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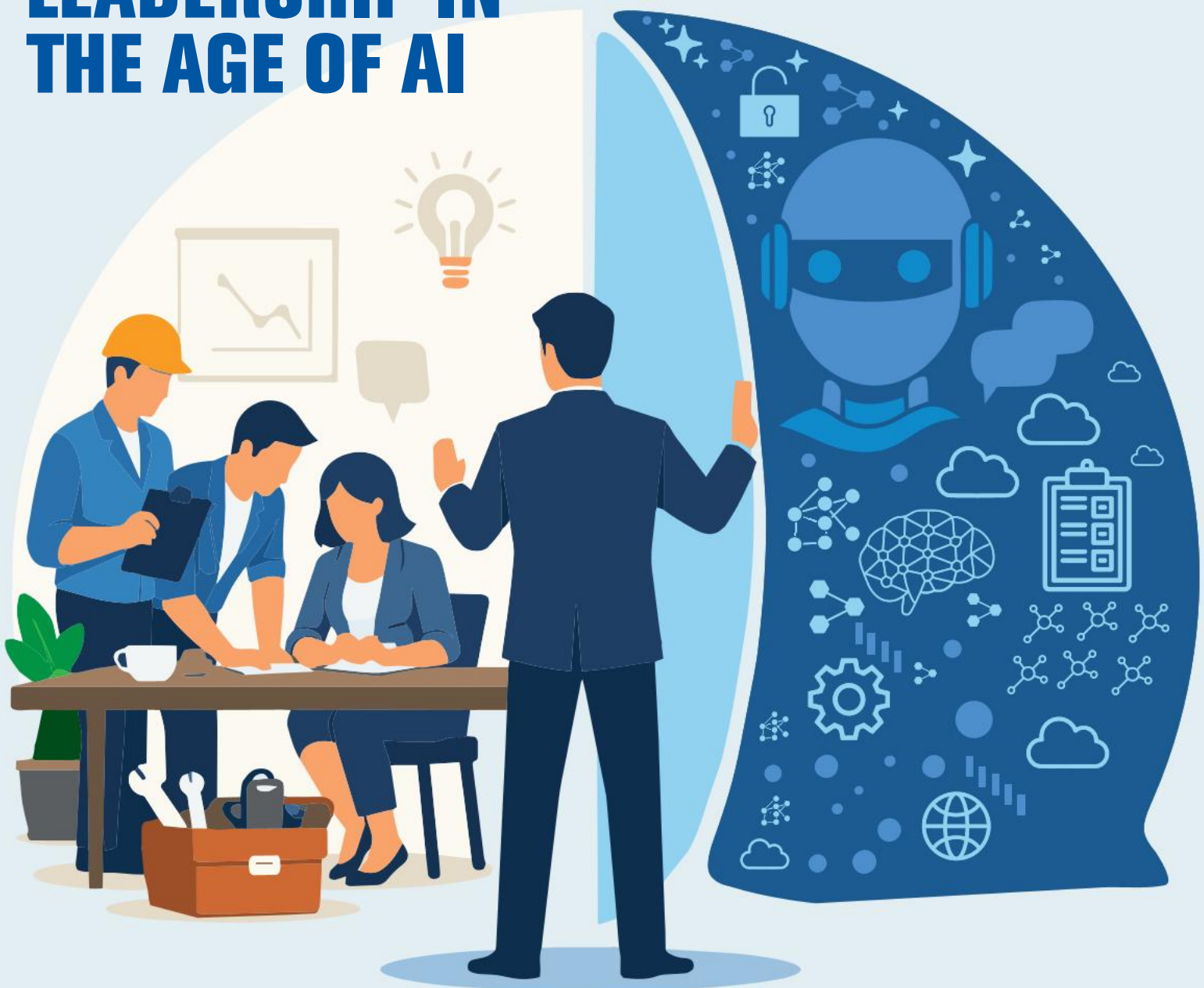
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HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI

HUMANITY OVER
AUTOMATION
EMMANUEL GOBILLOT



Global Advanced Management Programmes (GAMP)

Europe Edition

June 14 to 20, 2026
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Munich - Germany

