



Relational Wonder

*How the Conditions Around
Thinking Become Human Capability*

A FIELD GUIDE TO DESIGNING
HUMAN CAPABILITY

BY
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What Is Relational Wonder?

Most people think wonder lives inside people.
We describe someone as curious.
We call them inquisitive.
We assume wonder is a personality trait—
something people either possess or don't.

But over the past several years, as I studied
learning, artificial intelligence, engagement,
judgment, and organizational capability,
I kept noticing the same pattern.

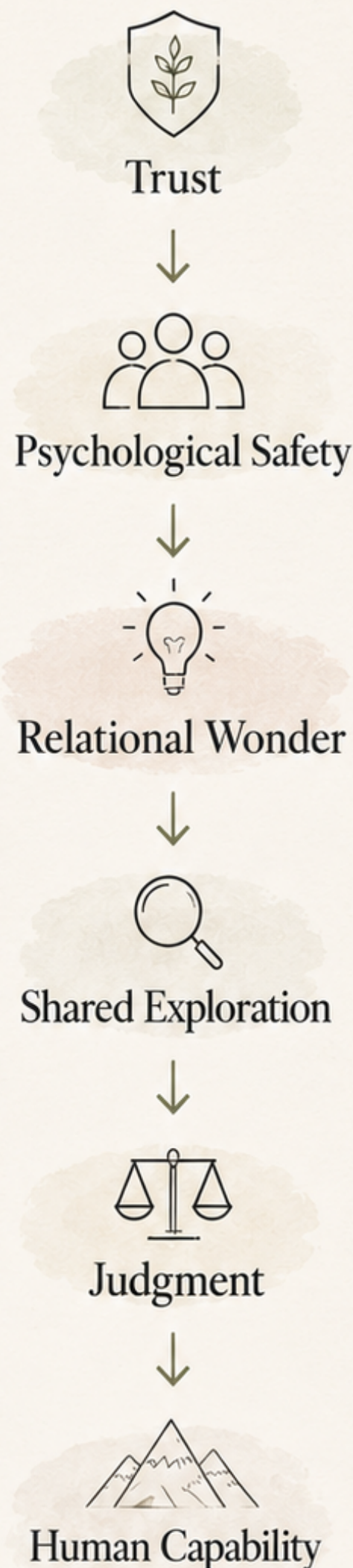
The moments of the deepest thinking weren't
explained by intelligence alone.
They were explained by relationship.

By whether people felt safe enough to say,
"I don't know."
Whether they could offer an unfinished idea.
Whether disagreement was treated as
exploration instead of evaluation.
Whether uncertainty was something to escape—
or something the group could hold together.



Relational Wonder *is*
the shared willingness to
remain with uncertainty long
enough for better thinking to
emerge together.

Wonder, then, is not simply curiosity.
It is a condition.
It emerges between people when trust makes
unfinished thinking safe enough to become visible.
And when it does, something remarkable happens.
People begin noticing what others overlook.
Questions become more valuable than quick answers.
Judgment becomes possible.
Capability begins to grow.



*Wonder is not the destination.
It is the condition that makes
judgment possible.*



What Relational Wonder Looks Like

IT'S NOT A FEELING. IT'S A PATTERN.

Relational Wonder shows up in the moments when people expose unfinished thinking, test ideas together, and remain open long enough for deeper understanding to emerge.

Look for these observable behaviors.



ADMITTING UNCERTAINTY

They say "I'm not sure" or "Help me understand" without fear of judgment.



CHANGING THEIR MIND

They are willing to revise their thinking when new evidence or perspectives make sense.



ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

They probe deeper, challenge assumptions, and ask "what if" or "why" questions that move thinking forward.



INVITING DISAGREEMENT

They welcome alternative viewpoints and create space for others to challenge ideas respectfully.



TESTING ASSUMPTIONS

They check their thinking against data, examples, or counterarguments instead of defending it.



