Speed Is Now Free. Judgment Is Not.

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Darcell L. Streeter
Chief Executive Officer
JMI Certified Nonprofit Executive
"Voted best nonprofit in Boynton Beach 2026"
📍 912 SE 4th Street, Boynton Beach, FL 33435
📞 561-244-7627 | 561-399-7485 (mobile)
🌐 www.womenscircle.org
🔗 Connect with me on LinkedIn

Generative AI has made output nearly free. It has not made discernment free. The women building what comes next are holding the asset the market just repriced.

By Dr. Darcell L. Streeter

Nothing in Venice was built in a hurry.

The city rests on millions of timber pilings driven through silt into the clay of a lagoon floor, laid by people who understood that water cannot be overpowered, only negotiated with. The tide does not accept a deadline. It does not respond to ambition, urgency, or a quarterly target. Builders who ignored it lost their work. Builders who studied it produced a city standing after a thousand years.

Venice has always been rendered as a woman. The Republic bore the honorific La Serenissima, the most serene, and Renaissance painters cast the city itself as Venetia: a queen crowned and enthroned on the sea, born of the water the way Venus was. It is a fitting likeness. What made this republic serene was never softness. It was the discipline to negotiate with forces she could not command, and to build an empire on that negotiation instead of against it. Long before anyone asked what women bring to leadership, this city had already answered.

What Venice demonstrates is not patience as a virtue. It is the discipline of building at the speed of the thing you are building on. Most enterprises no longer do this. Most of us were never taught how.

The Advantage That Expired

For most of my working life, speed was a differentiator. You could win by being faster. Faster to draft, faster to analyze, faster to answer, faster to market. That advantage is now available by subscription for the price of a working lunch.

Generative AI has commoditized production. Drafting, summarizing, synthesizing, modeling, translating: the cost of all of it collapsed within three years. When a capability becomes universally available, it stops functioning as a strategy and becomes a floor. Nobody builds a competitive position on a floor.

The strategic question has therefore changed shape. Not how fast can we produce, but what deserves to be produced, for whom, to what standard, and at what cost to the people producing it. Those are judgment questions. They have never been cheap, and nothing on the market has made them cheaper.

Velocity Did Not Deliver

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2026 found that only 20 percent of employees worldwide were engaged in 2025, the lowest level since 2020, at an estimated $10 trillion in lost productivity, roughly 9 percent of global GDP. Manager engagement has fallen nine points since 2022, which means the people converting strategy into execution are running closest to empty. Despite the scale of investment, only about 12 percent of workers report that AI has meaningfully changed how their work gets done. [1]

The enterprise picture is starker. MIT Media Lab's Project NANDA reported that after roughly $30 to $40 billion in enterprise generative AI spending, 95 percent of organizations saw no measurable effect on profit and loss, while about 5 percent extracted significant value. The lead author attributed that divide not to model quality but to a learning gap in how organizations absorb the tools. Those findings are preliminary and not peer reviewed, drawn from more than 300 disclosed initiatives, 52 organizational interviews, and 153 leader surveys. The direction is credible. The precision is not yet settled. [2]

We bought speed. We did not buy judgment. It turns out we were short on the second one.

The Discernment Economy

The bottleneck was never production. It was decision.

Every organization now has access to infinite drafts. Very few have a reliable method for determining which draft is true, which is useful, and which is merely fluent. Fluency and accuracy are not the same property, and a system optimized for the first will deliver the second only by accident.

Nor are fluency and fit. A model trained largely on one register of language will produce confident, polished output for audiences it was never designed to serve, and the mismatch will read as competence. Recognizing that something is well written and wrong for the people it is meant to reach is a form of expertise that appears on no efficiency dashboard anywhere.

This mismatch is not evenly distributed. Research on what scholars call the Strong Black Woman schema shows how the expectation to perform flawless competence without visible strain can calcify into a mechanism of self-erasure: the exact opposite of the discernment this economy claims to reward. [3] For many women leaders, telling what is well-written from what is actually right has never been an abstract skill. It has been a second job, unpaid and unnamed, that they were doing long before generative AI made the first job feel urgent.

Discernment is the capacity to hold ambiguity long enough to choose well. It requires information, context, cultural fluency, and a person steady enough to sit inside an unresolved question without rushing to close it. Organizations underfund that last requirement, because from the outside it looks like nothing is happening.

A leader in a hurry does not make faster decisions. She makes earlier ones, and then spends the next three quarters paying for them. The pause before a sound decision is not lost time. It is the one part of the process the new tools cannot perform on her behalf.

The Founder's Most Undercapitalized Asset

Most founders can recite their burn rate from memory. Very few could name their recovery rate, or say whether they have one.