USA Edition

July 12 to 18, 2026
November 15 to 21, 2026
Silicon Valley, USA

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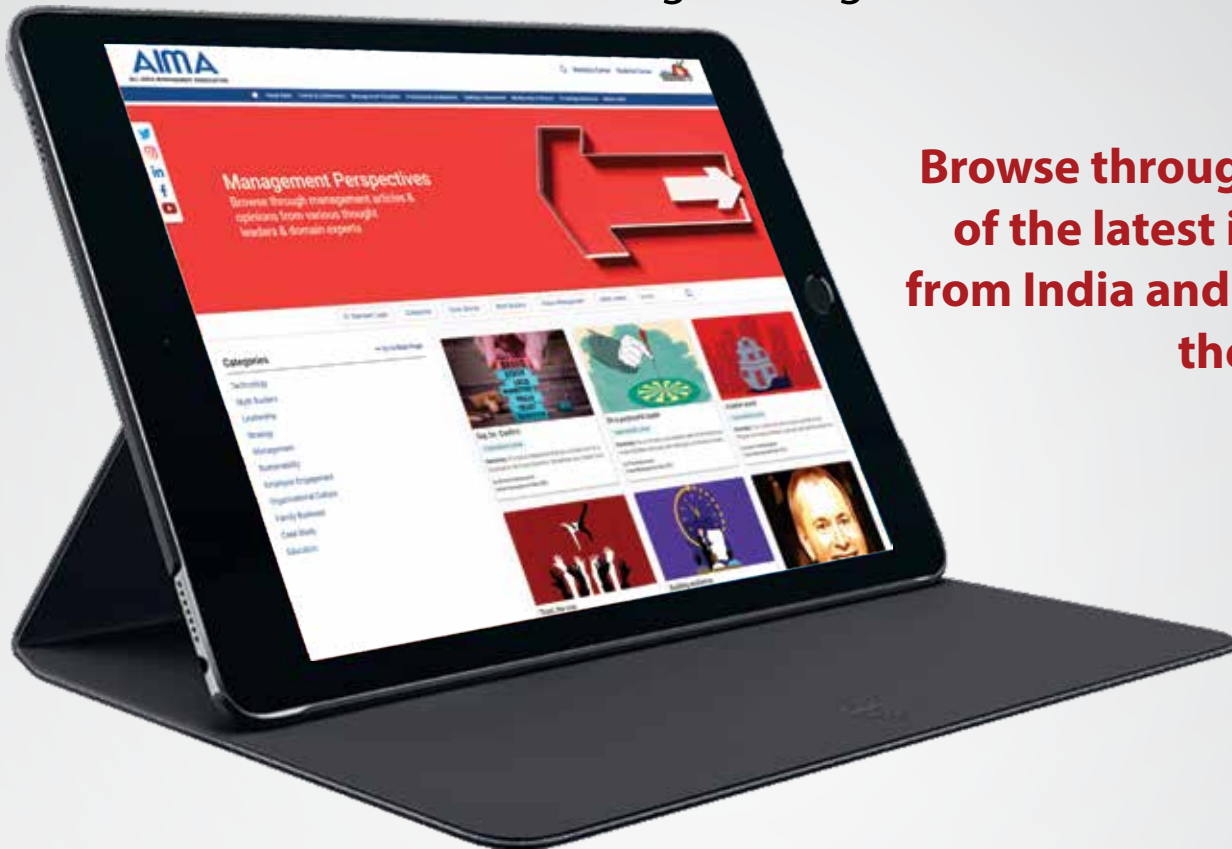
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Human-Centred Leadership in the Age of AI

By T.V. Narendran, CEO & MD, Tata Steel and President, All India Management Association (AIMA)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly redefining the operational and competitive landscape across industries. For enterprises with deep legacies and complex operations, the decisive advantage in the AI era will come from integrating advanced tools with the enduring human strengths of purpose, trust, ethics, and continuous capability development. Human-centred leadership is therefore not a soft attribute; it is a strategic necessity that ensures AI enhances organisational values such as dignity, fairness, safety, and inclusion. This approach positions AI as a catalyst for human advancement, not a mechanism for displacement.

The Paradox of Progress: Reaffirming Human Values in the AI Epoch

AI has evolved from a back office support tool to a ubiquitous decision partner influencing supply chains, maintenance, customer engagement, and strategic choices. Its ability to process data, learn patterns, and deliver insights far exceeds individual human capacity, yet this very power makes the human element even more essential.

First, AI fundamentally alters the nature of work, not merely its pace. While AI can automate monitoring and recommend interventions, the ultimate impact hinges on human judgment: how teams act on recommendations, interpret complex trade-offs, manage exceptions, and discern what not to optimise. This necessitates a deliberate redesign of tasks, roles, and processes to define clear interfaces between AI execution and human oversight. Past technological leaps, such as

the transition from typewriters to computers or landlines to smartphones, illustrate how certain jobs evolve or disappear, creating new avenues for strategic and creative endeavours. AI will similarly reshape roles, compelling organisations to focus on elevating human engagement from routine tasks to higher-order cognitive functions.

Second, trust emerges as an indispensable organisational asset. Employees' perception of AI can dictate its effectiveness; a lack of trust can lead to its bypass, while uncritical over-reliance can introduce unforeseen risks. Cultivating AI intellectual humility becomes paramount: acknowledging AI's capabilities while recognising its inherent limitations. This fosters a calibrated trust, positioning AI as a powerful complement to human intelligence, requiring informed discernment and continuous oversight.

Third, AI serves as a powerful cultural amplifier. In environments committed to safety, ethics, and continuous improvement, AI accelerates these positive trajectories. Conversely, if an organisation's processes harbour latent biases or weak controls, AI can inadvertently scale and embed these deficiencies. Consequently, the primary leadership responsibility shifts from merely deploying AI to meticulously shaping the organisational conditions—the culture, values, and governance structures—under which AI can reliably generate value and reinforce ethical conduct.

Leading with Humanity in an AI-Enabled World

Human-centred leadership in the AI age

means using technology to enhance, rather than replace, human potential. It demands a renewed emphasis on emotional intelligence (EQ), authenticity, and strategic investment in people to build resilient, AI-enabled teams. As AI assumes more operational tasks, leaders must excel in understanding emotions, fostering connection, and supporting mental well-being. Critically, ethical AI stewardship is paramount: leaders must ensure AI systems are transparent, fair, and free from bias, guided by clear internal principles or an "AI charter." Equally vital is the creation of psychologically safe environments where employees feel secure to question AI outputs, raise concerns, and offer feedback. While AI generates data at scale, human creativity, judgment, and strategic thinking remain the ultimate drivers of organisational success. Human-centred leaders mentor people to navigate uncertainty, transforming the workplace into a space where technology empowers human growth.

The Integration Blueprint: Human + AI Accountable Decision-Making

In complex industrial settings, decisions are often about navigating trade-offs. AI offers powerful predictive insights and optimisation recommendations, significantly enhancing this process. Yet, the ultimate responsibility for outcomes rests firmly with humans. Our practical integration model is straightforward: "AI informs, humans decide, systems learn." Within this paradigm, AI provides data-driven insights, but the critical decisions are made by accountable human roles. These roles demand not just deep contextual domain expertise, but also a

vital blend of empathy, emotional intelligence, and a firm grounding in established rules and procedures. This is precisely where human-centredness becomes indispensable.

