

Applause Is Not an Operating Model

How AI demos get declared "ready" before the real work starts

Burak Galiba · burakgaliba.com · August 2026

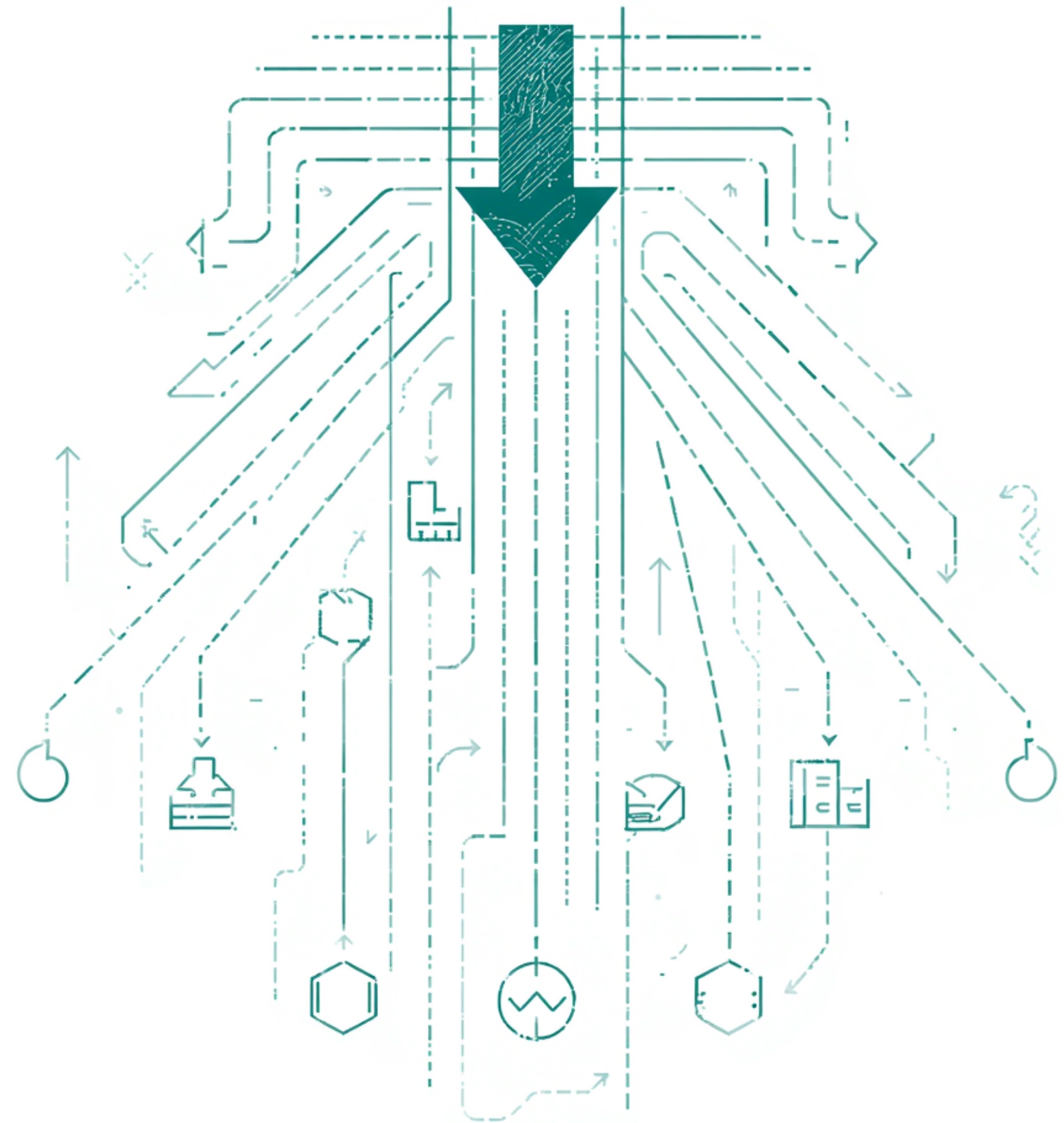


"We need AI" without a process is an instruction to produce demos

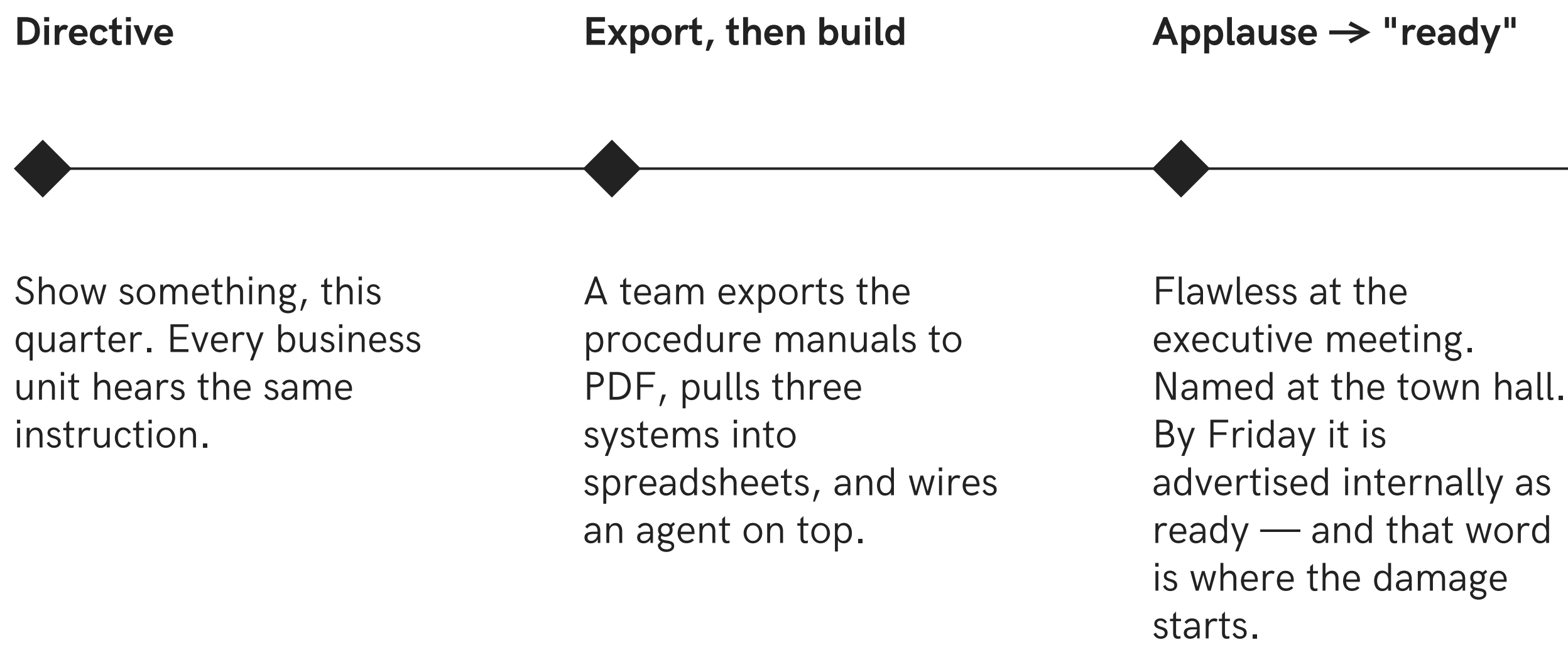
A directive from the top: visible progress this quarter. No definition of what, no process for how — pressure distributed evenly across the org chart.

The licenses are already paid for and the API tokens already provisioned. A demo needs no budget request, no procurement gate, no review of any kind — it is free and permissionless.

Nothing exists to stop them, so demos bloom in every corner of the building at once.



Six weeks to a flawless demo. One word of damage: "ready"



Perfection is a property of frozen data

The demo is flawless because the data is frozen, not despite it

Four production problems the export button deleted

Access control — someone with the right permissions did the exporting. Freshness — nothing changes in a static file. Conflicting sources — the curator already picked the winners. Edge cases — groomed out on the way to the spreadsheet.

Deleted, not solved

None of this is dishonest — prototypes are supposed to fake the hard parts; that is what makes them cheap. The failure comes next, when nobody in the room asks what data this is running on and demo perfection gets read as product maturity.

"Make it live" is a euphemism for "build it"

The demo was not version 0.9 of the system. It was a storyboard of it.

What lands on IT

Integrate the live systems. Build the pipelines that keep data current. Implement the permission model. Decide what happens when sources disagree.

The parts nobody demos

Evals. Logging. Rollback. In other words — build the product, from scratch. Months of this work is normal speed for the real thing, not a sign of a slow team.