BUILDING ON OTHERS' IDEAS

They listen actively and extend someone else's idea, making the thinking collective.



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Relational Wonder is not about having the right idea. It's about staying together while we look for better ones.

—

In My Experience...

WHERE HAVE YOU SEEN THESE BEHAVIORS CREATE THE BEST THINKING?

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WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF THEM?

.....

WHO HELPS YOU THINK BETTER?

.....

.....



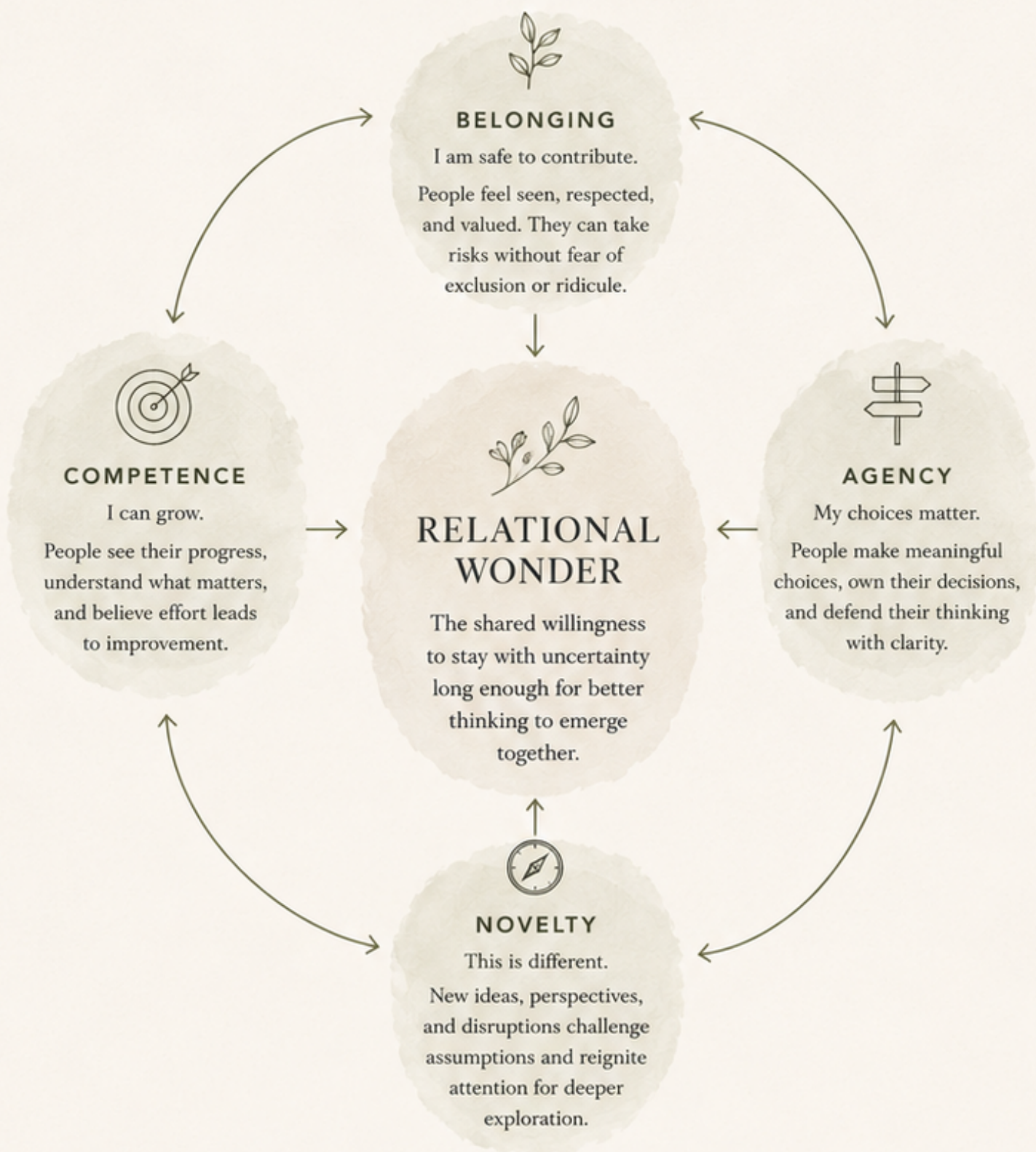
WONDER ISN'T ALWAYS LOUD.

