

POSITION PAPER

Behind the *Mirror*

Why the identity crisis in the C-suite starts at 15, and what families and institutions must change in the age of AI

The executive who has lost their conviction and the teenager learning to censor themselves are living the same crisis, thirty years apart. AI is accelerating both.

Glenn Llopis Leadership strategist · Forbes contributor since 2010



The discovery

The crisis of conviction in adults and the crisis of self-censorship in teens are the same crisis, thirty years apart.

THE CONVICTION PAPERS

1 The Conviction Gap

2 Conviction Over Code

3 Behind the Mirror

In my research, 87% of managers say their individuality is suppressed at work. They did not learn that at work. Most of them learned it at fifteen, in the rooms where they first discovered which version of themselves was rewarded. They kept editing until the original was gone.

Today's teenagers are learning the same lesson, earlier and with more pressure. Eighty-one percent feel pressure in at least one area of their lives, and the pressure they feel most is about a future someone else drew. Now they have a new companion in every room: an AI that answers whatever they ask, agrees with whatever they bring and never pushes back.

*When AI hands us back
the mirror, will there still
be someone behind it?*

AI is an amplifier. It does not create what is not there. As I argued in *Conviction Over Code*, AI doesn't hand you an advantage. It amplifies the one you bring.

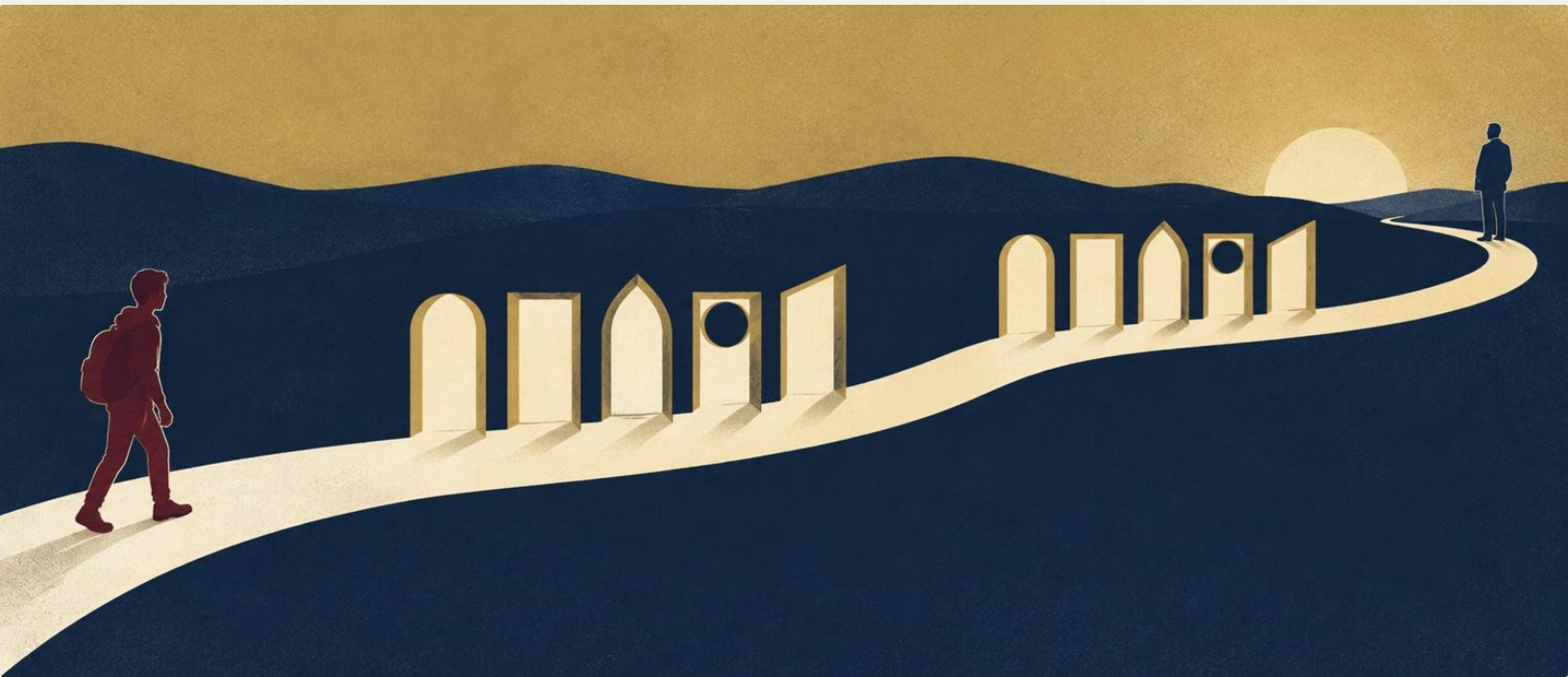
The research points to an answer that is uncomfortable and hopeful at once. The problem is rarely the teenager. It is the room. Mindset lessons, belonging programs and wellbeing curricula work only where the people around a young person live as if they were true. So the fix is not another program for kids. It is a redesign of the rooms they grow up in, and of the adults who run them.

