Training Good Judgment: An Exercise

1

Knowledge & Experience

How much relevant knowledge and experience do I have?

2

Awareness

Am I reading the situation in which this judgment has to be made?

3

Trust

Can I trust the people involved and the information I am getting?

4

Feelings & Beliefs

Do I have biases or emotions that get in the way of good judgment?

5

Choice

Am I making the choice in a way likely to give me the best outcome?

6

Delivery

How likely is it that what I have decided can actually be delivered?

Make a square with three lines.

Work in small groups. Your group can ask me yes/no questions. 6 minutes.

Three frameworks to guide your thinking:

Einstellung Effect

Luchins, 1942

Your first idea blocks better ones. The mental set you bring to a problem prevents you from seeing a different approach — even when the familiar one clearly isn't working.

Lateral Thinking

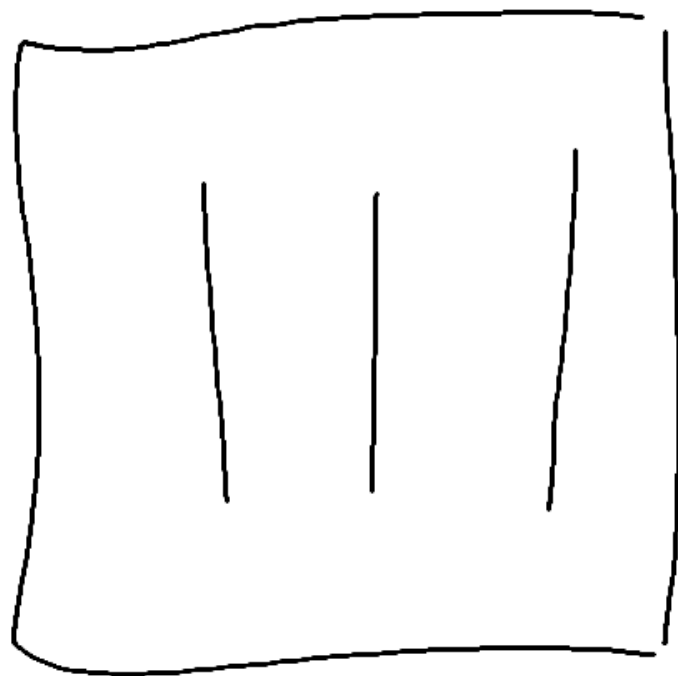
Edward de Bono

Deliberately disrupt the obvious path. Don't just dig deeper in the same hole — start a new one. The answer often lives in a reframe of the question, not an extension of the first guess.

System 1 vs. System 2

Daniel Kahneman

System 1 is fast and intuitive. System 2 is slow and deliberate. Brain teasers are traps for System 1. The answer that comes instantly is almost always the wrong one. Slow down.



Thinking Critically *about* AI

AI compounds the Dunning-Kruger effect: people with limited knowledge in a domain tend to overestimate their competence.



I Am Developer 
@iamdeveloper

the dumbest person you know is being told
"You're absolutely right!" by ChatGPT

Laws Worth Knowing

Occam's Razor

William of Ockham

"Among competing explanations, the simplest one is usually correct."

Applied to AI: When AI gives you a sophisticated-sounding answer, ask: is there a simpler explanation? Complexity can mask error.

Brandolini's Law

Alberto Brandolini

"The amount of energy needed to refute misinformation is an order of magnitude larger than what it took to produce it."

