

Team Pulse by CoastZone — The Deep Dive

Week 32, 2026 (Monday 3 August 2026)

The scarce resources of late summer 2026: protected attention, real difference, and the people nobody invited

Companion read to the podcast. Written for consultants working in a Danish/Nordic context. Every claim links to its source so you can dig in.

The big picture

Last week (Week 31) the thread was that speed had started masquerading as value. This week the research pushes one step further and gets more uncomfortable: the things that actually make a team perform are the things an organisation has to *protect on purpose*, because nothing in the modern workflow protects them by default.

Three of them showed up in the research of the past four weeks. **Attention** — a new book and a new HBR piece both land on the finding that high-performing teams are distinguished less by perks or office policy than by how fiercely they defend focused work. **Difference** — a new MIT Sloan Management Review tool argues that most “difficult team dynamics” are misread personality preferences, and that naming them early defuses them. And **inclusion of the unnoticed** — a Danish study published in June shows that the AI transition in Denmark is running at wildly different speeds for different people, and that the single biggest predictor of whether someone uses AI at all is whether a leader asked them to.

Meanwhile the management layer that is supposed to hold all three of these together is under measurable strain, and the training budget is mostly being spent on the wrong things.

Four themes. Each one has something you can do on Monday.

Theme 1 — The team benefit that actually works is protected attention

What’s moving. Ron Friedman, the psychologist behind *The Best Place to Work*, published *Superteams: The Science and Secrets of High-Performing Teams* with Simon & Schuster on **2 June 2026** — a genuinely new book (two months old at the time of writing), built on surveys of thousands of teams. Its central claim is counterintuitive: the best teams are *not* the ones that collaborate most, get along best, or put in the longest hours. What separates them is how they **manage energy and attention**, how they bring out the best in one another, and whether they keep improving over time.

The evidence. Friedman condensed part of the argument into *The Office Amenity That Actually Improves Teamwork* (Harvard Business Review, **9 July 2026**). Drawing on research covering **more than 6,000 knowledge workers**, he reports that the most effective teams are defined less by office perks or work arrangements — the thing most companies are currently arguing about — than by **their ability to protect focused work**. High-performing teams deliberately reduce interruptions through *focus blocks*, *meeting-free periods*, and systems that

minimise constant messaging and check-ins. The framing matters: rather than treating collaboration as constant interaction, the best workplaces recognise that collaboration depends on giving people the time and conditions to think deeply, solve problems independently, and then contribute better ideas to the group.

Note what this does to the hybrid debate. If the operative variable is protected attention rather than location, then “how many days in the office” is largely the wrong question — and a lot of organisational energy is being spent on it.

A concrete case. The most useful case here is Denmark’s own data, from the other direction. In the Ipsos study described in Theme 4, when Danish employees were asked what they needed in order to actually adopt AI at work, the top item was neither tools nor training courses. It was **time to learn** — alongside concrete role-relevant examples, reliable access, and clear expectations (Ipsos / Connected Women in AI / Aetheon Consulting, 11 June 2026). Employees are asking for exactly the resource Friedman’s research says high-performing teams protect. Most organisations are answering with a platform licence.

The Danish angle. This is the constructive sequel to Week 31, where McKinsey argued that cognitive capacity should be budgeted like headcount. Friedman supplies the team-level version: the unit of protection is the *calendar*, and it has to be a collective norm rather than an individual coping strategy. Denmark has an advantage here — flat structures make it culturally possible for a team to agree “we don’t message each other between nine and eleven” without it reading as insubordination. It also has a specific vulnerability: in a high-trust, high-availability culture, fast replies are how people demonstrate collegiality. Protecting focus means giving people explicit permission *not* to be instantly available, and that permission has to come from the leader out loud.

What to do Monday. Put one two-hour focus block in the team’s shared calendar this week — same slot for everyone — and make the leader the first person to visibly honour it. Then, at the next team meeting, ask one question: what interrupted us anyway, and who has the authority to stop that interruption? Protected attention that only exists in individuals’ calendars is not a team norm; it’s a private workaround.