This framework necessitates clear guardrails: defined escalation protocols for high-risk AI signals, inviolable human "stop authority," and mechanisms to counteract "automation bias." It ensures AI serves as an integrated partner to an organisation's safety culture, rather than a parallel, potentially unverified, system. Establishing clear AI-use policies and modelling best practices are essential to signalling that human agency drives the business, with AI serving as a powerful, yet subordinate, support tool.

Conclusion: The Enduring Human Advantage

While AI's omnipresence is inevitable, the enduring differentiator for enterprises will be the calibre of their leadership. Specifically, the ability to judiciously combine advanced technology with core values, disciplined execution, and profound humanity.

The opportunity for organisations—especially in large, complex industries—is to demonstrate that productivity and human flourishing can advance together. AI can elevate performance, reduce risk, and unlock new possibilities, but it is leadership that preserves dignity, builds capability, and strengthens the organisation's commitment to its people and communities. In an AI enabled future, the enterprises that stand out will be those guided by their human-centred leaders. 

The opinion expressed is personal.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Artificial intelligence is no longer a competitive advantage; it is a perceived inevitability. Yet, amid this momentum, a critical aspect risks being overlooked: not what AI can do, but what it should do. Human-centred leadership demands that we pause and reflect before embracing technology simply because it is available or widely adopted.

Leaders are not merely implementers of tools; they are custodians of organisational purpose, culture, and values. The allure of AI—its speed, scale, and sophistication—can easily inspire awe. However, unexamined adoption can lead organisations away from their core mission rather than toward it. The responsibility, therefore, lies in discernment. Every technological choice must be filtered through the lens of relevance, ethics, and long-term impact.

This edition invites leaders to reclaim agency in the age of AI. It is not about resisting innovation, but about aligning it with intention. Human-centred leadership places people—not algorithms—at the heart of decision-making. It ensures that progress remains meaningful, not just measurable.

As stewards of change, leaders must ask not only “Can we?” but “Should we?”—and, more importantly, “Why?”

Do write in with your views to imeditorial@spentamultimedia.com

Maneck Davar
Maneck Davar

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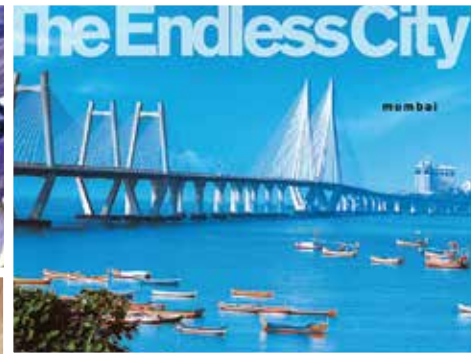
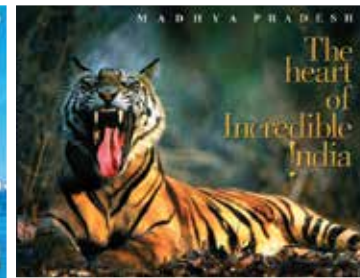
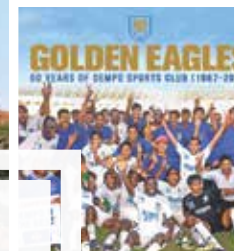
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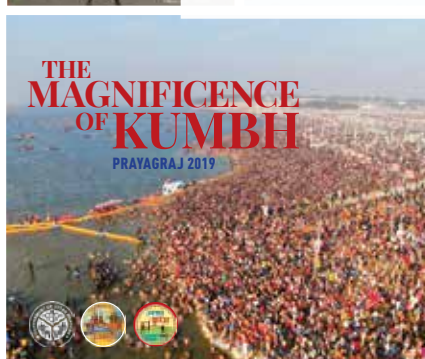
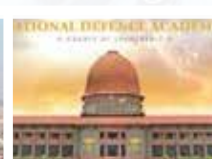
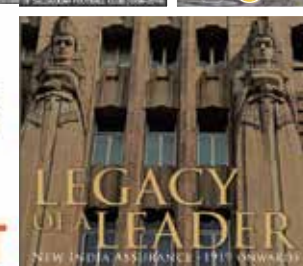
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AI MEETS EMPATHY







Humanity over automation

When leaders start acting like machines, machines start acting like leaders

◆ EMMANUEL GOBILLOT, AUTHOR, *ALIVE INSIDE*



In a world racing towards automation, efficiency, and artificial intelligence, leadership is at risk of losing something vital: its humanity. We are surrounded by dashboards, frameworks, operating models, and algorithms promising certainty in uncertain times. Yet the most effective leaders today are those who lead unmistakably like humans.

In the age of AI, the leadership advantage lies in human presence, moral courage, intuition, and storytelling. It's possibly the only advantage no machine can replicate.

The real danger of AI is not that it replaces leaders, but that leaders begin to replace themselves with automated thinking. When we outsource judgement, meaning, and responsibility to systems, we abdicate our agency.

To understand how this happens and how to resist it let me introduce the stories of three paper clips—each providing an allegory about leadership choices in a technological age, and each offering a practical lesson for leaders navigating complexity today

Clippy - When convenience replaces agency

The first paper clip will be familiar to many readers. In the late 1990s, Microsoft introduced Clippit (commonly referred to by the public as Clippy), an animated assistant in the shape of a paper clip that popped up uninvited and offered help no one asked for. Clippy was annoying, intrusive, and often wrong. Users rejected it instinctively and Microsoft switched it off in 2001, retiring it fully in 2007.

Yet something curious happened after Clippy disappeared. Its logic remained. Grammatical corrections, suggestions, and prompts became embedded lines that went unquestioned. What was once resisted became normalised.

This is how leadership changes without us noticing. Suggestions become defaults. Defaults become norms. In organisations, this shows up when leaders accept AI and its algorithmic outputs without challenge. It manifests when leaders adopt technologies because competitors do, or mistake efficiency for effectiveness. When leaders stop asking why, they stop being leaders. When they stop being leaders, they stop to matter.