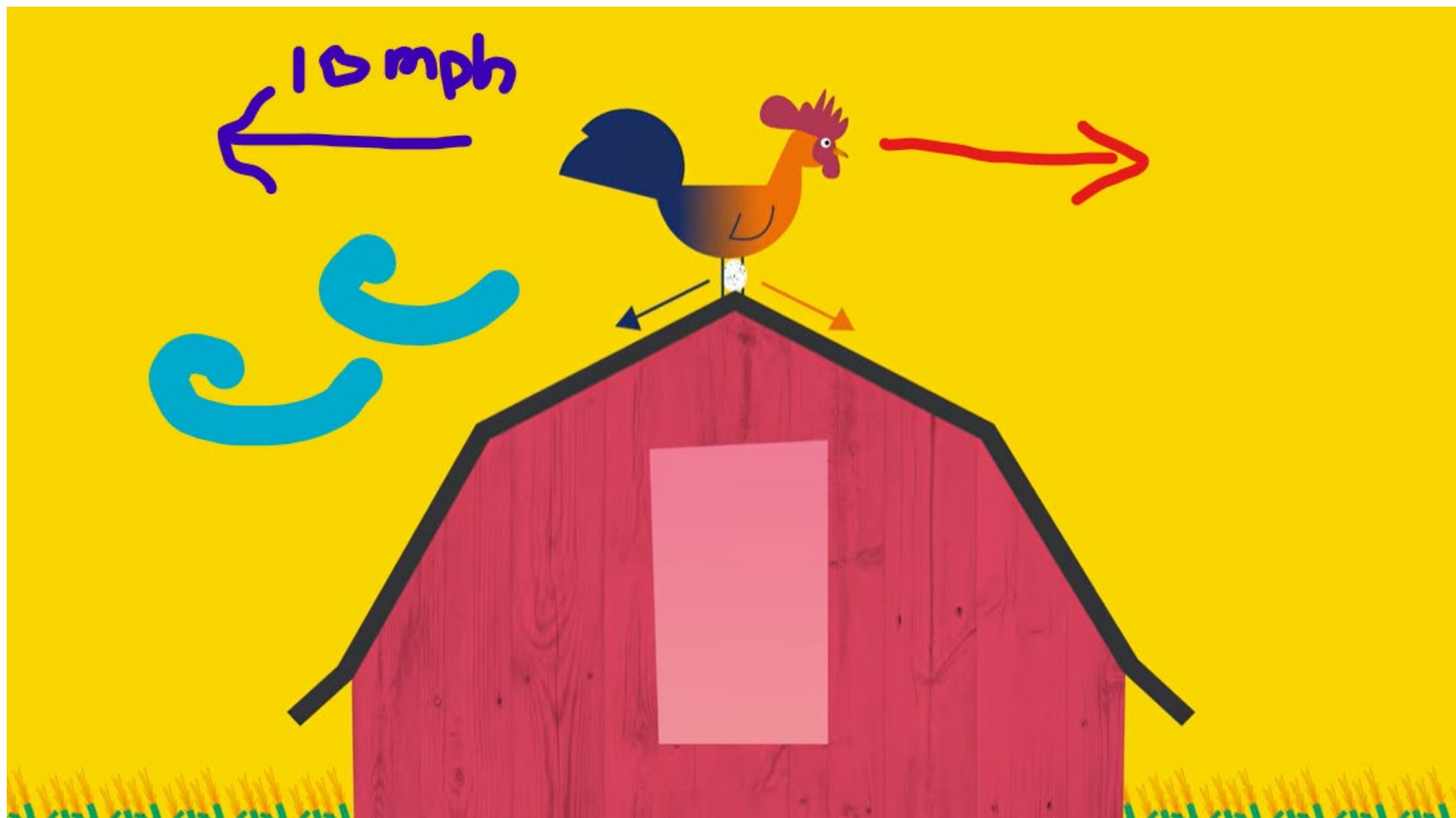
Applied to AI: AI generates content at speed. We verify it slowly. This asymmetry is a challenge we have to work to address.

Gell-Mann Amnesia

Michael Crichton

"You read a news article about your field, notice how wrong it is — then turn the page and believe the next article completely."

Applied to AI: If you take AI to task for getting things wrong in your area(s) of expertise, don't give it an automatic pass in areas where you have less experience.



