

White Paper

1911 The Last Holistic Leadership System

Operational Thermodynamics: The End of
the Polar Extreme and the Rise of the
Accountability Wave

This white paper tracks the progress of leadership thought seekers and icons through the ages. It tries to unpack common themes from voices and the timelines against when we first heard them.



The timeline is interesting.

There are large gaps in documented leadership dynamic in the early ages. Going back as far as Julius Caesar. Julius, Sun Tzu and Genghis Khan ruled with complete Authority. They are iconic because their success and decisive strategies still bear relevance today.

Though we agree that brutality is no longer something to aspire to. Today we can reflect on some of the principles they used to recalibrate and recondition strategies we apply in business.

However, it appears that in mapping the timeline we went from one extreme to the next. We hope to find the middle-ground that keeps us centred, efficient, profitable and amicable in the workplace.

"I came.
I saw.
I conquered."

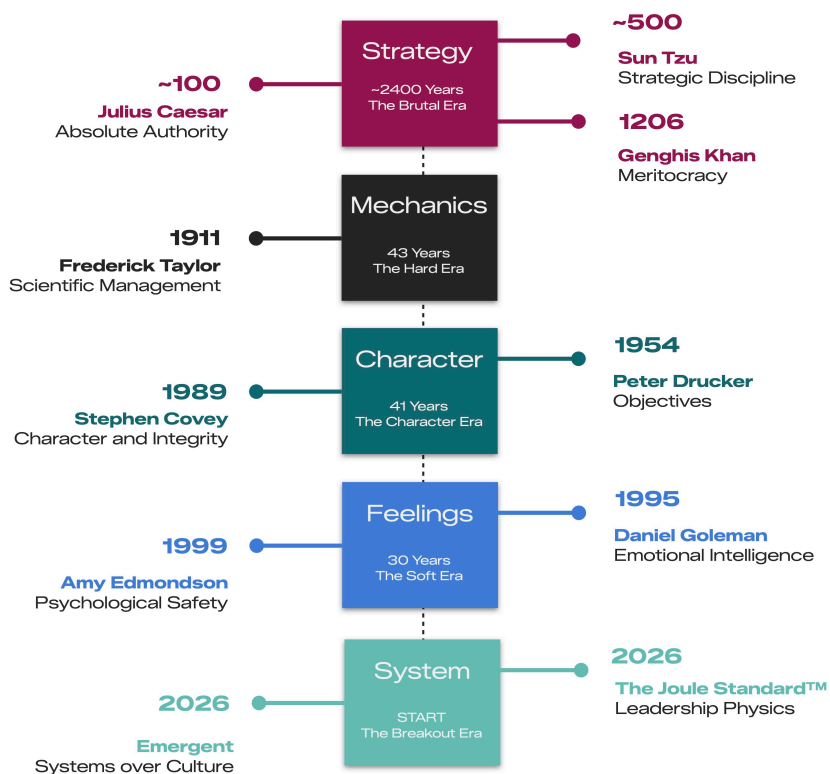
Julius Caesar

I. Executive Summary

History serves important lessons that we unpack and build on and innovate from. Ancient iconic leaders were brutal and ruled with an iron fist.

Yet, we still bring them to the future packaging their successes as learnings we can adopt today.

Leadership Paradigms Through the Ages



Simplified timeline of dominant leadership paradigms — not exhaustive

“I came. I saw. I conquered.”

Julius Caesar.

His authority was absolute, yet we still reflect on learnings from the past. Today, we sit at the opposite extreme. We went from ruthless to tolerant.

The past 25 years have been layered with culture dynamics promoting comfort over profit. The culture adoption led us to believe that "niceness" and perks would result in improved employee retention and better performance.

However, it has had the opposite effect.

According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace reports, low engagement—fuelled by a lack of clarity and accountability—has historically cost the global economy up to \$8.8 trillion annually in lost productivity (equivalent to ~9% of global GDP).

