

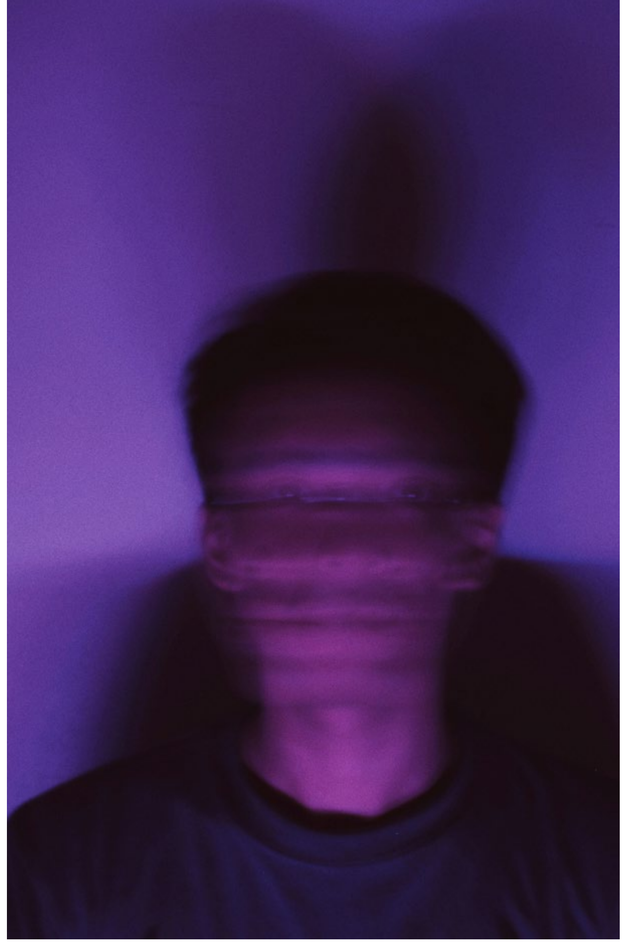
Mobilising generation numb

Why high-performing brands are rethinking people enablement

Sponge.

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Is the human engine that powers your organisation sputtering?

The modern workforce is undergoing a fundamental shift. Global upheaval, economic instability, the insidious after-effects of the pandemic, and digital saturation are shaping a workforce generation that is numb: cynical, stuck, longing for connection, and hunting for a renewed sense of identity at work.

In the first weeks of lockdown, McKinsey observed that five years of digital progress took place in just 60 days. The pandemic accelerated mounting strains on our human experience: digital overload, social fragmentation, and rising anxiety about personal security.

People feel they have been weathering storms for years now, and they're becoming hardened against further demands on their resilience. At the same time, large enterprises are under more pressure than ever to deliver – relentless pace, 'always-on' transformation, and agility in the face of disruption require constant innovation and endurance.

This means leaders are having to ask more of their people than ever, just as resistance is heightening. Whether it feels like inertia, disengagement, or defiance – leaders are increasingly faced with barriers to generating dynamism in workforce culture.

High-performing brands are starting to wake up to the fact that legacy approaches to enabling their people are inadequate and out of touch. Whilst attention (and millions of dollars) is paid to the mechanics of strategic initiatives, too often, they fail to address the human side of change.

By contrast, those who tackle this new mood music in the workforce head-on will be offering their people something they are craving. Simple – if not easy – actions that address the realities of what it means to be human in today's working world will resonate deeply with internal audiences, rebuilding trust, reforming teams, and reigniting the energy needed for sustaining market advantage – even survival.

Meet Generation Numb

The signals are everywhere. People's relationship with their work is changing. It's time for radical listening, and rethinking how we enable them.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

WORKFORCE SIGNALS

THE SIGNALS ARE EVERYWHERE

Stressed resourcing

Nearly 1 in 5 stressed from overwork due to staff shortages

Tech speed

40% need to reskill due to AI in next 3 years

Relentless change

Chronic uncertainty

5 years in 60 days: advance in digital transformation in lockdown





The no.1 use for GenAI: **Therapy** (2024)

Change volume up 550%

100% of C-suite expect major changes to workforce & 55% of orgs report team restructuring

Overwhelmed

Almost 60% overwhelmed by pace of change

73% report disruptive change in last year

Digital overload

Job risk

Exhausted

36% drop in willingness to support change

Detached

A fifth of workers want to quit, but don't

69% of remote workers burned out by digital tools



300ft of daily social media scroll. Same height as the Statue of Liberty



Financial pressure

50% are worried they can't pay bills

Cynical

45% of orgs have "low trust culture"

Seeking community

20% experience daily loneliness

Remote working

Global polycrisis

Pandemic

Sponge.



