

Driving renewal, hosted by Satu Rekonen

Episode 7: Head First into situations – guest Tuomas Syrjänen, Futurice

Satu: In this episode, my guest is Tuomas Syrjänen, a trailblazer in leveraging data and artificial intelligence, and the Chief AI Officer at Futurice. Tuomas is one of the founding members of Futurice and served as the CEO from 2008 to 2018. Under his leadership, Futurice increased its revenue tenfold and expanded into a European player.

In 2013, he was named Leader of the Year by Faktalehti. Currently, Tuomas is responsible for Futurice's Data & AI Renewal Program and also serves as the Chairman of the company's Board. He is particularly interested in utilizing data and AI in corporate decision-making, processes, and business model innovation.

Tuomas is a thought leader in this field, lecturing on the topic in programs such as the St. Gallen EMBA course. Additionally, he holds board positions in several companies, including Vaisala Plc, WithSecure Plc, Flow Technologies Ltd, and Vastuugroup Ltd, and contributes to the board of Kasvuryhmä. For Tuomas, continuous learning is crucial at work, and he strives to advance the AI paradigm within organizational operations.

His core expertise lies in bridging artificial intelligence and business. Tuomas's work motto is: 'Renewal creates energy, and energy drives success.' In this episode, we explore key questions such as: What are the most common growing pains that a scaling company faces, and how can it maintain agility and adaptability amidst growth? How does minimalist leadership manifest in an organization's daily operations, and how does it influence employees' actions and decision-making? What mindset and behavioral changes are required for more effective use of AI? And finally, what are the key capabilities of a change agent?

Welcome to the *Driving renewal* podcast, Tuomas!

Tuomas: Thank you.

Satu: Futurice was founded in 2000 by you and three other students from the Helsinki University of Technology. I'm curious, Tuomas, how much of the

original mindset and principles that the company was built upon still remain at Futurice today?

Tuomas: Yes, those principles are still present. The starting point back then was a desire to do things differently, to create new things, to challenge the way things are done, to look to the future, and to approach things in a new way. Those ideas were present even then. Of course, over the past 20-plus years, a lot has evolved—we've learned and understood a great deal. When you think about leadership, culture, and all that, it wasn't something a small company had to think about too much back then, so naturally, that has developed over time.

But I would say that the core values and mindset are still very much alive. If you think about what we're doing right now and where we're headed, it's clear that we are still drawing from those historical roots.

Satu: I'd like to walk through Futurice's growth journey with you and share that story with our listeners as well.

You've mentioned that in 2008, when Futurice started to grow in terms of staff and reached over 60 employees, you encountered your first growing pains. What did this mean from a leadership perspective and in terms of how the operations needed to be organized?

Tuomas: Maybe you could think of it this way: in the early years, we didn't really have much time to think about leadership. Our focus was more on worrying about where to get work, how to sell our services, and all that. Several years were quite tough, but then, little by little, things started to get easier—our reputation started to spread. By 2006, we even had a customer call us to buy something, which was quite a milestone.

Growth continued in 2007–2008. Actually, the very first small growing pains appeared when we had around 20–25 people, but those passed relatively quickly. But then, the real challenge came in 2008 when we had around 60–70 people. The old operating model, where we didn't pay much attention to leadership, simply didn't work anymore.

We were just trying to do things, sell, deliver, and keep customers happy. But suddenly, that approach wasn't enough. That was perhaps the wake-up call. We knew, of course, that companies often face growing pains after reaching 50 employees. For us, it hit quite hard in the fall of 2008, when we were at around 60–70 people.

Satu: How did this manifest itself?

Tuomas: Well, it manifested in things like this: previously, everything happened naturally, but then people started to feel like they no longer knew what was going on in the company.

They began asking questions, and from a leadership perspective, it started to look like people were no longer making smart decisions independently. Instead, mistakes began to happen. There were situations where I had to follow up with people and say, "That's not how we do things here."

Naturally, people also started having thoughts like, "Now that we're a real company, maybe we should be doing this or that," and so on. But above all, there was this uncertainty—people no longer knew or understood what was going on. This, in turn, led to a situation where things no longer happened as naturally and correctly as before. That was probably the biggest change we experienced.

Satu: What did you do then? How did you update your operations?

Tuomas: Well, first of all, we knew growing pains were coming, so we tried to prepare for it. We had done some research on what it means to become a "real company" and, to be honest, probably bought every book on scaling a business from Amazon at the time.

Those books were quite good in a way—half of them were really helpful. They described the problems very well. But the toolbox they offered was essentially this: there's a small company operating model, and then there's the big company model, which involves creating structures, approvals, budgets, controls, and all that kind of thing.