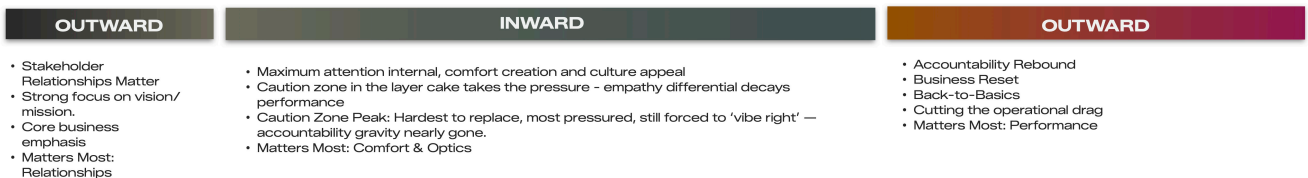
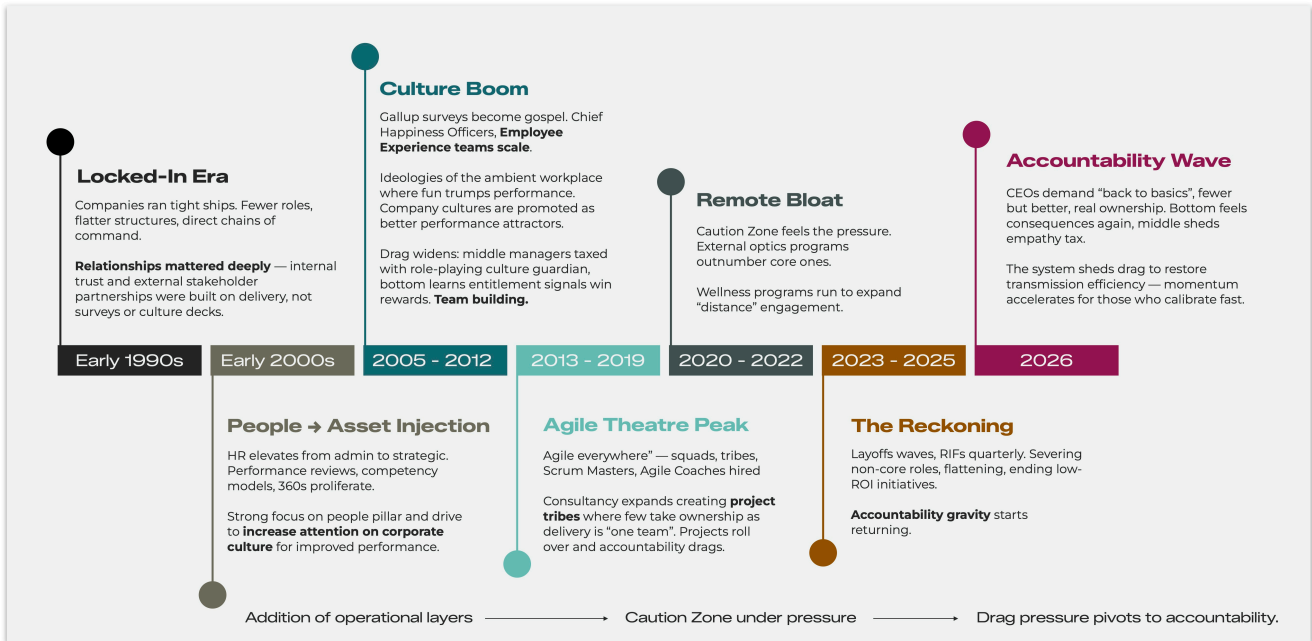
We promised retention, but instead, we faced the ‘Great Resignation’, where millions walked away from "comfortable" jobs that lacked substance.

We didn't build a dynamic culture; we built a system of high friction. As Adam Grant argues in his work on rethinking, comfort can be the enemy of growth.

We've been layering human-centric goals and character ideologies onto workplace leadership practices since 1954. We haven't had a holistic, physics-based approach to leadership dynamics since Frederick Taylor in 1911.

It can be argued that we haven't actually had a proper view of corporate energy transmission since. Everything post-1911 has been repackaged, person-centred practices that amplify the individual employee over the engine.

The Physics of Drag and Recovery



The Result?
 Operational Drag, stagnation and an innovation Flatline

The Solution?
 We shift.
 To Operational Thermodynamics™.
 Leadership is not about feelings. It is the calculated transmission of energy from Core Purpose to External Accountability.