The malady



The rise of generation

numb

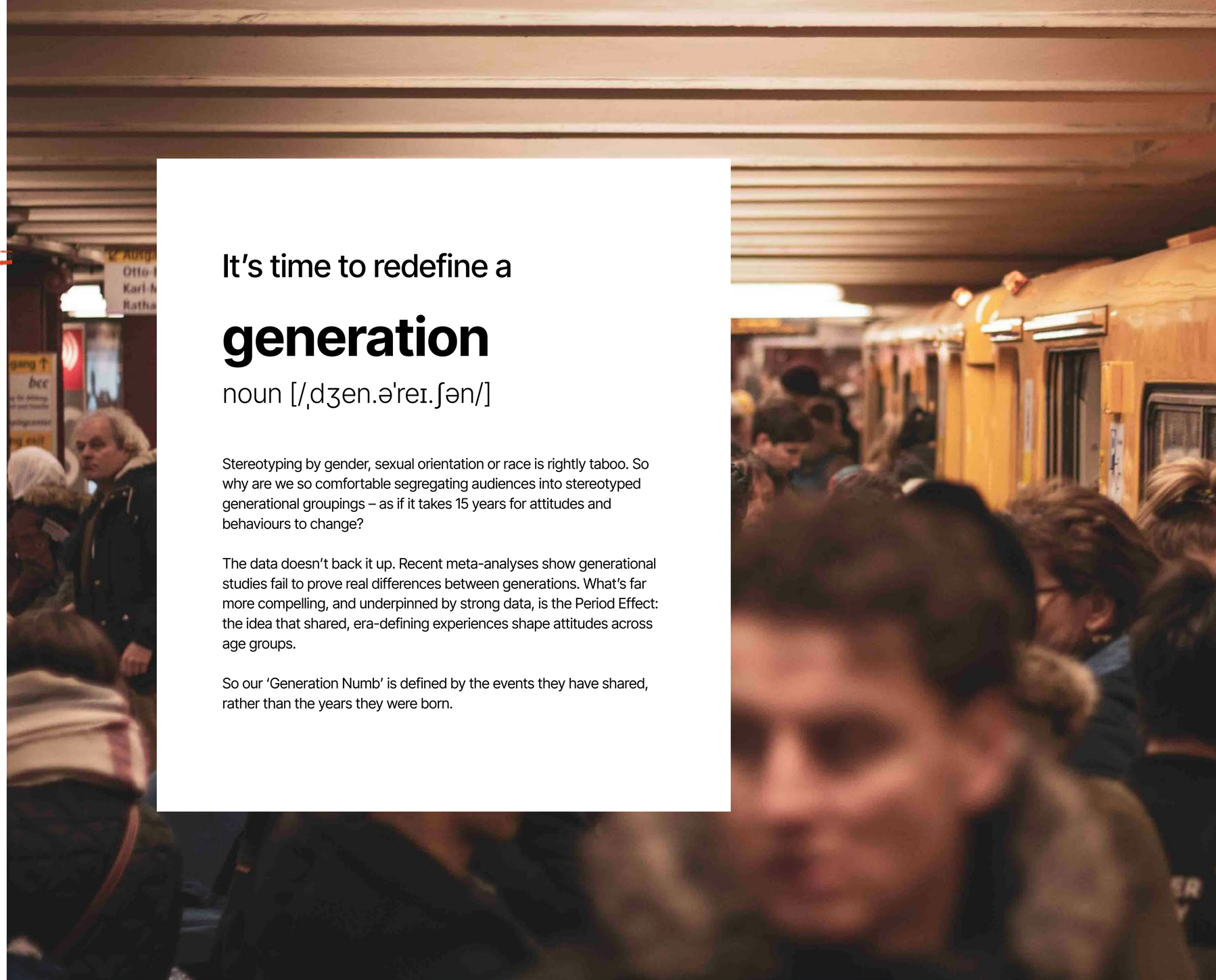
A watershed moment

"For years, we'd been studying these human emotions and they don't really change that much. We'd get excited if we saw a 2% shift. And all of a sudden the data came back and it was so different. We are not who we were 5 years ago. The universe has changed and with it the core emotional values that govern decision making."

GEORGE CAREY (HUMAN-OLOGY)
on The CMO Podcast with Jim Stengel

We’re witnessing the emergence of a workforce shaped not by when they were born, but by what they’ve collectively endured: a sustained period of global cultural upheaval, a pandemic, the rise of political polarisation, chronic uncertainty, and the unrelenting effects of digital saturation. The result? Generation Numb – a workforce spanning multiple age cohorts that’s emotionally fatigued, craving connection, and in search of meaning at work.

For those accountable for delivering strategic change against this backdrop, to ignore it is fatal. To understand it is an advantage worth seizing.



It’s time to redefine a

generation

noun [/ˌdʒen.əˈreɪ.ʃən/]

Stereotyping by gender, sexual orientation or race is rightly taboo. So why are we so comfortable segregating audiences into stereotyped generational groupings – as if it takes 15 years for attitudes and behaviours to change?

The data doesn’t back it up. Recent meta-analyses show generational studies fail to prove real differences between generations. What’s far more compelling, and underpinned by strong data, is the Period Effect: the idea that shared, era-defining experiences shape attitudes across age groups.

So our ‘Generation Numb’ is defined by the events they have shared, rather than the years they were born.

Chronic uncertainty is the operating backdrop of modern work

Sustained uncertainty has developed anxious people into hardened people – numb to attempts to inspire them with corporate vision and purpose comms.

Every leading "Uncertainty Index" out there is displaying an alarming pattern: over the past decade, global uncertainty has surged and held, fed by recession cycles, political instability, inflation shocks, war, climate volatility, and now the rapidly escalating disruption of AI.

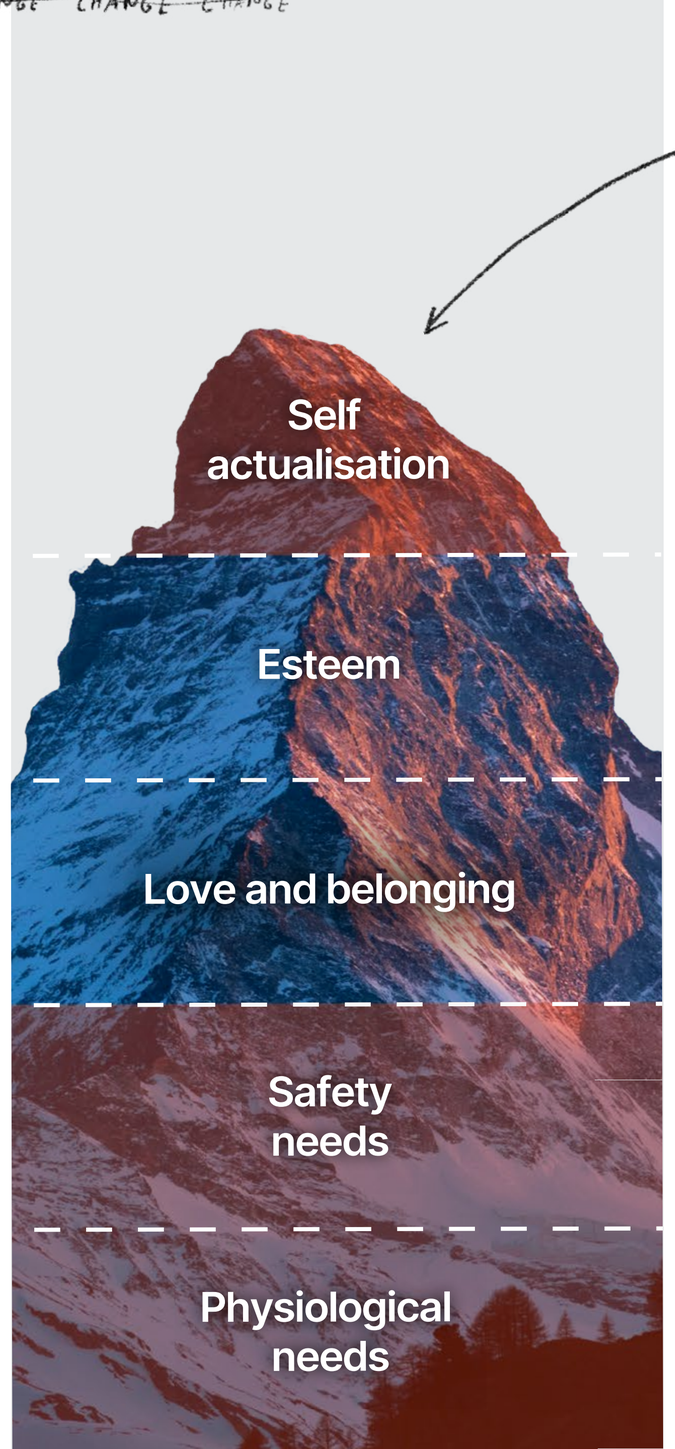
For employees, the anxiety that "something bad might happen" has, in many cases, already become lived experience. Where workers once feared redundancy, restructures, or disruption, now they've endured them – or watched it happen to peers, repeatedly and publicly.