Theme 2 — Most “difficult team dynamics” are misread personality preferences

What’s moving. *A New Way to Address Troubled Team Dynamics* (MIT Sloan Management Review, 22 July 2026) by **Ina Toegel**, professor of leadership and organisational change at IMD, and **Jean-Louis Barsoux**, term research professor at IMD, makes an argument that is easy to nod along to and hard to operationalise: whether team members collaborate effectively is often rooted in their ability to work through, accept and *capitalise on* their differences — not in eliminating the differences.

The evidence. Their contribution is the method, not the sentiment. The authors adapted the **Big Five** personality assessment into a tool for illustrating personality *preferences* across a team, then ran facilitated discussions in which participants connect their collective trait profile to the specific tensions and difficulties the team is experiencing — and defuse them in the process. They tested the tool with **more than 600 ad hoc teams** attending IMD leadership development programmes, and confirmed its applicability with **100 senior executive teams across Europe, Asia and the United States**, spanning multiple industries. For newly formed teams, the same exercise provides insights that **accelerate cohesion** rather than repair it.

The Big Five is the right instrument for a specific reason: unlike the typologies that dominate corporate team-building, it has a genuine psychometric research base. That matters for a consultant's credibility. It is also worth being precise about what is new here — the Big Five is decades old; what is new is the July 2026 facilitation design and the scale it has been tested at.

A concrete case. The 600-plus ad hoc teams are the case. These are teams assembled for a programme, under time pressure, with no shared history — the fastest possible stress test of whether naming differences up front changes behaviour. The authors' reported result is that connecting the team's *collective* trait profile to its felt frictions defuses those frictions during the conversation itself, which is a much stronger claim than “personality tests raise awareness.”

The Danish angle. In Week 30 we covered the finding that difference only pays off if the team can bear the friction it creates. This is the missing tool. It also lands in a Danish context that is genuinely ambivalent about personality instruments: Danish workplaces use them heavily, and Danish practitioners are rightly sceptical of typologies that hand people a four-letter identity to hide behind. The distinction to hold onto is that Toegel and Barsoux use the profile as a *vocabulary for a conversation about a real, present tension* — not as a label. Væksthus for Ledelse's *8 teorier: Få et endnu bedre samarbejde i dit team* (February 2026) offers the Danish counterpart: a set of classic frameworks plus six overarching questions for team development, useful for teams where a formal assessment would feel heavy-handed.

What to do Monday. Move the difference conversation *before* the conflict. In the next new team you set up, spend the first session on how each person prefers to receive information, argue and decide — and write it down as a standing artifact. In an existing team that is already grinding, don't open with the personality profile; open with the specific tension, then use the profile as the explanation. Preference, not character. The sentence that does the work is “that's a difference in how we're wired, not a difference in how much we care.”

Theme 3 — The management layer is the ceiling, and the training budget is aimed at the wrong skills

What's moving. *What Middle Managers Need Most In The AI Era* (Forbes, **31 July 2026**) by Cindy Rodriguez Constable assembles a case that is uncomfortable precisely because none of the individual numbers are surprising. Middle managers in 2026 are being asked to own AI integration for their teams *while* navigating return-to-office friction *and* hitting performance targets that were set before either variable existed. Each of those is a full organisational initiative. Companies are running them concurrently through the same layer, on the assumption that the layer will absorb the load.

The evidence. From **DDI's Global Leadership Forecast 2025**, drawn from **more than 10,000 leaders across 50 countries: 71% of leaders report significantly more stress than a year prior**, and **40% are actively considering leaving their roles. 80% of organisations lack confidence in their own leadership pipelines** — a figure that has barely moved across three consecutive DDI surveys, through a period in which the composition of work itself changed substantially.