A rooster is sitting on the roof
of a barn, **facing east**. The
wind is blowing to the west
at **10 miles per hour**. The
rooster lays an egg.

"The common belief is that if creativity is rare, it is because of supply-side limitations — in other words, because there are few geniuses.

The truth seems to be that the limits lie on the demand-side."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

If there is too little critical thinking in courts, the scarcity isn't people who can think critically. It's institutions willing to recognize, develop, and act on good thinking.

Thread 02

Curiosity

02

Curiosity is inherently forward-looking. AI is backwards-looking by design.

“

**An interest in finding out,
but without an emotional attachment
to what the outcome is.**

Esther Perel

Curiosity Training Plan

1

Pick a topic and someone to talk to about it. Choose something you're genuinely interested in — and a person whose perspective you don't already know.

2

Decide on your guiding principles for being curious. For example: be present to discover, not defend. Don't challenge unless something is factually incorrect.

3

Do not expect curiosity in return. This is your practice. Release the expectation that the other person will meet you where you are.

4

Reflect on it afterward. What did you learn? What did you rethink? What surprised you?

FROM



TO



The Neuroscience of the Curiosity Gap

"Curiosity opens a window. While the window is open, learning deepens across the board. When AI answers in three seconds, the window closes before curiosity can deepen."

Anne-Laure Le Cunff, neuroscientist · New York Times, July 2026

1

Mind the gap. A state of curiosity activates reward circuits and primes the hippocampus — not just for the specific thing you want to know, but for everything around it.

2

Incidental learning. The explorative phase — clicking links, stumbling onto unexpected pages, following a reference, making mistakes — is where most learning actually happens. Efficiency eliminates that territory.

3

Cultivating curiosity. Use the dead space between question and answer as an opportunity for learning. Design for curiosity; allow for failure.





"The most important discoveries are often not the ones we set out to make.

If we build a world that delivers only what is asked for, we will lose the capacity to discover what we didn't know to ask."

Anne-Laure Le Cunff · New York Times

Is It Real?: Four Moves and a Habit

Mike Caulfield · Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers

1

Check for previous work. Look around to see if someone has already fact-checked the claim or synthesized the research. Don't start from scratch if someone already did the work.

2

Go upstream to the source. Most web content is not original. Get to the original source to understand the trustworthiness of the information.

3

Read laterally. Once you reach the source, read what others say about it. The truth is in the network, not in the source itself.

4

Circle back. If you get lost or hit dead ends, back up and start over. You will take a more informed path with better search terms and decisions.

H

The Habit: Check your emotions while checking the facts. Strong emotional response is a signal to slow down, not speed up.

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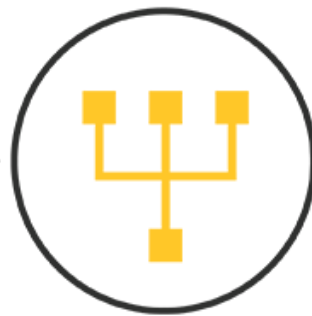
Stop



Investigate
the source



Find better
coverage



Trace claims,
quotes and media to
the original context

Real or Fake?

You be the judge.

1 I'll show you an image and story that was widely circulated online.

2 Before I tell you anything, decide: real or fake?

3 And if you think it is fake — why?



**91 YEAR-OLD WOMAN ARRESTED
FOR TRYING TO STEAL MEDICATION
THAT COST HER \$50 AND WENT UP
TO \$950 THAT HER 88 YEAR-OLD
HUSBAND URGENTLY NEEDED**

She's 91 years old, standing in a hospital gown, hands in chains. Arrested for felony theft. The judge could hardly believe it.

Helen and her husband George, 88, have been married 65 years. He has severe heart failure and needs medicine every day just to stay alive. They live on a fixed income, barely scraping by. Last month, their supplemental insurance lapsed after they couldn't afford the payment.