High-profile mass redundancies in tech, financial turmoil, and existential questions around job relevance are constant, front-page noise.

After such a sustained period of uncertainty, people are shutting down to focus on self-preservation. Every new initiative is landing in a workforce wired to expect risk. Talk of "strategic change" or "reimagining the future" often reads as code for more disruption, more instability. And in that mindset, lofty visions and purpose statements sound tone-deaf.

> People have little time for the needs of the company. They're focused on protecting their own.

WORKFORCE MINDSET IS OFTEN HERE



+43%

Rise in relative importance of staying safe to American adults since 2019.

HUMAN-OLOGY, 2025

52%

More than half of workers are financially stressed (ie struggle to pay all bills and have anything left over).

PWC, 2024

50%

Half of workers who experienced an underperforming transformation agreed that transformation was just another word for layoffs.

EY, 2021

We're hyperconnected - yet more disconnected than ever

We used to talk about technology in terms of distraction and the attention economy. Over time, and sped up by the pandemic, that story has shifted – to one of deep-rooted isolation.

The relationship between technology and human loneliness is an evolving one. With five billion people worldwide on social media, and adults spending an astonishing three quarters of their waking hours online, there's less and less time in the day for any tangible experience of humanity.

Community is being lost in surprising ways. Take the death of monoculture – that shared sense of **"everyone saw that, everyone's talking about it."** Once, a finale, a news moment, even an ad could spark instant collective experience. Now, our feeds are fragmented, our moments siloed, our references increasingly private.

This embedded loss of day-to-day human connection in our jobs is a loss of what makes us *feel* things at work. Connection with people can be good or bad – it can make you angry, make you happy, make you laugh. But it rarely leaves you numb.



"I got off the plane!"

In 2004, 52.5 million Americans – almost a fifth of the population – tuned into "The Last One", the series finale of beloved sitcom Friends.

NEW YORK TIMES, 2004

Starbucks

The erosion of the "third place".

Starbucks built its brand around the idea of the "third place": a space between home and work where people could connect, linger, and feel a sense of community. But that vision has quietly eroded. Today, over 70% of U.S. sales come from mobile app and drive-thru orders, reflecting a dramatic shift in consumer behaviour. The Starbucks experience has become more transactional and solitary, overshadowed by a culture of convenience, efficiency, and individualism over connection – a reflection of cultural changes since the pandemic.

CNN BUSINESS, 2024



Everyday feels like

Everything everywhere all at once

How a world of constant crisis – amplified by sustained years of digital excess - has left people numb.

When the iPhone launched 18 years ago, Steve Jobs wasn't wrong when he said, 'This changes everything'. The babies born that year are graduating into adulthood in 2025. Since then, the combined weight of our online and offline lives has steadily pushed us toward numbness.

Overwhelmed by polycrisis

Recession, war, climate anxiety, polarisation, rising inequality – and all at once. Compounding global crisis events, sometimes called a "polycrisis", create an 'overwhelming state where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'.

Overwhelmed by our digital lives

Digital adoption now outpaces human adaptation. Each new technology reaches mass use faster than the last. We know it's taking its toll. Almost 70% of remote U.S. workers already feel burned out by digital communication tools.

...yet, everything is so underwhelming

As the volume of noise rises and we scroll endlessly through our feeds, quality is collapsing. In the digisphere, this is known as “enshittification”, but it’s happening offline too. It’s everywhere you look – from underhanded “shrinkflation” to the creeping erosion of special, joyful things: concerts and restaurants spoiled by camera phones; plastic bottles washed up on tropical beaches – even people having to queue to summit Mount Everest. What once was magic is now overpopulated and over-instagrammed.

The everyday reality of the modern worker is often one of overstimulation without inspiration.