Then the mismatch. Organisations have responded to AI mainly with *technical* training: AI fluency certifications, prompt courses, platform adoption programmes. But the tasks AI is absorbing — status tracking, routine

communication, data aggregation, performance monitoring — are precisely the tasks that used to consume management bandwidth. What remains is the relational and cognitive work: strategic synthesis, coaching for growth, decision-making under genuine ambiguity, reading organisational context well enough to act on it. DDI found that leaders themselves name **“setting strategy” and “managing change” as their two greatest skill gaps** — and that **only 22% of HR teams are currently prioritising those areas** in development planning. Organisations are training managers for the tasks AI is about to make redundant.

The layer is also shrinking. Live Data Technologies has documented a **6.1% decline in manager headcount** in recent years, driven by AI-enabled delayering, and **Gartner projects** that through 2026, **20% of organisations will use AI to flatten structures further, eliminating more than half of middle-management positions in affected firms**. The managers who remain will carry larger teams, more complex human-AI workflows, and fewer management peers.

And the compounding effect, again from DDI: **high-potential talent is 3.7 times more likely to leave within a year if their manager does not regularly create growth opportunities**. A manager who is not developing becomes the ceiling for everyone beneath them.

A concrete case — Denmark. The Danish version of this gap is unusually well documented. Djøf’s analysis *Ledelse i AI-æraen kræver nye kompetencer*, published **11 May 2026** and based on responses from **more than 1,800 leaders** in the private and public sectors, found that **84% of leaders now use AI in their work — up from 60% in 2024**. But **33% feel they lack the competences to use it themselves**, **25% do not feel equipped for the leadership task that comes with AI**, **30% have had no competence development in the area in the past two years**, and **27% work somewhere that has not yet taken a position on AI use at all**. Djøf chair Sara Vergo’s framing, from the **accompanying release**: “*Det er problematisk, at så mange ledere ikke oplever, at de har de nødvendige kompetencer til at arbejde med og lede i forhold til kunstig intelligens.*” Djøf followed up on **29 June 2026** with the broader finding that **four in ten employees have not been offered AI upskilling at all**.

The Danish angle. In Week 31 we looked at the *bottom* of the pipeline — who trains the next generation of experts when AI takes the routine work. This is the layer above, and it has the same structural shape: the organisation is buying the training that is easy to measure rather than the capability it actually lacks. Denmark’s flat structures make the middle layer thinner to begin with, which cuts both ways: less bureaucracy, but also fewer peers to lean on and a shorter drop from “team lead” to “expected to think strategically.” The Danish public sector at least has a shared infrastructure for this — Væksthus for Ledelse’s **films and exercises on faglig ledelse and the leadership chain** exist precisely to make leadership development a structured local conversation rather than an individual purchase.

What to do Monday. Open the leadership development budget and sort every line into two columns: *tools AI will handle within eighteen months*, and *judgement, coaching, strategy and ambiguity*. If the first column is larger, you have found the organisation’s real bottleneck, and it isn’t the technology. Then ask each manager one DDI-shaped question: which of your people had a genuine growth opportunity created for them in the last quarter? The ones with no answer are where your high-potential attrition is going to come from.

Theme 4 — Behavioural science: AI makes you more original and your team more alike

What's moving. *The Hidden Cost of AI-Assisted Creativity* (MIT Sloan Management Review, **13 July 2026**) by **Thomas H. Davenport** and **Viktor Dörfler** synthesises four studies with almost nothing in common — short-story writing, circular-economy solutions, a humour caption contest, and collaborative storytelling — and finds the same two-layer result in all of them. Layer one: the person using AI produced a better individual result, cleaner and more finished, faster. Layer two, which almost nobody is measuring: **collective diversity fell**. Ideas across the group converged. And crucially, this happens *even among people working separately, with no contact between them at all* — it is not social influence, it is a shared upstream source.

Their most actionable finding is about **workflow stage**: AI used in *idea generation* reduced diversity, while AI used only in *idea selection* preserved variety comparable to human-only work. Same tool, opposite effect on the group, depending on where in the process you let it in.

