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A CDNA INSIGHTS PAPER

COLLECTIVE JUDGEMENT

IN THE AI ERA

The science of better decision-making when stakes are high

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01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faster is not the same as better.

AI is changing the economics of decision-making. Analysis that once took days can now be done in minutes, and business scenarios and growth options can be generated at a fraction of previous cost. But none of that changes who is accountable. Boards remain accountable for strategy and risk. CEOs and executives remain accountable for the consequences of their decisions. With that accountability unchanged, and decisions now made at a speed leadership teams have never had to operate at before, "Collective Judgement" is starting to show up as a scarce commodity.

The cost of getting this wrong rarely looks dramatic in the moment. In one organisation we advised this year, a capable leadership team accepted a confident, AI-generated recommendation with only challenging it lightly. The analysis was impressive and fast, but the timeline left little room to pressure-test it. Within two quarters, the assumptions behind it proved wrong, and the team had to unwind a call most of the room had privately doubted from the start. Nothing about that decision looked reckless at the time. That is exactly what makes it dangerous.

This creates a new leadership challenge for all of us. Organisations need to become better at deciding what to trust, what to challenge, what is missing and what to do next.

Our Global Leadership Pulse, based on conversations with 150 senior leaders over the past year, shows the following:

95% say they would challenge AI when its recommendation conflicts with their judgement.	**91%** believe human intuition will become more valuable as AI becomes embedded in work.
58% identify judgement as the most important human leadership capability for the AI era.	**56%** are concerned that over-reliance on AI could weaken decision quality.

THE CDNA LEADERSHIP PULSE, 2026

The message is not that leaders want less AI. Instead, it’s about leaders needing better judgement with AI - when to accept it, when to question it and when to override it.

But there is a gap worth naming. 95% of leaders say they would challenge an AI recommendation that conflicts with their judgement, and yet 56% are concerned that over-reliance on AI could weaken decision quality across their organisations. Confidence in one's own ability to challenge AI, in other words, is running ahead of what is actually happening in practice.

This is not a contradiction so much as a warning. Intent and behaviour rarely move at the same speed, particularly under time pressure, when a fast, coherent, data-rich answer is sitting in front of you and the meeting is already running late. Believing you would challenge a recommendation is not the same as building the conditions that make challenging it possible in the first place.

That distinction, between what leaders intend to do and what their organisations are actually built to do, is where “Collective Judgement” begins.

From individual judgement to “collective judgement”

For decades, consequential decisions have often been concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of senior leaders. The result is decision bottlenecks, over-reliance on individual experiences, filtered information and distance from real context in which decisions need to be made.

As AI makes analysis and expertise more widely accessible, judgement no longer needs to sit exclusively at the top. It needs to move closer to the people with the right information, and with people who have more context of the business and customer experiences. The shift is from a few leaders having the answers, to an organisation having the capability to have “Collective Judgement”.

But this is not simply the ability to make more sound decisions. It’s the organisation's capability to discern what matters, make sense of incomplete information, challenge assumptions, recognise bias, weigh consequences and commit to action with appropriate autonomy.

“Collective Executive Judgement” depends less on individual brilliance but more on the conditions surrounding every decision it depends on. Whether people can challenge hierarchy, whether inconvenient evidence gets heard, whether different perspectives are genuinely considered, whether accountability is clear and whether the organisation learns from its own decisions.

02 WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Our 2026 Leadership Pulse reveals a real tension, and it's worth spelling out exactly what it is. Leaders are confident in their own judgement: 95% say they would challenge an AI recommendation that conflicts with it, 91% believe human intuition will only become more valuable as AI spreads, and 58% rank judgement as the single most important leadership capability for this era. Yet 56% are already concerned that over-reliance on AI is weakening decision quality in their own organisations right now. Put simply, most leaders believe they would personally resist AI's pull, while at the same time admitting that resistance isn't actually holding up at the organisational level. That gap, between belief and what is actually happening, is worth paying attention to.

