# Curiosity Up, Ego Down

## People-first thinking in the age of AI

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I haven't been one for big articles and posts to my network. Generally my focus and time go to the teams I'm lucky enough to oversee and the people in my real-world circle who I connect with and enjoy. However, over the last several months I have been thinking a lot about people, work, AI, and the intersection of where those things meet as it relates to impact and happiness.

As part of this journey, I owed it to myself to sit down and really lay out all the thoughts and mental rabbit holes I have been exploring and questioning. It's been a bit existential.

At this point, I've concluded that these concepts are worth sharing: one, to create some self-accountability in my analysis process and next steps, and two, because some of this thinking may be going on in others' heads and their journey may benefit from my openness.

None of the following is meant to be declarative as a path forward. All of this is in its infancy, and people are much too complex to assume there is any single correct set of answers. That said, I hope the following can bring guided thinking and potential areas to lean into for all of us as we navigate this new era of work and AI.

While this isn't written for any one audience, it will likely be more real for you if you are a people-first leader or peer coach who is in, or adjacent to, technology work. Especially one who is beginning to see more unease as roles and teams transform alongside AI.

I am (or said more humbly, strive to be) a people-first leader, I have always believed that incredibly talented and empowered teams will create more organizational upside than any other lever in business.

I am also a deep advocate for the right *amount* of people needed to create a solution or solve a hard set of problems. I have seen continuously over my career the impacts of having too many people in the wheel of innovation, a' la 'too many cooks in the kitchen'. I've also seen the reverse, where not having enough people fractures a high-performing team's ability to deeply focus on priorities. Instead, they get swamped in 'respond to this sales lead', 'create this marketing document', 'build this status report' and so on.

Said plainly, you have to create balance in a system of people and work.

**This brings me to my first rabbit hole**, which is that I have never seen the potential for such rapid change in the system laid out above than I do today with AI. To clarify, I don't mean simply that less people can now do more work output (which, is patently true). I mean more, that people in these systems are likely not ready for, or re-thinking fast enough, the boundaries and operating structures around them and their teams. I know this, because I am thinking *a lot* about this, and even with that effort I still feel behind[1].

This brings up three big considerations.

The first, is that the change of pace might just be happening too fast (use these AI tools, stop coding, break your squads into mobs, embrace AI-DLC, now deploy agents, have your agents deploy agents, use the right models, build the right harnesses, swap the models, manage your token allocation, burn tokens, don't burn tokens, create prototypes faster, re-think the commercial landscape, create less slop, and so on). It's a lot, and people by nature deserve some time to learn, potentially grieve for the past, and then adjust to the changes happening around them.

The second, is that many are not wired to think about breaking the structural system they're in so dramatically, and that even if they are wired that way, they may not be empowered to do so.

The third, is that in one's career journey, one tends to gravitate towards a set of things they're good at. And, once landed in that zone, attempt to get enjoyment out of that path. To change the makeup of that landing zone introduces substantial change to self-identity and self-worth. From there things start to cascade dramatically — one begins to question: expertise, self

expectation, outward expectation, team dynamic, compensation, time management, routine, and more.

To simplify the above, we are really talking about: pace of change, level of agency, and care of self.

**Pace. Agency. Self.**

Where *I think* I've arrived, is that no movement forward in a people-first manner can happen without these three core structures being in harmony. You can't solve any of the above without solving all three. If you want faster pace, you better create a structure for agency and reassurance of self. If you want reassurance of self, you better give autonomy and the right time to adapt.

**This brings me to the second rabbit hole**, which is the perception versus lived-experience of this technology. I am in conflict here.

When I look at people's general view of this tech (micro and macro) there is deep hesitation and concern with the path we're on. Yet, in my own exploration, I see tremendous empowerment. Something feels amiss.

Most people, in aggregate, are *not* excited about this technology. Go and spend a few minutes on almost any Reddit thread related to AI, you will see negativity all the way down: the tech is overindulgent, self-confirming, wasteful, bad for the environment, and likely to create few winners and many losers.

On top of that, there's a non-zero number of highly-visible technology leaders talking about potential society ending risks (see the Ezra Klein interview of Bill Gates from late September). And, looked at logically this concern is not without reason, there is very little top-down action to provide confidence in how these risks are being regulated or mitigated.

So, how in the world can anyone feel excited about or be on board with all this?