In the beginning, we didn't know any better, so we started implementing those ideas. But after a few months, we started feeling that this wasn't exactly enjoyable. Energy started to get sucked into building control mechanisms and such. And then came perhaps the most important realization—someone happened to ask the right question: "Wait a minute, what's going on here? We've got pretty much the same people as a year ago, with maybe 20 more, and now we're thinking that people are stupid and irresponsible, and they need to be controlled, and someone needs to decide for them. Is the problem that people have suddenly become stupid and irresponsible, or has something happened in our system?"

That was a big wake-up call. Once we had this realization, we started looking into why our organizational operating model was changing. We sought more information and understanding, and gradually, the idea began to emerge: maybe

we could scale the company differently than what the traditional toolbox suggested.

Satu: Currently, Futurice has around 800 employees?

Tuomas: Something like that, probably around 700–800 employees.

Satu: Looking back to 2008, what kind of turning points have you encountered along the way in terms of growth?

Tuomas: There are probably two sides to this. One is how we approach the market, and the other is how things look internally.

If I start with the market perspective, I'd say we are currently building what could be called our third "success recipe"—if that's the right term. During the first ten years or so, we primarily operated as a pure technology house. We did various Symbian projects, mobile phone solutions, and so on. Around 2008–2009, we started to realize that this approach was no longer enough. We needed to integrate design into our work, and we saw the Agile revolution emerging strongly.

We began building our second winning recipe, which included Agile methodologies, multidisciplinary teams combining design, technology, and more, and, importantly, building a strong culture around software development. This approach worked well—and still does to an extent—but the market has matured. Both customer and market maturity have increased, making differentiation more challenging. That's why we are now developing this third success formula, which is still a work in progress.

That's the external side of things. Of course, these transformations have also brought their own challenges internally. We've had our share of internal issues during these market transitions.

2008 was a major turning point for us. It was when we realized that scaling the organization required transparency and principles-based thinking. Instead of giving people precise rules on what to do and not do, we focused more on encouraging transparency and promoting positive practices like sharing information, building understanding, collaboration, coordination, and even the necessary control. It was also about clarifying business responsibilities so that everyone understood their role within the business context.

This approach worked well for quite a few years. When we had just under a hundred employees, or even up to 200–300, understanding the principles and

implementing them was relatively straightforward. But as we grew to 400 and then 500 people, it became clear that while the principles remained valid, implementing them was significantly more challenging.

Around 2016, we introduced a new approach to address this challenge by establishing "family companies." Instead of having everything under Futurice, we launched companies like Columbia Road and others. This allowed us to scale our operations while staying true to our principles.

Internally, a big focus—where I've also been involved—has been on leveraging data and AI in our internal operating model. While our core principles are still valid, I'd say that at this scale, implementing them is quite challenging. This is something we're constantly working on.

Is the situation good right now? I'd say no. If I had to give it a grade, maybe it's around a seven out of ten. But it was worse a few years ago, so we are definitely heading in the right direction.

Satu: Exactly. You mentioned that things were worse a few years ago. How did things start to shift in a better direction? What actions did you take?

Tuomas: Well, there are different ways to approach this. One significant aspect has been creating transparency—whether it's about organizational competencies, what's happening internally or externally, or even financials and other metrics. Building transparency is perhaps one of the biggest challenges as an organization grows.

For example, when we were a smaller company with 100–200 people, it was quite simple. We just shared information more or less openly, and it was self-evident. But at this scale, structuring that information in a way that makes sense is an art form in itself. Complexity has increased, and there are many such challenges.

But as I mentioned earlier, if I had to grade us, it might be a seven out of ten, so there's still quite a bit to do. However, we've managed to make some progress, and of course, the bar must always be set very high.

Satu: Yeah, I can imagine that as the organization grows, maintaining agility, renewal capability, and nurturing a particular culture can be quite challenging.

Tuomas: Yes, absolutely. You have to fight against that every day. My own experience, and what we've often told people as founders, is that "big and boring is not an option." It's a phrase that aims to capture this mindset. However, the world around us often pushes in the opposite direction—towards

doing things the same old way, avoiding renewal, and not daring to try something different.

For example, the bigger a company gets, the more likely you are to encounter things like audit comments suggesting that you need this or that control. These are completely valid points, but the real question is: how do you implement that control? Do you do it the traditional way, where a person manually approves it, or is there another, more innovative way to handle it?

These are precisely the situations where you need a strong agenda—a clear vision of how you want to do things differently.

Satu: If I remember correctly, earlier this year, in February, there was an interview with you and Frank Martela in *Helsingin Sanomat* about minimalist leadership. You were the CEO at Futurice until 2018, so could you share a bit about your understanding of minimalist leadership and how it might manifest in everyday life at Futurice?