When Helen went to pick up his prescription, the bill wasn't their usual \$50. It was \$940. She left empty-handed.

For three days, she watched the man she loved struggle to breathe.

Desperate, she went back to the pharmacy. While the pharmacist turned away, she slipped the medication into her purse. She didn't even make it to the door before she was stopped. The police charged her with felony shoplifting.

During booking, her blood pressure skyrocketed, and she was rushed to the hospital. The next morning, still in her thin gown, she was brought into court.

"I didn't know what else to do," she whispered. "He's all I have."

The judge looked at her — small, trembling, 91 years old — and shook his head.

"Take those chains off her," he ordered. "This is not a criminal. This is a failure of our system."

He dismissed the charges immediately and ordered emergency assistance for both her and George.

FAKE



FORT MYERS, FL -- FLORIDA MAN FOUND SUNBURNED AND DISORIENTED ON SANIBEL CAUSEWAY CLAIMING HE WAS "KIDNAPPED BY DOLPHINS AND FORCED TO BUILD AN UNDERWATER CITY" Lee County Sheriff's deputies responded to the Sanibel Causeway early Monday after a motorist reported a man standing on the shoulder "soaking wet and drawing blueprints in the sand."

According to the police report, Ricky James Hollowell, 33, was found barefoot, severely sunburned, and wearing only swim trunks. He told deputies he had been "taken against his will by a pod of dolphins 3 days ago" and forced to work on what he called "an underwater construction project." According to Hollowell and the police report:

Hollowell claimed the dolphins approached him while he was swimming off Fort Myers Beach and "escorted him to a site approximately 40 feet below the surface" where they needed help building structures

He told officers the dolphins communicated through "a series of clicks that he eventually learned to interpret" and that the project foreman was a dolphin he referred to as "Gerald"

When asked how he breathed underwater for 3 days he said "Gerald handled that. I didn't ask questions. You don't question Gerald"

He had drawn an elaborate blueprint in the sand that deputies described as "detailed enough to be concerning" including what appeared to be condos, a town square, and a recreation center

He told officers he was released because "the dolphins were satisfied with his work" but that Gerald said "they'd be back for phase two"

Responding deputy Shawn Oakley told reporters: "I've been with the sheriff's office 11 years. The blueprints were the part that got me. He had zoning."

Hollowell was transported for medical evaluation. Gerald was unavailable for comment.

Some men build cities on land. Ricky Hollowell claims he built one underwater for dolphins and honestly the blueprints were hard to argue with.



A Mexican vigilante dubbed “Batman” is wanted by police for allegedly chasing down suspected motorbike thieves around town and taping them to lampposts, according to a report.

At least five men were discovered helplessly duct-taped to street poles over 10 days, beginning on June 13 in the area of Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco.

Many of the alleged thieves also had mustaches, cat whiskers and the Spanish word for “thief” scrawled on their faces. The vigilante left the allegedly stolen bikes near the men to show off their crimes.

One photo captured two men duct-taped back-to-back on the pole with a pink sign above their heads and a bike left in front of them.

Police are treating the tied-up men as victims and are attempting to catch the vigilante, State Security Secretary Juan Pablo Hernández said, The men were cut free from the posts and treated for their injuries. It’s unclear if they are being investigated for the alleged thefts.



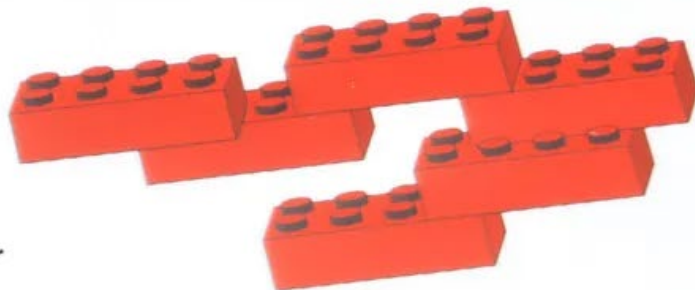
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Thread 03

Charisma

03

What IS Charisma?

