EXECUTIVE VISIONING

re:Invent 2025 Building an Innovation-Ready Culture in the AI Era

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AWS Executive Visioning

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BUILDING an INNOVATION-READY CULTURE in the AI ERA

Opening

At re:Invent 2025's Executive Summit, the AWS Executive Visioning team facilitated immersive workshops with executives from diverse sectors exploring how organizational culture determines technology's impact on AI innovation and adoption success.

Through collaborative sessions, participants explored four critical organizational challenges:

1. **Smart Self Governance:** building AI governance without stifling innovation
2. **Change-Ready Culture:** creating cultures that embrace rather than fear change
3. **Innovation Engine:** developing systematic approaches to innovation instead of random experimentation
4. **Customer-First Mindset:** ensuring AI decisions truly serve customer needs rather than internal convenience

Executives left with concrete actions developed through peer discussions and valuable new executive connections. The experience reinforced that successful AI adoption requires addressing culture alongside technology implementation and measuring success through business outcomes rather than tool adoption metrics.

The session format enabled executives to move beyond theoretical discussions into practical strategy development. Working in cross-industry groups, participants shared real-world challenges, identified key signals to monitor emerging trends and market shifts, and co-created actionable approaches through structured breakout sessions that transformed individual insights into collective wisdom. Below are the key themes that emerged from these discussions.

Smart Self-Governance

The discussion of Smart Self-Governance centered around building AI systems with automatic self-management capabilities while maintaining compliance and trust.

Participants explored how governance enables rather than constrains innovation through proper guardrails and circuit breakers. The conversation highlighted the critical importance of data foundation as a prerequisite for effective AI governance, emphasizing the journey from chaos to control to process. Key themes included the need for observability and monitoring of AI systems, the balance between automation and human oversight, and the recognition that governance philosophy must shift from control to enablement. The groups emphasized that while perfect governance is impossible, organizations must strive to make governance both robust and enabling, turning it from a perceived barrier into a competitive advantage.

Resources

BLOG

Data Governance in the Age of Generative AI

Explore more →

PODCAST

AI Transformation and Governance Leadership: A Chief AI Officer's Perspective

Explore more →

BOOK

The Delicate Art of Bureaucracy: Digital Transformation with the Monkey, the Razor, and the Sumo Wrestler

Explore more →

Key Actions

Create Data Foundation

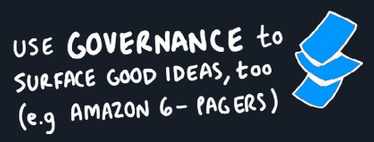
- Establish stable data infrastructure that combines structured and unstructured data effectively
- Build control points for data movement and identify which use cases matter most
- Develop checkpoints and governance processes that enable rather than constrain innovation

Establish Governance Philosophy

- Define organizational tenets that guide AI governance decisions and build trust with leadership
- Implement Minimal Viable Governance (MVG) approach to shift organizational mindset from data control to data enablement
- Focus on unchanging organizational values and essential business requirements (durable truths) rather than starting with cost considerations

Build Technical Safeguards

- Deploy observability and monitoring capabilities to track AI drift and unusual patterns
- Implement circuit breakers and AI guardrails directly into models themselves
- Use reasoning models to verify AI behavior and maintain human-in-the-loop oversight where critical



Change-Ready Culture

The discussion of Change-Ready Culture emphasized that culture, not technology, drives AI innovation and meaningful adoption.

Participants explored how organizations must embrace change and continuous transformation as the norm, creating psychological safety for experimentation and calculated failures. The conversation stressed the importance of top-down leadership alignment combined with bottom-up employee engagement, ensuring that AI augments rather than replaces human workers. Key themes included the need for learning frameworks that shift from static skills to dynamic capabilities, the critical role of change champions and reverse mentoring, and the recognition that transformation must be celebrated rather than feared. The group acknowledged that successful change-ready cultures view disruption as opportunity and create environments where innovation thrives.

Resources

BOOK

The Octopus Organization: A Guide to Thriving in a World of Continuous Transformation

Explore more →

BLOG

From Possibility to Practice: Reinventing the Enterprise from the Inside

Explore more →

Key Actions

Foster Experimentation Infrastructure

- Create innovation hubs and safe spaces for testing with clear guardrails and limited blast radius
- Establish experimentation boards to evaluate projects and make kill-or-grow decisions
- Implement “two-way door” decision frameworks that enable faster iteration and learning

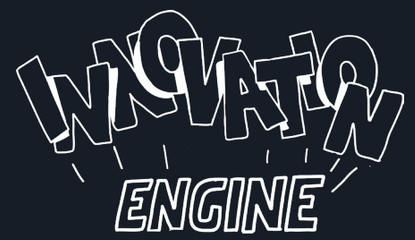
Develop Learning Capabilities

- Launch reverse mentoring programs that facilitate bi-directional learning between levels of seniority
- Create train-the-trainer models and job rotation opportunities to build informal networks
- Shift focus from technical skills acquisition to building capabilities for handling ambiguity

Build Recognition Systems

- Identify and reward change champions who lead by example in embracing new technologies
- Create reward structures that celebrate experimentation, learning from failures, and innovation
- Establish small wins programs that build trust and create positive flywheels for change adoption

Innovation Engine



The discussion of Innovation Engine focused on developing systematic approaches to test ideas quickly and scale successful innovations.