The evidence — with an honesty note. The core experiment behind this is **Doshi and Hauser**, *Science Advances*, **July 2024** — so the underlying data is not new; the four-study synthesis and the stage-of-workflow rule are. In that experiment, **300 participants** wrote an eight-sentence micro-story for a young-adult audience, in three conditions: no AI, one AI-generated starting idea, or a choice of up to five. **600 judges** then rated the stories. Writers with the most AI access scored **8.1% higher on novelty** and **9% higher on usefulness**. The gains were concentrated among the *less* creative writers — measured by a Divergent Association Task — who saw novelty rise **10.7%** and usefulness **11.5%**, with stories rated up to **26.6% better written**, up to **22.6% more enjoyable** and **15.2% less boring**. That effectively equalised creativity between the least and most creative writers, which is a real and democratising result.

Then the cost. Using OpenAI's embeddings to measure similarity, the researchers found a **10.7% increase in similarity between stories** in the single-AI-idea group compared with the no-AI group. Anil Doshi's own framing: while individual creativity rises, "*there is risk of losing collective novelty.*" Oliver Hauser named the trap precisely — it is a social dilemma. If individual writers learn that their AI-assisted work is rated as more creative, each has an incentive to use AI *more*, and the collective novelty of the whole pool falls further.

For a team, translate that directly: every individual on your team can be getting measurably better while the team's idea portfolio gets measurably narrower. No dashboard you currently own would show you that.

A concrete case — Denmark. The Danish preconditions make the homogenisation risk higher, not lower, because almost nobody has agreed on norms for *how* AI enters the work. The Ipsos study *Den ujævne transition: AI på arbejdspladsen i Danmark 2026* (**11 June 2026**, with Connected Women in AI and Aetheon Consulting) found that while **nearly half of Danish employees say their workplace has made AI tools available** and **one in five use AI daily**, **half have no clear expectations for how AI should be used**, **half experience no follow-up on their competences**, **only one in four have been offered training**, and **more than half are never invited into decisions about AI**.

The study's largest single effect is a leadership effect: **where a leader actively encourages AI use, two out of three employees use AI daily; where that encouragement is absent, three out of five never use AI at all**. (We covered Gallup's international version of that mechanism in Week 30 — this is the Danish evidence, and it is stronger than the international framing usually suggests.)

The distribution is also uneven in a way worth naming. Among younger employees, women and men are close to equal on AI confidence and active learning. The gap opens with age and experience: among the most experienced employees, **37% of women describe themselves as comfortable using AI at work, against 53% of men.**

Women aged 49–66 score lowest on every parameter in the study — tools, training, expectations, leader support and participation in AI decisions — and **three out of four are not invited into AI decisions at their workplace.** Nearly half of experienced women say they simply do not know how their workplace handles AI. As the report puts it, the people furthest from the transition are also the ones who cannot see it clearly enough to assess it.

CBS's **AI Survey 2026** (fielded February 2026, published March 2026; **4,281 respondents, 2,647 in active employment**; researchers Torsten Ringberg and Per Østergaard Jacobsen) supplies the structural backdrop: **84% of Danish companies have no AI strategy, only one in ten employees has had formal AI training, and 70% of leaders use AI at work against 32% of employees** — a 38-point gap.

The Danish angle. Put Theme 4 next to Theme 2 and the point sharpens. The organisational value of difference is exactly what AI-assisted ideation quietly erodes, and the people whose difference is most likely to be missing from the room are the ones nobody invited into the AI conversation in the first place. Homogenisation isn't only a prompting problem; it is also a *who was in the meeting* problem.

What to do Monday. Change the order of your next ideation session. Silent solo round first, no AI, everyone writes their own ideas — then bring AI in to help *select*, stress-test and sharpen. Generation human, selection assisted. And before that session, look at who is in the room: if the most experienced people on your team have never been asked what they think about how AI should be used, you are narrowing your idea pool twice over.