AI adoption is moved fast. McKinsey's State of AI 2025 report found that regular generative AI use among organisations rose from 33% to 72% in a single year. Separately, the World Economic Forum projects that AI and automation will displace 92 million jobs globally by 2030. Most organisations, in other words, are further along in deploying AI than they are in building the judgement to use it well. That gap is where the real risk sits, not in the technology itself, but in how quickly it gets trusted. And that speed is exactly the problem. A recommendation that arrives instantly, stated with total confidence, is simply easier to accept than to interrogate, regardless of whether it turns out to be right.

Consider what this means in a boardroom. AI produces a market-entry recommendation in seconds. A succession shortlist is ranked before the discussion begins. A pricing model identifies the “optimal” move for entering a new market. A CEO asks for the risks of an acquisition and receives a polished answer before the first director has finished framing the question.

The danger is subtle. AI can shape the question, frame the options, establish the starting point and determine what feels reasonable. And because the output is fast, coherent and data-rich, challenging it requires the human to spend cognitive effort precisely when the technology is promising to save it.

> *We may be entering an era in which the hardest part of decision-making is not generating alternatives, but resisting the first convincing one.*

The opportunity is therefore not to put humans back in front of the machine. It is to build leaders and decision processes that are capable of thinking independently alongside it and whether the organisation creates the environment for making this possible.

Hierarchy, time pressure, incentives, group dynamics and the desire for consensus can all make an intelligent executive less likely to question a recommendation in the room than they imagine they would in principle. Each pulls a different bias. Hierarchy can amplify confirmation bias, since challenging a senior voice feels riskier than agreeing with it. Time pressure can strengthen anchoring, because the first plausible answer is easier to accept than to interrogate. Incentives and prior commitments can make contrary evidence easier to dismiss. And the desire for consensus can make all of these harder to challenge, because disagreement starts to look like disruption.

The practical question is therefore not whether executives have biases. Everyone does. It is whether the decision environment surfaces them before it shapes their decisions.

03 WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED WORKING WITH LEADERS

For 19 years, Corporate DNA has worked with boards and executive teams across 36 countries, 15 industry sectors and more than 70 leadership interventions. Much of that work anchors around our 5H™ Model - Head, Heart, Hunch, Hands and Habits. But a leader can score strongly across all five and still watch their organisation make poor collective decisions. To us, one pattern is consistent: decision quality depends as much on the conditions around the decision as on the intelligence of the people making it.

Strong decision environments challenge assumptions, surface disagreement, distinguish evidence from opinion and make accountability explicit. Weak decision environments, on the other hand create a different pattern: hierarchy suppresses challenge, analysis creates false certainty, consensus replaces real debate, and the cost of being wrong is rarely made explicit.

These choices matter. A poor strategic choice can stifle your growth or revenue for years. A weak succession decision can cost a company a leader, a team and momentum. A misplaced transformation priority can consume millions, while the real problem remains untouched. And the biggest cost is often the new opportunities that disappear while the organisation pursues the wrong priorities because of bad decisions. None of this shows up as a single bad moment- it shows up as a pattern, repeated often enough that it starts to feel normal. Let us look at a concrete example.

An FMCG example

One FMCG leadership team we worked with in this past year was not short of data, options or expertise. It was struggling with something harder: several competing priorities were individually defensible, but the team could not prioritize which ones to pursue and why.

The work therefore moved beyond generating more analysis. The team had to test assumptions, expose competing interests, confront uncomfortable trade-offs, quantify the consequences of different choices and decide what they were prepared to stop. In practice, that meant a series of structured sessions to separate each priority from the politics around it - surfacing which ones were being defended on merit, and which were being defended because someone had already staked their reputation on them. We helped the team assign one clear owner to the priority that mattered most, with an explicit mandate to say no to the rest.

None of this was about finding the most convincing answer. It was about understanding the call being made, sizing the downside honestly, and agreeing upfront on the signals that should trigger a rethink.That distinction matters enormously in an AI-enabled organisation, where AI can make almost every option look equally plausible. Judgement is knowing which call to make, when to accept it, and when to change it.