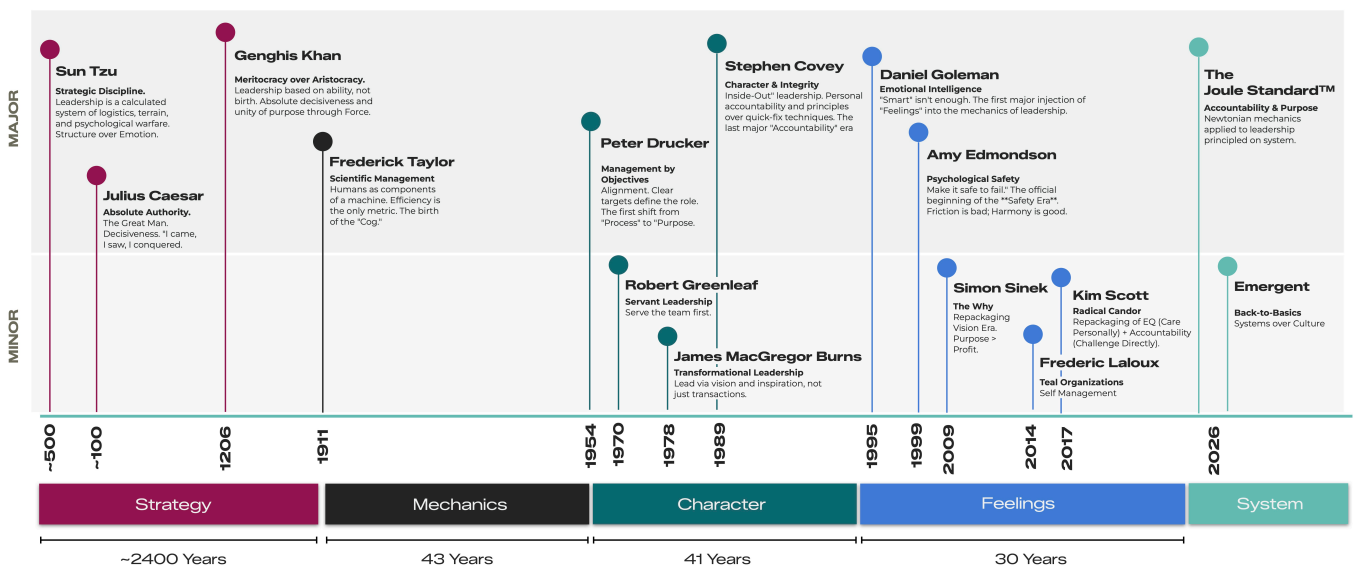


Image: Pixabay

II. The Layering of the Individual (1999–2025)

In 1999, psychological safety became the gold standard in leadership dynamics. It was necessary coming out of a process-system design that treated employees as mechanistic levers.

This continued to build until we substituted kindness with tolerance. Leading with kindness was weaponised into conflict avoidance. The Era of “Nice” has left us with 25-years of soft skills without the hard metrics.



Leaders are burning out because they are carrying the load of broken transmission. The system is buckling.

Despite the digital revolution, US productivity growth has averaged roughly 1.3% since 2005, down from ~3% in the post-WWII era.

We didn't run out of ideas; we ran out of pressure.

Our productivity levels are lower, despite better technology since WWII.

We added more software, more 'engagement' surveys, and more perks. Yet the engine has run out of steam. This is the definition of Artificial Drag—increasing input (Force) with decreasing output (Performance). The management layer is conflicted. They cannot manage performance and be “Nice”, so the level of tolerance for poor performance has increased.