What survives the handoff

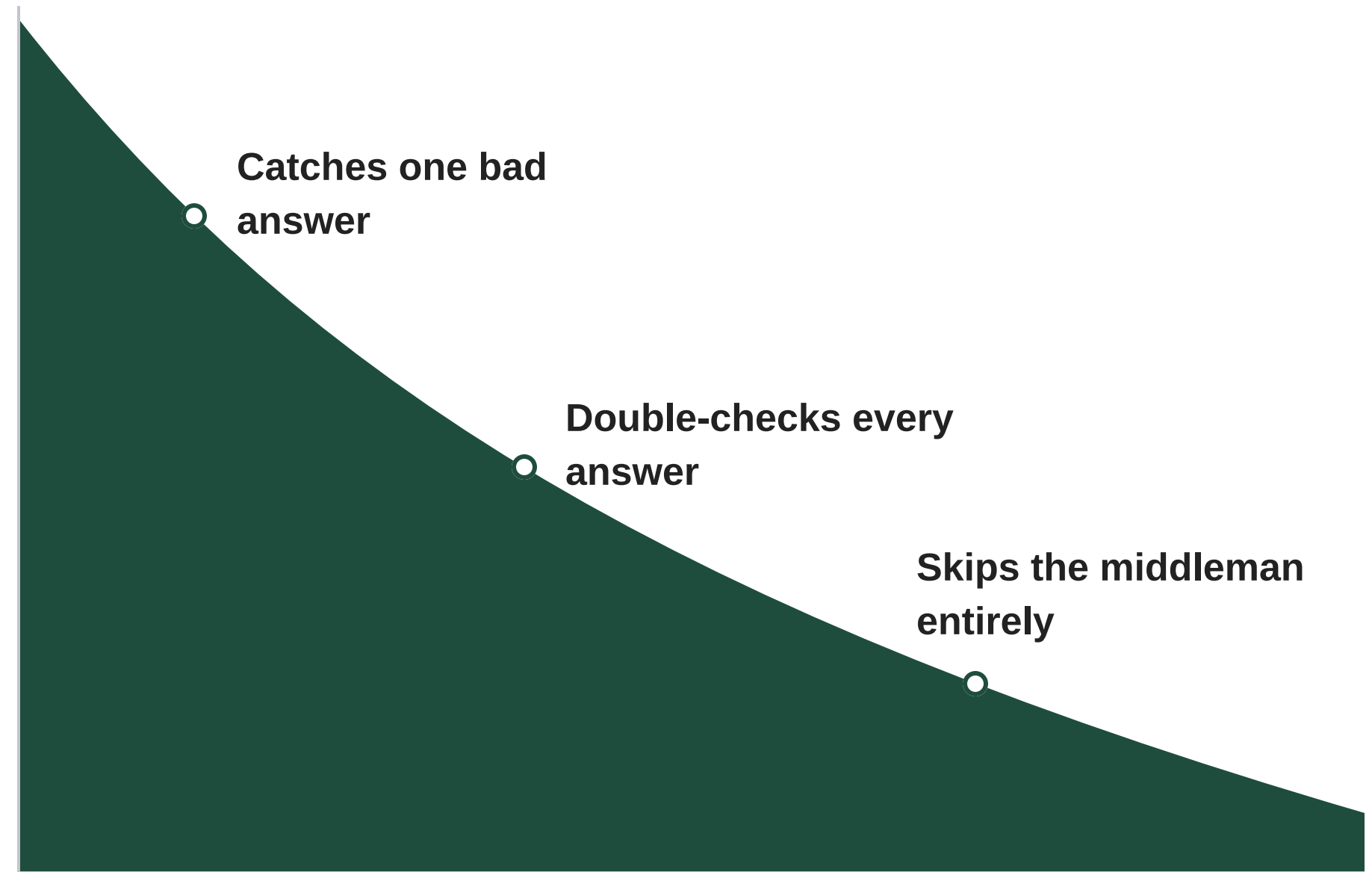
Almost nothing — except the prompt and the idea. Every hard problem of production was not solved by the demo. It was deleted by the export button.

Meanwhile, the snapshot rots

Trust decays in weeks

It was advertised as ready, so people keep using it. Procedures get revised; the PDFs don't. Records change; the spreadsheets don't. Wrong answers arrive dressed identically to the right ones — so users catch one, then double-check every answer, then skip the middleman entirely. The next tool inherits the skepticism this one earned.

TRUST IN THE ASSISTANT



WEEKS AFTER LAUNCH

"We saw it working in March. Why is IT taking so long?"

Reasonable people, terrible outcome — the signature of a missing operating model

Nobody behaved badly

The business team didn't lie — they built exactly what was asked, fast. Leadership applauded a genuinely good idea. And IT isn't slow: months of integrations, pipelines, permissions and evals is normal speed for the real thing.