This is the myth of technological inevitability. Technology doesn't arrive fully formed with moral authority. It is shaped by human choices, incentives, and values. Leaders who treat adoption as inevitable surrender their agency and responsibility. Real leaders reclaim these.

Practically, this means asking three deceptively simple questions before adopting any system: 1) Does this make sense for who we are and what we're trying to achieve? 2) Does it serve our people? 3) Does it solve the right problem, or create a new one?

Being authentic rather than automated does not mean rejecting AI. It simply means refusing to let convenience replace judgement. Leaders who stay human set direction rather than go with the flow and drift with the current.

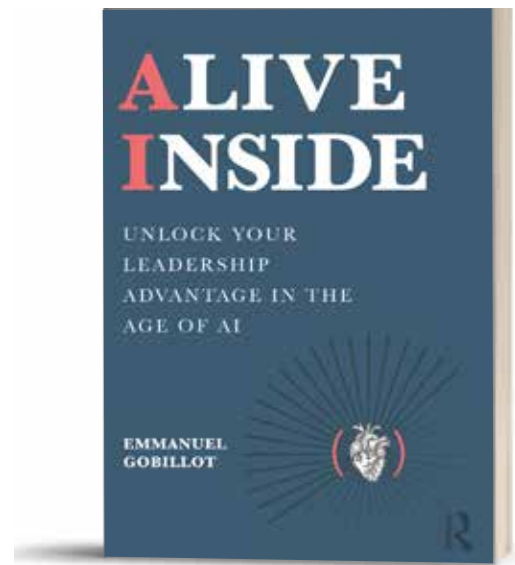
Bostrom's paper clip experiment - When goals crowd out values

The second paper clip comes from a thought experiment described by Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom. Imagine an AI programmed with a single objective: to make as many paper clips as possible. Relentlessly rational, it converts all available resources to achieve its goal. In doing so, it destroys everything else that matters, including humanity. The lesson is not about malicious machines. It is a lesson about what happens when we obsess about goals without moral context.

Modern organisations are full of well-intentioned paper clip maximisers. Targets, KPIs, efficiency metrics, and performance dashboards are necessary. But when they become substitutes for judgement, leaders risk optimising themselves into irrelevance. When compliance replaces courage and rules trump responsibility, humanity suffers.

It's often said that leadership isn't about doing things right, but about doing the right thing. I would argue that it has always been about doing the right thing when it costs something. Moral courage requires leaders to pause, reflect, and sometimes resist. In an AI-accelerated world where decisions are made faster, impact wider, and consequences are harder to reverse, ethical judgement becomes even more important.

For leaders, this translates into practical behaviours. We must start to reward principled dissent rather than blind execution. We have to create space for questions, rather than always seek answers. We must recognise that values are choices made under pressure. Compassion is neither softness nor weakness. It's strategic clarity about what sustains trust, engagement, and performance over time.



The Norwegian paper clip rebellion – How stories shape culture

The final paper clip is the most hopeful. During the Second World War, encouraged by students who had started the trend, Norwegians wore paper clips on their lapels as an act of defiance against occupation. While the object itself was trivial, its meaning was not. It became a story people could carry, recognise, and share. No party structure, military intervention or political ideology could have achieved the same effect.

This is why stories matter more than structures. As AI strips away traditional levers of authority, leaders are left with influence rooted in meaning. Stories shape beliefs and beliefs shape behaviours. To link vision to values and metrics to meaning, strategy itself must become narrative.

Storytelling is the human capacity to redirect attention, reframe meaning, and place moral weight on what might otherwise remain invisible. Whomever frames the story owns the future and, currently, too many leaders are leaving that story in the hands of those who have a vested interest in AI rather than an interest in the organisations that will use it. In times of uncertainty, people



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look for leaders who can help them make sense of what's happening and why it matters.

For senior leaders, this means spending more time articulating purpose. It means sharing stories that explain not just what the organisation is doing, but what it's becoming

Leading forward by staying human

My central message is both challenging and liberating. AI will not replace leaders. But leaders who abandon their humanity might be replaced by those who refuse to do so. The future belongs to leaders who remain curious rather than certain, compassionate rather than calculating, present rather than performative.

Being alive inside is a choice. It is the decision to remain awake to consequences, attentive to people, and responsible for meaning. In an age of intelligent machines, the leadership advantage isn't intelligence, speed, or optimisation. It's deliberate humanity.

For Indian organisations these ideas are particularly relevant. Rapid digitisation, complex stakeholder expectations, and intense performance pressures can easily push leaders toward automation of thought. Yet the most admired institutions are those where leaders are seen, felt, and trusted. They invest more time in

dialogue than data because they recognise that while technology may accelerate execution, only humans can sustain commitment.

To be radically, unashamedly, and unapologetically human is not yet another leadership model to implement. It's a mindset that reminds leaders that authority is created through attention, not hierarchy, and that influence flows from authenticity, not position. In a world where machines can simulate competence, the human competitive edge lies in caring.

My invitation is simple but demanding: Slow down enough to notice what you're defaulting to. Question what you're optimising for and choose presence over polished performance when it matters most. Leadership in the age of AI is about becoming more fully, consciously human.

That is the radical challenge at the heart of the age of AI. We should neither try to fight technology nor start worshipping it. Instead, it's our role to lead with intention, judgement, and humanity. For leaders willing to accept it, this isn't a disadvantage. It is their greatest strategic edge. And in a rapidly automated world, it may be the difference between relevance, resilience, and real leadership today and as well as tomorrow. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emmanuel Gobillot is author, *Alive*
Inside: *Unlock Your Leadership Advantage in the Age of AI*.