Sometimes it looks like a pause, a question, or a change of mind.

The Conditions That Make Wonder Possible

WONDER DOESN'T HAPPEN BY CHANCE.

It emerges in environments where four conditions are intentionally designed and consistently protected. These conditions don't guarantee wonder—but without them, it rarely appears.



How they work together

Each condition reinforces the others.

Belonging makes the risk of sharing safe.

Competence builds the confidence to contribute.

Agency creates ownership of ideas and decisions.

Novelty disrupts autopilot and opens new pathways.

Together, they create the environment where Relational Wonder can emerge.

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*You can have all the content in the world.
Without these conditions, people will perform.
With them, they will think.*

DESIGN IMPLICATION

The goal isn't to add more activities. It's to protect the conditions that make deep thinking possible.

Why AI Changed Everything

A Shift in What We Depend On

IT'S NOT BECAUSE AI CAN THINK.
IT'S BECAUSE AI EXPOSED OUR ASSUMPTIONS.

For decades, we measurement what people produced—assuming it reflected what they understood.

AI made it possible to produce high-quality work without the thinking behind it.

Suddenly, finished work stopped being a trustworthy signal of capability.

AI didn't create the need for Relational Wonder.

IT REVEALED IT.

“When answers become instant, what becomes scarce is not information—it's the conditions that make human judgment possible.”

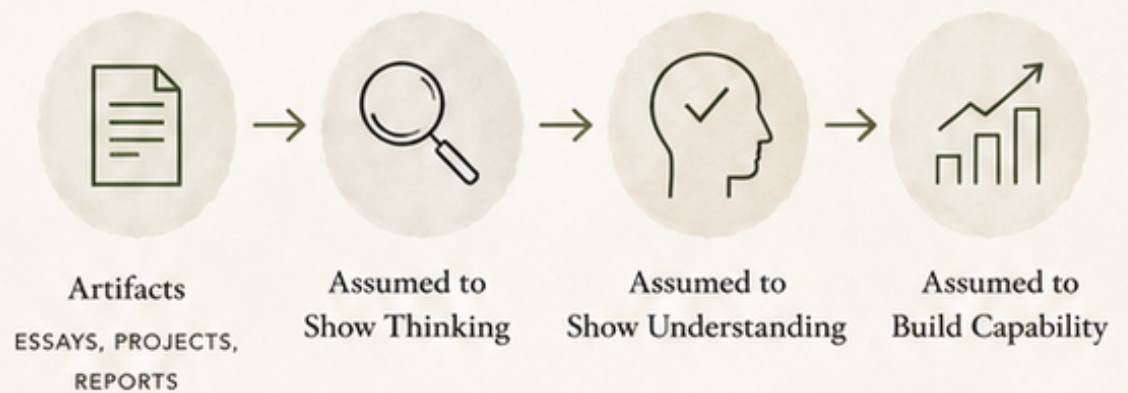
WHAT'S AT STAKE

When we design without Relational Wonder:

- ✗ Students outsource judgment.
- ✗ Engagement becomes performance.
- ✗ Risk disappears.
- ✗ Superficial certainty replaces deep understanding.
- ✗ Capability stops developing.