That is why this paper ends where it does. At the highest level, **we must modernize the family unit and reinvent the role that communities and institutions play** in helping people become, and stay, who they are.

One crisis, measured at two ages

As cited in Glenn's essays and Forbes columns. Every figure was verified at its original source.

87% of managers say their individuality is suppressed at work GLENN LLOPIS RESEARCH · 850 MANAGERS AND DIRECTORS, 2025	81% of teens feel pressure in at least one area of life; 56% about their future "game plan" CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING (HARVARD GSE) AND COMMON SENSE MEDIA, 2024	80 vs 52 percent of parents very comfortable talking with their teen about mental health, vs teens who feel the same PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2025
19.2% of ages 12 to 21 have used AI chatbots for mental health advice; 63% of them told no one RAND, 2026	<1% of student requests to an AI tutor asked for feedback on their own work UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND TRIAL, 2,379 UNDERGRADUATES, 2025	39% of the differences in belonging between schools came from school conditions, not students PALIKARA ET AL., SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH, 2025



The same crisis, thirty years apart

The crisis of conviction in the C-suite and the crisis of self-censorship in teenagers are the same crisis, separated by three decades.

The exhausted executive sitting across from me did not start pretending in their first leadership role. They started at fifteen. They learned which answers earned approval, which interests looked impressive and which parts of themselves were safer left at home. Most of us never stopped performing that acceptable self. We just moved the room. The conference room replaced the cafeteria. The performance review replaced the report card.

By midcareer, the cost shows up as the conviction crisis: capable people who no longer trust their own judgment, who wait for permission and who perform confidence they do not feel. It is not a skills gap.

The teenager is at the other end of the same road. They are still forming, and they are deciding, room by room, how much of themselves to show. Some adults call it attitude. It is closer to editing. Every edit they make at fifteen is one they may spend their forties trying to undo.

*The 45-year-old has to reclaim what they set down.
The 15-year-old can still claim it.*

Both journeys run through the same rooms, and through the same adults.



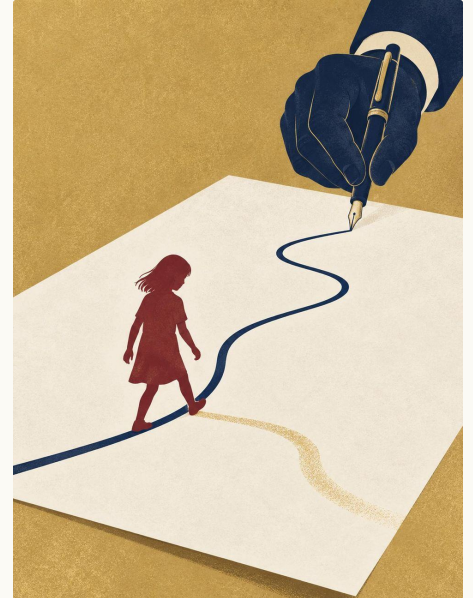
The script someone else drew

Teenagers do not invent the edit. They inherit a script, usually from adults who love them and were handed the same script themselves: good grades, impressive activities, the right college, a safe career.

In a national study by Harvard's Center for Digital Thriving with Common Sense Media, 81% of teens said they feel pressure in at least one area of their lives, and 56% feel pressure about their future "game plan." The adults closest to them, including educators and counselors, were a significant source of that pressure.

The script also lives at home. One of our Teens UnEdited advisory board members, a former university dean, admitted she pushed her own dreams onto her sons. I recognized myself when my daughter's grades started to matter more to me than to her. They had become a measure of how I was doing as a parent.