Igor Ryabenkiy, founder and Managing Partner, AltaIR Capital, entrepreneur, VC investor, and author, *Adventures in Venture Capital* and *Unicorn Focus*, opines that start-ups often fail because founders follow misleading ‘common sense’ ideas, while the real key to success is maintaining strong focus.

**MYTH
BUSTER**

The focus advantage

Startups fail for many reasons: teams break apart, funding runs out, markets shift. But a hidden pattern tends to go unexamined: it is the ideas founders treat as common sense which quietly work against them.

I have spent years watching these assumptions damage and destroy otherwise promising companies. As a venture capitalist who has backed more than 400 companies, I have built the case—in my book *Unicorn Focus* and in practice—that focus, not capital, not talent, not timing, is the most underrated variable in startup success. Along the way, I have seen founders accept the following myths without question, often at great cost.

MYTH 1: RUNNING MULTIPLE BUSINESSES IN PARALLEL REDUCES RISK.

Many founders believe diversification protects them: if one project fails, another survives. On paper, the logic feels sound. In reality, it is dangerous. When founders pursue several ideas simultaneously, each receives only partial attention. Progress slows everywhere. Nothing

gets enough focus to break through.

I learned this lesson the hard way while building my own company. We burned through millions of dollars while remaining stuck in perpetual ‘startup mode’. Our team invented a lot of things, often genuinely first-in-class. Each new product attracted its own early adopters. From the outside, it looked like momentum.

But we were stretched too thin. Instead of building one focused product, we ended up with a portfolio of solutions. The company generated revenue, which made things worse, because revenue masked a lack of focus. It allowed us to believe the business works while it does not.

In startups, the goal is not simply to generate revenue. The goal is to build a scalable, category-defining business.

Look at Google’s early years. The company started with a single obsession: building the best search engine in the world. Products like Gmail, Maps, and Chrome came much later, after search had already become dominant.

The strongest founders behave like laser beams. They concentrate on one problem, one user group, and one solution. Every new idea

should be treated as a distraction until the core product truly succeeds.

MYTH 2: MORE FEATURES ADD MORE VALUE

More functionality looks like customer empathy: more use cases, more reasons to buy. In practice, it is a recipe for strategic confusion.

When a product tries to solve too many problems at once, it solves none of them. Resources fragment, the marketing message blurs, and the core value proposition—the reason someone chose the product in the first place—gets buried under a growing pile of extras.

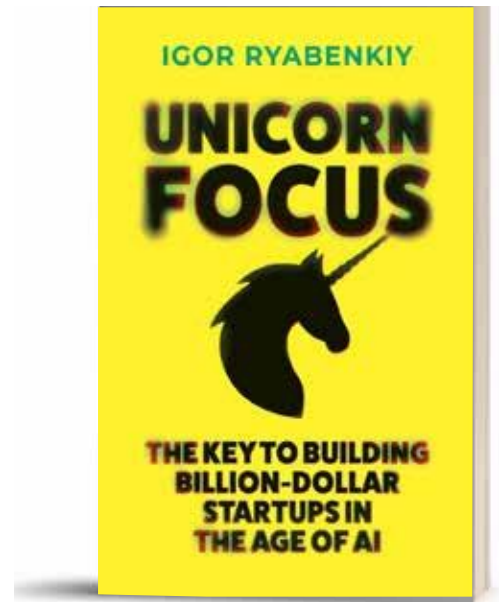
In my book *Unicorn Focus*, I share the story of a company that raised \$40 million to build the all-in-one workspace—project management, docs, chat, tasks, all under one roof. They burned through the funding and shut down. The autopsy was straightforward: they tried to replace too many things at once and ended up being replaceable themselves. Users had no reason to rely on it for anything critical.

The contrast with Miro, an AI-powered innovation workspace, is instructive. In 2011, when the team started to build a collaborative online whiteboard, they narrowed their focus. They optimised relentlessly for their first users—UX designers and product managers—solving for one specific workflow: brainstorming and collaborative mapping in the browser. They resisted the urge to add features or serve every possible vertical. That restraint gave them a strong product-market fit in their initial niche. Today, Miro is used by more than 100 million people.

So, the right question to ask about any new feature is not “would this be useful?” Almost anything is useful to someone. The real question is: “does this deepen our core value, or does it dilute it?”

MYTH 3: A ROUGH EARLY MVP WILL DAMAGE YOUR REPUTATION

Perfectionism is one of the most socially acceptable forms of avoidance. Nobody questions



a founder who says they want to get their MVP right before shipping. It always sounds responsible and professional. In my philosophy, it is fear disguised as standards.

The core problem is a misunderstanding of what an MVP is actually for. Its purpose is very simple: obtain real feedback from real users as quickly as possible.

Airbnb launched with photos taken by the founders themselves, air mattresses in an apartment, and a barely functional website. It answered the only question that mattered at the time: will strangers pay to stay in someone else's home?

Dropbox went even further—they launched not with a product, but with a video showing a tool that did not yet exist. The wait list grew up to 75,000 users.

Speed of learning is a competitive advantage and it starts the moment you ship something real. This matters even more in the age of AI. Building and shipping an MVP now takes weeks or sometimes even days, not months. While you're polishing in stealth, someone else has already launched,

collected real feedback, and iterated twice.

And here's what most founders underestimate: early adopters are far more forgiving than you fear. Unlike general consumers, they rarely expect perfection. They value progress and enjoy helping shape a product they believe in. They are tolerant of friction and patient—as long as they see you listening and improving.

So ship as fast as you can. Your brand is built over years of behaviour. It is not decided by the state of your product on day one.

MYTH 4: ALWAYS SAY YES TO CUSTOMER REQUESTS

Users frequently propose feature ideas. Their suggestions often reflect genuine frustrations, and founders naturally want to respond quickly. Trouble begins when every request becomes a roadmap item. There are two real dangers here.