Tuomas: This is a great topic, and perhaps there's a common misconception around it. I've always said that minimalist leadership is not a free or effortless decision. It doesn't mean stopping leadership altogether or avoiding actions; rather, it involves building a system.

Transparency is one aspect. In traditional leadership, all responsibilities naturally fall to managers or leaders. But in minimalist leadership, the focus is more on creating an environment that is transparent and understandable. It's about helping people think for themselves, engaging in continuous dialogue with them so that their thinking develops.

Instead of telling people to do this or that, it's about having those conversations. For example, engaging in dialogue takes quite a bit of time—it's a real investment, if that's the right term. It requires patience. It's always the same: when you see the whole picture yourself, it's hard to understand why others don't immediately see it too.

One of my favorite examples—I don't remember who said it, but it was a well-known Finnish leader—goes like this: It's strange when management spends six months creating a strategy, finally reaches a shared understanding, then holds a half-hour communication session with employees and wonders why they're not on board.

This is the challenge—it requires dialogue. That's why I often say that a minimally led organization isn't necessarily “efficient” in the English sense of

the word; it's more about being "effective." The goal is to generate renewal, spark new ideas, and allow people to pursue their own agendas and motivations.

In my view, harnessing people's motivation and energy is one of the primary tasks of organizations. Unfortunately, too often, organizations manage to waste that energy.

Satu: Indeed, in the same article, you mentioned that people should be led more through their energy levels. How have you implemented this, or how does that look in practice?

Tuomas: It starts with recognizing that people have different motivations and desires. Instead of dictating from the top down exactly what needs to be done, it's more about setting a general direction and allowing people to pursue their own initiatives within that framework.

This might not be the perfect example, but it helps illustrate the point: Take something challenging, like opening a new office in a new country. It's difficult and demanding work, yet people often want to do it. You might find that some people want to live in one city and others in another.

If the organization wants to expand to a particular city but no one is interested in going there, it doesn't make sense to push it. You wouldn't be harnessing that energy. Instead, if someone is enthusiastic about moving to a particular city in Germany, for example, the question then becomes whether that city makes sense from a business perspective. If it does, it could be a smart decision.

Of course, it's not about letting people do whatever they want without boundaries. It's always a delicate balance—figuring out where to tap into people's motivation while maintaining organizational goals.

The same principle applies to service offerings. Often, this approach feels like balancing on the edge of chaos and order. That's where the best energy emerges, where innovation happens. But it also means you're constantly walking a fine line, making sure things don't tip too far into chaos.

Satu: And it can be quite exhausting too.

Tuomas: Yes, and it also requires people to tolerate and manage uncertainty. It often means that no one might give explicit approval, and individuals must take responsibility for their actions.

One aspect of human nature is that we often seek someone to say yes or no, so we don't have to bear as much responsibility ourselves. Minimalist leadership, however, encourages people to carry their own share of responsibility.

Of course, it's important to understand that mistakes happen and not everything will succeed—that's perfectly okay. But the key is whether people take responsibility for their actions.

Satu: It sounds like dialogue plays a central role in leading through energy levels as well. Do you have any specific structures at Futurice to maintain this kind of dialogue?

Tuomas: Yes, we do have various approaches to this. Digital channels are quite actively used. Recently, I've also been talking about how, even though it can sometimes feel a bit heavy, the more people engage in dialogue on Slack or other platforms, the more it reflects that they care. It's a good sign, even if keeping up with the dialogue all the time can sometimes be exhausting.

We also have different types of structures. For example, we hold monthly events called *All Hands* under the name *Futu Friday*. Different people use different methods. Personally, I used to try to have a conversation with everyone in the company annually. I couldn't quite keep up with that as the company grew, but one-to-one dialogues are incredibly important.

There are different ways to facilitate this kind of dialogue. The big question is how to build structures that make this dialogue both efficient and effective.

For me, even though it was really demanding and time-consuming, I found those *speed date*-style conversations extremely valuable—at least for myself. I also understood that employees found them valuable because my understanding of where the company stood and its current situation evolved quite a bit between the first and the last conversation.

I also learned that it's often not worth paying too much attention to the loudest voices. The quieter group often has a slightly different perspective, and by listening patiently and asking questions, you could get truly brilliant insights and observations.

Satu: That's a very important observation, and often that's where the real insights emerge—when different perspectives get a chance to meet.

So, Tuomas, you currently serve as Chief AI Officer at Futurice. Great title! What does this role entail for you?

Tuomas: The background to this is that back in 2018, I asked to step down from the CEO role. There were a few reasons for this. First, I had been in the role for ten years, and I felt that my own energy levels for that position were no longer at their peak. I believed that a rotation would be beneficial for both myself and the organization.