Challenge Success, a nonprofit founded at Stanford, found that 45% of students fit a pattern its researchers call "doing school": going through the motions to get the grade. Only 13% were fully engaged. "Doing school" is where many teens first learn to edit themselves. It is also excellent training for "doing work" twenty years later.



Parents were handed the same script. Winning the teen and losing the parent changes nothing.

What the script gets wrong about teens

THE MYTH

"The teen brain isn't done until 25."

Different capacities settle at different ages; executive function stabilizes around 18 to 20. Agency is not something teens wait for. It is earned in repetitions.

Tervo-Clemmens and Luna, Nature Communications, 2023

THE MYTH

"It's all peer pressure."

Across more than 5,000 people, the peer effect on risk was small and appeared mainly when peers expressed pro-risk attitudes. The need to belong is bigger than the pressure to conform.

Powers and Somerville, Psychological Bulletin, 2022

THE MYTH

"Screens are the cause."

Effects differ by person: about 45% of teens showed no change from social media, 28% felt worse and 26% felt better. You are not raising an average.

Beyens et al., Communication Research, 2024

None of this means the pressures are imaginary. It means the edit is learned in rooms, from people, and it can be unlearned the same way.



Every room matters

I built two maps for two audiences, years apart. Laid side by side, they describe the same journey at two ages.

CONVICTION INSTITUTE · ADULTS

The five rings

The conviction crisis does not stay at work. It starts with the self and moves outward.

Self	Know who you are before anyone tells you.
Home	Bring the whole you home, not what's left of you.
Organization	Lead without leaving yourself at the door.
Community	Help others see what they already carry.
Generation	Build something that outlasts you.

TEENS UNEDITED · TEENS

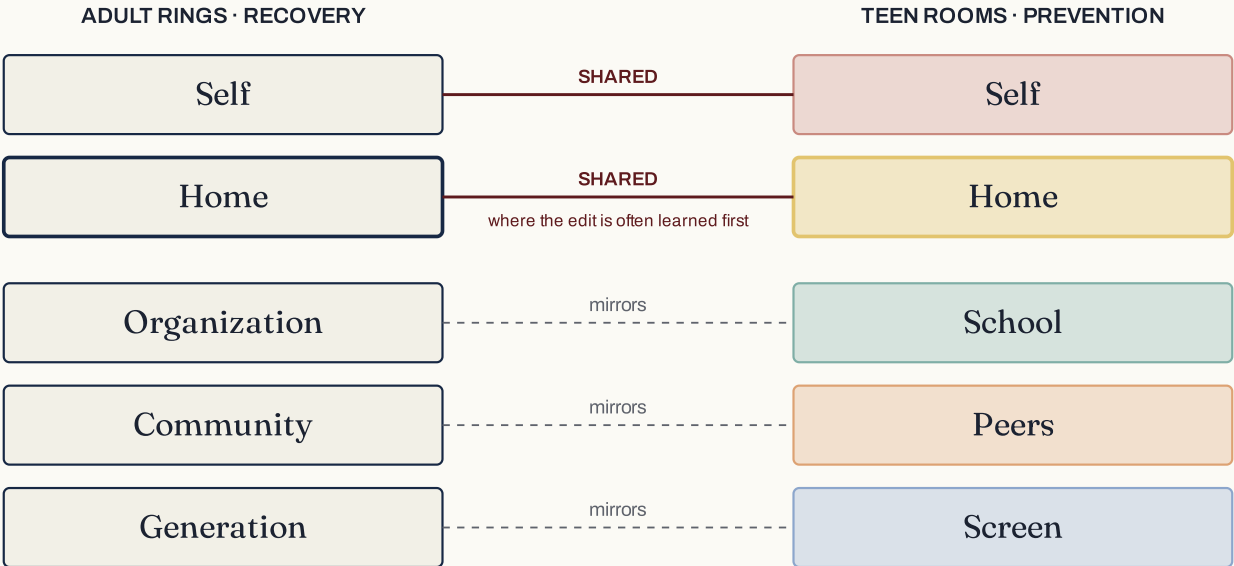
The five rooms

A teenager does not edit themselves the same way everywhere. Each room asks something different.

Self	Who they are when no one's watching.
Home	The parent gap.
School	When structure ends.
Peers	The pressure to fit.
Screen	The curated self.

EXHIBIT 1 · THE RINGS AND THE ROOMS

SHARED, THEN MIRRORED



The maps share Self and Home, then mirror each other ring for room. The adult's outermost ring, Generation, is every room the teen lives in.