Participants explored how innovation must become a core organizational capability rather than a one-off activity, requiring clear north star vision and structured experimentation processes. The conversation highlighted the importance of breaking down organizational silos to enable cross-functional collaboration and knowledge sharing. Key themes included the need for dedicated time and resources for experimentation, learning, and horizon thinking; the balance between delivering immediate ROI and investing in long-term innovation; and the recognition that AI enables teams to move faster while still requiring human critical thinking and oversight. The group emphasized that successful innovation engines require both top-down strategic alignment and bottom-up empowerment.

Resources

BLOG

Break Through Barriers: Accelerate Innovation in Traditional Organizations

Explore more →

BLOG

How Can You Build a Culture of Experimentation?

Explore more →

PODCAST

Disrupt or Be Disrupted: Cultivating Resilience Through Innovation

Explore more →

Key Actions

Establish Strategic Direction

- Define clear north star vision that aligns all levels of the organization toward common innovation goals
- Build consistent planning framework that everyone can operate within cohesively
- Create tenets and principles that guide innovation efforts and decision-making processes

Build Innovation Infrastructure

- Establish experimentation boards with clear benchmarks for evaluating and scaling successful projects
- Create cross-functional teams with freedom to experiment within governance guardrails
- Develop mechanisms for sharing learnings and best practices across the entire organization

Enable Rapid Experimentation

- Implement “think big, start small, scale fast” methodology with structured learning campaigns
- Create dedicated time for experimentation and horizon thinking separate from operational demands
- Build safe environments where failure is treated as learning opportunity rather than career risk

Customer-First Mindset

The discussion of Customer-First Mindset emphasized embedding customer impact as the primary filter for all AI decisions and technology implementations.

Participants explored how organizations must work backwards from customer needs rather than starting with technology solutions, ensuring that AI serves human needs while building competitive advantage. The conversation stressed the importance of direct customer engagement, co-creation models, and the “empty chair” concept to keep customer perspective central to all decisions. The “empty chair” concept is an Amazon practice that involves reserving an empty chair in meetings to represent the customer voice, ensuring that every decision considers customer impact before moving forward. Key themes included the need for customer advisory boards and forward-looking insights; the balance between meeting customers where they are today while providing vision for the future; and the recognition that AI opens new ways to solve customer problems but doesn’t change the fundamental need to build quality products that create real value.

Resources

PODCAST

Driving Invention with the Latest in AWS Generative AI

Explore more →

ARTICLE

The Imperatives of Customer Centric Innovation in the AI Era

Explore more →

Key Actions

Deepen Customer Intelligence

- Implement “get out of the building” practices to observe customers in their natural environments
- Establish customer advisory boards for forward-looking insights and co-creation opportunities
- Use “empty chair” concept in meetings to ensure customer perspective drives all major decisions

Enable Rapid Value Delivery

- Start with simple, digestible use cases that create immediate customer value and build trust
- Put AI tools in customers’ hands quickly while ensuring they prove value before scaling to production
- Develop analysis capabilities for forecasting and demonstrating measurable business value to customers

Align Organization to Customer Value

- Connect all work directly to customer value with clear justification for technology investments
- Scale customer anecdotes to identify themes and drive internal innovation priorities
- Use customer signals from external interactions to reimagine internal workforce productivity and processes

Close

The Executive Visioning sessions at re:Invent 2025 brought together global leaders to tackle the fundamental challenge of building innovation-ready cultures in the AI era.

Participants left equipped with concrete, actionable frameworks: establishing governance philosophies that enable rather than constrain innovation; fostering experimentation infrastructure with clear guardrails; building organizational learning capabilities that adapt to continuous change; and deepening customer intelligence through direct engagement.

The key insight that emerged across all sessions: successful AI transformation requires addressing organizational culture alongside technology, with human ingenuity and customer obsession remaining at the center of all innovation efforts. Organizations that master this balance—building trust in AI systems while maintaining unwavering focus on customer value—will be best positioned to turn AI capabilities into lasting competitive advantage.

To continue this conversation and explore strategies for building innovation-ready cultures within your organization, we invite you to connect with your AWS account manager.

