WHY PLAYING IT SAFE IS HR'S BIGGEST RISK

Terence Mauri argues that future readiness is not a technology programme. It is the discipline of replacing conformity with curiosity, cold automation with human-centred intelligence, and yesterday's operating logic with the courage to act.



THE ARGUMENT

"Agility is the new stability."

The biggest risk is not change itself, but meeting it with yesterday's assumptions. HR becomes future-ready by making room for curiosity, human brilliance, warm AI, and action before certainty arrives.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

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THE READINESS GAP

Agility is the new stability

HR's most dangerous position is not panic or complacency. It is mistaking activity for the capacity to absorb, interpret, and act on change.

Mauri describes HR as operating between two familiar but unproductive states. In the panic zone, urgency is high and readiness is low. AI, geopolitical uncertainty, supply-chain shocks, and shifting customer expectations arrive as threats to be managed. In the complacency zone, confidence is high and humility is low. Success becomes evidence that yesterday's logic will continue to work.

The alternative is a future-ready zone: proactive, pro-people, and pro-technology. It does not reduce uncertainty. It improves the organisation's ability to notice change early, learn quickly, and turn disruption into renewal. Mauri's formulation - agility is the new stability - treats adaptability as an operating capability rather than a crisis response.

Mauri contrasts the rapid rise and fall of corporate fortunes to make the point. The examples are less a valuation lesson than a warning: competitive positions can now be redrawn faster than established planning cycles can respond.

For HR, future readiness begins with a different question. Instead of asking how to protect the current model from disruption, leaders ask whether the organisation is learning as fast as tomorrow's customers and talent.

Mauri's encounter with a Norwegian funeral director illustrates the breadth of the challenge. Even that industry, he noted, is adapting to requests for sustainable burials, space burials, and other nontraditional choices. No sector can assume that continuity in its core demand will protect it from changing expectations.

This shifts HR's mandate. Workforce planning cannot be limited to filling today's jobs; learning cannot be limited to closing today's skill gaps; and culture cannot be treated as a backdrop to strategy. Readiness combines urgency with humility and turns change into a capability the organisation can absorb.

THE READINESS GAP

67% of HR leaders expect more change, uncertainty, and transformation in the next 12 months.

31% say they have the mindsets, skills, and culture needed to stay ahead of disruption.

CURIOSITY OVER CONFORMITY

Bureaucracy is a tax on tomorrow

The organisation that is most certain of what it already knows is often least prepared to see what is changing.



Terence Mauri at HR WEEK Warsaw, illustrating why curiosity beats conformity.

Mauri argues that organisations tend to become cultures of conformity as they grow. Processes multiply, permissions accumulate, and the instinct to protect what works begins to crowd out the habit of asking what might work next. He calls this drag the bureaucratic misery index, or BMI. Unlike its medical namesake, organisational BMI measures the weight of rules, friction, and delay.

Curiosity offers a counterweight. It is not casual brainstorming or a licence to chase every novelty. It is the discipline of challenging the status quo, looking beyond the company's category, and asking the question that established success has made easy to ignore.

Mauri's example is the Schwarz Group, the German owner of Lidl. He describes a large, conservative retailer whose customers began asking whether it could provide cloud services and cybersecurity. The obvious response was no: that was not the business the group was in.

A team examined the request rather than rejecting it. It connected the rise of digital sovereignty with capabilities the group had developed for itself. Mauri said the resulting digital business had hired more than 3,500 people and was generating EUR 1.9 billion annually in cloud and cybersecurity services.

The company did not abandon its core; it used an adjacent signal to reveal an asset that the existing category had hidden. It moved from defending identity to exploring capability.

For HR, the lesson is direct. Future-ready cultures make it safe and useful to question inherited assumptions. They reward people who connect weak signals, invite ideas from beyond traditional boundaries, and create room for small experiments before the strategic case is fully obvious.

"Curiosity beats conformity."

A high BMI protects yesterday's answers. A curious culture keeps looking for tomorrow's question.

THE STRATEGIC PORTFOLIO

Stop automating the past

The biggest risk is not change itself. It is applying yesterday's assumptions, roles, and decision logic to a future that no longer rewards them.



Terence Mauri speaking at HR WEEK Warsaw.

Mauri proposes a practical portfolio question: what should the organisation sunset, and what should it sunrise? To sunset is to eliminate, automate, augment, or simply stop work that no longer creates sufficient value. It releases capacity from yesterday's logic so the organisation can invest in tomorrow's advantage.

His first shift is from meaningless work to human brilliance. Automation should remove cognitive clutter and low-value repetition, not reduce the role of people to supervising machines. The ambition is to create space for judgment, imagination, and work that people can see matters.

Mauri reframes ROI as return on intelligence: the value produced when brain capital is deployed as deliberately as financial capital. Information must travel, specialists must contribute beyond functional boundaries, and teams must solve the hardest customer problems together.

The remaining shifts move from zombie bosses to frontier leaders, truth decay to ethical impact, and cold AI to warm AI. Together, they form a strategic portfolio: which sunset items still consume budget and attention, and which sunrise capabilities remain underfunded?