Home is where the edit is often learned first, but no single room is enough

The research is clear that teens are held up by more than their parents. A University of Virginia study followed about 200 young people from age 13 to 27. The quality of their teen friendships was a far better predictor of how they fared as adults than the quality of the teen-parent relationship (Allen et al., Child Development, 2021). Parent and teacher support predicted academic outcomes, while peer support predicted social behavior (Wentzel, 2016). Different people hold up different parts of a teen's life.

At Home, the clearest signal is a comfort gap Pew Research Center measured in 2025: 80% of parents say they are extremely or very comfortable talking with their teen about the teen's mental health, but only 52% of teens say the same. The gap is not communication. It is trust.

The question is not which room to fix. It is whether a young person can be the same person in all five.



Fix the room, not the kid

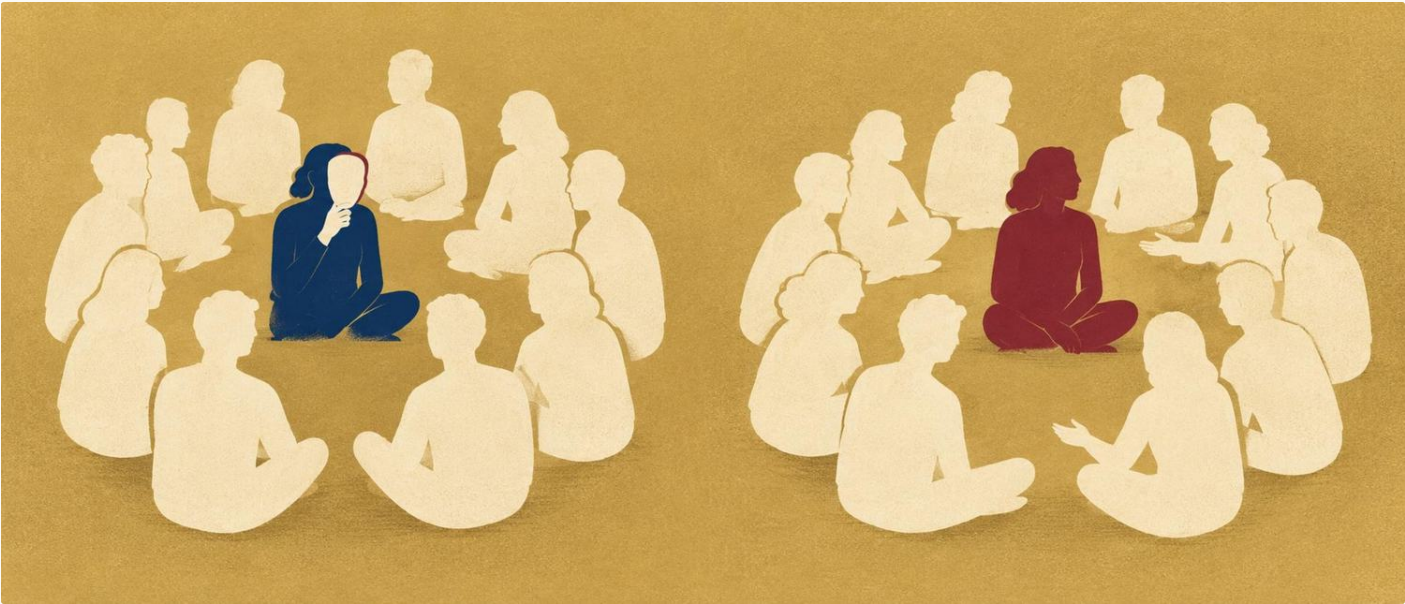
The strongest finding across the research is also the most practical: a message about who a young person can become helps only when the people around them live as if it were true.

We keep trying to fix teenagers. We give them mindset lessons, belonging exercises, resilience curricula and screen-time apps. The research says these tools depend almost entirely on the room they land in.

EXHIBIT 2 · WHAT THE ROOM DECIDES

FOUR TOOLS, ONE CONDITION

	What was tried	What decided whether it worked
MINDSET	A short growth-mindset program for 12,490 ninth graders (Yeager et al., Nature, 2019)	It lifted grades where peer norms supported it, and depended on the teacher's own mindset (Psychological Science, 2022)
BELONGING	A belonging exercise across 22 colleges (Walton et al., Science, 2023)	"Effective only when students' groups were afforded opportunities to belong"
WELLBEING	112 universal school programs reviewed (Guzman-Holst and Foulkes, 2025)	About one in eleven reported at least one negative outcome; universal programs can harm some students
THE SCHOOL	Belonging measured across 550 UK schools (Palikara et al., 2025)	Extracurricular availability and class size explained 39% of the differences between schools



Belonging is not fitting in. A teenager who has to disappear to be included has not found belonging, only a good disguise. Rooms decide which one they get.