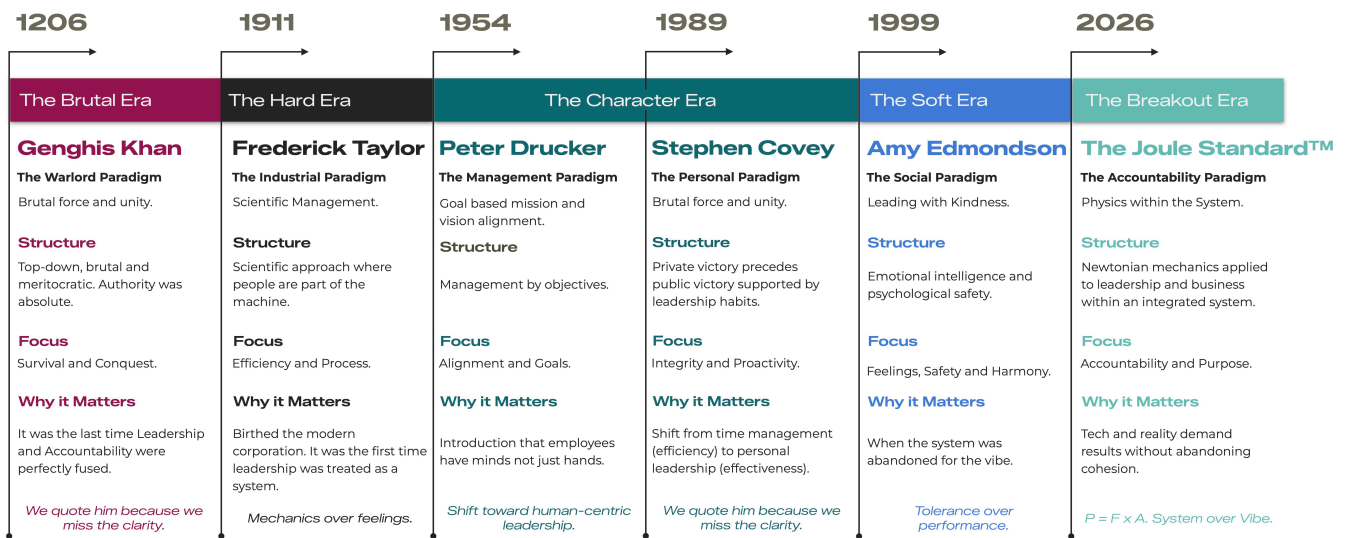
Only ~23% of employees, globally are actively engaged. ~62% are not engaged; they are ‘quiet quitting’ (Gallup). They are psychologically detached, yet we continue to amplify culture. If culture is working, why are 59% watching the door?

For 25 years we ran the opposing dynamic to Absolute Authority and installed safety and kindness. Yet, it resulted in a workforce where the majority are detached. **Safety did not create energy; it created a vacuum.**

III. The Diagnosis: Why the Old Model is Buckling the System

For 820 years we fought our way out of brutality. We then tried to right-set one extreme by implementing another.

Only it didn't solve the problem we had hoped it would. We encouraged improved integration with a human-first centred approach.



$$P = F \times A$$

Performance = Force x Accountability

Increased tolerance has diluted accountability and effort, which destroys performance. When Accountability drops to zero, performance drops to zero no matter how much force or effort you put behind it.



You cannot "motivate" your way out of a mechanical failure.

IV. The New Science: Operational Thermodynamics™

In business and leadership, energy transmission is calculated and purpose driven. The energy dynamic is measured and calibrated for optimal performance.

We need to move from Alignment to Transmission. The probability of complete alignment is unlikely, so the continuous effort on forcing it is artificial drag. Energy expenditure that can be better served elsewhere.

The system outperforms its components. In mechanics each part of the system has equal weight.

Drag is nothing but the energy we are not harvesting. We allow it to leak because we are ignorant of the Physics of Accountability.

In Operational Thermodynamics, 'doing the right things' means aligning with the Core Purpose. Anything else is just friction.

"A bad system will defeat a good person every time."

W. Edwards Deming

The Second Law of Thermodynamics

Entropy in a closed system always increases. Businesses are closed systems. Without the external force of Accountability, they naturally drift toward chaos (Entropy). The 'Kindness Cult' tried to fight entropy with empathy. Physics determines that you fight entropy with Effort (Force x Distance).



Image: Pixabay

V. The Blueprint: The Purpose to Accountability Paradigm™

Transmission Originates at the CORE

The entire business is derived from its intent or purpose. Anything within the system that detracts from the core is operational drag.

Each requires a business CORE driven definition to attach meaning.