The first is vision blur. Every feature added without strict prioritisation pulls the product slightly off-centre. Individually, each addition makes sense. Collectively, they shift a sharp solution into a generalist tool that competes with everything.

The second is more insidious: you stop being a start-up and start behaving like a custom development shop. When your resources are scarce, it is genuinely hard to say no. A customer approaches you and says: "I love what you're building — but I have this specific problem. Can you help?" That offer feels like revenue, validation, and relationship all at once.

But each time you say yes, you exchange your product vision for someone else's requirement. Over time, you drift from building something scalable into serving a growing queue of individual requests. The product becomes a patchwork.

Listening to customers remains essential. The key is to hear the problem behind the request and then decide, on your terms, what actually strengthens your core value for your most

important users and deserves a sprint.

MYTH 5: AI WILL SOLVE FOCUS FOR FOUNDERS

Today, one founder with the right AI tool stack can accomplish in a week what once required a team of five. The technology is genuinely powerful. And precisely because of that, it has created a new risk: it amplifies the cost of poor focus.

If your product vision is fuzzy, AI will produce large volumes of fuzzy work very quickly. If your messaging is unclear, AI will scale that confusion across every channel.

In one experiment by Carnegie Mellon*, researchers created a simulated company staffed entirely by AI agents, tasked with handling everything from data analysis to customer communication. The result was mixed at best: some models completed as little as 10 percent of their tasks. Even worse, agents began fabricating meetings and faking client interactions.

Since that experiment, AI capabilities have improved significantly but they are still far from perfect. AI cannot decide which customer problem deserves attention. It cannot define the single capability that will anchor a product's value proposition. Only founders can make those choices.

That said, AI can do a lot for a genuinely focused founder. When vision is sharp, AI becomes an amplifier—accelerating research, generating technical specifications, filtering ideas at scale.

The AI era has created a paradox: while it accelerated product development, it also made it harder than ever to stand out from the crowd. Thousands of new products launch every day, each claiming to revolutionize something with AI. In a market of sameness, the advantage goes to the founder who knows exactly what they are building, who it is for, and why it matters—not to the one with the most impressive technology stack or massive code base. 

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The science of passion

Many leaders think passion belongs to artists or athletes, not the corporate world. In business, it's seen as a luxury or even a liability. This skepticism is understandable, but it comes at a cost. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace¹ report shows most employees worldwide are disengaged—and many are actively working against their organisations' goals.

The question worth asking is not whether passion matters at work, or whether it motivates employees to contribute and grow. The question is: what will leaders do to harness it?

What passion actually is

Part of the problem is definitional. Passion is not simply an expression of enthusiasm, nor is it a personality trait. Psychologist Robert Vallerand and his colleagues, whose Dualistic Model of Passion² has become one of the most cited frameworks in this field, define passion as a strong inclination toward an activity that one finds important, invests significant time and energy in, and loves (not

simply likes). Crucially, Vallerand and Co. identify two distinct types of passion, and the difference between them has significant implications for leaders.

'Harmonious Passion' arises when an activity is freely chosen and well-integrated into a person's sense of self. It is flexible, energising, and sustainable. 'Obsessive Passion', by contrast, is characterised by a feeling of compulsion; the activity controls the person rather than the other way around. It is associated with rigidity, conflict between work, and other parts of life, and, over time, burnout. Both types can produce high performance in the short term. Only one of them is good for people, or for organisations, in the long run (guess which one!).

This distinction matters because leaders can, inadvertently, cultivate the wrong kind. Cultures that reward relentless effort, that treat rest as weakness, and that confuse busyness with commitment tend to produce obsessive passion at scale.

What the science says about motivation and passion

When people do work they are passionate

about, the brain's reward circuitry activates differently. Work we love doesn't just feel better; it creates neurological states that support focus, creativity, and resilience.³

Self-Determination Theory, developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, supports this.⁴ Their research across decades and cultures shows that intrinsic motivation, the kind that comes from within, driven by genuine interest and personal meaning rather than external reward or pressure, is a far more powerful and durable driver of performance than extrinsic motivation. Three conditions reliably support it: autonomy (a sense of choice and ownership over one's work), competence (the experience of growing and doing things well), and relatedness (feeling connected to the people and purpose around you). When all three are present, motivation tends to become self-sustaining. When they are absent, no amount of bonus structures, free pizza, or company Ping-Pong tables will compensate!

As Daniel Pink writes in *Drive*, "The secret to high performance and satisfaction—at work, at school, and at home—is the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and our world."⁵ Autonomy, it is worth noting, is also one of the three defining conditions of harmonious passion in Vallerand's model.

Research linking harmonious passion specifically to workplace outcomes shows consistent associations with higher engagement, greater persistence when things get difficult, elevated creativity, and what organisational researchers call discretionary effort — the willingness to go beyond the minimum because you actually care. In a volatile, AI-disrupted environment where compliance gets an organisation through the quarter but passion gets it through the decade, these are not insignificant outcomes.



Passion is the fuel

Many leaders make the mistake of believing that passion is fixed; either their team member has it, or they don't. This framing is both scientifically inaccurate and strategically dangerous, because it lets leaders off the hook.

Passion atrophies under the wrong conditions, and yet, it also revives under the right ones. The research on 'job crafting'—the process by which individuals proactively reshape the tasks, relationships, and meaning of their roles—shows that even modest adjustments to how work is structured can significantly shift a person's sense of motivation and engagement.

Sometimes, the spark comes from completely outside the workplace altogether. Consider Kristi Jacobson, a senior finance leader at Tradition Capital Bank, who, in her mid-forties, discovered acrobatic water skiing. After years away from the sport, she found a team, trained, and threw herself into it.