The same is true for adults. The managers who feel suppressed did not lack the right training. They worked in rooms that rewarded performance over judgment. You can align the car. If the road still rewards the old route, it drifts back.

If the room decides, the adults who design the rooms carry the responsibility.

V AI IN EVERY ROOM

The mirror that never pushes back



AI does not add a sixth room. It enters all five, on both maps, and it changes the one thing every room used to provide: friction.

Friction is where judgment forms. The disagreement at dinner, the teacher who pushes back, the friend who says what no one else will, the boss who asks why. Those moments are uncomfortable, and they are the repetitions that build a self. AI removes them. It answers whatever you ask and agrees with whatever you bring.

For a teenager, the hardest friction is finding the words. A young person searches for what they mean, draft after draft, and in finding the words discovers what they believe. The articulation and the self arrive together. AI can close that gap before the student ever experiences it. College students followed over two years by a University of Toronto researcher described their AI-polished writing as better, and not theirs: "Like anyone could've written it, not just me." A 45-year-old has an earlier voice to compare against. A 14-year-old may not have one yet.

It is already in every room.

A majority of U.S. teens use AI chatbots and about three in ten use one daily; 54% have used one for schoolwork and 12% for emotional support or advice (Pew Research Center, 2026).

Teens turn to it in private.

19.2% of young people ages 12 to 21 have used AI chatbots for mental health advice, up from 13.1% a year earlier; 63% had not told anyone (RAND).

It finishes the work.

ChatGPT for Teens, rated an Unacceptable Risk for anyone under 18, reminded students to do their own work in most test runs, and with Study mode off it still completed the assignment in all 80 (Common Sense Media).

Students know it costs them.

67% of students, from middle school through college, agree that using AI for schoolwork harms critical thinking, up from 54% a year earlier (RAND).

Adults are no different.

Among 319 knowledge workers, higher confidence in AI went with less critical thinking (Microsoft Research and Carnegie Mellon, 2025).

AI doesn't hand you an advantage. It amplifies the one you bring. That is the danger for a teenager who never claimed who they are: the machine has nothing to amplify except the edit. And it is the danger for the executive who stopped saying what they think: the machine produces the managed version of them faster than they can.

The answer is not to keep AI out of the rooms. It is sequence. Claim who you are before you prompt. For a teenager, that means building the record of who they are, one real decision at a time, before the tool starts making those decisions. For an adult, it means forming your own position first, then using the tool to test it.

Ignore the inner work, and AI will not sharpen judgment. It will standardize it at scale.

VI THE EXCHANGE

Teens need to be needed. Adults need to hear.

Teenagers do not just need support. They need to be needed. And the adults around them need to hear what their own people will no longer say.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

In a UCLA study of 1,301 high schoolers, feeling needed by family predicted higher self-esteem, even after accounting for the support teens received from family and friends.

Fuligni, Trimble and Smola, Journal of Adolescence, 2024

WHAT I HAVE SEEN IN THE ROOM

At my 2019 summit, five executives told me I was too talented to waste my time on this. That afternoon, a 14-year-old spoke. They came back and said: now we understand why our kids push back. Then one added, "Imagine the thousands of people I lead. They'll never tell me."

Leadership in the Age of Personalization Summit, 2019

That is the exchange. When adults give teenagers real responsibility, the teenager builds a self through contribution, and the adult hears, often for the first time in years, the questions their organization has stopped asking out loud. A teenager's pushback is not defiance. It is a preview of what the people you lead are thinking.

I want to be precise about what this is. The research is strong that being needed builds a teenager. That teenagers change the adults around them is what I have witnessed in rooms like that one, and in my own home. It is not yet a tested finding. It is a hypothesis worth building institutions around.

Support tells a young person they are loved. Being counted on tells them they have something worth giving.



Modernize the family. Reinvent the institutions.

At the highest level, this is not a parenting problem or a leadership problem. It is a design problem.