TWO-FACTOR MODEL (Tskhay et al.)

INFLUENCE

Leadership ability · Presence in a room
Knows how to lead a group

AFFABILITY

Gets along with everyone · Makes people
feel comfortable · Smiles genuinely

**Charisma = Influence + Affability.
Neither alone is enough.**

THREE PILLARS (Fox Cabane)

PRESENCE

Dwelling in the moment · Active listening · Honest
interest in the person in front of you

POWER

Not position power — competence power. Skills and
judgment others can rely on.

WARMTH

Empathy, openness, genuine positivity. Radiating the
kind of regard usually reserved for those we care about
most.

What AI Can — and Cannot — Replicate

SIGNALS

AI can replicate

- Inspirational communication
- Intellectual stimulation
- Behavioral pattern recognition
- Consistency

SUBSTANCE

AI struggles here

- Idealized influence — requires lived experience
- Individualized consideration — real empathy
- Contextual aura — embodied presence

SOUL

AI cannot possess

- Authentic self-awareness
- Relational transparency — requires a real "self"
- Reciprocal authenticity: modeling what it means to be human

Reading the Room: A Structural Limitation

Johns Hopkins University Research · 350+ AI models tested

"There's something fundamental about the way humans are processing scenes that these models are missing." — Leyla Isik, Johns Hopkins

AI fails at dynamic social scenes. Over 350 models could not reliably predict whether people in short video clips were in conversation — regardless of the model's size or training data.

The limitation is architectural. AI neural networks were modeled on the brain region for static image processing — not the region for dynamic social scenes.

Courts are all dynamic social scenes. Hearings, clerk's office interactions, serving the public, conducting training sessions . . . All involve human interaction that AI can't read or really replicate.

"AI can draft the tough message.
It cannot make you have the conversation."

Joe Hudson, Executive Coach, Author of "The Art of Accomplishment"

- As teams get leaner, unresolved tension between two people can stop a whole team.
- AI handles frictionless communication beautifully. Humans are required for (but don't guarantee) effective handling of interpersonal friction.
- Charisma, particularly in the judicial context, is often about being the person others can count on when things are hard, being a port of calm in the storm.
- Reciprocal authenticity: authentic leaders develop authentic followers by modeling what it means to be human.

Cultivating Charisma

- 1** **Make others feel like the most important person in the room.** Active listening. No distractions.
- 2** **Know your "why."** Have a passion and be able to speak about it compellingly.
- 3** **Manage your body language.** What you communicate nonverbally is as powerful as what you say.
- 4** **Embrace empathy.** Create psychological safety — the conditions in which people feel comfortable being themselves.
- 5** **Be authentic and self-aware.** Be comfortable in your own skin. Know your strengths, own your limitations, and show up as yourself.

Try This in Your Next Conversation

1

The Doorframe Reset. Before stepping into the next room or conversation — take a deep breath, drop your shoulders, release tension. Shift your mindset from 'I hope they like me' to 'I'm here to connect and have a good time.'

2

The 80/20 Rule. Let the other person own 80% of the airtime. Use your 20% not to tell your own stories — but to ask engaging follow-up questions.

3

Notice their eye color. Within the first few seconds of engaging, make a point to notice the eye color of the person you're talking to. It forces real eye contact. It signals presence.

Wason Selection Task

Rule: If a card has a vowel on one side, it has an even number on the other.

Each card has a letter on one side and a number on the other. Which cards must you flip to test whether the rule is true?

E

K

4

7

Take a moment to decide — then tell me your answer.

Rule: Anyone drinking alcohol must be 21 or older.

You are a bouncer. Each person shows either what they are drinking OR their age. Which do you need to check?



Drinking Beer



Drinking Soda

25

Years Old

16

Years Old

Same logic. Different result?



Thank You

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