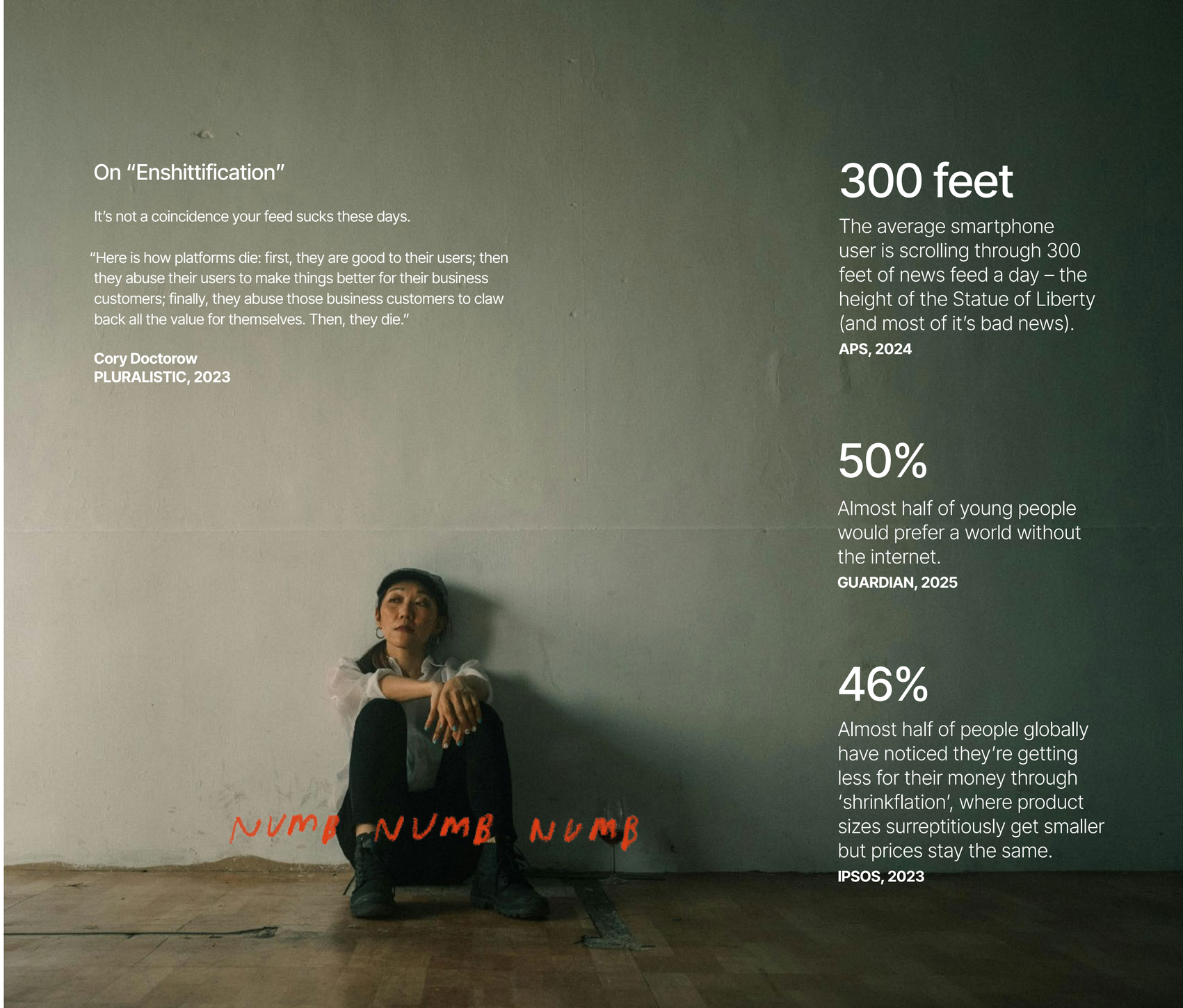
Too much, too fast, all the time. Eventually, we stop feeling at all.

On “Enshittification”

It’s not a coincidence your feed sucks these days.

“Here is how platforms die: first, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.”

Cory Doctorow
PLURALISTIC, 2023



300 feet

The average smartphone user is scrolling through 300 feet of news feed a day – the height of the Statue of Liberty (and most of it’s bad news).

APS, 2024

50%

Almost half of young people would prefer a world without the internet.

GUARDIAN, 2025

46%

Almost half of people globally have noticed they’re getting less for their money through ‘shrinkflation’, where product sizes surreptitiously get smaller but prices stay the same.

IPSOS, 2023



The remedy

Activating generation numb



We've developed a pragmatic, invigorating approach to help organisations address the needs of Generation Numb: a remedy to unlock energy in the workforce once more.

Mapped across three simple, sequential stages – "Me", "Us", and "It" – these approaches are designed to build trust, reignite collective belief in the mission, and help individuals reconnect with each other and their work.

The three stages of un-numbing the numb.

This process can be thought of as tackling different maturity stages of people enablement. When people are at their most resistant – in a state of hardened self-preservation – leaders should focus on creating impact in the "Me" stage.

Addressing each stage creates the emotional foundations for the next. Inertia and resistance convert to dynamism, with motivated teams built for speed and ready to develop new skills and capabilities.



You'll notice...

AI is often absent from these tactics. They are addressing very human needs, so often AI solutions won't work the way a human one will.

These tactics are not anti-AI – they're just pro-human.

ME

1

Meet personal priorities

If your workforce is walled up and hardened against transformation efforts - this primarily comes from a place of self-preservation.

Therefore, your job here is to **build trust around the goal**, and a vested interest in its success for your audiences, by focusing on areas within your control.

US

2

Restore connection

The workplace is filled with human interaction (Zoom, Teams, Slack) that lacks human connection.

Restoring community at work activates deep human motivators, whilst creating the group momentum you need to transform fast. It takes a village to navigate critical change. **Help people find their village.**

IT

3

Break through the apathy

Despite everything that's going on, work is still allowed to be energising! At its best, work is a fulfilling part of our identity. With trust built and a sense of team established, people are in the right place to get excited about the "It" again – the mission itself.

This is the stage where you **bring people back to life around the work** – and, in a wonderful full-circle moment, can find your own joy again too.