04 THE HIDDEN PROBLEM

Most organisations today can usually see their investment in AI. They can measure adoption, productivity and costs. What is harder to see is whether their capacity to exercise judgement is strengthening or weakening with AI.

> *We call this gap "Judgement Debt" - the deficit that builds when the speed and scale of decision-making increase faster than the organisation's ability to question, interpret, challenge and own those decisions.*

We know how financial debt shows up on a balance sheet. Judgement debt, however, does not show up on any report or dashboard - it shows up as a decision that costs an organisation something it can never get back, whether it be business capital, a market share, or the organisation's own reputation. That is what makes judgement debt more dangerous. An organisation can look financially healthy, operationally efficient and well-invested in AI, while its capacity to exercise sound judgement is quietly eroding underneath all of it.

That erosion is not spread evenly. An automated recommendation on a low-consequence task carries little risk to it. However, a recommendation affecting capital allocation, succession, safety, reputation or a major customer decision carries a great risk. The risk concentrates precisely when three things coincide: high reliance, weak challenge and high consequence.

And judgement debt rarely announces itself. It appears first in ordinary organisational behaviour - recommendations accepted without enough scrutiny, assumptions carried from one meeting to another, and fewer people willing to question the prevailing view. Eventually, those behaviours become the organisation's culture. When an organisation repeatedly accepts and tolerates this behaviour, it becomes part of how the organisation works. That is why judgement debt is not simply an AI risk. It's an organisational one.

One weak decision may be survivable. A pattern of weak decisions compounds debt.

The Five Judgement Vulnerability Zones

Judgement Debt rarely arrives labelled as a bad decision. It tends to build in recognisable moments, and knowing where to look is the first step to catching it before it compounds. Our work with global organisations points to five zones where judgement becomes most vulnerable. We call this the “five Ps” of Judgement.

ZONE	THE MECHANISM	TYPICAL MOMENTS
PRESSURE	**Judgement gets compressed**	*Deadlines, quarter-end, crisis, overload, fatigue*
POWER	**Judgement gets suppressed**	*Hierarchy, senior voice speaks first, low psychological safety, dominant personalities*
PREFERENCE	**Judgement gets biased**	*Wanting a “yes,” incentives, ego, reputation, emotional attachment*
PRECEDENT	**Judgement gets trapped**	*“We’ve seen this before,” past success, sunk costs, expertise becoming rigidity*
PACE	**Judgement gets outpaced**	*AI-generated answers are finalised before deliberation has been properly done; less built-in time to sit with a decision before committing to it*

These zones rarely act alone. A decision made under time pressure is also more likely to defer to the most senior voice in the room, and a confident-sounding AI can make that deference feel like discipline rather than avoidance. The zones reinforce each other, which is exactly why judgement debt can build so quietly, one reasonable-looking decision at a time.

Take a familiar boardroom scenario. A leadership team facing a fast-approaching deadline defers early to the most senior voice in the room, who points to a similar call made three years ago as reassurance. An AI-generated forecast, delivered with total confidence, closes the debate before anyone raises a concern. No single moment here looks like a failure of judgement - pressure, power, precedent and pace are each doing something small and individually reasonable. It is usually only in hindsight, after the decision has gone wrong, that the pattern becomes obvious.

The most useful question a leader can ask before a consequential decision is not “are we confident in this?” but rather “which of these zones are active in this room right now?” That shift, from confidence to context, is often enough to slow a decision down just long enough for judgement to catch up.

Judgement becomes vulnerable when it is compressed by pressure, suppressed by power, biased by preference, trapped by precedent, or outpaced by speed.

05 COLLECTIVE JUDGEMENT

None of these five zones is abstract - every organisation lives in them daily. The real question is whether judgement is structured to survive them, or left concentrated in the hands of a few people who are more exposed to every one of them. That is where “Collective Judgement” comes in.

For decades, critical decisions have largely sat at the top with a small number of senior leaders. With AI, when analysis, scenarios and expertise can be accessed almost instantly, judgement no longer needs to be concentrated at the top. It can be distributed across the organisation.

