

SUMMIT SPOTLIGHT 2025

The future of work in an AI world

GFX:

[AWS LOGO] EXECLEADERS

ANDREA CLARKE: Who remembers the first time they used Uber? Hands up. Who remembers downloading the App, waiting to see if a car was going to turn up, and then hopping in with no money exchanged into a stranger's car?

GFX:

ANDREA CLARKE

AUTHOR AND FUTURIST

ANDREA CLARKE: Who thought, this is never gonna work out? Anyone? Hands up. Did anyone think it wasn't going to work? Interesting ooh only a couple. What's really interesting is that this is the quiet truth about the human psyche. Of course we know that we use it all the time now. But at the moment change feels uncomfortable. It feels like a shift, and it feels like a risk, feels like a bit of a stretch. And this is the problem facing leaders like you everywhere today whether you are aware of it or not. Everyone in this room is all in on the tech and that's great, right. Good for us. But what about those people in our teams and those people across our businesses who aren't moving as fast as we are, what about them? How can we all help people adapt to the profound changes that are coming our way, that are already here?

I believe we're spending a lot of time and a lot of energy hyping the tool, when what matters most is the human trait of adaptability that makes the tool work really well. And in a workplace the consequence of misunderstanding this moment is already showing up. AI adoption is already hitting a wall. Not because of tech failure but because there are many people who may not be admitting it to you, there are many people who are simply afraid of it, and there are only 12% of Australian businesses that have any kind of formal training to introduce it, which is pretty terrifying. I had a banking executive tell me a couple of weeks ago that he has 5,000 employees who are refusing to open a basic AI tool, right? That's terrifying. My response was this. The first step in introducing AI, especially to those who are on the receiving end of it, is acknowledging the facts about change. And the facts about change is that we don't like it because we're not necessarily wired for change. We are addicted to sameness. We are obsessed with our routine. This is probably why everyone in your team orders the same coffee every single day, right. Do we all order the same coffee every day? Yeah.

And this is why when we're stuck in traffic and the GPS says here's a shortcut we're like no, I'm good, I'm all good thanks right here, I'm going to sit here on Spit Road for another 17 minutes [laughter], right. You people on the Northern Beaches we are on the same page. I'm going to sit here for another 17 minutes because I have certainty about this path, about this pathway. That is our brain conserving energy and keeping us safe. We are not all wired to be visionary. Many of us, most of us are wired for sameness. So when change shows up, especially fast change that's very intimidating and very complicated, our first reaction is to protect what we know. We deny it. We dismiss it. And we delay it. Not because we're lazy, but because we're human. We are wired to associate change with loss. Loss of time. Loss of energy. Loss of job security. Maybe even the loss of colleagues.

And for many of us we will know people where that loss over the next couple of years is very real. And it's usually only with time and distance that we can see the gain, that we can see the upside that change brings to us. I want you to think about the biggest change you've been through in the last ten years. It might have been job loss. It might have been divorce. It might have been some other major life event. But think about the first time that change presented itself to you. How did you feel? Did you try to deny it? Hands up. Did anyone try to deny that change? Did you dismiss that change or try to disregard it? And now, a couple of years along from whatever that change moment was for you, can you see the upside? Can you see the opportunity? I can see some people smiling. Can you see the upside in what that change has brought you? Does it help you live better, lead better, or learn better? I can see nodding. I know. Thank you. We all know at the moment we say it's a blessing in disguise right but usually we don't see that until a couple of years down the track. And this is what we need to help people with, all of our teams, anyone who may not be admitting that they're not happy about the changes coming down the pipeline.

And this is why adaptability is the most important leadership and human skill of this moment. Because it's not just about responding and reacting to change. It's about recognising what is shifting around us in that moment, and opting, having the agency, to be an active player in shaping that change. IQ might get us the job. And EQ might help us get along with people, not everyone, but most people. But it's AQ that helps us stay relevant, that helps us keep our jobs, that helps stay curious and open. It helps us understand what is no longer fit for purpose when we have a change right in front of us.

So when we start a conversation with our teams about AI let's remember that it's not all about the tech. It's also about talent. It's also about communicating the reality of change. When did we start outlawing the truth about change, that it's hard, it's difficult? And we've got to work really hard to break that script, that default setting that we all have towards it. It's about creating space for others to see possibilities where they may only see threats at the moment. Let me share with you two high AQ habits that you can offer up to your teams if you find people resisting change. This is how we build our AQ muscles. Number one is engaging with signals of change. The earlier we see a change coming the more options we have to respond to it. So ask yourself what am I noticing now that might really matter in six months' time, might really matter in six years' time.

A signal of change might be something small. It could be something as nuanced as a shift in customer language. It could be something more obvious. It could be a new AI plug in. But this is how we start being engaged in change, being an active player in change, actually paying attention to what is changing around us. So I want you to ask yourself now is what is a signal of change that you need to be paying attention to? What's a signal that you might be ignoring? What might you be ignoring? I feel like we're all ignoring something. If we think hard enough about it we'll know.

Now ask what does that signal require of me today? 'Cause good futures are built in today's behaviour. How can I engage with that signal of change today? And what is the opportunity if I do versus the risk if I continue ignoring it, if I ignore that signal of change? And the second high AQ habit is profoundly simple, deceptively simple. It's simply asking what if. Pilots do this every time they get into the simulator. When they test multiple versions of the future they're rewiring their default response to change. They're better prepared for what's coming next. They're better prepared to apply new thinking to new problems. And of course we know how-how important that is especially if those problems appear midair. But we can all do the same. We can get into our own simulator. So throw this question out to your teams, kick it around and ask what if. What if AI helps this team spend 80% less time on admin and 80% more time with a client. What if upskilling this team doesn't slow us down, what if it sets us apart. And what if this team saw change not as a disruption but perhaps as a design opportunity, a way to do things better, a way to figure out what's no longer fit for purpose. These are really simple questions that help change our posture from resistance to readiness. And these questions invite us all to imagine how things might be different, to move beyond the obvious, and imagine what is our role as an active player in change once we're engaged in what those signals are. What if we get jealous of an AI agent being assigned a task that we wanted? Right, not impossible. Let's think about how change plays out. Do you want to be an active player in that change? Now ask yourself what if I was ready for that. What if I was ready for that? What would that actually look like?

I think we can all agree, many of us will probably agree that we've spent that last couple of putting out fires. Would anyone agree with me? Or is that just my observation across the top 50 ASX. We've spent a lot of time putting out fires the last couple of years and I believe the next chapter about modern leadership is about building firebreaks. It's specifically about creating the space, the safety, and the systems to help people adapt before they're left behind, mostly those people in our teams. So we all know that you don't have to be a tech expert to shape how AI lands around you just have to be open, intentional, deliberate and curious. But here is the invitation, hype the tool. Hype the tool as much as you like.

But I also want you to think about hyping what makes it work really well, and that is our adaptive intelligence. It's a different kind of AI and it is just important. I believe that when all role models that our teams follow, our cultures will shift, resistance will soften, and that will make way for a workforce where real innovation has longevity. And I know what we all know, that is the kind of workplace that we want to be a part of. So, please connect with me on LinkedIn. If you run either of these two exercises with your teams I'd love to know how you go. Thank you very much. Thank you.

GFX:

[AWS LOGO] EXECLEADERS