Stage one: Me

Meet personal priorities

1



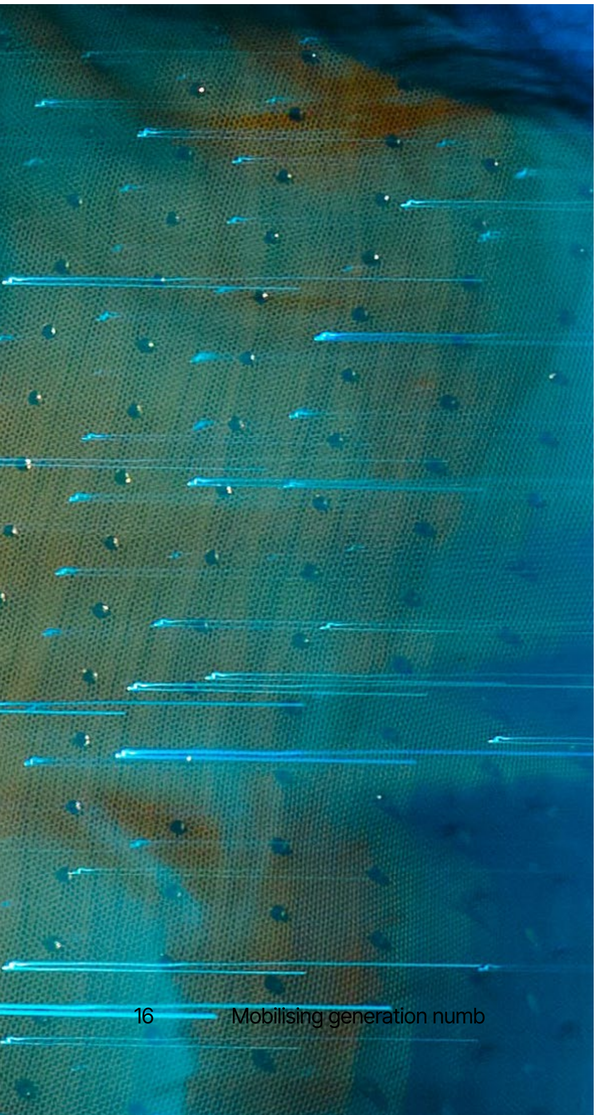
If your workforce feels walled off from new strategy and change, it’s often self-preservation.

Start with the basics: clarify roles and expected behaviours per team. Rethink comms on Vision and Purpose. You can’t ask people to care about changing the world if they’re worried about getting through the week.

People want realism and transparency. **Strip away the gloss.** Think radical respect, adult-to-adult.

Then **make it worth their while**: link change to tangible career growth by mapping new skills to personal advancement. Get them invested, practically, personally, and professionally.

Enablement tactics



Build communications around your best storytellers

Be wary of top-down messaging. Where possible, source your best storytellers to deliver enhanced comms: through two-way dialogues, User-Generated Content, and peer-led documentation of the journey. The more grassroots this movement, the better.

Define the ‘golden habits’

Convert knowledge pieces (that explain the change) into defined habits that clearly describe what people should do. This could look like a ‘Top 5 Habits’-type resource broken down by role. Focusing on habits makes change feel concrete and accessible.

Offer manager-exclusive experiences

Considering their key role in scaling change well, you can never focus too much on your managers. Build manager-specific playbooks (or, better, a parallel manager programme) that gives them message clarity, buy-in, belief, and visibility of development opportunities

Publicise how your skill needs map to career-building opportunities

In uncertain times, the benefit of change to the individual is the chance to future-proof their own career. Be explicit about new skill needs and encourage that anyone join in. Make skill development sessions available to all. Assemble small, role-agnostic project teams around tasks to offer stretch opportunities for the willing.

Prioritise learning modalities that offer a personal touch

This isn’t about curating your course libraries. Think quality, not quantity. Place a renewed focus on mentoring, job shadowing, pod coaching, and practice environments – deeper experiences that make people feel valued. Identify your ‘ambassador groups’ and offer them unforgettable experiences.

Google

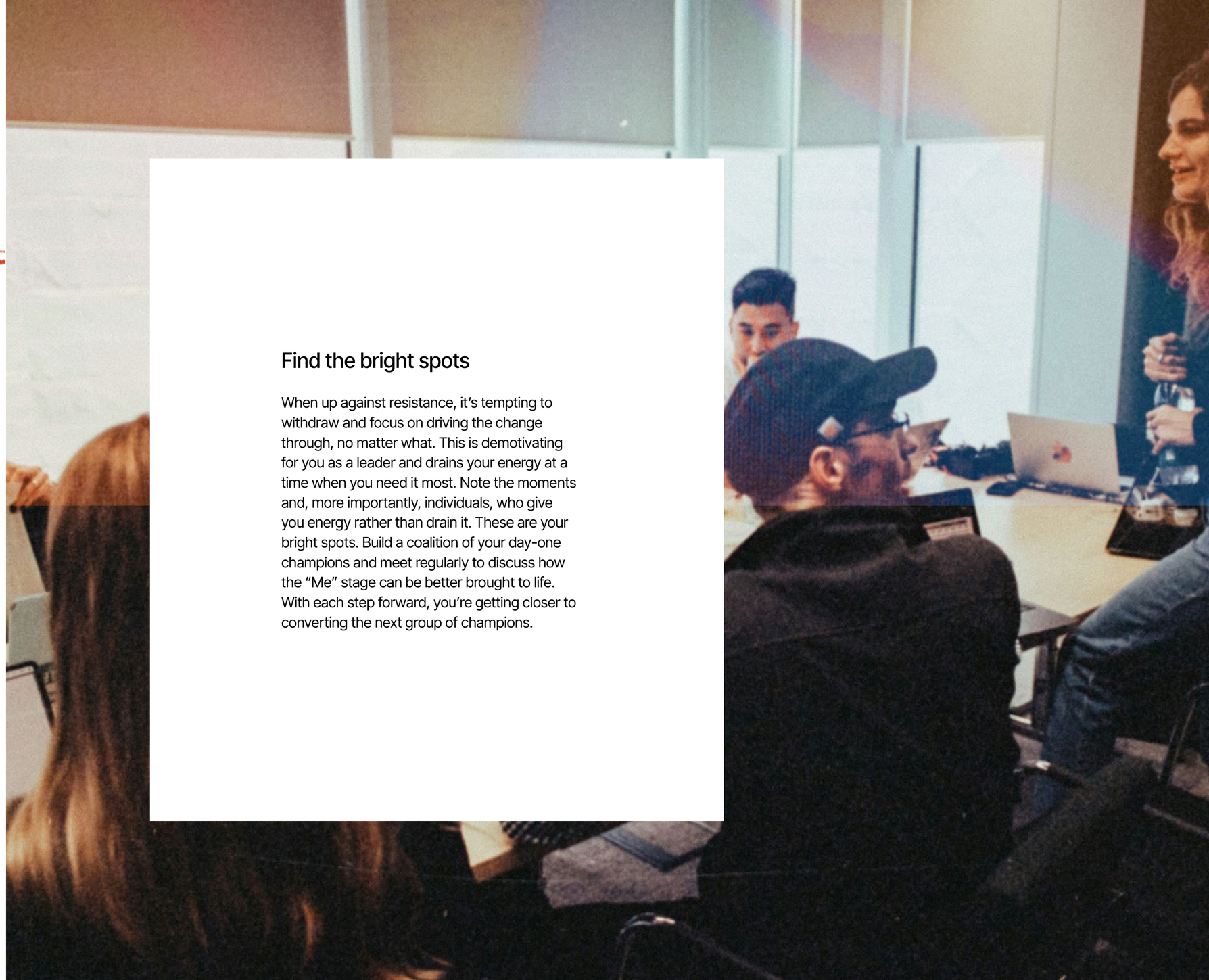
TGIFs

An exemplar of ‘adult-to-adult’ company comms, in Google’s “Thank God It’s Friday” meetings, upper management shares private information and opens the floor to a Q&A. Anyone in the company is free to converse directly with senior executives, on anything from new product vision to recent mistakes.