This makes “Collective Judgement” a new leadership “meta-skill” that’s required in organizations today. It is the ability to help people make better decisions together - combining evidence, experience, context and the willingness to challenge collective thinking. But this does not mean everyone decides everything. It means putting judgement closer to where the information is, while keeping decision rights and accountability clear.

For this, three conditions matter:

CAPABILITY: Can people interpret evidence, recognise uncertainty and be comfortable in exercising their judgement?

COURAGE: Can people challenge hierarchy, surface inconvenient truths and disagree without consequences?

CLARITY: Can people tell which decisions need collective scrutiny, and which ones they can simply make themselves?

These three conditions rarely fail in isolation. An organisation might have real capability but no courage, so good analysis dies quietly in the room before it reaches the people who need to hear it. It might have courage but no clarity, so every decision gets escalated regardless of whether it actually needs to be. Or it might have clarity on paper, decision rights clearly drawn, while the capability and courage to use them well are missing exactly where it matters most. All three need to be present together, not just written into a governance document.

Even when all three are in place, judgement can still be a blind spot because of biases built into how our human brain actually decides. Because from a Neuroscience perspective, the brain does not approach every decision neutrally. Under uncertainty, pressure or cognitive load, we rely on shortcuts. We look for evidence that confirms what we already believe (confirmation bias). We give greater weight to people we identify with (affinity bias). We anchor on the first recommendation or narrative (anchoring bias). We can give disproportionate weight to what worked last time (precedent bias) and become more comfortable with information that fits the existing narrative in our minds.

These biases are often invisible to the person experiencing them. A senior leader may believe they are exercising intuition when the brain is actually recognising a familiar pattern. A team may believe it has reached consensus when, in reality, less senior voices have stopped challenging the dominant view.

There is a group version of this too that is well documented in neuroscience research. Disagreeing with a group activates the same brain regions associated with threat and discomfort, while agreeing with it activates reward. Some studies have found that conformity can go further still, subtly changing what people

actually perceive, not just what they say out loud. Disagreeing with the room, in other words, is not merely uncomfortable. It registers, neurologically, as something closer to a threat.

That is precisely why Courage cannot be assumed just because a room is technically open to debate. It has to be actively built because for the brain, staying quiet is genuinely the easier path.

This isn't just intuition. The idea of a measurable "collective intelligence" factor in groups was first tested and named in a 2010 study by researchers at MIT and Carnegie Mellon. Groups tackled a range of tasks - including ones with no single correct answer, like moral dilemmas and prioritisation calls. And the factor that emerged had little to do with the group's average intelligence or its highest individual IQ. The strongest predictors instead were how evenly people took turns speaking, and how socially attuned members were to one another. In other words, whether the room made space for more than one voice to actually be heard. It's a finding that has shaped how researchers think about group performance ever since.

That is what Collective Judgement actually means: reasoning well together on exactly the kind of ambiguous, judgement-heavy calls organisations face - the “meta-skill” that Capability, Courage and Clarity are built to create. It cannot, therefore, just mean more people in the room.

Consider what this looks like when it works. In one leadership team we observed, a mid-level manager flagged that a key growth assumption behind a major investment for the organisation, didn't hold in two of the three markets being modelled. The recommendation had already gained real momentum in the room. But because the team had built the habit of testing assumptions before committing, the concern got raised, tested openly, and actually changed the final decision. No one person in that room was smarter than the recommendation being challenged. The team however, collectively, was. Every important decision based on this then reinforces the culture - who was heard, what was challenged, which assumptions survived, what was prioritised and who ultimately owned the call.

That is the real shift underway: not more information reaching more people, but more people building the judgement to use it well, together.

06 WHAT WE’RE NOTICING IN BOARDS

Today, boards have more access to information than ever, but that does not mean they are making better decisions. Board packs are thicker, dashboards are more sophisticated, and AI can now generate a fully-reasoned recommendation before the meeting even starts. None of that changes the board's actual constraint: directors meet periodically, carry far less day-to-day context than management, and have limited time to test what they are being shown. More information without more time to interrogate it does not produce better judgement. It just produces more confident-looking decisions.