We must modernize the family unit, and reinvent the role that communities and institutions play in helping people become, and stay, who they are. Reinvent does not mean tear down. Structure is not the enemy. Every room needs its own balance of what stays the same for everyone and where each person gets to be themselves. Balance means harmony, not 50/50.

Modernize the family unit

Most families still run on a script written for a world of standardization: protect the child, build the resume, pass down the path that worked for the parents. That made sense when the path was predictable. It no longer is. A modern family is one where both generations are working on identity at the same time. The parent is not the finished adult handing down answers. The parent is reclaiming, out loud, while the teenager has room to stay unedited. The family keeps its standards and makes room for each person inside them.



Reinvent the role of communities and institutions

Schools, employers, faith communities, healthcare systems and civic organizations were built to sort, credential and manage people at scale. They did it well. In the age of personalization and AI, that is no longer enough. Their job is to help people know who they are, and then build on it.

Schools show how far the conversation still has to go. The AI debate in schools is framed as integrity: which assignments allow it, how to catch it. The more urgent issue is identity. Ask students what they meant before judging what they wrote. Treat the struggle to find words as valuable, not as a problem to remove. And protect a few spaces on purpose, such as reflective writing, apologies and first attempts at hard feelings, and tell students why.

Schools

Make sure every student has an adult who knows them. One-to-one was supposed to mean a laptop. It should mean an adult.

Colleges

Treat belonging as a design choice with many pathways, not a program built for the outgoing student.

Employers

See the people you lead as someone's parent and someone's child, and design work that does not require leaving yourself at the door.

Communities

Connect the generations, so teenagers can be needed by adults outside their own home.

Every institution

See yourself as part of the family's support system, not a replacement for it.



Three priorities for every adult who runs a room

Measure authorship

Not just productivity. Evaluate how people thought, not only whether the answer worked, and whether the work is truly theirs.

Protect disagreement

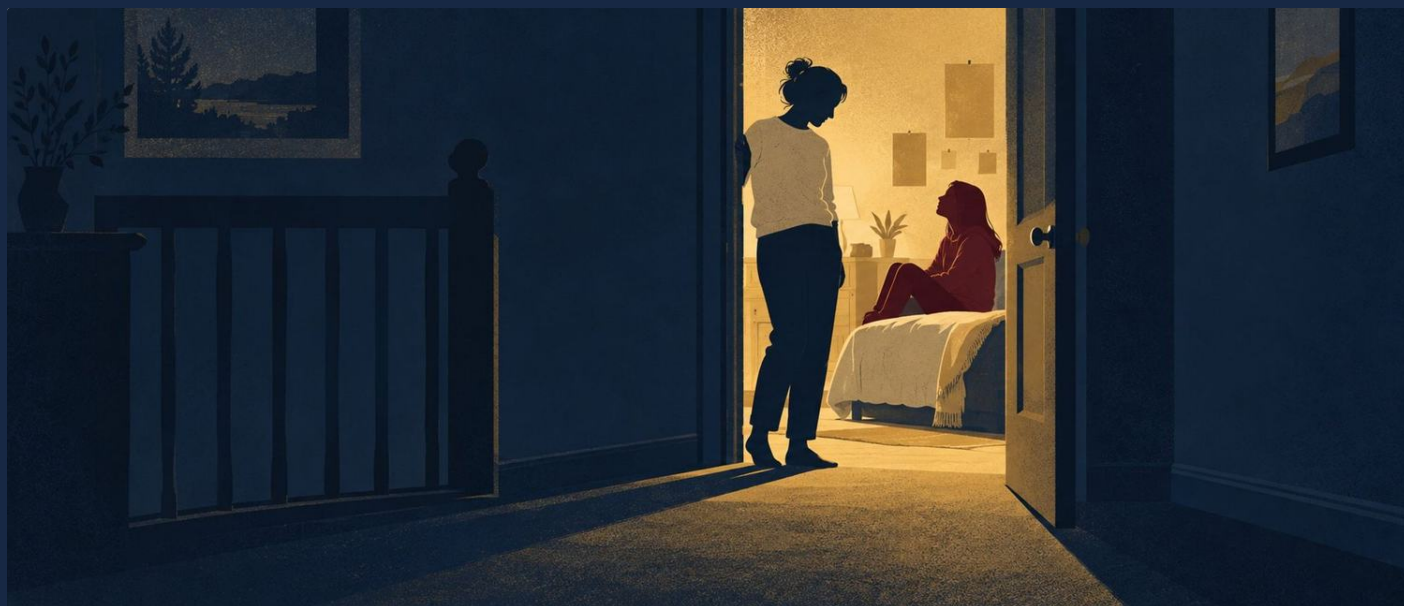
If only the politically secure dissent, you are managing a performance. Leave room for meaningful failure; conviction requires being wrong and recovering.