One of the key reasons was that I had a growing sense that there were significant challenges in knowledge work. Starting from basic questions like: What do we, as an organization, actually know? We sell expertise to our clients, but back in 2018, we had almost no real understanding of our own organizational knowledge. We tried to get people to fill in competency databases—if we managed to get 40% of our staff to fill in anything, that was already a success.

This sparked a strong idea that with data and AI, we could probably approach knowledge work quite differently. There's a funny anecdote here: a couple of years earlier, I had joined the board of a construction industry company. I learned a lot about the challenges in construction, but a couple of years later, I had to admit to myself that as a knowledge worker, it wasn't my place to comment on the construction industry's challenges because knowledge work has at least as many, if not more, issues—they just don't show up as visibly.

In construction, the problems are visible and tangible, but in knowledge work, there are many hidden challenges. That's really where this journey began. We started working on this both internally and with clients. At first, it was more of an experiment—perhaps "curiosity" isn't the right word, but it was exploratory work for several years. Of course, we were always doing client work, but when generative AI emerged, it essentially became mainstream overnight.

Nowadays, I work on similar things with clients—different processes like redefining complex B2B processes to reduce lead times by 80%, or transforming a customer service unit from a cost center to a value-creating unit while simultaneously improving efficiency and customer satisfaction. We're also looking at how to completely reshape leadership practices.

This work happens both with clients and internally, as we aim to "walk the talk" by constantly developing our own operating models. I strongly believe that consulting—and our own business—will look quite different in five to ten years than it does today.

Satu: What is then your hypothesis regarding the consulting business? What are the biggest elements that will change?

Tuomas: Well, at the moment, if we think about value creation for the client, part of it comes from things such as the organization's culture, processes, and brand. But probably—unscientifically speaking—around 80% of it comes from the individuals doing the work. I believe that a technology and data component will be integrated into this. Each person's work will be augmented, and the role of the organization will grow. This means that if consulting firms will provide supporting tools and similar resources to aid in execution, then as a result, clients will no longer just buy hours of work; instead, they will purchase a package that includes highly skilled individuals along with technology, data, and other elements that enhance the success of the work.

Additionally, business models will likely evolve. One somewhat high-level hypothesis is that across different industries, we often see a shift from project-based business to product development-driven business. I believe that consulting is at a similar turning point. In the future, I'm not sure clients will pay for hours of work. Instead, it may be more of a combination of people, technology, processes, and operational models.

We already see this happening in cybersecurity, for example. In cybersecurity, managed detection and response (MDR) is a major growing business area. This offering combines human expertise, technology, data, and operational models into a single package for clients. I believe this kind of approach will expand into other areas as well.

Satu: What does this require from organizations in terms of restructuring and operations? That must be a major challenge.

Tuomas: Yes, absolutely. And fundamentally, there are two aspects to consider—firstly what this means for our clients. One goal is to reduce the challenges our clients face in utilizing technology. Because, in reality, technology rarely provides direct benefits on its own—it needs to be harnessed within the right operational model. For example, we've already learned and experimented with tracking strategy execution using data and AI on a weekly basis.

This fundamentally changes the way we approach strategic processes. Instead of checking progress once every six months, we can now monitor and refine it weekly. However, the challenge is that this also requires changes to operational models and processes—likely even role changes.

And there's often resistance to change, inertia. Our hypothesis is that even when clients have access to the right technology, they struggle to adapt their

operational models. Our approach, much like in cybersecurity MDR, is to create a managed service package where the client buys a solution that includes expertise, an operational model, and technology—making it much easier for them to adopt.

But this also demands significant internal changes on our side. And there's still a long way to go, and this shift will require a more product-development-driven approach and so on. Essentially, we're trying to package things in a way that makes it easier for clients to buy, but this also means we'll need to undergo a major internal transformation. The alternative would be to continue as we are and expect the client to change. But I strongly believe that we should be the ones adapting our ways of working.

Satu: As you mentioned earlier, generative AI made AI mainstream, and now everyone has at least some idea of what it is. But AI is much more than just generative AI. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the most important AI technologies today and where they are currently most effective.

Tuomas: That's a great point. Even though generative AI has made AI mainstream, when we're asked to analyze potential use cases, I'd say that easily 60–70% of them rely on something other than generative AI—often more traditional AI techniques.

I have to go back to my own history for a moment—back in the 90s when I was studying machine learning at Otaniemi. Some of the algorithms we used then are still highly relevant today, such as Bayesian inference and similar approaches.

It's also amusing how, in many cases, when people talk about AI, what's actually being used might just be linear regression. So we always have to consider the right tool for the job.

Sometimes, clients (and even we) might want to apply sophisticated AI, but the problem could be solved with simple data analysis. That's why we always have to ask ourselves—are we solving a business problem, or are we just implementing technology for technology's sake? These are two very different things.