Across our work with boards and executive teams, we are seeing four traps that are becoming more visible.

1. The information trap

Business scenarios are getting easier to generate, and recommendations increasingly polished. Yet we see boards spending valuable time interrogating the analysis rather than exercising discernment about what actually matters. More analysis and less discernment is a dangerous combination - it can create false confidence, because the assumptions underneath the analysis were never properly challenged.

2. The experience trap

Deep experience is invaluable, but it can also anchor judgement to patterns that worked in a different context. The people with the most experience in the room are often also the most senior, which means their instinct is also the hardest to challenge. We notice the most consequential challenge often comes late in the conversation, or after management has already invested heavily in a particular strategic direction. Experience should widen a board's judgement. Too often, it narrows the room's willingness to question it.

3. The consensus trap

A smooth board meeting is not necessarily an effective one. We see important decisions move towards consensus before competing interpretations have been properly surfaced. With AI increasingly shaping management recommendations, this becomes more significant. Who challenged the thinking, where did human judgement enter, and who ultimately owns the call?

4. The Speed trap

AI can now produce a fully-formed recommendation before the board has even finished framing the question. What used to take two rounds of discussion, spread across two meetings, increasingly gets resolved in one. Board papers arrive later, decisions compress into whatever time is left, and the questions that would normally interrupt a fast-moving conversation simply don't get asked in time. Speed itself is not the problem. The problem is mistaking a fast decision for a well-tested one.

These traps change the way any board works. It is not enough to just scrutinise the decisions made. Boards increasingly need to scrutinise how the decisions were made in the first place. What assumptions were tested? What contrary evidence was considered? Where did AI influence the recommendation? Who disagreed, and why? What would have to be true for this decision to be wrong?

Look closely at any one of these traps, and more than one vulnerability zone is usually at work. The information trap combines pace and false confidence in the data. The experience trap combines precedent and power. The consensus trap combines power and preference, dressed up as agreement. Boards that can name which zones are active in a specific decision are in a far stronger position to counter them than boards that simply agree, in principle, that judgement matters.

In practice, this means building scrutiny into the process itself, rather than leaving it to chance or to whoever happens to speak up. Some boards achieve this by rotating a designated dissenter role for the most consequential agenda items. Others build a pre-mortem into board papers, asking management to lay out how a decision could fail before the vote is taken. The mechanism matters less than the discipline: judgement has to be built into how the board operates, not assumed to be present just because the right people are in the room.

A Board that asks only for certainty, outcomes and reassurance will eventually receive polished certainty, outcomes and reassurance. A Board that tests assumptions, welcomes difficult information, distinguishes

confidence from certainty and is willing to revisit its own judgement gives the CEO and Executive Team permission to do the same.

The Executive Team then has an equally important role. People across an organisation watch whether executives genuinely challenge one another, whether enterprise priorities override functional interests, whether poor news travels upwards quickly, whether decisions stick, whether performance is calibrated fairly and whether somebody can disagree with the CEO without paying a price for it.

None of these traps announce themselves as failures of governance. In the room, they look like an efficient meeting, a decisive board, a leadership team firmly in control. What a board tolerates in these moments teaches the organisation more about how decisions really get made than any values statement ever will. The board's job, hence, is not to have more answers than the management or AI. It is to ensure that consequential decisions have survived sufficient human scrutiny.

07 MAKING COLLECTIVE JUDGEMENT VISIBLE

Across our work with global organisations, we see a recurring pattern. Organisations are rarely lacking intelligence, expertise or analytical capability. In fact, the opposite is often true. They are populated by highly capable leaders with sophisticated processes and access to more data than ever before.

Yet their **collective judgement** often falls short of their **collective intelligence**.