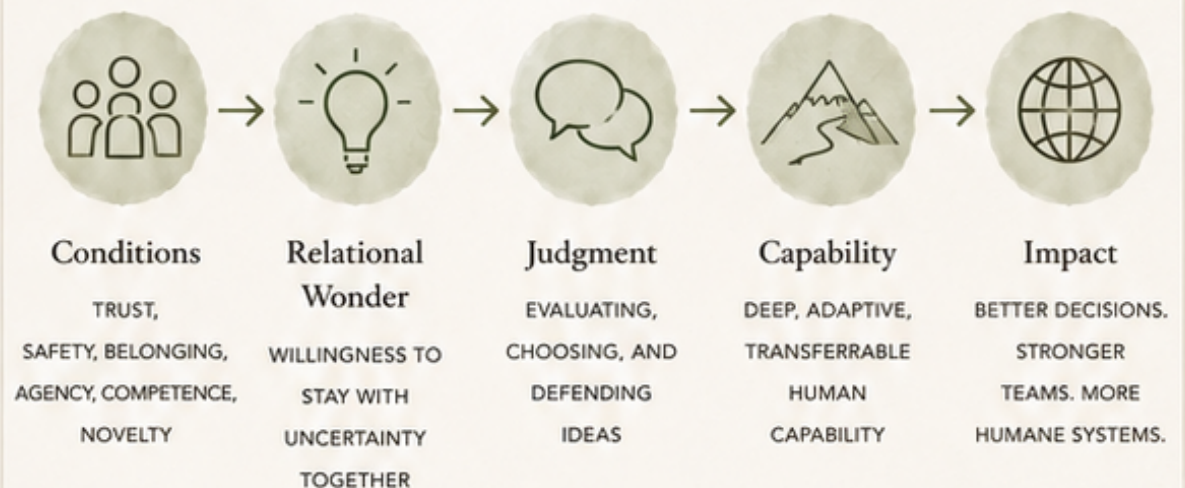
OLD WORLD

We assumed the *artifact* revealed the thinking.



NEW WORLD

We now know capability emerges from *conditions*.



AI accelerates production.
Relational Wonder builds human capability.
*One is speed.
The other is substance.*

*The future belongs to those who can think well together.
Relational Wonder is how we build that future.*

Bringing It All Together

RELATIONAL WONDER ISN'T A NICE IDEA.
IT'S A DESIGN CHOICE.

The conditions we create shape the thinking we see.
The thinking we see shapes the judgment we develop.
The judgment we develop shapes the capability we build.
And the capability we build shapes the future we create—together.



When we design for Relational Wonder,
we don't just improve engagement.
We build the conditions for human capability to grow.

“

*The future doesn't
belong to those
who have the
most information.
It belongs to those
who can think well,
together.*



HOW TO START—Today



1. DESIGN THE CONDITIONS

Focus on trust, safety, agency,
competence, and novelty.
Make them visible.
Make them intentional.

Conditions are the soil.



2. PROTECT THE THINKING

Value unfinished ideas.
Ask better questions.
Make disagreement productive.
Notice the signals of thinking.

*Protecting thinking
is protecting capability.*



3. BUILD TOGETHER

Cultivate Relational Wonder.
Nurture judgment.
Develop capability.
Create impact.

*Capability is a collective
achievement.*

THIS GUIDE IS ROOTED IN RESEARCH,
TRADITIONS, AND MODELS THAT INSPIRE THIS WORK.



Psychological Safety
Amy Edmondson



Understanding by Design
Grant Wiggins &
Jay McTighe



Self-Determination Theory
Deci & Ryan



Social Constructivism
Vygotsky



Relational Frame Theory
Hayes, Barnes-Holmes
& Roche



Appreciative Inquiry
Cooperrider & Srivastva

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke McKinney is an instructional designer, educator, and researcher exploring the conditions that make thinking safe to show—so human capability can grow. Through *The Engaging Teacher* and her work with educators and organizations, she helps design learning and work environments that honor the human part of progress.

Brooke McKinney



Your Next Step

Choose one space where you influence
people—one class, one meeting,
one team, one conversation.

Ask yourself:

*What condition around thinking
can I strengthen—starting now?*

*Small shifts in conditions
create big shifts in capability.*