This is where it gets tricky, because I'm reading (and hearing) these concerns daily, but at the same time I'm using the tools! And the lived truth for me, is that I have never felt more empowered by a technology. I can learn and problem solve faster than ever. I can self-critique and challenge my thinking better than ever. I can build and create things that were impossible

with my skillsets as of a year ago. I can automate annoying tasks and re-invest that time back in myself and the team. I can multi-thread work in a way I've never been able to. I can get recaps and transcripts from meetings I didn't attend and ask better questions in the new time I now have. The things that limited team impact a year ago (code repo complexity, research synthesis, speed to build and test) are largely falling away. An idea can become real, be tested, and launched (or discarded) in record time.

Surely there's value here? Surely others are feeling it?

Let's pause. Because we can start to hypothesize here that the truth likely lies in the murky middle of the above viewpoints. The underlying challenge is that we just don't know yet, there's too much changing too fast to know the full ramifications (positive and negative). For example, it's very possible what I see as empowerment and time savings now becomes the net-new baseline a year from now and I'm more stressed than ever because I've become accountable for more. Or maybe, the reverse is true too, and my work is more streamlined and more impactful as agents do much of it for me.

One thing I've landed on, is that we're not going back. I don't see gen AI tools being put back in the box. And one just has to look at history to know economic incentives will push use of this tech as far as it can go.

This then brings us back to how we can be people-first while this journey takes place and while these various viewpoints float in the ether.

My take is that the best path is candid, authentic communication about what's happening and where people should put cycles to learn and grow. Pure optimism or pure pessimism will both land flat. For example, there's no good that comes from pretending developers will still be writing code in a year's time, or that designers should be manually linking prototypes together in Figma. The tactical work has shifted. A single person is now capable of much broader impact, but the work will look much different and, for many, that will feel sad. No analogy from the past (the calculator, photography, autopilot, or writing assembly) will make someone feel better about losing what they see as an essential craft. We must empathize with this, but stay true to the value we do see coming (more time back, more autonomy, more interesting problems to solve, a deeper ability to learn, and fewer limits on what's possible).

This then brings us to the second factor to consider: the nuance in the delivery. Candid and authentic communication still needs to be individualized, there is no one-shot way to frame this for someone. Some of these concepts may need to be drip fed over time, others may require simply giving someone access to tooling and letting them explore and get excited, still some may require more side-by-side exploration and demoing. Articles, podcasts, books, whiteboarding sessions — we owe it to our peers to use every tool in our kit to frame this change in an empowering way.

Even if done perfectly and with good intent, some folks may not be interested in this new journey, and the truth is, that's okay. It may not be for everyone, but opting out is a tough choice, and will likely have significant ramifications for them in the years to come.

**Rabbit hole number three**, and perhaps the one I'm most conflicted about: what is the scope of people I (and we) should realistically strive to impact?

Selfishly, I want to focus on my friends, family, and direct team members first and foremost because I'm fearful of what might be coming to impact their livelihoods. Of course, if I'm honest with myself, I likely need to be thinking bigger. The waves of people that could be impacted by these changes are immense, and only with thoughtful guides (us?) doing some version of the above can we hope to soften the landing.

This is further complicated by the fact that it's very likely there will be substantial winners and losers in this journey — the ratio of which, we don't yet know. This is no different than all previous major technology shifts. It's just that this time the speed of change is much faster than anything we as a society have seen.

And there's more. Most folks are not as exposed to these coming changes as those of us in tech and tech-adjacent industries. They instead are working hard and doing their best to live a fulfilling life. And, where they are exposed to this transformation, the brand of AI tech isn't helping. So, perhaps our final question should be: as people come on board, by choice or by necessity, how do we create more positive exposure and build bridges for them?

To me, this is the crux of it: **where all three of these rabbit holes meet**.

Can we be rigorous in our critique of this transformation while still embracing the positives and new abilities we see happening? Can we capture the upsides in aggregate without giving them right back to the forces at hand?

Are we able to create a wave of momentum through our teams and peers that can begin to change the tide of perception around AI? In essence, can we remain optimistically excited and reasonably skeptical, while still creating preparedness?

Here's my commitment. I'm going to keep educating those around me and bringing my thoughts forward. I'm going to showcase what's cool, and criticize what sucks, about this journey. I won't stop learning and challenging my own assumptions. I will empathize with those who are unsure, but I won't carry them. In return, I'll expect those I engage with and invest in to be open and curious about what's coming. This will require a shift in mindset, and a willingness to leave ego behind.

In sum: curiosity up, ego down.

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1 Realistically, I'm likely in a top percentile of informational knowledge on the topic of AI work impact. I'm using a multitude of tools, reading articles and books, listening to podcasts, trialing various frameworks, and continuously talking to my network about this evolution. I've built production apps. Stood up task forces. Gone to meetups. Yet still, I feel behind. Things are moving so, so fast.