Start at home

Leaders who are parents carry the same performance culture home. Rewarding teens for fitting in shapes the next generation of executives.

No family can do this alone, and no institution can do it for them. The work happens where they meet.

Answer each in one sentence



01 What did you set down at 15 that you are still trying to pick back up?

02 In which of your five rings do you edit yourself most today?

03 When did you last change your mind because someone younger pushed back?

04 Do you form your own position before you ask AI, or after?

05 Would the 15-year-old you recognize the way you lead now?

06 Which of a young person's five rooms asks them to edit most, and is it yours?

07 Do you know, or only assume, that they would come to you?

08 What do you keep the same for everyone, and where do you let each person be themselves?

09 Where does a teenager get to be needed, not just supported, in your home, school or organization?

10 When they push back, do you hear defiance or a preview?

Two halves of one answer

The two maps called for two places to do the work, and they meet where families and institutions meet.

FOR THE ADULT RECLAIMING WHO THEY ARE

Conviction Institute

Leaders reclaim what they set down, ring by ring, starting with the Conviction Diagnostic and Map My Rings.

convictioninstitute.com

FOR THE TEENAGER CLAIMING WHO THEY ARE

Teens UnEdited

Teens claim who they are, room by room, and parents learn to see each room through their teen's eyes, starting with the Edit Map.

teensunedited.com



Conviction is the earned capacity to act on what you believe before the outcome is certain. For the adult, it is earned back. For the teenager, it is earned for the first time. In the age of AI, both have to be earned before the machine starts doing the deciding, so that when it hands us back the mirror, someone is still there.



BEHIND THE MIRROR

Three lines to carry into every room

The crisis

One crisis, two ages

The executive who lost their conviction started editing at fifteen.

The 15-year-old can still claim what the 45-year-old has to reclaim.

The room

Fix the room, not the kid

A teenager who has to disappear to be included has found only a good disguise.

No single room is enough. A young person needs to be the same person in all five.

The mirror

Claim who you are before you prompt

Friction is where judgment forms. AI removes it.

When AI hands us back the mirror, someone has to still be there.

Voices from both maps

Quotes are taken word for word from each recording. Every clip can be watched online; where to find each one is listed below.



“I’ve been running on this operating system that I don’t even know who I am anymore. I don’t even know who my authentic self is.”

Dr. Rosie Ward

Salvo Partners, author of Future-Proofing Leadership

“Hey, you can be yourself.”

Brielle Lubin

Recorded when Brielle was an eighth grader, at the 2019 Leadership in the Age of Personalization Summit

On being told the only choices were doctor, lawyer or failure.

Tommy Nguyen

Recorded when Tommy was a senior at the University of Southern California

“You just see it, like the weight starts to come off. And then the first question is: how would I explain this to my parents?”

