From Efficiency to Coherence

Why resilience, not optimization, must guide the 21st century

By MARTIN STUDER — July 2025

For decades, the pursuit of efficiency was treated as unquestionable progress. Lean supply chains, just-in-time production, relentless cost-cutting — all celebrated as marks of managerial genius. Efficiency became not just a business strategy but an ideology, shaping policy, finance, even culture.

Yet in a world of cascading shocks — pandemics, climate disruptions, geopolitical fractures — efficiency alone is no longer enough. Systems optimized to the brink of fragility break under stress. What we need now is not just speed or scale, but coherence: the ability of systems to hold together, adapt, and regenerate.

The tyranny of efficiency

Efficiency is seductive because it offers clarity. Ratios, margins, “more with less.” But its very strength can become weakness. By stripping away buffers, redundancies, and diversity, hyper-efficient systems leave no room for error.

The global supply chain crisis during COVID-19 exposed this starkly. Decades of offshoring and just-in-time logistics had minimized costs, but when borders closed and factories stalled, the entire system seized up. Similar dynamics are visible in energy markets, in financial networks, and even in health systems that run "hot" until overwhelmed.

Donella Meadows, the systems thinker, warned of this paradox: the tighter and more optimized a system, the less resilient it becomes. A violin string tuned too tight will snap.

Fragility revealed

Nassim Nicholas Taleb popularized the idea of the "antifragile" — systems that gain from shocks. Nature provides countless examples: forests that regenerate after fire, immune systems strengthened by exposure, ecosystems resilient precisely because of their redundancies.

Our human-built systems, however, have trended in the opposite direction. We design for efficiency, not antifragility. Airlines schedule crews to the minute, financial markets run on hair-thin liquidity, agriculture relies on monocultures highly vulnerable to pests or droughts. When disruption comes — and it always does — collapse propagates faster than recovery.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre has mapped nine planetary boundaries, from climate stability to freshwater use, that delineate the safe operating space for humanity. Cross too many, and systemic risk cascades globally. Efficiency ignores such boundaries. Coherence recognizes them as the operating conditions for survival.

From parts to patterns

The core flaw of efficiency thinking is that it sees parts, not patterns. A factory is efficient if its output per worker rises, regardless of whether its processes degrade rivers or erode trust in communities. A farm is efficient if it maximizes yield, even as soils are stripped and biodiversity declines.

Coherence asks a different question: do the parts work together in ways that sustain the whole? It is a relational lens. A coherent economy balances production with regeneration, profit with purpose, present gain with future viability.

This is why efficiency, and coherence must not be treated as synonyms. They diverge sharply once we look beyond the next quarter.

Towards coherent balance sheets

Just as we argued in “Valuation Beyond Compliance,” coherence must be inscribed in the way we account for value. Balance sheets that recognize natural assets and ecological liabilities are not add-ons — they are reflections of reality.

Efficiency thinking hides costs “off balance sheet.” Coherence insists they be brought into view. Forests, watersheds, soils, and biodiversity are not “externalities.” They are the productive base. Their degradation is not someone else’s problem. It is a liability.

This reframing alters investment logic. A company that looks efficient because it squeezes suppliers or externalizes waste may, under a coherent lens, be revealed as dangerously fragile. One that invests in resilience — diversified sourcing, regenerative practices, community wellbeing — may look “inefficient” today but proves enduring tomorrow.

“Efficiency optimizes for the next quarter; coherence safeguards the next quarter-century.”

Coherence in practice

The language of coherence may sound abstract, but its application is concrete:

- In energy, a coherent system balances renewables, storage, and grid flexibility — not just chasing lowest short-term cost per kilowatt hour, but ensuring reliability under stress.
- In finance, coherence means stress-testing portfolios against climate and biodiversity risk, not assuming diversification across fragile assets equals safety.
- In health, coherence values public health infrastructure and preventive care as assets, rather than stripping them as “excess capacity.”
- In food systems, coherence privileges crop diversity, soil health, and local networks alongside yield per hectare.

These are not luxuries. They are preconditions for survival in an age of volatility.

From growth to generativity

Efficiency often reduces life to throughput. Coherence restores attention to generativity — the capacity to renew. This aligns with the EIG compass:

- Ecology: Recognize that every enterprise sits within planetary boundaries.
- Integrity: Ensure that disclosures, governance, and incentives align with reality, not optics.

- Generativity: Build systems that leave more options, more resilience, more possibility for those who follow.

This is not anti-growth. It is post-growth. Growth at the expense of resilience is a pyrrhic victory. Growth within coherence is prosperity that endures.

A leadership challenge

Moving from efficiency to coherence is not a technical upgrade; it is a leadership shift. It requires courage to resist the siren song of quarterly optimization, to invest in buffers and redundancies that appear “wasteful” to the spreadsheet but prove life-saving in a storm.

Boards and policymakers must learn to reward coherence. Regulators should embed resilience metrics alongside efficiency ratios. Investors must value durability as highly as velocity. And citizens must ask not only whether systems deliver cheaply today, but whether they can hold together tomorrow.

From compliance to coherence

Efficiency made sense in a world of stability. But in a century defined by turbulence, coherence is the greater virtue. It asks us to design not just for output, but for endurance.

We can no longer afford the illusion that efficiency guarantees progress. Only coherence — systems that are resilient, regenerative, and relational — can carry us through the shocks ahead.

The challenge is clear: optimize for the next quarter, or steward for the next quarter-century. The choice will shape the legacy we leave.

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About Bluerain *Coherence* Series

This essay is part of a broader collection exploring how valuation, healthspan, collaboration, longevity, and biodiversity can be re-aligned with the rhythms of life — at a pace that enables regeneration rather than exhaustion.

The purpose of this compendium is to:

- Contribute meaningfully to public discourse on systems change and intergenerational strategy
- Offer fresh language and framing for leaders navigating complexity
- Share what we are learning, unlearning, and building in real time

We welcome dialogue, respectful critique, and collaboration — to deepen a shared understanding of what it means to steward coherence in a time of disruption.

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About the Author

Martin Studer is an entrepreneur and impact investor focused on sustainability and longevity. Trained as an economist and certified public accountant, he brings decades of leadership experience in finance, governance, and executive management. As founder of Bluerain Partners, a Swiss family office, he works globally on projects spanning climate resilience, healthspan innovation, and intergenerational stewardship.

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Our work is anchored in long-term purpose, driven by the belief that meaningful progress requires curiosity, collaboration, and courage.

We engage globally in projects that span climate resilience, health span and longevity, and the evolving nature of work and technology. We do so through investing, advising, governance, and venture development — always with an emphasis on coherence across generations, disciplines, and geographies.

These essays are authored by Martin Studer in a personal capacity. They reflect his experience, reflections, and aspirations — and may not necessarily represent the formal positions of Bluerain Partners Group AG, its subsidiaries, affiliated projects, or partners.

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