CORE is the central point from which everything else is mastered. Without intent there is no reason to exist.

The entire system is built around the core giving each part intent and purpose.

Accountability as a Law of Physics

Leadership Physics is a transmission system. The entire system needs calculated and calibrated transmission from the core to the outer rings.

Each cog is a part of the system that needs equal weighting for optimal performance.

The Blueprint

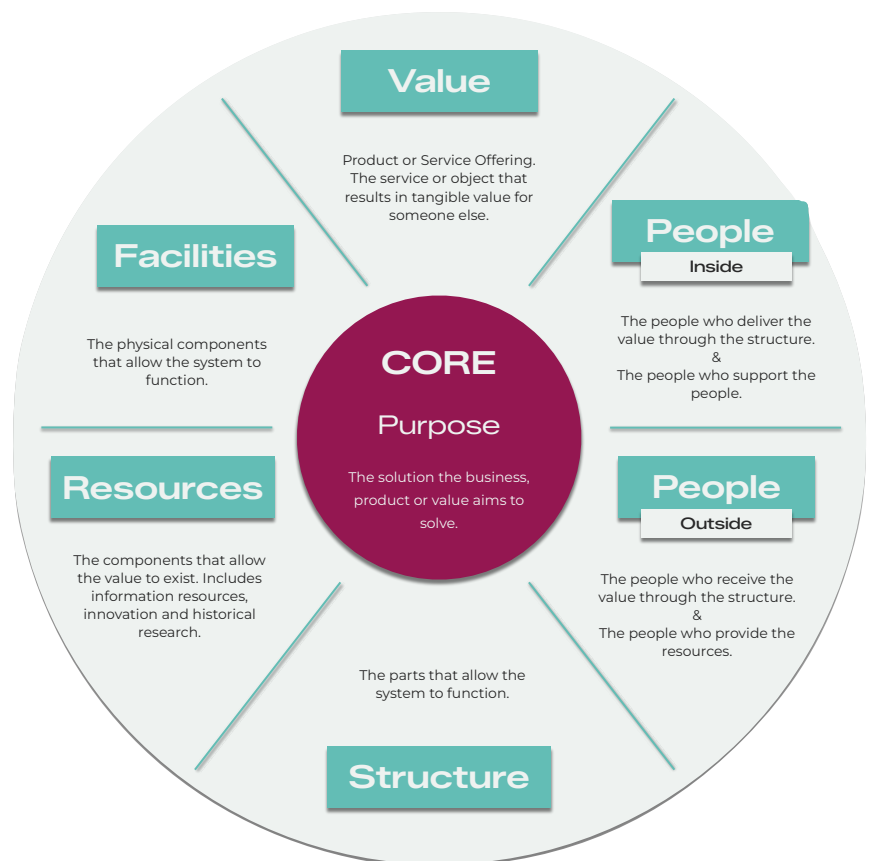
The Core holds the Purpose: It is the generator. The energy source. It codes the reason for the business to exist in the first place.

The Transmission Rings

These six cogs carry equal weight. Amplifying one over the other will dilute energy. If facilities are problematic, the joules lost on the functional operating system are lost so that cog cannot perform well.

The result: One underperforming cog impacts the others and the system is uncalibrated and unregulated.

Stop managing feelings.
Start managing physics.