AWS re:Invent

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Appendix

Session One: Monday

Ryan Seaman

Explore more →

Session Two: Monday

Helena Yin Koeppl

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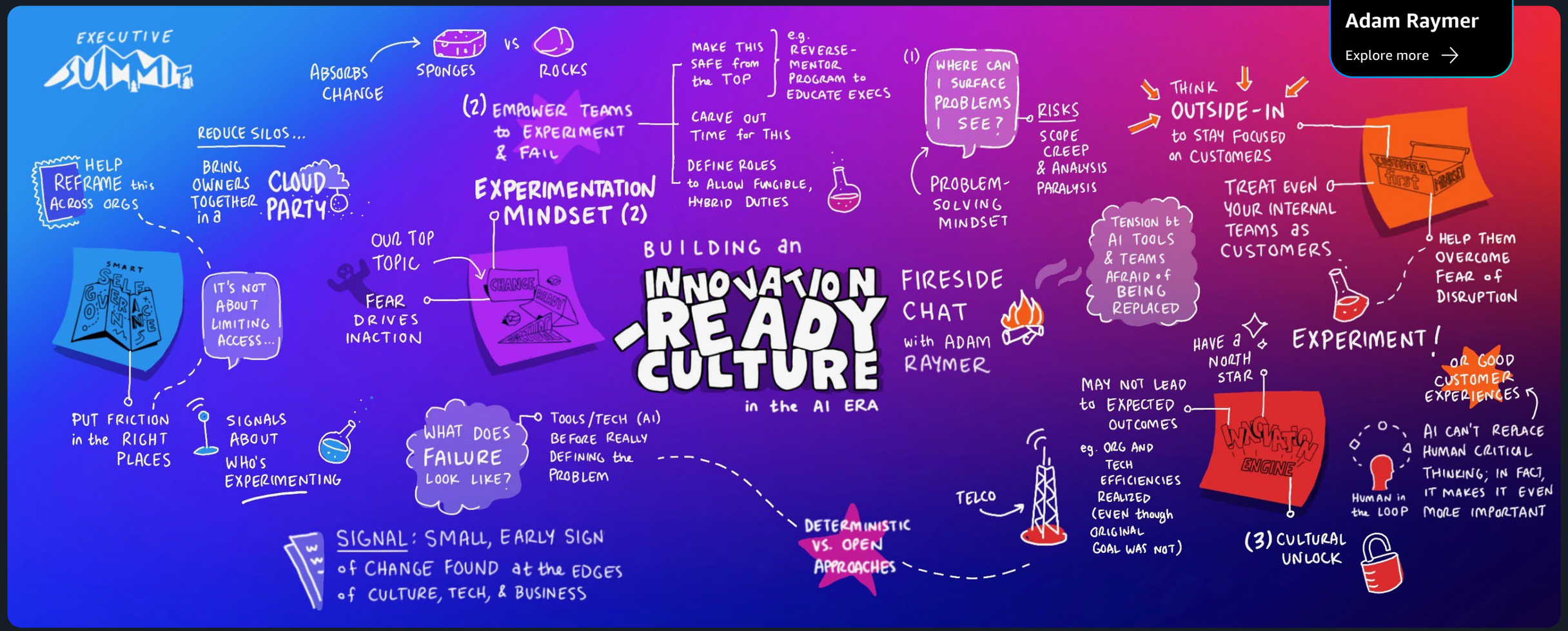
Session Three: Wednesday