L.A.T.T.E

When examining customer experience after a run of bad form, Starbucks realised frontline staff were overwhelmed. They invested in habit training to help them respond in-moment to unhappy customers – Listen, Acknowledge, Take Action, Thank them, Explain, or, LATTE. Customer satisfaction and employee engagement scores rose.

Leader survival trick



Find the bright spots

When up against resistance, it’s tempting to withdraw and focus on driving the change through, no matter what. This is demotivating for you as a leader and drains your energy at a time when you need it most. Note the moments and, more importantly, individuals, who give you energy rather than drain it. These are your bright spots. Build a coalition of your day-one champions and meet regularly to discuss how the “Me” stage can be better brought to life. With each step forward, you’re getting closer to converting the next group of champions.

Stage two: Us

Restore connection

2

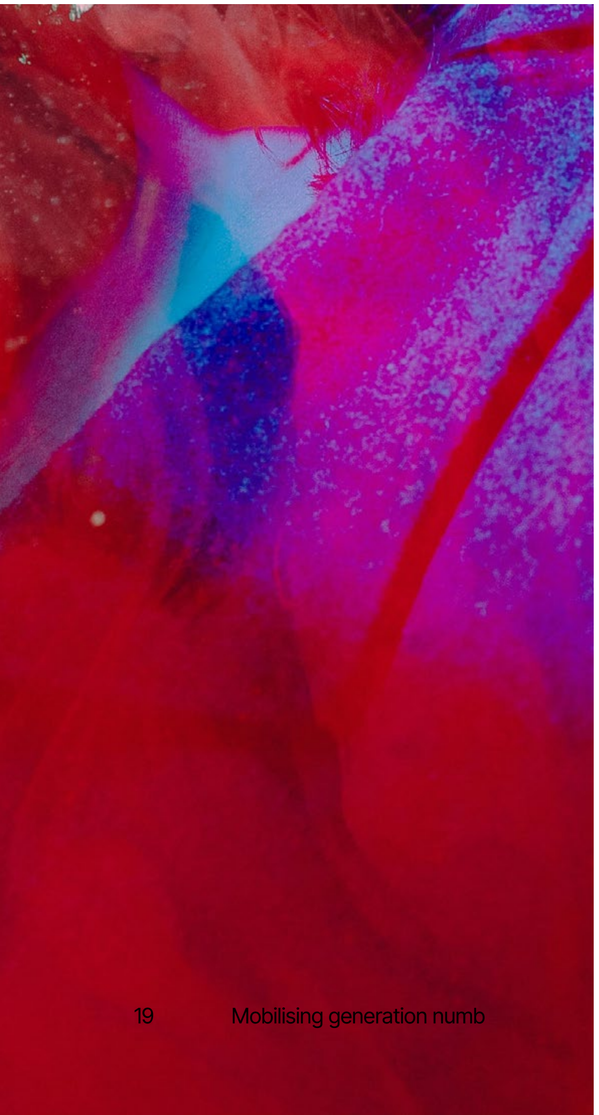


Make room for human moments.

Though it seems counterintuitive when time-scarce, connection formed in ‘unproductive space’ creates the energy to meet today’s demands.

Encourage interdependency. Yes, you need flexible teams—but you need speed and energy more. When everyone knows their role, collaboration becomes second nature. Here, you’re designing for belonging, where people build community through the work. Then, **build communal belief** through quick wins and grass-roots movements where the “Why” comes from peers. Relinquish perfection. The reward is self-motivating teams.

Enablement tactics



Design new digital rituals

Well-designed digital rituals make business-as-usual feel more energising. A good digital ritual is inclusive, barrier-free, authentic, and triggers emotion. Examples include virtual voting tools, “GIF-only check-ins”, shared daily wins, and gratitude notes.

Lean into small-group dynamics

Create venues for groups of five or fewer to gather. Pair org-wide comms moments with small-group follow-ups to allow for space to discuss the change. Promote cross-functional group composition for fresher perspectives and unexpected connections.

Structure in-office events for a concentrated dose of community

As Return-to-Office mandates rise, celebrate what’s only possible in person. Design in-office events where people explore what happens when you put screens away altogether. More meetings with no laptops; more paper and pen. And more, just… people.

Create unstructured environments to engage with leaders

Authentic conversation between leaders and teams often happens in the negative spaces – when the talk finishes and people refill their coffees. Structure time with leaders that makes them accessible in person in an authentic way: get them physically in front of people and the negative space will take care of itself.

Create a scoreboard (to help people know they are winning)

When people feel like the new ways of work are working, they start believing. A score board – a highly visual reporting system built on one to two key metrics, such as “calls conducted” or “new kick-offs attended” – keeps focus and builds communal belief.