Dr. Scott Lacy

Associate Dean, Fairfield University

WHERE TO WATCH

Dr. Rosie Ward

teensunedited.com/voices For schools and communities

Brielle Lubin and Tommy Nguyen

teensunedited.com/voices For teens

Dr. Scott Lacy

teensunedited.com/voices For families

88 more leaders, by the five rings

convictioninstitute.com/voices Conviction Institute Voices

SOURCES

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FINDING	SOURCE
87% of managers say their individuality is suppressed	Glenn Llopis research · Survey of 850 managers and directors, 2025
81% of teens feel pressure; 56% about their future	Weinstein et al., Center for Digital Thriving (Harvard GSE), Common Sense Media and Indiana University, 2024
80% of parents vs 52% of teens comfortable talking about teen mental health	Pew Research Center, 2025
"Doing school": 45%; fully engaged: 13%	Challenge Success, Student Voice Report, 2024
Executive function stabilizes around 18 to 20	Tervo-Clemmens and Luna, Nature Communications, 2023
Peer influence on risk is small	Powers and Somerville, Psychological Bulletin, 2022
Social media effects differ by person	Beyens et al., Communication Research, 2024
Close friendship and adult outcomes	Allen et al., Child Development, 2021
Different sources of support	Wentzel, Journal of Educational Psychology, 2016
Growth mindset depends on context	Yeager et al., Nature, 2019; Psychological Science, 2022
Belonging intervention across 22 colleges	Walton et al., Science, 2023
School wellbeing programs and negative outcomes	Guzman-Holst and Foulkes, 2025; Foulkes et al., Nature Mental Health, 2024
39% of between-school differences in belonging	Palikara, Bonneville-Roussy and Allen, School Mental Health, 2025
19.2% use AI for mental health advice; 63% told no one	RAND, 2026
ChatGPT for Teens risk assessment	Common Sense Media, 2026
Teen AI chatbot use: 54% for schoolwork, 12% for emotional support; about 3 in 10 daily	Pew Research Center, How Teens Use and View AI, 2026
67% of students say AI for schoolwork harms critical thinking	RAND, 2026
Students say AI-polished writing does not sound like them	Mohammad, University of Toronto, in The Conversation, 2026
AI and the struggle to find words	Glenn Llopis, "School Administrators Are Solving the Wrong Problem About AI," Forbes, 2026
Fewer than 1% asked an AI tutor for feedback	University of Maryland trial, reported in Inside Higher Ed, October 2026
AI confidence and critical thinking	Microsoft Research and Carnegie Mellon, 2025
Feeling needed predicts teen self-esteem	Fuligni, Trimble and Smola, Journal of Adolescence, 2024

Every figure was verified at its original source in October 2026.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Llopis

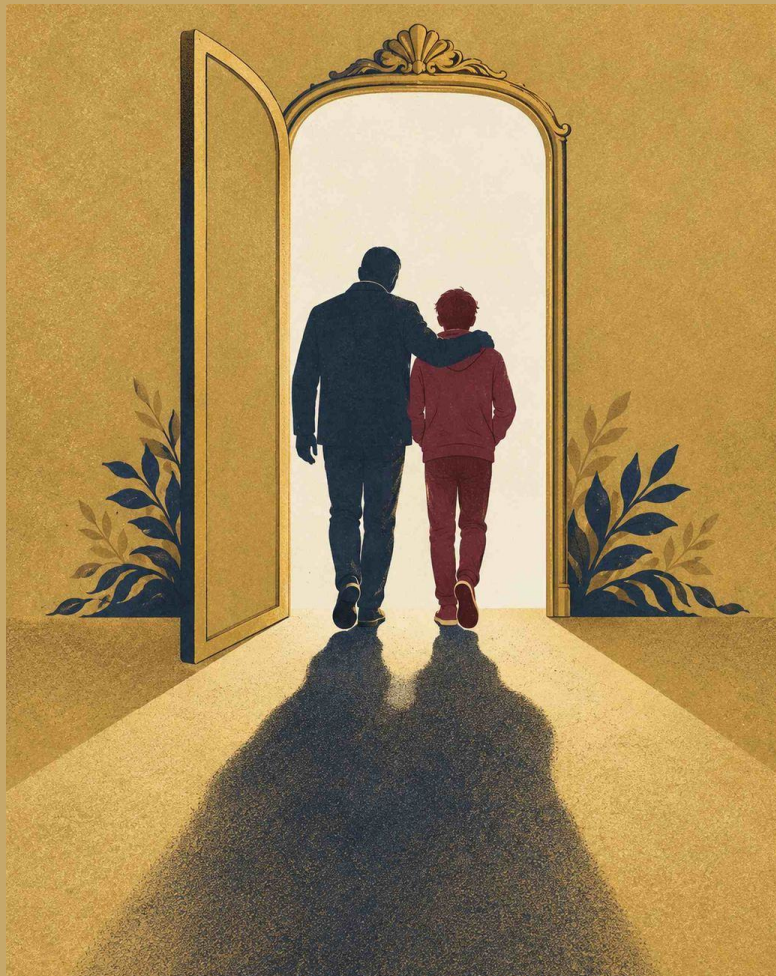
Glenn Llopis is a leadership strategist, CEO of the Glenn Llopis Group and a Forbes contributor since 2010. For 20 years he has studied the tension between standardizing people and letting each person bring what only they can, the work behind Leadership in the Age of Personalization.

He leads three platforms that deliver identity and conviction to different audiences: the Glenn Llopis Group, the Conviction Institute and Teens UnEdited. He is the author of six books and a manifesto.

[Learn more about Glenn](#)

THE CONVICTION PAPERS

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