Adam Raymer

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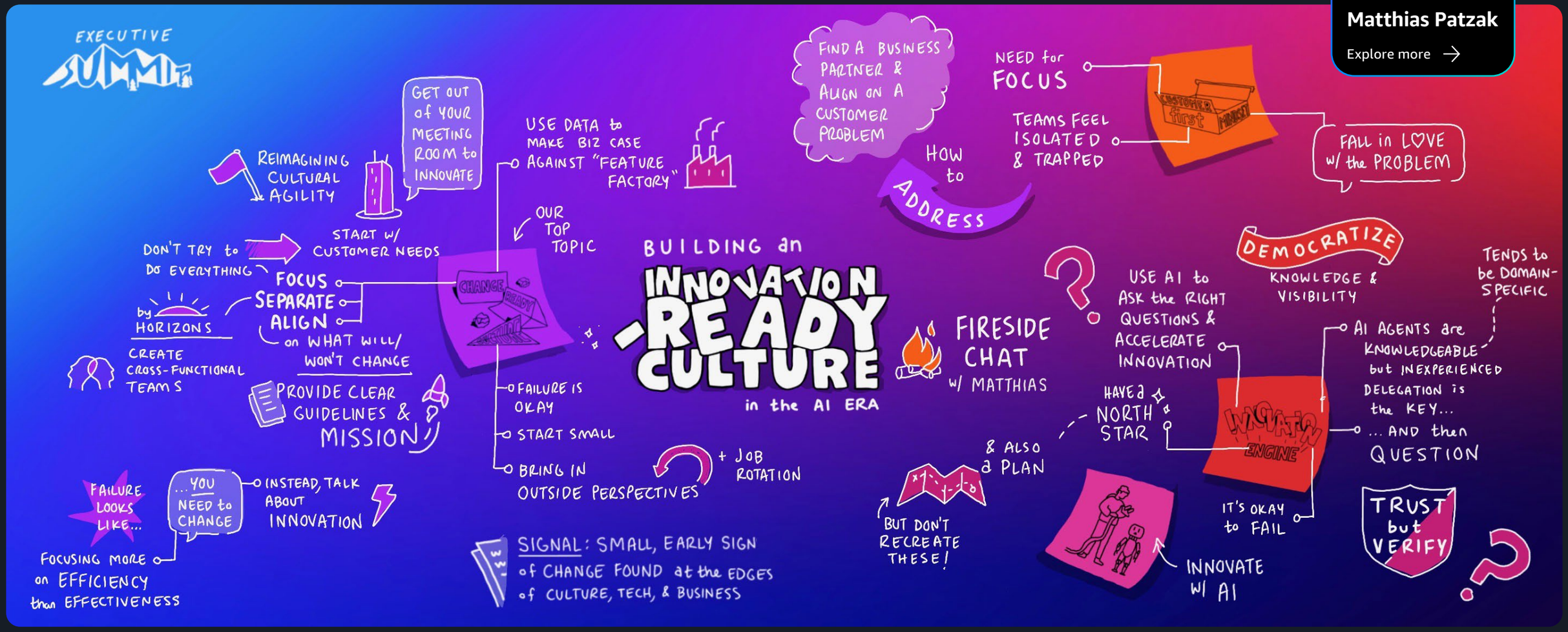
Session Four: Wednesday



Matthias Patzak

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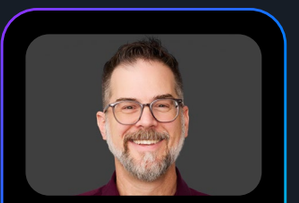
Session Five: Thursday



Stephen Brozovich

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EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

AI BELONGS in the BUSINESS NOT in IT

EMBRACE DISAGREEMENT; ALIGN on the OUTCOME

OUR TOP TOPIC

CHANGE READY QUESTION

DECOUPLE COMP & BIZ RESULTS

HAVING A CULTURE of INNOVATION & AGILITY

INCENTIVIZE EXPERIMENTATION W/ TOP-DOWN SPONSORSHIP & OWNERSHIP

GOVERNANCE to SURFACE GOOD IDEAS (eg. AMZ 6-PAGERS)

eg TENETS to DRIVE DECISION-MAKING

SMART SELF GOVERNANCE

MAKE SURE YOU KNOW the OUTPUT YOU'RE MEASURING TOWARDS

ESTABLISH CLEAR THRESHOLDS for WHEN/WHERE to INTERVENE

HUMAN / AUTOMATED

KEEP US in the LOOP!

IT'S ABOUT GETTING PEOPLE to FEEL SAFE DEALING W/ AMBIGUITY

DON'T INCENTIVIZE PERFECTION

HIRE PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE in YOUR MISSION

DEFINE A CLEAR CUSTOMER PROBLEM!

USE THIS as a POSITIVE

FRUSTRATION CAN BE A SIGNAL of READINESS

BUILDING an INNOVATION-READY CULTURE in the AI ERA

SIGNAL: SMALL, EARLY SIGN of CHANGE FOUND at the EDGES of CULTURE, TECH, & BUSINESS

BE WILLING to PUT BUSINESS on HOLD to DIVE DEEP-OBSESS!

CUSTOMER first OBSESSED

GO BEYOND JUST ANECDOTES

JEFF B. READ CUSTOMER EMAILS

HOW FAR INTO A MEETING BEFORE the WORD 'CUSTOMER' COMES UP?

TIME to EXPERIMENT

RETHINK INCENTIVE STRUCTURES

NOT JUST REVENUE-FOCUSED

INNOVATION ENGINE

FIRESIDE CHAT W/ STEPHEN BROZOVICH

LEAN INTO the DISCOMFORT of NOT KNOWING WHERE YOU'RE GOING...

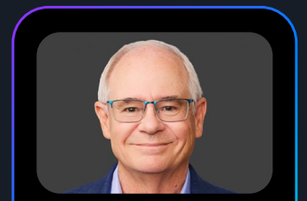
26 YEARS @ AMAZON

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

BE CLEAR on the OUTCOME, THEN LET AI FIND PATHS

A NORTH STAR

Session Six: Thursday



Tom Soderstrom

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