The reason is structural, not personal. Individual capability is relatively easy to build and even easier to see: a strong leader visibly reasons well, communicates clearly, and makes confident calls. “Collective judgement” is harder to build and far easier to lose, because it depends on what happens between people, not within any one of them. Whether a junior voice gets heard, whether a plausible answer gets tested rather than accepted, whether yesterday's decision gets revisited honestly. None of that shows up on an individual's performance review. All of it shows up in the organisation's results.

That gap is visible long before anyone puts a number on it. Candour comes and goes. Challenge arrives too late to matter. Ownership blurs the moment something goes wrong. Decisions get escalated and revisited long after they should have been settled. Teams pour enormous energy into making decisions, and comparatively little into finding out afterwards whether those decisions were actually good ones.

This is what **CDNA’s 5H™ Model** - Head, Heart, Hunch, Hands and Habits is built to make visible: the gap between what an individual leader can achieve and what an organisation collectively decides. In practice, this means looking at decisions the way they actually happened, not the way they get described afterwards - reviewing how a specific high-stakes call was made, who was in the room, what evidence survived scrutiny, and what happened after the decision landed. Individually, this can look great. But assessed together, across an organisation's most consequential decisions, it becomes a clear map of where judgement is strong, and where it is quietly eroding.

When organisations deliberately strengthen the conditions for good judgement, we typically see meaningful movement within six to twelve months. Across our work, improvements in collective judgement are commonly in the region of 15-30%, with the greatest shifts often appearing in the dimensions that were weakest at the outset. The improvement is not simply a higher assessment score. It is in how it becomes visible in the way the organisation operates: more challenge before a decision rather than after it, clearer

ownership, fewer unnecessary escalations, faster decision cycles, and greater willingness to revisit assumptions in the light of outcomes.

In one organisation we worked with, the clearest early signal wasn't the score at all. It was a mid-level manager pushing back publicly on a proposal from someone two levels above them - something that, eighteen months earlier, would have been raised privately afterwards, if at all. The number moved later. The behaviour moved first.

Importantly, the starting point matters. A relatively mature leadership system may see a 10-15% improvement and count that as significant. Where judgement capability is more uneven to begin with, a shift of 20-30% may be seen as significant, once the basics of candour, ownership and calibration are put in place for the first time.

Either way, the direction of travel matters more than the starting score. An organisation that knows exactly where its judgement is weakest, and is closing that gap deliberately, will consistently outperform one that simply assumes its intelligence is enough.

Applying judgement for the sake of making better decisions is not an end in itself. The bigger opportunity is creating a stronger culture - one that enables high-performance and sustains it over time. And accountability for that culture is increasingly becoming critical. Boards are increasingly holding CEOs and executive teams accountable not just for the decisions they make, but for the culture and conditions in which those decisions get made. Culture and organisational health are increasingly becoming matters of board oversight, rather than simply the remit of CHROs.

This matters because culture is built one decision at a time. We believe people learn what an organisation truly values not from its stated values, but by watching what happens when choices get difficult. Can a senior leader be challenged? Does evidence override politics? When a decision fails, is it a blame-game or careful calibration? Does accountability hold when outcomes become uncomfortable?

These are judgement moments. And collectively, they teach an organisation how things really work and help an organisation in “keeping it real”. Better Collective Judgement creates greater candour, clearer accountability, stronger ownership and more confidence to act. Doing this consistently, these behaviours become culture.

And the relationship is naturally rewarding. “Better judgement shapes stronger culture and stronger culture creates the conditions for better judgement”**.** Ultimately, both serve a bigger outcome: sustained high-performance in organisations.

In an age where intelligence is increasingly abundant, the competitive advantage for any organisation will be a culture capable of exercising good "Collective Judgement" - consistently, not occasionally. That advantage is not built through a single intervention or one landmark decision. It compounds the same way it erodes: through repetition, in moments that rarely look consequential at the time. This is an advantage AI cannot simply replicate, because it lives in how an organisation behaves, not in what it has access to.

BETTER JUDGEMENT -> BETTER DECISIONS -> REPEATED BEHAVIOURS -> STRONGER CULTURE -> SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

09 WHAT LEADERS SHOULD DO

Start with the decisions that matter.