There's also the question of extracting real benefits from technology. To do that, we typically need to change processes and operational models as well. If we go back to your original question, generative AI is just one part of the equation. For large-scale numerical data, deep learning and neural networks are

often used. But in many cases, something as simple as linear regression or rule-based decision-making can be enough.

But in many cases, something as simple as linear regression or then Bayesian inference or various other very different methods are being used. More than anything, AI has opened people's eyes to rethinking how we approach problems in entirely new ways.

Satu: I'm thinking about Futurice's role in advancing different types of AI. How do you see this AI trend evolving, and how does Futurice aim to influence the way businesses operate—and, on a broader scale, how society functions?

Tuomas: Well, there are a few different angles to this. Ethics and related topics are often discussed, but from my perspective, the most important driving force is whether we are helping people succeed—whether in their work or elsewhere. As long as we enable people to succeed in their jobs or in life, things are generally in good shape.

Of course, we must ensure that everything is done properly and in compliance with regulations, but that's a given. This also ties into the business world. One of my favorite examples is about enterprise software. If we look at current enterprise systems, how many of them are actually designed to help people succeed in their work? Not that many. A classic example is CRM systems. Companies constantly struggle with CRM platforms.

Then, if we think about what CRM systems are actually designed for today, they have two main purposes. One is to force people into a process, and the other is to consolidate information for management. So, is it really a surprise that people find them frustrating? Now, actually, a new generation of CRM systems is emerging—ones that are designed with the primary goal of helping salespeople succeed in their work.

For me, a key question is: can we drive a paradigm shift where our primary goal is to help people succeed in whatever they do—whether it's work or something else? Then, another crucial aspect is that technology alone doesn't create value. Simply adding technology to an existing operational model might bring marginal benefits—if any.

The real value comes when we fundamentally rethink the approach. For instance, in the construction industry, where I've been involved for nearly a decade, we've worked on shifting from a project-based paradigm to an industrial assembly paradigm, where technology and data play a role.

But early on, we realized that simply introducing new technology wouldn't yield results. Real change required a full paradigm shift—rethinking how we view processes, roles, people's professional identities, many things.

But technology is the underlying enabler of all this. The same pattern can be seen in many other areas as well. For example, for decades, we've been taught that organizations have to choose between being customer-centric leaders or cost-efficiency leaders—because customer-centricity comes at a cost.

Now, with AI, I believe that the cost of personalization is approaching zero. This means that companies may no longer have to choose—instead, they can be both customer-centric leaders and cost-efficiency leaders at the same time. This sparks new ways of thinking and raises the question: what constraints does technology eliminate? And if we remove those constraints, it could open up entirely new possibilities for rethinking our industry and ways of working—even after 40 years.

That's what we want to bring to the table. And, of course, we also want to deliver high-quality, well-executed technology solutions—because that's what these initiatives require to succeed.

Satu: Earlier, you mentioned that technology alone doesn't create value—it requires changes in ways of working and thinking. What have you learned about what helps facilitate these kinds of transformations in organizations?

Tuomas: Perhaps the key question is: what are the different factors at play? One important aspect is identifying the guiding principle or 'North Star' that we are working toward. For example, in processes, we've noticed that Lean has experienced a kind of renaissance. It provides a strong framework for process optimization and direction. To give a concrete example, knowledge work often involves a lot of handovers—where tasks are passed from one person to another. One of our main themes has been figuring out how to reduce these handovers and how to equip individuals with a broader skill set so they can handle more tasks independently. When handovers are minimized, processes become much smoother for the customer—faster, more efficient, and overall more effective.

Another major factor is supporting people in succeeding at their work. Then we also need the courage to challenge conventions—to ask why things are done a certain way. Do we actually need this step? Could we approach this differently?

A typical example of this is how organizations often fear the legal risks associated with selling complex B2B products. Because of this, every proposal must go through legal approval. This, in turn, creates delays in the process—since legal teams are typically overworked and have a long backlog of tasks.

So, of sending every proposal to the legal department, we can use technology to automatically check whether it complies with company policies or other relevant criteria. This means that an entire step in the process can be eliminated. Rather than just making the legal team more efficient, we shift their workload in about 95% of the cases to technology in single sales-related issues.

And this doesn't necessarily eliminate anyone's role or job—it simply changes the way we need to think about work. Instead of manually reviewing every proposal, the legal team should shift their focus toward developing technology that enables the customer-facing teams to handle these processes independently and successfully.

Satu: Yeah, and the slowness in the process probably comes, at least to some extent, from the human mind...

Tuomas: Yes. The cognitive effort required to change something is significant, and it shouldn't be underestimated. It's also about human perception—the willingness to think differently. Professional identity plays a role in this as well. One common shift in professional identity, particularly in knowledge work and many other fields, is the transition from managing chaos as a core part of the job.

