



Why a Great AI Strategy Starts with Being Uncomfortably Honest

Allegra Care-Dare-Share Newsletter - Issue #5 - 5 min read

When I stepped away from the C-suite in December, I'll admit - I had my doubts.

After years driving digital transformations at some of Europe's large financial organizations, helping bloom the Netherlands' first digital bank, and leading award-winning AI initiatives at Virgin Money, I wondered: could I really build something meaningful starting from scratch? Just me and a simple question: what if software and humans could work like a team, amplifying each other?

That experiment became Claridora, and then 4 AI agents. Since launching my "How-to Guide to Agentic AI" and beginning interviews for my upcoming book "Care, Dare, Share: Lead and Thrive with Heart, Mind, AI" something unexpected happened. Board members, CEOs, and chairmen started reaching out, not for polished consulting presentations, but for honest conversations about their AI transformation struggles.

The pattern became clear: transformations were an art at the best of times, but now, with the advent of AI, they are crucially needed and require a real balance between difficult choices: on people, on processes, on methods, on strategy. Senior leaders are facing difficult choices with little basis of experience.

So in this Newsletter, I will tackle, week after week, the key questions senior leaders raise with me and propose a simple, practical, action-driven approach to solve them.

Imagine the scene. It's mid-2021 in the boardroom of a data-driven titan like Zillow. The dashboards are glowing. The AI, a marvel of predictive power, projects confident profits on the thousands of homes it's buying.

A senior data scientist presents with pride: "The model's projections for Q4 are up 12%. We're optimizing buys in Phoenix and Atlanta with 98% accuracy." The room is filled with the reassuring hum of data-driven confidence.

Then, a quiet voice from a regional head of operations speaks up. "I'm not seeing this on the ground," she says. "The feeling is wrong. Buyers are getting spooked... The algorithm can price a house, but it can't feel the emotional currents of fear and exuberance that truly drive a market."

How was that whisper of human intelligence received? It was likely acknowledged, then politely dismissed before the room turned back to the hard numbers.

That dismissal, that preference for the comfortable data over the uncomfortable truth, ultimately cost them half a billion dollars. It was a stunning failure not of technology, but of leadership.

This is the Rationality Mirage in action: a relentless pursuit of optimization that creates brilliant yet deaf, data-rich transformations destined to fail. Since beginning the interviews for my book,

"Care, Dare, Share: Lead and Thrive with Heart, Mind, AI," I've seen this pattern echo in conversations with leaders everywhere. We are so desperate for certainty that we reject the very human wisdom that can save us.

So in this issue, I want to explore why the most successful AI transformations aren't built on the smartest algorithms. They're built on the most uncomfortable truths.

The Illusion of the Green Dashboard

We love our dashboards. They provide a clean, quantifiable, and dangerously incomplete picture. When every metric is green, we feel a sense of control. But this is often an illusion.

The real story, the one that determines success or failure, lives in the messy, human feedback that doesn't fit neatly into a chart. It lives in the unspoken tensions, the quiet frustrations, and the "whispers from the ground" that we are trained to ignore.

Most organisations are drowning in comfortable lies. Data gets filtered. Reports get massaged. Truth-tellers get labelled as "negative". We build a culture of comfort, not a culture of clarity. And that is where transformations go to die.

CARE: Create an "Actionable-Truth-Zone"

In my Care-Dare-Share model, **CARE** isn't about being soft; it's about being strong enough to handle the truth. It's the empathy required to create what I call an "Actionable-Truth-Zone"—an environment where reality is faced directly, not through rose-tinted spreadsheets.

Transformation requires brutal facts. And you only get those facts when people feel safe enough to share them.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

- **Host "Brutal Truth" Sessions:** Schedule regular meetings where the explicit goal is to examine uncomfortable realities. You're not there to assign blame; you're there to understand and improve.
- **Ask "Where might we be wrong?":** Make this a standard part of your planning process. It signals that you value insight over confirmation.
- **Celebrate the Messenger:** Publicly thank and reward the people who surface problems early, rather than those who hide them until they become crises.

When you care enough to seek out uncomfortable truths, you don't just get better data. You build the psychological safety required for real change to take hold.

DARE: To Act on the Painful Truth

Hearing the truth is one thing. Daring to act on it is another.

No company demonstrates this better than Domino's. In 2010, they were a punchline. Focus groups called their pizza "cardboard". The easy path would have been a slick new marketing campaign.

Instead, they dared to do something terrifying. They launched their "Honesty Revolution". They looked customers in the eye and said, "You're right. We messed up. And we're going to fix it".

This act of daring vulnerability became the foundation of their entire transformation. Their AI-powered "DOM Pizza Checker" wasn't just a tech tool; it was a transparent promise to their customers that they were serious about quality. They didn't hide their uncomfortable truth; they made it their North Star. The result? A 7,000% increase in stock price and a complete brand resurrection.

SHARE: The Truth Transparently

Finally, you must **SHARE** the journey—the successes *and* the failures. This is how you turn individual acts of honesty into a cultural norm.

I learned this firsthand at Aegon NL. We were facing the uncertainty of an acquisition, and our mortgage team, despite their incredible success, was anxious.

In a town hall, I started not by celebrating the wins, but by taking accountability for our failures. "We have attempted to upgrade our legacy IT solutions... and we failed every time... I am... very sorry about that".

The vulnerability in that moment didn't weaken us. It strengthened our trust. By openly sharing our setbacks, we could honestly celebrate how the team had succeeded *despite* them. It created a powerful sense of shared purpose that energized everyone through a difficult period. When leaders share honestly, they invite others to do the same.

How to Build Your Own "Actionable-Truth-Zone"

You don't need a massive budget to start leading with honesty. You just need courage. Here is a simple plan to begin:

1. **Start Your Meetings Differently:** For the next month, begin every major meeting with the question: **"What are we not seeing?"** or **"What uncomfortable truth do we need to discuss?"**. This simple reframing gives people permission to be honest.
2. **Reward the Truth-Tellers:** The next time someone brings you bad news or a difficult piece of feedback, thank them publicly. Treat the information as a valuable gift, not a personal failure.
3. **Conduct a "Failure Analysis":** Take one recent project that didn't go as planned. Gather the team and document what went wrong and, crucially, what you learned. Share these insights—not as a report card, but as a playbook for getting smarter.

Your Next Move

Here's your 30-minute challenge this week:

Run a **"Brutal Truth" Session** with a trusted team. No slides. No agenda. Just ask:

👉 **"What is one uncomfortable truth about our AI strategy that we are avoiding?"**

Then, just listen. The future of your transformation isn't hiding in a glowing dashboard. It's waiting in the uncomfortable conversation you're brave enough to start.

Next week: *From Insight to Impact: How to Act with Tailored Empathy (and Avoid the One-Size-Fits-All Trap).*

Until then... care deeply, dare bravely, and share honestly.

Allegra