Collective Judgement is not something leaders exercise only when facing a major strategic decision. It is built or eroded in the ordinary flow of work: in meetings and quarterly business reviews, performance calibrations and town halls, offsites and one-to-ones, and in the hundreds of smaller choices leaders make between them.

The ask, therefore, is for leaders to make those everyday moments build better collective moments:

1. Solve the right problem before solving it well

Under pressure, leaders are remarkably good at solving the problem that has been presented to them. Good judgement starts one step earlier: establishing whether it is actually the right problem. In a leadership meeting, an offsite or a business review, this can be as simple as pausing before moving into solutions. What are we really trying to solve? What evidence tells us that? What are we assuming? Who might see this differently? Leaders do not need to make every conversation longer; they need to recognise which problems deserve better diagnosis before action to see where is Collective Judgement working well and where it's constrained.

2. Make decisions with judgement, not just data

Most consequential business decisions arrive with incomplete information. A pricing decision, a senior hire, an investment choice or a market call rarely comes with a spreadsheet that provides the answer. In executive meetings and quarterly reviews, leaders need to distinguish between what they know, believe, assume and sense. They bring together data, experience, context and instinct; deliberately seek evidence that might challenge the prevailing view; and know when sufficient judgement has been exercised to make the call.

3. Use feedback to improve judgement, not simply performance

Every one-to-one, project review and feedback conversation is an opportunity to develop somebody's capacity to make better judgements without the leader being present. Rather than simply telling someone what went wrong or what the leader would have done differently, leaders explore the thinking behind the action: What did you notice? What options did you consider? What assumption drove your choice? What would you do differently now? The objective is not only to correct yesterday's performance but to improve tomorrow's judgement.

4. Turn priorities into real choices

Town halls and strategy offsites are full of priorities. The harder leadership task is deciding what will not be prioritised. When leadership teams translate strategy into quarterly priorities, budgets or resource choices, judgement means confronting trade-offs explicitly. If this is genuinely number one, what moves down the list? What will we stop? Where will resources move? What might we deliberately disappoint in order to deliver what matters most?

5. Turn alignment into action and ownership

A good meeting is not one in which everyone nodded. It is one after which people know what happens next. At the end of executive meetings, project reviews and offsites, leaders make explicit: What did we decide?

What did we not decide? Who owns what? By when? What will success look like? What new evidence would cause us to revisit the decision? This is particularly important where responsibility crosses functions or markets.

6. Calibrate performance, talent and potential collectively

Performance calibrations and talent reviews are judgement-rich moments. Numbers may inform them, but leaders are still making human judgements about contribution, potential, readiness and behaviour. The quality of those judgements improves when leaders compare evidence, challenge one another's assessments and distinguish results achieved from how those results were achieved. Done properly, calibration is not an HR ritual. It is one of the clearest opportunities a leadership team has to define collectively what good performance and leadership actually mean.

7. Make challenge normal and commitment equally normal

Leaders often say they want candour. Employees learn whether they really mean it by watching what happens when somebody disagrees. In executive meetings, project reviews, town halls and offsites, leaders can deliberately invite the dissenting view, ask the person who has spoken least, or ask "What are we not saying because the CEO or the most senior person is in the room?" But psychological safety is not an excuse for perpetual debate. Challenge needs to happen before the call and commitment needs to follow it.

8. Revisit decisions to improve the next one

Organisations spend enormous amounts of time making decisions and surprisingly little time examining whether their judgement was good. Quarterly business reviews, project retrospectives and strategy reviews provide natural moments to revisit consequential calls. What did we believe would happen? What actually happened? Which assumptions held? Which did not? Was the outcome poor because the judgement was poor, or was it a good decision that produced an unfavourable outcome? The distinction matters.