And the organization still manufactured a fiasco

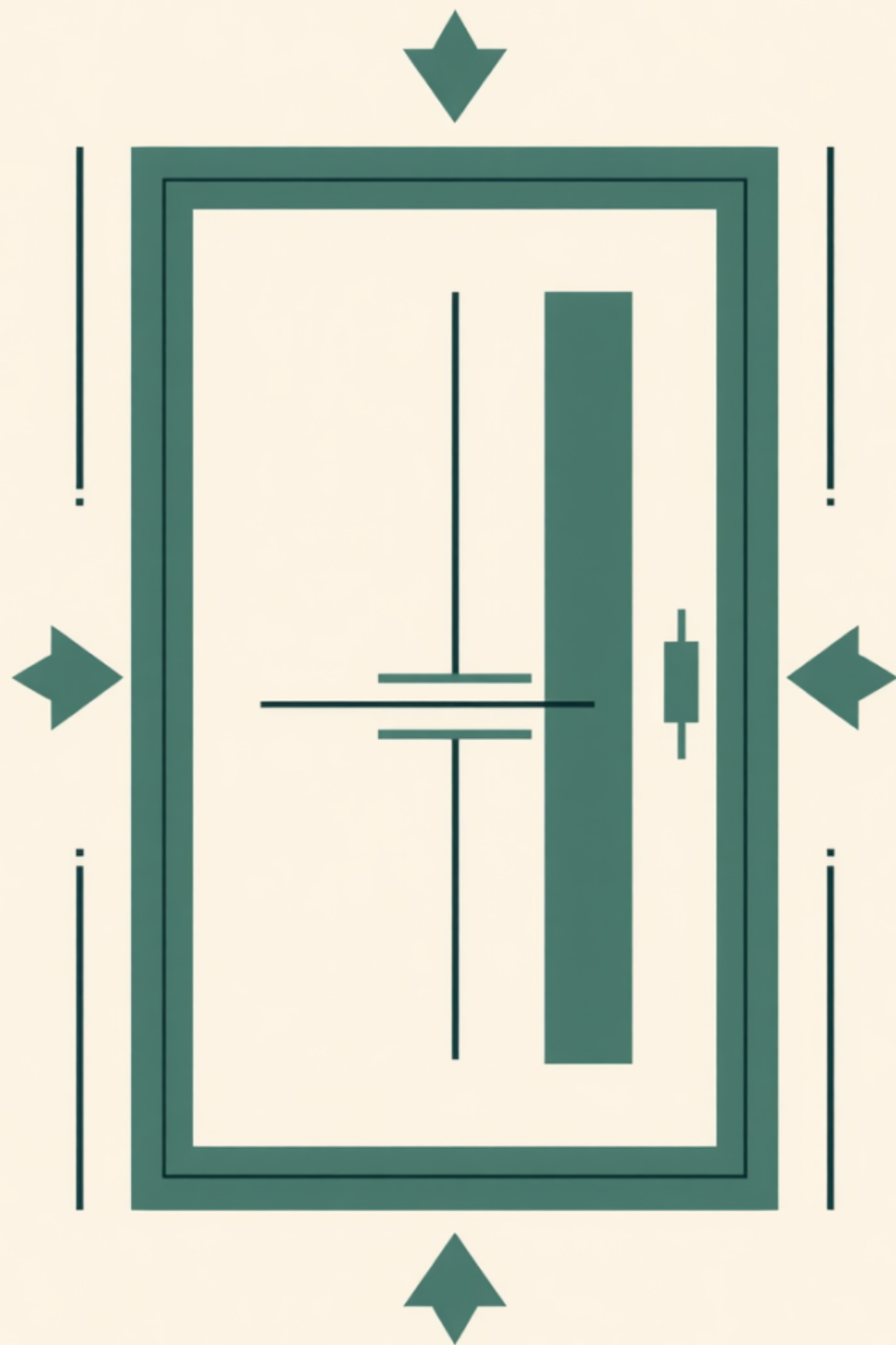
Leadership is still anchored to the applause moment, so engineering is being measured against a mirage it never created.

95%

of enterprise GenAI pilots produce no measurable P&L impact

No intake process for AI work, so the executive showcase became the intake. No prioritization criteria, so applause became the criterion. No published definition of "ready," so the word was free for anyone to claim. Recognition rewarded the demo; funding followed the showcase; nothing rewarded shipping. I suspect a good share of that 95% is applause doing a job an operating model should be doing.

Source: a report from MIT's NANDA project, 2025, as reported by Fortune.



Build a front door

1. One front door

A one-page intake every AI initiative files before it reaches an executive stage: named owner, data sources (static snapshot or live connection?), target workflow, and a value hypothesis you could someday measure. A registration, not a permission slip.

2. Criteria · 3. Define "ready"

Published criteria and funding gates decide what advances — not whoever demos loudest. And "ready" means live data, an owner, evals, a rollback plan. A demo on static data is a proposal.

4. Showcase rule · 5. Redesign applause

Every demo states, on the slide, what data it runs on and what production would take. And the team that ships gets at least the recognition the demo got. No punishment for the business units.

Where to start

Two artifacts, before the next executive showcase. The one-page intake form — owner, data sources, workflow, value hypothesis. And the showcase rule, one sentence in the meeting invite. Neither needs a committee. Both change what the applause means.

↓ **Download the essay (PDF)**

Free AI Readiness Score — 20 questions, about ten minutes
burakgaliba.com/readiness

Burak Galiba · burakgaliba.com · Views are my own.