Spotify

Chapters and Guilds

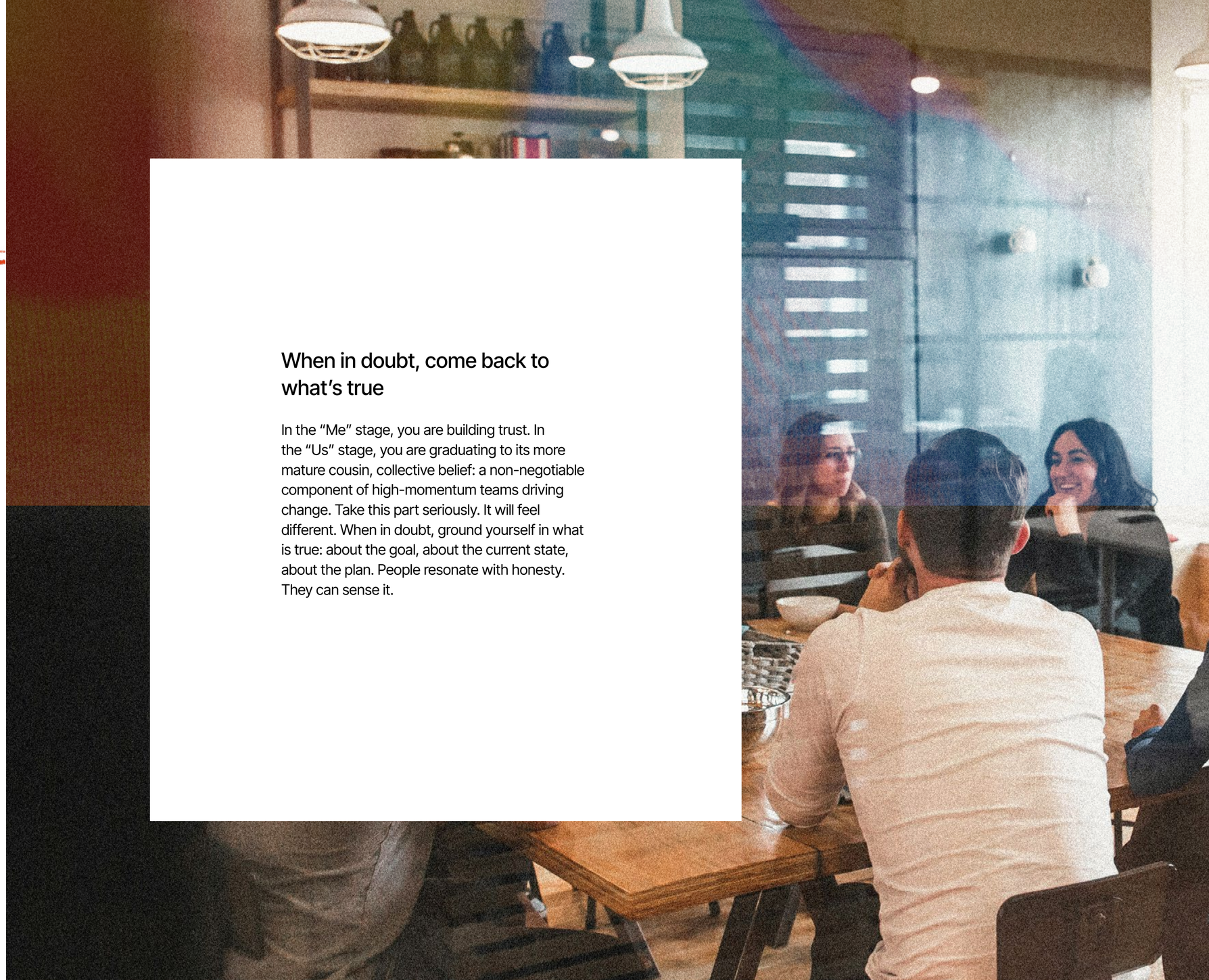
Spotify’s structure foregrounds small-group dynamics that promote autonomy and community around the work. Small ‘squads’ of six to twelve developers resemble ‘mini-corporations’. These form ‘co-operatives’ with others – supported by ‘chapters’ and ‘guilds’ that offer expertise and work-related community, and connection around hobbies.

virgin atlantic

The Fuel Gauge

Wanting to reduce costs and improve sustainability, Virgin Atlantic divided their 335 captains into two groups. One was a control. The other got a target and a scorecard that tracked their monthly fuel usage. The reporting group dropped fuel costs by £3.3 million.

Leader survival trick



When in doubt, come back to what’s true

In the “Me” stage, you are building trust. In the “Us” stage, you are graduating to its more mature cousin, collective belief: a non-negotiable component of high-momentum teams driving change. Take this part seriously. It will feel different. When in doubt, ground yourself in what is true: about the goal, about the current state, about the plan. People resonate with honesty. They can sense it.

Stage three: It

Break through the apathy

3



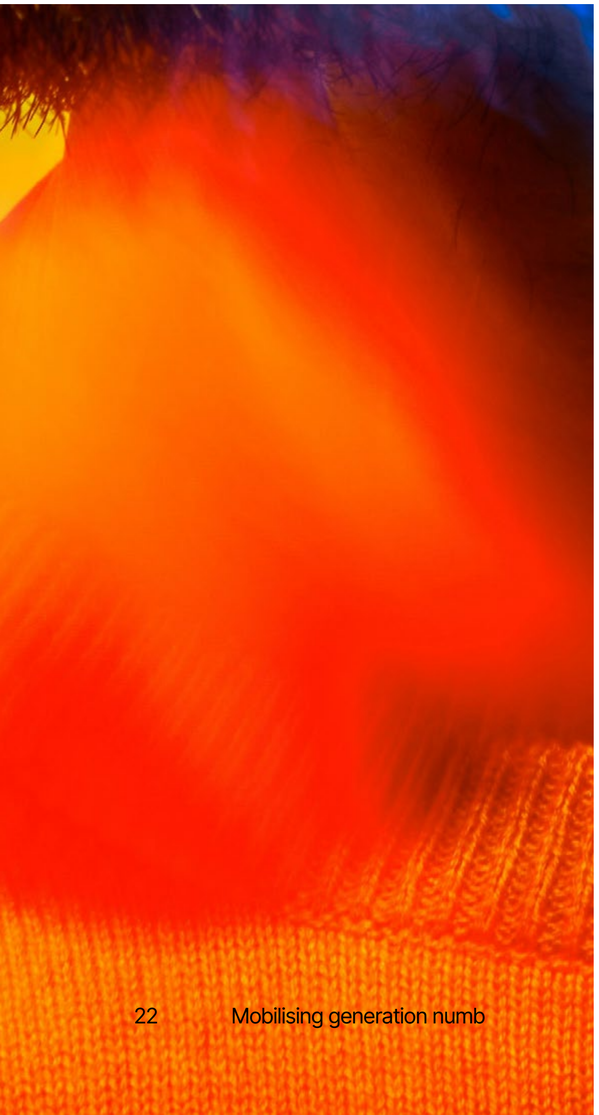
> "70 percent of employees said that their sense of purpose is defined by their work."
>
> **MCKINSEY 2020**

The world's leading brands offer moments of delight in the customer experience all the time. Why not keep a few for yourself?