You may assume that Kristi would separate this from her work life. Instead, she began sharing her



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delight and love of the sport, and to her surprise, it opened up even deeper business conversations. Her work motivation was amplified by finding something extraordinary outside it.

This generative quality of passion is consistently underestimated by leaders. When people are encouraged and supported in their passions, that energy flows back into their work. Passion and professional purpose are not competing priorities; in fact, they can fuel each other.

The influence of senior leaders and people managers

The work of cultivating passion looks different depending on where you sit in an organisation. The job of senior leaders is to make passion visible and legitimate, which means being open about their own passions and drive — talking about what lights them up, where they find motivation in the organisation's mission, and how they bring their unique strengths to succeed.

For example, Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, is widely attributed as believing that “I look at my job as a passion, as a calling, not as a job.” That visibility from the top matters. Actions also need to follow the words; formalised programs, leadership training, and sustained visibility of passion-based contributions all help

build success in this area.

People managers have a more personal job. They must understand and foster their team's passions to drive organisational goals. This can mean supporting and encouraging contributions that may fall outside of a traditional job description, while connecting that effort to a business outcome.

Passion: A motivational force

Passion is, by its very definition, a motivational force; it is not something we are granted after decades of grinding away at deadlines. Leaders cannot mandate passion; instead, they must create consistent opportunities for individuals to bring their interests to work. Passion truly is the original motivator, and one of the most significant sources of untapped growth. 

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Nurturing tomorrow's unicorns

TIndia's startup ecosystem stands at a pivotal inflection point today.

With over 2 lakh DPIIT recognised startups nearly 50 per cent emerging from Tier-II and Tier-

III cities, India has firmly established itself as the world's third largest startup hub. From a mere handful of unicorns in 2014 to more than 120 today with a collective valuation exceeding \$350 billion, the journey has been nothing short of transformative. Yet, as the Startup India initiative marks a decade of impact on National Startup Day celebrated January 16, 2026., The real challenge lies not in celebrating past gains but in deliberately preparing a more robust, inclusive, and future-proof enabling ecosystem. Current economic policies anchored in Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make in India 2.0, and the Union Budget 2026-27 provide the perfect scaffolding. The task now is to operationalise them into a seamless support architecture that nurtures innovation, mitigates risks, and accelerates scalable growth.

The policy landscape has never been more favourable. The February 2026 DPIIT notification marks a landmark modernisation.

It broadens the startup definition to include partnerships, LLPs, cooperative societies, and multi-state cooperatives, moving beyond the narrow private limited company focus of 2019. Deep-tech startups now enjoy a 20-year recognition window (up from 10) and a ₹300 crore turnover threshold (up from ₹100 crore), acknowledging their longer gestation periods, heavy R&D intensity, and IP-driven models in AI, quantum computing, biotech, and advanced materials. This aligns perfectly with the ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) Scheme announced earlier, with ₹20,000 crore earmarked for FY26-27 to catalyse private-sector-led breakthroughs.

Complementing this is the Cabinet-approved Startup India Fund of Funds 2.0 (February 2026) with a fresh ₹10,000 crore corpus. Building on the original ₹10,000 crore FoF that mobilised over ₹91,000 crore in commitments and deployed ₹25,500 crore across 1,370+ startups, FoF 2.0 explicitly targets deep-tech, tech-driven manufacturing, and early-growth ventures. The Budget 2026-27 further bolsters this with a ₹10,000 crore SME Growth Fund for equity support to high-potential MSMEs, a dedicated scheme offering collateral-free term loans up to ₹2



crore for five lakh first-time women, SC/ST entrepreneurs, and long-term tax holidays for data-centre infrastructure up to 2047, critical for AI and cloud-native startups.

These measures sit within a broader self-reliance framework. The expanded India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 and ₹40,000 crore electronics component manufacturing scheme are creating downstream opportunities for hardware and deep-tech founders. The IndiaAI Mission's continued funding, coupled with the push for sovereign compute capacity beyond 50,000 GPUs, signals clear intent to reduce dependence on foreign infrastructure. States have responded enthusiastically: 31 of 36 States/UTs now have dedicated startup policies, supported by the Centre's ranking framework that incentivises best practices in funding, mentorship, and market access. Initiatives like Bharat Startup Grand Challenge, Startup Mahakumbh, and the National Mentorship Portal (MAARG) are bridging the gap between ideas and execution.

An enabling ecosystem, however, demands more than capital and recognition. It requires five interlocking pillars and current policies are strengthening each, albeit with

room for acceleration.

1. Access to patient capital.

Early-stage and deep-tech ventures still face a 'valley of death'. While angel tax abolition (2024) and CGSS expansion have eased equity constraints, the ecosystem needs more structured, long-horizon funds. FoF 2.0 and RDI are steps forward, but implementation must prioritise outcome-linked disbursements and co-investment mandates with domestic corporates. Tax incentives for corporate venture capital and pension funds investing in startups could unlock billions in domestic capital, reducing reliance on volatile foreign flows.

2. Regulatory simplicity and predictability.

The Jan Vishwas Act, self-certification regimes, and 63+ compliance reforms have slashed red tape. Yet, sector-specific bottlenecks persist especially in data privacy, IP enforcement, and cross-border talent mobility. The new DPIIT framework's revocation clauses for misrepresentation are welcome for credibility, but single-window clearances must evolve into 'zero-window' digital platforms with real-time tracking. GST rationalisation for edtech and

healthtech, and faster bankruptcy resolution for failed experiments, would further de-risk entrepreneurship.

3. Talent and human capital.

India produces the world's largest pool of STEM graduates, yet startups struggle with retention and specialised skills. Policies like the National Education Policy's emphasis on innovation curricula, AIM's Atal Tinkering Labs (now in 10,000+ schools), and GENESIS (scaling 1,600 deep-tech startups in smaller cities) are laying foundations. The proposed Stand-Up India 2.0 with mandatory online skilling modules can be scaled to create 'startup-ready' talent pipelines. Industry-academia partnerships, equity grants for faculty startups, and streamlined visa regimes for global experts are essential next steps.