Books & tools to watch

- **Ron Friedman, *Superteams: The Science and Secrets of High-Performing Teams*** (Simon & Schuster, 2 June 2026, 352 pages) — the most directly usable new team book this summer. Read the **HBR piece** first to decide whether the book is for you.
 - **The Toegel & Barsoux Big Five facilitation design** (**MIT SMR, 22 July 2026**) — a rare case of a team-dynamics tool arriving with a sample size attached.
 - **The Uneven Transition** (Ipsos / Connected Women in AI / Aetheon Consulting, June 2026, free PDF) — the best current dataset on how AI adoption is actually distributed across the Danish workforce. Useful in any Danish client conversation about AI rollout.
 - **Væksthus for Ledelse: films and exercises on faglig ledelse and the leadership chain** — 12 films and 25+ exercises, free, aimed at directors, chiefs and professional leaders. Not new, but the natural Danish public-sector companion to Theme 3.
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Three things to remember

1. **Protected attention is the team benefit that actually works.** Friedman's 6,000-worker research says focus blocks and meeting-free periods separate high performers more reliably than perks or office policy — and

Danish employees, asked what they need for AI, said the same thing: time to learn. Protect the calendar as a team norm, not as an individual coping strategy.

2. **Name the difference as preference before it becomes character.** The IMD tool, tested on 600+ teams and 100 executive teams, works because it gives a team vocabulary for a tension while the tension is still about wiring rather than about intent. Do it in the first week of a new team, not in the sixth month of a bad one.
3. **Use AI to choose, not to come up with — and check who was never asked.** Individual output rises 8–9%; story similarity rises 10.7%. Generation human, selection assisted. And in Denmark, whether a person uses AI at all is mostly determined by whether a leader asked them — which means your idea pool is being narrowed by the invitations you didn't send.

Sources & dig deeper

International

- Ron Friedman, *The Office Amenity That Actually Improves Teamwork* — Harvard Business Review, 9 July 2026 (6,000+ knowledge workers)
- Ron Friedman, *Superteams: The Science and Secrets of High-Performing Teams* — Simon & Schuster, 2 June 2026
- Ina Toegel & Jean-Louis Barsoux, *A New Way to Address Troubled Team Dynamics* — MIT Sloan Management Review, 22 July 2026
- Thomas H. Davenport & Viktor Dörfler, *The Hidden Cost of AI-Assisted Creativity* — MIT Sloan Management Review, 13 July 2026
- Anil R. Doshi & Oliver P. Hauser, *Generative AI enhances individual creativity but reduces the collective diversity of novel content* — Science Advances, July 2024 (300 writers, 600 judges); plain-language summary via [University of Exeter / ScienceDaily](#)
- Cindy Rodriguez Constable, *What Middle Managers Need Most In The AI Era* — Forbes, 31 July 2026
- [DDI Global Leadership Forecast 2025](#) — 10,000+ leaders across 50 countries
- [Gartner: top predictions on AI-driven layering](#)

Danish

- Ipsos, Connected Women in AI & Aetheon Consulting, *Den ujævne transition: AI på arbejdspladsen i Danmark 2026* — 11 June 2026 ([full report PDF](#))
- Djøf, *Ledelse i AI-æraen kræver nye kompetencer* — 11 May 2026, 1,800+ leaders ([press release](#))
- Djøf, *AI er blevet hverdag på jobbet — men kompetenceudviklingen halter* — 29 June 2026
- CBS, *AI i hverdagen og på arbejdspladsen* — CBS AI Survey 2026 — March 2026, 4,281 respondents ([CBS summary](#))
- Væksthus for Ledelse / Lederweb, *8 teorier: Få et endnu bedre samarbejde i dit team* — February 2026
- Væksthus for Ledelse / Lederweb, *Film, øvelser og redskaber om faglig ledelse og ledelseskæden*

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