THE FIVE SHIFTS

Bullshit jobs	→	**Human brilliance**
Data silos	→	**Mass intelligence**
Zombie bosses	→	**Frontier leaders**
Truth decay	→	**Ethical impact**
Cold AI	→	**Warm AI**

TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITY

Warm AI starts with the capacity to change

Efficiency without trust, transparency, and well-being may make an organisation faster while making it less able to endure.

Most organisations, Mauri argues, are investing heavily in technology infrastructure while neglecting the human infrastructure needed to absorb the change. Systems may be ready before the organisation is. People face Zoom fatigue, meeting fatigue, collaboration fatigue, and the cumulative strain of repeated transformation.

He cites a steep decline in change capacity since the pandemic, placing it at 38%. The managerial point is visible: an organisation cannot continuously add new tools, priorities, and processes without removing something else. Eight working hours contain only 480 minutes. Technology can increase leverage, but it can also fill every recovered minute with new demand.

Warm AI begins by asking a different design question: how can the organisation harness AI while keeping humanity at the centre? It asks whether the technology increases agency, improves decisions, creates space for meaningful work, and strengthens rather than erodes social muscles.

A cold implementation treats headcount reduction as the primary proof of value. A warm implementation treats human capability as the asset to amplify. It may automate roles and tasks, but within a broader redesign of work: repetitive activity is removed, judgment is elevated, and employees are prepared to use the technology responsibly.

Human infrastructure is therefore both a capacity constraint and a design principle. The goal is not to shield people from change, but to make change absorbable - and to ensure that productivity gained through AI becomes room for better work rather than fuel for permanent acceleration.

COLD AI

Machine-based

Faster and leaner, but potentially detached from meaning, social connection, and human judgment.

WARM AI

Meaning-based

Technology that empowers people, expands capability, and keeps humanity at the centre of work.

THE 30-DAY TEST

Name one practice to sunset: a broken meeting, a manual workflow, an outdated performance review, or another piece of work that consumes capacity without creating equivalent value.

"Cold AI is machine-based. Warm AI is meaning-based."

THE TWO HORIZONS

Every HR calendar needs tomorrow work

Operational excellence keeps the hive alive today. Exploration keeps it alive when today's source of value disappears.



Terence Mauri at HR WEEK Warsaw.

Mauri uses a beehive to explain the portfolio challenge. When a bee discovers pollen, it returns and performs a waggle dance that directs the colony to the source. Roughly three quarters of the bees follow. They exploit a known opportunity efficiently. The remaining quarter continue searching.

If every bee followed the known route, the colony would over-harvest the available pollen and eventually starve. The so-called tomorrow bees preserve resilience by looking for the next source before the current one is exhausted.

HR needs both populations. Today's work includes payroll, hiring, employee relations, compliance, and the steady delivery of essential systems. Tomorrow's work scans weak signals, tests new operating models, develops emerging skills, and asks which capabilities customers and talent will expect next.

The failure mode is not operational focus itself. It is allowing the urgent to consume the entire calendar. Future-ready HR protects time for tomorrow work while simplifying the approvals and coordination rituals that slow today's decisions.

THREE CALENDAR QUESTIONS

TODAY

Which activities only serve today's model, and which must remain excellent because the enterprise depends on them?

TOMORROW

Where is protected time for weak signals, experiments, emerging skills, and the next source of value?

SIMPLIFY

Which approval step, sign-off, duplicated analysis, or hand-off can be removed without weakening judgment?

THE COURAGE TO ACT

Future readiness becomes real when something changes on Monday

Courage is not a personality trait reserved for dramatic moments. It is the operating habit of speaking up, saying no, eliminating the unnecessary, and acting before certainty arrives.

Mauri closes the argument with courage. He recounts the return of figure skater Alysa Liu, who retired at 16 under intense pressure, resumed training, and later won Olympic gold. For Mauri, the story illustrates a wider career lesson: the regret of inaction outnumbers the regret of action.

In organisational life, courage is rarely a single heroic decision. It is the courage to challenge a comfortable assumption, say no to low-value work, remove a broken process, admit that a successful model is losing relevance, and keep purpose steady while methods change.

Future readiness cannot be delegated to an innovation team or reduced to AI adoption. It is a portfolio of choices made throughout the operating system: what to learn, what to stop, what to simplify, what to protect, and where to invest trust.

Curiosity supplies the questions. Warm AI supplies a human-centred design principle. Today-and-tomorrow thinking supplies the resource balance. Courage turns them into action.

Mauri's final message is deliberately unfinished: learning is never finished, the job of HR is never finished, growth is never finished, and culture is never finished. The future-ready organisation does not wait to become ready. It builds readiness through repeated acts of intelligent subtraction and purposeful renewal.

The practical test is Monday morning. Has one unnecessary practice been stopped? Has one block of tomorrow time been protected? Has one approval or hand-off been removed? Has one use of AI been redirected toward human capability? Future readiness becomes visible when those answers change.

THE MANAGEMENT QUESTION

What will your organisation stop, simplify, or redirect in the next 30 days so that future readiness becomes an operating habit rather than a slogan?