Is managing chaos a good professional identity? Well, for now, it's often necessary—because many processes still involve a lot of chaos. But looking ahead, in many cases, this identity will need to shift toward being a systematic process developer. With the help of technology, we can reduce the need for chaos management, allowing professionals to focus on refining and improving processes instead.

Satu: And that transition can be quite intimidating, especially when you don't yet know what to anchor your professional identity to.

Tuomas: Yes. In many roles, the most respected individuals are often those who can handle and fix the biggest messes, manage the worst chaos, or have the best organizational memory—knowing exactly how things have been done before. But is that still going to be the most valuable professional identity in the coming years? I'm not so sure. I believe people will need to anchor their

identity to something else. And that's why this transformation is so deeply rooted in individuals—how we help people build new professional identities. Which brings us back to the original question: how do we ensure that everyone comes along in this transformation?

Because what I don't want to see is a society—or a company—where one group of people is fully engaged in the transformation, adapting their ways of working, and becoming super productive, while another group is left behind. That is a challenging situation, both at the company level and on a broader societal scale.

This might not be the best analogy, but I have to say, I'm not exactly thrilled when I look at Silicon Valley's societal structure—where some people make millions while others are living on the streets, and it feels like there's not much in between.

Satu: How do you see this within Futurice? How has the company managed to ensure that everyone within the company keeps up with this transformation?

Tuomas: We have our own struggles as well. But for example, one way we address this is by capturing organizational knowledge automatically. We no longer need to ask people what they've done—it's all tracked automatically using technology and AI. We leverage AI extensively to understand our customers and the market, either semi-automatically or fully automatically, and we're continuing to automate these processes. We've also implemented automated strategy tracking based on digital footprints. Then there are various individual applications here and there. Am I satisfied with how far we've come?

No, absolutely not. But at least we're making an effort to apply these changes internally as well.

Satu: How about the shift in people's thinking and ways of working? How much of that change is an active focus at Futurice?

Tuomas: Yes, we face the exact same challenges. I've actually found it a bit amusing that we've been selling various transformations to other industries for the past twenty years—or at least major transformations for the past ten years—and we're going through the same process ourselves. And, of course, we're dealing with the same issues: resistance to change, the belief that 'this doesn't apply to me,' and so on.

And at the same time, when it comes to driving behavioral change, it's often not about whether people want to change—it can come down to small, practical obstacles. For example, in one of our sales processes, we noticed that the biggest barrier to behavioral change wasn't resistance itself, but rather the cognitive load of figuring out how to do something differently. One specific issue was that people found it overwhelming to rethink how they should approach customers via email. In the midst of a busy workload, this hesitation meant that the new approach simply wasn't adopted. But when we provided concrete examples—suggesting specific email templates—people were much more willing to use them, often just copying and pasting. When you consider how many different priorities and tasks are competing for attention within an organization, the key is making behavioral change as easy as possible. And we've observed the same pattern in many other areas as well.

Satu: Given your experience leading and facilitating change in multiple projects and organizations, have these transformations become easier over time?

Tuomas: No. And I find it a bit amusing because managing people can be quite exhausting at times, and one of the reasons I stepped down from the CEO role was that my energy levels were a bit low, and I wanted a change—something more technical for a while. But in the past few years, I've realized that most of my energy still goes into working with people, because their role in driving transformation is so central. So I end up coding in the evenings and on weekends—that's when I take on my technical battles. But in the end, everything always comes back to the same thing: people are at the heart of it all.

Satu: Exactly. That's the most important point of influence if we truly want to drive change. Back in May, you were a guest on Futurice's Tiennäyttäjät podcast, where you emphasized the importance of change agents in the adoption of AI within organizations. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this—what skills or characteristics make a great change agent? What do you think defines them?

Tuomas: First of all, my perspective on this has only strengthened since then—especially when we talk about process-level changes. Of course, in organizational-level transformations, the CEO often acts as the key change agent. But in process-driven changes, the role of change agents becomes even more critical. There are situations where we see a truly great change agent, even if the surrounding organization isn't fully on board with the change. Yet, because of that one person's drive and initiative, things still move forward, and they're able to push the transformation through.

Then, we've also seen the opposite happen—where leadership and everyone in the organization want change to happen, but there isn't a real change agent driving it. And in those cases... well, nothing really happens. So, what are the key capabilities of a good change agent? I've actually spent several hours this week discussing this exact topic, so I've been thinking about it quite a bit.

There are definitely a few key traits that stand out. One of them is the ability to engage in dialogue in all directions. A good change agent needs to be able to communicate with the people actually doing the work—understanding how the change impacts them and how it can be implemented effectively. At the same time, they must also be able to engage in dialogue with leadership. And these are often very different types of conversations. But the ability to engage in dialogue.