Recovery rate is the interval between a demanding decision cycle and the point at which a leader can make the next consequential call at full quality. I am naming it here as my own construct, not borrowing an established metric. It stands on the shoulders of the research literature on recovery experience, psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control, as predictors of sustained wellbeing and performance. [4] But that research asks whether recovery happens. Recovery rate asks how fast.

Almost no one measures it, which means a great many people are running critical decisions through an uncalibrated instrument. A 2024 series of interviews with twenty-five senior women leaders found this described the same way, again and again. One leader put it simply: “I was like a hard drive, and the hard drive had no further capacity.” [5] She kept performing. No one around her questioned the quality. She did.

The asset is a founder's capacity for sound judgment under uncertainty, and it is physiological before it is strategic. A 2025 scoping review of the clinical burnout literature confirmed what the body has been reporting for years: chronic, unrecovered stress keeps the nervous system switched on and slowly resets the whole system's baseline for stress higher. [6] This is not a metaphor for being tired. It is a measurable shift in the machinery that complex decision-making and creative problem-solving actually run on. Depleted people do not decide poorly because they are careless. They decide poorly because exhausted judgment defaults to whatever is fastest and most familiar, which is precisely the wrong instinct in a market where fast and familiar are what the machines already supply without limit.

Gallup's manager data makes the point at scale: the steepest decline sits with the people carrying the most decisions. That is not a morale problem. It is a decision-quality problem with a balance sheet attached.

We capitalize equipment. We expense people. Then we are surprised when the people depreciate faster than the equipment.

Building recovery into an operating model is not a wellness measure. It is asset protection. The distinction is not semantic: wellness gets cut in a hard quarter, and asset protection does not.

What the Merchants Understood

Venice has one more thing to teach, and it is financial rather than architectural. From the twelfth century, the Republic financed maritime trade through an instrument called the colleganza. It paired a sedentary investor, the stans, who supplied the capital, with a traveling merchant, the tractor, who carried the voyage. What made it radical was who it admitted. It opened long-distance trade to capable merchants holding neither capital nor collateral, let investors diversify across voyages rather than stake everything on one, and distributed what Venetians called the risk of the sea and the people: shipwreck, piracy, confiscation, and the ordinary volatility of price. Economic historians regard it as a direct precursor of the joint stock company. [7]

Venice did not become the wealthiest city in Europe through individual heroics. It became wealthy by engineering a way to share risk.

Venice imagined herself as a queen who ruled the sea. She rarely extended the same authorship to the women who actually crossed it.

Women in business are disproportionately handed the tractor role by default: go, carry it alone, survive the crossing. Researchers studying the Strong Black Woman schema have named the mechanism directly: endurance without complaint gets rewarded, while the risk-sharing structures that would make that endurance sustainable quietly go missing. [3] Far fewer of us were taught the stans side of the contract, which is where the capital sits and where the risk is spread. A network is not a circle of mutual encouragement. It is a risk-distribution structure, and it should be designed like one.

Three forms of capital run underneath everything argued here, and none of them show up on a balance sheet. The first is discernment: the trained capacity to tell a fluent draft from a true one, and a well-written answer from the right one for the room it is meant to serve. The second is recovery capacity: the physiological and practical ability to return to full decision quality after a demanding cycle, rather than simply pushing through it. The third is risk-distributing relationship: networks built, deliberately, to carry what no single leader should carry alone. Venice built an economy on the third of these. Ubuntu philosophy, the African ethical tradition expressed through the principle that a person becomes a person through other persons, has been naming the same truth far longer, describing a leader's wellbeing as inseparable from the wellbeing of the community she serves. [8] Discernment without recovery burns out. Recovery without distributed risk isolates a leader inside her own resilience. Held together, the three are what let a woman keep leading well, on her own terms, for the long run.

The Ability to Decline

There is something worth noticing about women crossing borders to build together rather than to compete. The convening is itself the argument: capacity that cannot be produced alone, and risk that grows lighter when it is distributed rather than privately absorbed.

Economic independence is usually described as the ability to earn. It is more accurately the ability to decline. A woman who can turn down the wrong contract, the wrong investor, the wrong pace, is negotiating from a different position than one producing at volume and hoping something lands. That capacity is not a temperament. It is built, and it is built out of margin: financial margin, relational margin, and enough steadiness to hold an open question until the right answer surfaces.

We were trained to lead from hurry. The market has finally caught up to what the body already knew. The pause was never the cost of leadership. It was always the infrastructure — the same discipline that kept a city standing on water for a thousand years.

Dr. Darcell L. Streeter is a learning scientist, global keynote speaker, and nonprofit CEO. Her research bridges generative AI and culturally responsive design, exploring how emerging technology can serve multilingual, multigenerational communities without erasing their humanity. She is founder of B.HER Global, CEO of The Women's Circle, Inc., and founder of Positive Images Consulting, a learning and development firm operating since 2005.

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