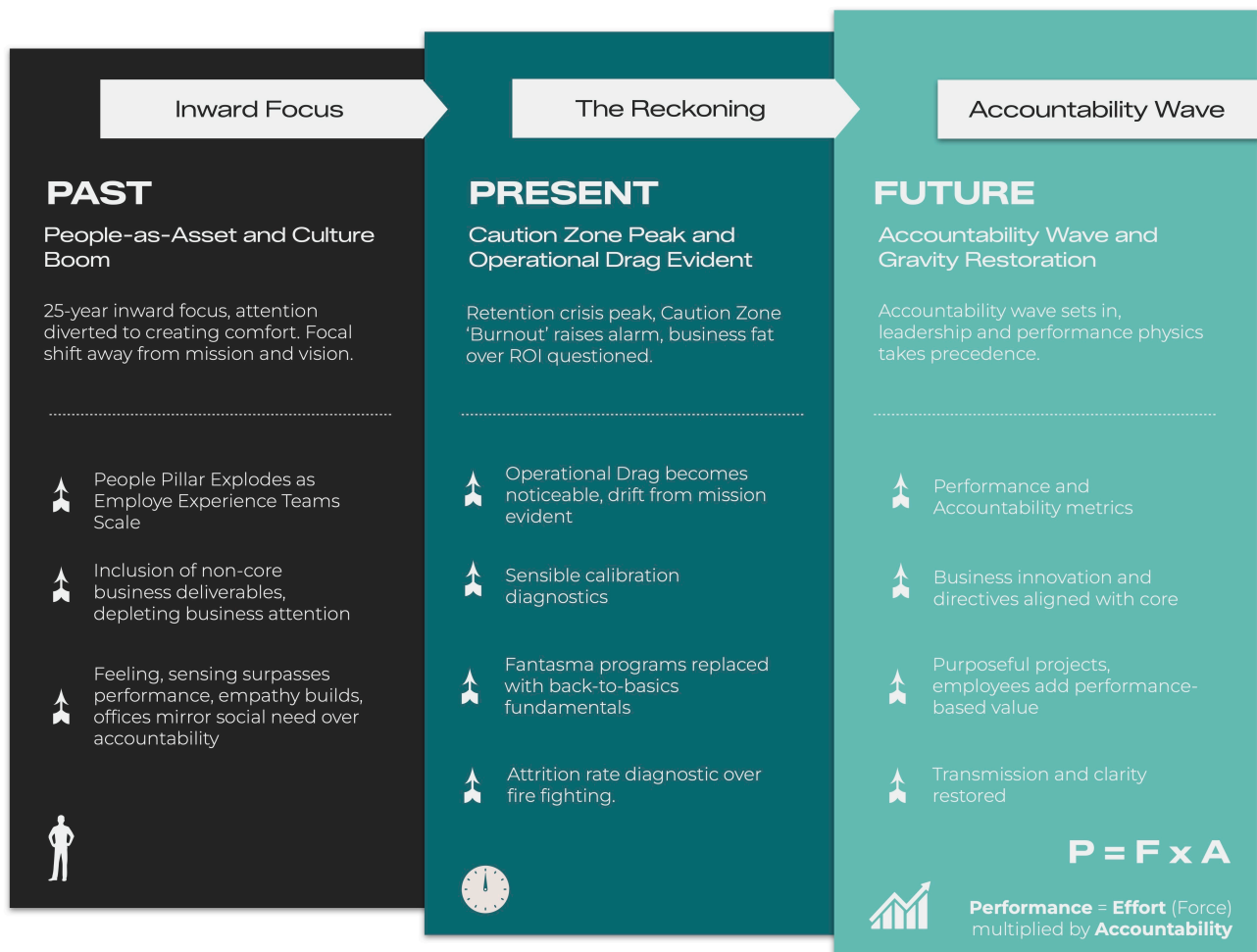
VI. 2026: The Accountability Wave

The market is regressing to "brutal efficiency". We're back to quoting Genghis Khan as a leadership icon because the middle is broken.

We don't need brutality; we need Calibrated Accountability.

The market is swinging to the extreme right—favouring brutality and 'Genghis Khan' tactics—because the middle (Kindness) failed. But brutality is just another form of Drag (high pressure, low transmission). We need a Third Way: Calibrated Accountability.

From Operational Drag to Clear Transmission



The leaders who survive 2026 will be the ones who can measure and minimise Operational Drag.

Stop quoting history.
Start calculating momentum.