And secondly, they must *want* to engage in these conversations. I often say that a person who throws themselves headfirst into every situation. The best ones I've seen immediately jump into discussions as soon as they notice an issue that needs to be addressed.

Then, there are also people who are more analytical thinkers—they prefer to solve problems at their desk, working through ideas in their own mind. But when it comes to being a change agent, I'd say that diving headfirst into situations with people is an extremely important trait. A change agent also needs to have a clear agenda—an idea of what they are trying to achieve. But at the same time, their understanding needs to be grounded in reality. They can't just stay in the clouds, hoping that someone else will make the change happen. They must be able to link the daily, real-world execution to the new way of thinking and working. And that, once again, is a real challenge.

And then I'd say that one of the most essential traits is simply persistence. Changing a large operational model is really tough—you just need to be persistent and not let setbacks, so to speak, drag you down too much.

Satu: I'd be interested to know—are change agents usually found in very different roles across an organization, or do they tend to be in specific types of positions?

Tuomas: That's a good question. I'd say the most important thing is recognizing them, regardless of their position. They can be in very different roles and have very different personalities—the key is to identify them and empower them.

This ties back to our earlier discussion on *minimalist leadership* and *energy levels*. For example, let's say a company has three major focus areas—complex B2B sales, customer service, and another key function. If we had to decide which one to start transforming, the typical approach might be to choose the one that looks best in Excel as a business case. But if there's no *change agent* in that area, I wouldn't start there.

Instead, I'd focus on the area where there's someone truly passionate about making change happen—because without that person, nothing will get done. Change isn't something you can simply *assign* to someone. It has to come from within.

Satu: How does the change spread beyond that? A change agent can push things forward to a certain point, but...

Tuomas: Often, when people see a change working, more will naturally want to get involved. Some companies use *champion networks* or similar structures to formalize this process.

In my experience, change typically spreads in two ways. One approach is to go deep into a specific area—creating an example of success that draws people in. Another is to broadly introduce smaller tools or practices—like AI copilots—without expecting immediate large-scale transformation. Over time, once some successful changes have taken root, interest grows. New change agents emerge, and momentum builds.

Eventually, once the organization's overall capability and understanding increase, a more structured, top-down approach can take over.

Satu: I'm curious—since we've talked about how behavioral and mindset shifts are central to successfully adopting new technologies—do you think that everyone needs to, in some way, update their professional identity in order for these changes to take hold?

Tuomas: Yes, I'd say so. This ties back to our earlier discussion about what the future looks like within companies and in society as a whole.

I believe that everyone needs to find *joy* in learning, challenging their own ways of working, and rethinking what their job actually is. This should come from a place of curiosity and excitement rather than fear. Take customer service as an example. Traditionally, customer service roles have had a few challenges.

One challenge is that roles tend to be quite narrow. Given the high turnover and the assumption that people's skills are limited, tasks are often kept very specialized. But we've already seen that with technology, we can support people in real-time, allowing them to take on a much broader scope of work. And when someone can handle a wider range of tasks, the work itself usually becomes much more interesting.

Another common challenge is a lack of *control*. In many jobs, employees feel like they don't have a clear sense of control over their work. But we've found that technology can help improve that sense of control. And through improvements like these, we should be able to inspire people to embrace change with *enthusiasm and curiosity*, rather than through fear or frustration.

Satu: When thinking about driving change and renewal within organizations, how do you make it more *systemic* rather than just something that happens in isolated pockets? What are your thoughts on that?

Tuomas: I'd say that, based on my experience and perspective, senior leadership plays a crucial role in making change systemic.

If I go back to the construction industry as an example, one of the most critical turning points—though I don't recall the exact year—was when the CEO decided that he needed to personally lead the transformation. This was significant because there had been a disconnect: the digital team had been working on their own, concluding that the builders weren't really on board with the digital future.

Now, you can probably guess what the builders thought about the digital team in return. And this has been an important lesson: whenever you find yourself thinking that 'the other side just doesn't get it,' you can be sure that they're thinking the exact same thing about you. When that happens, the real issue isn't competence—it's a lack of dialogue. In this case, the CEO, Jussi, decided that every time he heard this kind of disconnect, he would bring both groups into the same room and have them sit down for two hours if necessary—until they found common ground and a shared agenda.

This might sound simple, but in reality, it's quite challenging. It requires people to truly understand each other and see the world from completely different perspectives. Some people approach things through a process lens, others through a technology lens, and yet others from a different angle altogether. Finding common ground in these dialogues can be difficult and even frustrating. It requires real commitment, and everyone involved has to be willing to let go

of their own rigid viewpoints, at least to some extent, and make an effort to understand the other side.