Delight = joy + surprise: a powerful antidote to numbness. Create the unexpected. Act boldly. Lean into humour.

To fuel innovation and bring people back to life at work, **stimulate imagination.** Use design elements that unlock creativity: play, debate, time and space, experimentation, and research. Finally, **co-create the future.** Reduce your own burden by bringing people in and designing each phase of strategy delivery together.

Enablement tactics



Promote analogue moments in a digital world

The best way to combat digital overwhelm? Pull the plug. Printed signs, disposable cameras, snail mail. What if that next marquee session had no slides? Old school is back in. More “offline” experiences will improve productivity, and your people will thank you for not always having to split their attention between humans and technology.

Cultivate a support system to sustain the realities of change

No change happens without setbacks. How do you break through when things aren’t fun? Build the right safety mechanisms to keep the team fearless! Celebrating vulnerability, a highly visible network of peers for when the answer isn’t always clear, and a strong feedback culture, are all ways to encourage people to continue to take risks and quickly convert ‘failure’ into accelerated learning.

Embrace play principles in your marquee experiences

We’re not talking about gamified leaderboards. This is about designing your next experience – whether online or offline – around principles of play that unlock deeper value: unstructured parameters, autonomy, risk-taking, curiosity, failing safely, just-in-time support. We all need more ‘play’ at work – as long as it’s grounded in the strategic intention behind it, rather than the novelty factor that can be a distraction.

Build simulations that unlock new possibilities

Simulations help recreate the conditions needed for a new vision or deep practice. A well-designed simulation is immersive, story-driven, stimulates imaginative thinking, and instantly becomes the marquee experience in your strategic programme. Whether an elaborate brand experience, a virtual world, or a narrative-driven game, it quickly becomes the thing people can’t stop talking about!

CHANEL

House of Learning

In Albermarle Street in London, Chanel opened a beautiful, multi-story centre for teams to gather and learn. For their manager programme, guests received paper invitations, inked in Chanel lipstick shades, with a handwritten style inspired by Coco Chanel’s penmanship.

Ford Foundation

Worker Voice Design Lab

To boost customer experience, Ford Foundation partnered with three businesses to create Worker Voice Design Lab, where leaders from a port authority, an airline, and a health care provider worked alongside frontline workers. In each case, it sparked prototype innovations for customer experience, with interventions designed by workers implemented at the core of the business.

Leader survival trick



Let go

Breaking through the apathy is the scary part. You've got to be bold – take a leap of faith. But you have more support than you think. While you're trying to reignite belief in the journey for your teams, lean on them to help you find your spark too. Resist the urge to determine the solution: ask your team where to go next. Ultimately, the greatest risk to you in this method is managing the timeline – because you can guarantee more contributors will lead to better ideas. Control this by ensuring group accountability. Steer people back to true north. Seize on the flashes of brilliance.

From resistance to momentum



One thing is certain. You can bet on chaos.

The demands on people are only going to get more sustained and intense – so this moment matters. You need a plan to get on the front foot. You need an approach that addresses the core of the challenge and sets your people up so that they're no longer reactive (or, rather... unreactive!) – but high-performing in shaping the future.

The trap so many leaders are falling into is an understandable one: "I don't have time for all this. I need to get the job done."

At the heart of this paper is a simple message:

> This ***is*** getting the job done.

Your ability to galvanise your team is the problem that needs solving – the opportunity that needs seizing.

It's a choice every strategic leader needs to make: how long can you continue to chase change and at what point are you going to start leading it?

People enablement needs a new approach



Reading the room is a transformation imperative

People's emotional state is now a central variable in your ability to meet your goals. The weight leaders are feeling on their own shoulders is a signal of the current climate.

Paradoxically, it's also a key – an opportunity – to re-activating a workforce that has otherwise lost patience with further demands on their resilience.

Addressing numbness is the way to build high-performing teams

Leaders who take a radical stance on empathy – choosing to respond to resistance not by 'pushing through', but by tackling the mood music head on, will stand out: offering something their audiences are craving, and thereby winning hearts, minds, and momentum at a pace their competitors will envy.

Tackle numbness in stages

Investment in each stage has exponential benefits beyond the precise moment-in-time need. It creates a more motivated, united, and invigorated workforce – more resilient to ever-growing change demands, and better equipped to take on new challenges.

- Don't go straight to 'It' – focus on 'Me' and 'Us' first.
- Bring humanity back in to rebuild trust, belief, and motivation.
- Then break through the apathy and reconnect people to the big picture.

There is everything to play for

In today's world, any plan you're investing in is likely to be outdated before you even hit the green button. By contrast, investment in equipping your people to handle change – even thrive in it – will yield dividends for years to come.

For leaders who take these approaches seriously and recognise that this is the most valuable work you will do, the strategic advantage is tempting enough to bring anyone back to life!

Authors



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Josh is Chief Creative & Learning Officer at Sponge Group, where he leads The Practice consultancy and The Studio. A recognised authority in learning and development, he has partnered with a wide portfolio of Fortune 500 and Interbrand organisations – with roles in digital learning strategy, solutions design, business development, and creative leadership. Josh blends a strong strategic lens for connecting L&D to performance, while championing moments of human resonance in the workplace.



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About Sponge

Over more than 20 years, Sponge has been the people enablement partner of choice to 43% of the Interbrand Global 100, one in 10 of the Nasdaq, and a third of Europe's Fortune 500.

Supporting leaders tasked with high-stakes transformation, we deliver targeted shifts in behaviour, culture, and capability through unforgettable learning. Our approach blends strategic learning consultancy, underpinned by human science methodologies, with world-class creative—delivered end-to-end across digital, blended, and in-person experiences.

Related perspectives from The Practice, at Sponge:

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