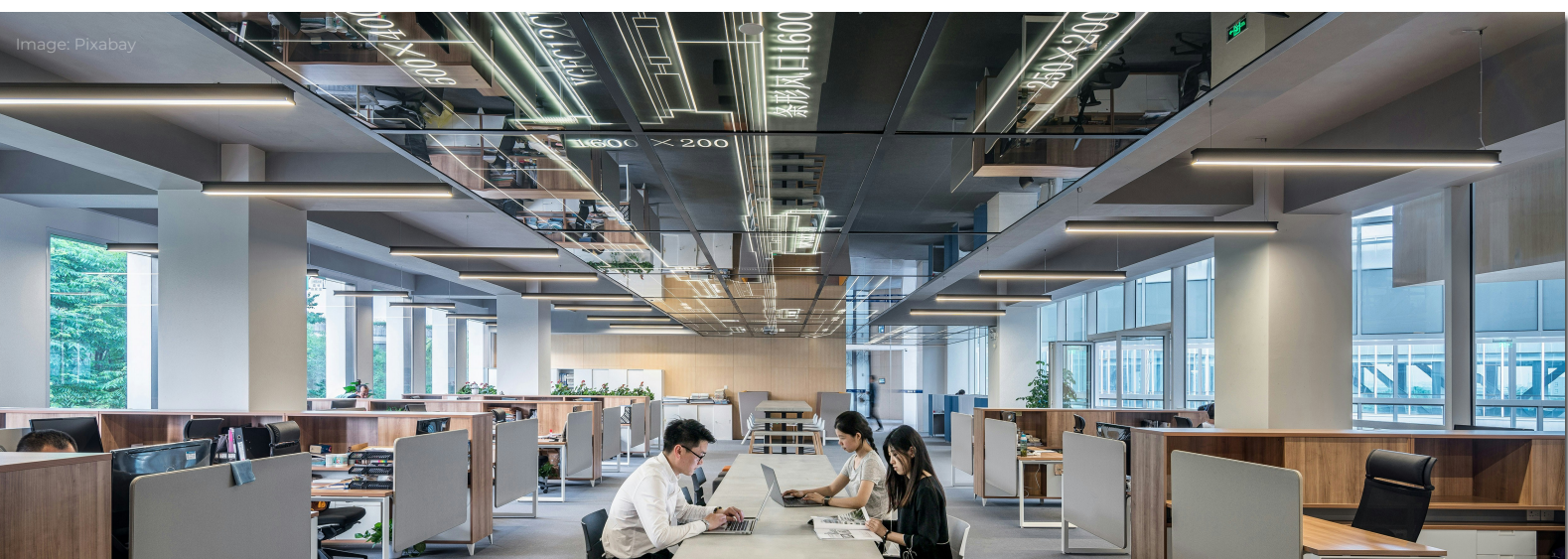
No Fluff. Just Physics.

A system with zero drag moves at the speed of purpose.

Now physics demands the correction.

If your system is still bleeding talent, momentum, or meaning —
don't wait for the next wave to force the conversation.

The Joule Standard™ starts here.



References

1. Clausius, Rudolf (1850). The Mechanical Theory of Heat. Origin of entropy and thermodynamics.
2. Deming, W. Edwards (1982). Out of the Crisis. MIT Press. Foundational text on system vs. individual performance.
3. Gallup (2025). State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report. Data on global employee engagement (21% engaged in 2024), with 62% not engaged and 17% actively disengaged; disengagement costing the global economy \$438 billion in lost productivity in 2024.
4. Genghis Khan (Historical Reference). The Secret History of the Mongols. Referenced as the extreme reaction to weak leadership.
5. Holiday, Ryan (2016). The Daily Stoic. Portfolio. Evidence of the market return to "hard" virtues.
6. Senge, Peter (1990). The Fifth Discipline. Doubleday. Reference for "Systems Thinking" (noted as lacking the "Accountability" metric).
7. Tholet, Deirdre (2025). Mastering The Joule Standard™.
8. Tholet, Deirdre (2026). The Culture Cult: The Physics of Why Companies Bleed Talent and Momentum. White Paper.
9. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1995–2024). Labor Productivity and Costs. Highlights 25-year stagnation in output per hour despite technological advancement.
10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (various years). Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS). "Quits Rate" historic highs in 2021/2022 ("The Great Resignation").
11. Grant, Adam (various). Think Again (2021) and HBR articles. Reference for the "comfort" trap.

Deirdre Tholet

Physics of human pressure in high-stakes systems

The Joule Standard™

Contact / Connect

LinkedIn: [Deirdre Tholet](#)

Substack: [42WordAlchemist](#)

LinkTree: [42WordAlchemist](#)

www.fortytwowords.com