This is why *conflict management* becomes a critical skill in any large-scale transformation. If you're trying to change an industry that has operated the same way for 40 years, conflict is *inevitable*. If there were no resistance, the change would have already happened.

And then there's the question of how we respond to conflict. The easiest thing to do is to ignore it. And often, that's exactly what happens—people just conclude, 'They don't get it,' and move on. But the real challenge is figuring out how to harness that conflict as part of the transformation process. Of course, that's easy to say—but not nearly as easy to actually do.

Satu: That's a great example. It sounds like, in addition to fostering dialogue, there's also a need for *conversation facilitation skills*—which has been mentioned before in previous interviews.

Tuomas: Exactly. One small but powerful initiative introduced in construction was having software developers work *directly on-site* in the construction site offices.

Because physical distance can easily create a kind of mental distance as well. If the construction site is in one place and the coding is being done at headquarters, those two worlds can start to feel completely separate. By having the developers work *on-site*, it meant that discussions happened naturally, multiple times a day, leading to a much deeper mutual understanding on both sides.

In the end, I realized that some people really enjoyed it—because they got to see the impact of their work in a completely new way. And on both sides, mutual understanding improved significantly. These are exactly the kinds of things we should always be thinking about—what are the simple, effective ways to create more opportunities for dialogue and shared understanding?

Satu: Sometimes, the solution is actually quite *close at hand*. It doesn't necessarily require massive organizational restructuring or complex planning.

To wrap things up, I'd like to ask you a few final questions. First, what do the coming years look like for Futurice?

Tuomas: Well, it hasn't exactly been easy for us over the past two years either. There have been three key challenges. The first is this transition from our second success recipe to our third one. It is progressing. Is it progressing fast enough? Well, of course, we always wish things would move faster.

The second challenge has been our own internal self-reflection—taking a hard look in the mirror. And the third is that the market hasn't exactly been the easiest. But over the past few months, we've been moving in a good direction.

This transformation we've been discussing is progressing, and our operational performance is also improving. But the next couple of years—especially next year—will likely still be quite intensive and challenging, both in terms of driving internal change and navigating the market. However, one realization I've had recently is that pushing change through in a strong market is actually much harder than doing it in a difficult market.

Now that times have been tough, we've actually been able to drive change through much more effectively. I've seen and heard the same thing happening in other industries as well—when challenges increase, so does the willingness to change.

Satu: Well, in your view, what are the energy levels like at Futurice right now?

Tuomas: That's a pretty good question.

Better than they were at certain points. But the way I interpret it is that the challenge is that there's *a lot of variance*.

There are areas where the energy levels are really high, and then there are areas where the energy is lower. Some areas don't need any extra energy at all—they are exactly where they need to be. But is the energy level consistently high across the entire organization? Not quite yet.

Satu: One last question—how do you think our students should learn to use AI so that they can stay ahead of the curve and become truly AI-native by the time they enter the job market?

Tuomas: That's actually a great question. I've been discussing this topic quite a bit recently with people around here, and I think it's an important way to frame the conversation. Once again, we're at a decision point—a 'red pill or blue pill' moment. We can use AI in a way that reduces our own thinking—where we

essentially stop thinking altogether and just ask AI to do everything for us. That's a bad path.

The other path is to use AI to enhance and develop our own thinking. And I believe that's the crucial approach. What I've noticed is that AI actually forces us to think even more—to critically evaluate what we should do differently and what new possibilities we could explore.

But there is a risk that we start reducing our own thinking and outsourcing it entirely to AI. And in my view, that's not a good path. This is why I believe students should actively push themselves to keep thinking critically. Not all answers will come pre-packaged, not everything will be readily available—you'll have to struggle with difficult questions and work through complex problems. That process builds real capability. And when combined with AI, it makes you even better. I suspect this will lead to a growing polarization.

Those who don't want to think will end up thinking even less. Those who do want to think will be able to go deeper, develop their understanding further, and learn at an entirely new level. The same principle applies to learning—if you want to learn something with the help of AI, the learning process can be much faster. But if you just want to outsource learning to AI, that's probably possible too.

So this is probably one of the *big* dividing lines ahead.

Satu: Exactly—so it's about *harnessing* AI in a way that improves *your own* thinking.

Tuomas: Yes.

Satu: Thank you, Tuomas, for such an insightful conversation. I've gained a lot of new perspectives on how change can be driven forward in organizations—and also on how challenging that process can be within one's own organization and ways of working. This discussion also opened up new thoughts on how AI will reshape the way we work in the future and how crucial it is to prepare for the opportunities it brings. I really appreciate your time and your thoughts—thank you!

Tuomas: Thank you, this was great!