9. Make your own judgement visible

Perhaps the most powerful way leaders develop "Collective Judgement" is by allowing people to see how they themselves think. In a town hall meeting for example, a CEO can explain not just what has been decided but the trade-offs behind it. In a leadership meeting, an executive can say, "This is what I know; this is what I'm assuming; and this is what would change my mind." In a performance conversation, a leader can acknowledge that new evidence has altered their view. In an offsite, the most senior person can speak last rather than unconsciously anchoring everyone else's thinking.

None of these behaviours stays confined to the leadership team. What happens at the Board shapes the Executive Team; what the Executive Team does repeatedly shapes leaders throughout the organisation; and what leaders do repeatedly, becomes the organisation's lived culture. Collective Judgement, in other words, is not another leadership activity to add to the calendar. It is how "Making Leadership Real" actually happens, through what leaders and leadership teams already do, every day, in the flow of work.

10 THE OPPORTUNITY

This paper opened with a simple observation: information and analysis are getting cheaper and faster to produce, but judgement is not getting any easier. If anything, it is becoming the scarcest, a most valuable capability an organisation needs. We have given that scarcity a name - "Judgement debt" and a shape: five

recognisable zones where it takes hold, from the pressure of a deadline to the pace of an AI-generated answer arriving before the question has even been framed. We have shown where it hides in boards, in the traps that make a smooth meeting feel like a good one. And we have shown where it is built or eroded every day, in the ordinary meetings, reviews and conversations that leadership teams already have, whether or not they realise judgement is what's actually at stake in them.

AI is making intelligence more abundant. This is not making judgement less important, but making it more valuable. As information, analysis and expertise become more widely distributed, competitive advantage will increasingly depend on what organisations do with them, not on how much of them an organisation can access.

The strongest organisations will not necessarily have the most information, the most sophisticated models or the fastest answers. They will be the ones able to distinguish signal from noise, challenge confidently held assumptions, combine evidence with experience, make consequential choices with clear ownership, and calibrate when they get them wrong.

This is also not a problem that waits. Judgement debt compounds the same way any other debt does - quietly and faster, the longer it goes unaddressed. The longer an organisation delays looking at how its decisions are actually made, the more those decisions get handed down, by default, to whichever voice is loudest, whichever precedent is nearest, or whichever AI recommendation arrives first.

In the end, AI doesn’t remove human judgement from consequential decisions. It raises the stakes for exercising it well. This is the opportunity of "Collective Judgement" - to make visible the decisions that have traditionally been invisible, to identify and reduce judgement debt before its consequences compound, and to build cultures where good judgement is not dependent on a handful of exceptional individuals, but becomes something an organisation can build, measure and sustain.

This is where CDNA works alongside organisations, not to hand over another model or framework, but to help leadership teams see their own decision-making clearly, through the same lens this paper has laid out. We do this in two ways. First, the **Judgement Pulse™** measures the five vulnerability zones (pressure, power, preference, precedent and pace) shaping the decisions that matter most in an organisation today. Second, the **Judgement Index™** moves beyond the individual to assess an organisation's collective judgement as a whole, closing the gap between individual capability and how the organisation decides together. We then stay engaged long enough to see whether this new way of deciding holds under pressure.

That conversation is often where we start. The starting point is rarely complicated - usually a single, honest look at how the last major decision in the room actually got made: who was heard, what was assumed, and what evidence would have shown the decision was wrong.

That single conversation, repeated deliberately across the decisions that matter most, is what separates organisations that talk about judgement from organisations that actually practise it. It costs little to start. It costs a great deal to keep delaying. That is the opportunity in front of every leadership team today: not to out-compute the competition, but to "out-judge" them.

The organisations that win the next decade will not be the ones with the best AI. They’ll be the ones with the best “Collective Judgement” and know how and when to use it.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



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ABOUT CORPORATE DNA CONSULTING

Corporate DNA Consulting (CDNA) is an award-winning global leadership and culture advisory firm headquartered across London, Singapore, Dubai, Riyadh and Miami. For over 19 years, CDNA has partnered with leaders across 36 countries and 15 industries to 'Make Leadership Real' - helping organisations deliver real impact through hard evidence and sustainable change. To explore more about what we do, visit us at www.corporatednaconsulting.com