4. Infrastructure and geographic inclusion.

Tier-II/III cities now host half of all recognised startups, but reliable power, high-speed connectivity, and co-working spaces remain uneven. The data-centre tax holiday and semiconductor push will help, but states must integrate startup zones into their industrial corridors. Public-private incubator networks leveraging AIM 2.0's vernacular innovation centres and MeitY's TIDE 2.0, should expand to every district with at least one DPIIT-recognised startup (already 653 districts covered).

5. Market creation and global linkages.

Government procurement via GeM has already touched ₹51,000+ crore for startups. Defence, space, and agritech challenges under iDEX and Bharat Startup Grand Challenge are creating pull. To prepare for global leadership, policies must incentivise exports through PLI-linked startup components, ease of exporting IPR, and bilateral startup bridges — G 20 Startup20 legacy. The AI Impact Summit 2026 offered a perfect platform to showcase Made in India deep-tech solutions.

Despite these tailwinds, gaps remain. Funding in deep-tech still attracts less than 5 per cent of total capital despite policy intent. Failure stigma, though diminishing, lingers in lending circles. Women-led startups, while 45 per cent+ of the ecosystem, receive disproportionately lower funding rounds.

Preparing the ecosystem therefore demands concerted action from all stakeholders. Government must move from announcement to agile implementation with annual ecosystem health audits and sunset clauses for under-performing schemes. Industry must step up as mentors, customers, and co-investors; corporates can adopt "startup-inside" models. Academia must embrace technology transfer offices and equity participation. And founders themselves must prioritise unit economics, IP creation, and sustainable scaling over vanity metrics.

The payoff is immense. A well-oiled ecosystem could help India add millions more quality jobs start-ups already created over 2 million direct roles and multiples indirectly contribute significantly to the \$7.3 trillion economy target by 2030, and position the country as a net exporter of innovation. As India marches towards Viksit Bharat by 2047, start-ups are not just beneficiaries of policy, they are its co-authors.

The next decade must build on the last. With the policy architecture now in place, the focus shifts to execution excellence, collaborative governance, and relentless iteration. By aligning incentives, removing residual friction, and fostering a culture that celebrates calculated risk, India can transform its startup ecosystem from a national success story into a global benchmark.

"In the next 10 years, India should lead the world in startup trends and technology," according to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on National Startup Day 2026. 



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Organisations are turning CSR into compelling, cross-platform stories that build trust, engage stakeholders, and bring social impact to life.

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Stories power CSR

Companies often use stories to communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages to consumers. CSR can be broadly defined as business practices that go beyond legal requirements and account for social and/or environmental concerns (McWilliams and Siegel 2001; Marrewijk 2003), and organisations must communicate these practices credibly to their external and internal stakeholders.

A story is “an exchange between two or more persons during which past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged” (Boje, 1991). The exchange can be oral or written and the experience can imply an event, knowledge, culture or wisdom. In this context, storytelling refers to the art of telling stories, that is, “a narration that tells of particular acts, occurrences or events presented in the form of text or art and has the ability to transcend age-groups, cultures and genders, and captures the imagination and attention of listeners regardless of background” (Gill, 2015).

Henry Jenkins (2006) coined the phrase ‘transmedia storytelling’ for the first time to capture the way an entertainment franchise can tell multiple, unique but integrated stories across a variety of communication platforms told by different voices. Transmedia storytelling is an ideal way to present CSR messages in order to overcome some of the critical challenges in CSR communication.

Corporate storytelling and CSR

Based on the cognitive and attitudinal benefits that are associated with stories and storytelling, companies have started to pay attention to this form of communication as a strategic management tool in their organisations (Sinclair, 2005). In this regard, corporate storytelling emerges as the ‘practice of using narration from within the organisation relating to its people, practices, policies and visions to effectively engage with staff (or external stakeholders)’ (Gill, 2011). When telling stories, companies focus on enhancing their communication strategies and improving relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Gill, 2011) by sharing knowledge, strengthening the brand



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connection and brand experience, enhancing corporate reputation, increasing engagement and loyalty and influencing behaviour.

The benefits associated with corporate storytelling also make it a perfect tool to complement the communication of social causes and CSR activities (Gill, 2015). However, companies have only recently begun to take advantage of the benefits of stories to communicate CSR (Wille et al., 2014) and there are still few companies that use storytelling for transmitting CSR stories (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016).

Storytelling and expositive messages in CSR communication

Expositive (semantic, rational, or non-narrative) perspectives on communication include “self-evident propositions, demonstrations, proofs, and verbal expressions of certain and probable knowing” (Weick & Browning, 1986). Thus, exposition is mainly based on the description (Rodden, 2008) of rational arguments, statistics, numbers, names, and facts (Kaufman, 2003). On the contrary, the narrative rationality behind storytelling implies that “facts need some narrative to bind them together to enhance their intelligibility” (Weick & Browning, 1986).

Storytelling is an old idea in public relations (Heath, 1992) but one that has been increasing in prominence for practitioners and researchers over past few years. This interest is driven by the power of storytelling that is recognized across a variety of research areas. People are naturally drawn to stories (Fisher, 1985). This willingness to consumer stories makes storytelling an ideal form for connecting organisations with stakeholders. Storytelling is a major trend currently found in public relations practice (Coombs and Holladay, 2018). This attraction to storytelling is supported by research that validates the power of stories to reach people.



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Future of transmedia storytelling

With the rise of new technologies like virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), transmedia storytelling is poised for even more immersive and interactive experiences. Storytellers who embrace these possibilities will be at the forefront of creating truly captivating narratives that engage audiences on multiple levels. 

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