ACCELERATE **CHICAGO**

Craft software with confidence in 2026

Fast Code That Misses the User's Reality Is Still the Wrong Code



LOOKS PASSING. IS A WARNING.

User empathy as a technical skill for engineers

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You're good at this.

That's the problem.

And nobody sent you the memo.

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Three things used to slow us down.

Build friction

Code smell

Test failure

Your judgment is fine. Its operating environment turned hostile.

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// WHY CLEAN CODE GOT HARDER TO READ

Three things used to slow us down. AI makes all three quieter.

~~Build friction~~	→	**Fast**
~~Code smell~~	→	**Clean**
~~Test failure~~	→	**Green**

Your judgment is fine. Its operating environment turned hostile.

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// THE PART THAT MAKES IT HARDER

Clean and green makes pushback feel subjective.

Messy code

Easy to challenge. "This abstraction is doing too much. I need more tests."

Clean, green, AI-written

Pushback feels like a vibe. Now you're the one slowing the team down on a hunch.

Now you say: "it looks fine, but it decided something."

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// THE OBJECTION YOU'RE ALREADY FORMING

The models are amazing.

That's the engine, not the caveat.

Knows everything

In general. It read the whole internet.

Knows nothing

About your users, your data, your domain.

A weak model fails loud. A great one fails quiet.

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// WHAT THE MODEL CAN'T OWN

It can do the implementation. It can't own the judgment.

It doesn't carry the pager.

It doesn't sit in the escalation call.

It doesn't get the angry email forwarded to it.

It doesn't have the scar tissue from last time.

You do.

The model can do the work. You still own the call it can't.

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// THE ONE INSTRUMENT STILL STANDING

It's not a tool. It's a question.

What is this deciding for the person that wasn't its to decide?

Empathy: the ability to understand, share, and vicariously experience the emotions, thoughts, and perspectives of another person.

Empathy as a technical skill. The only detector AI can't pass for you, because it points outside the code.

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// CASE 1 · THE FLAKY TEST

It turned off the smoke alarm because the beeping was annoying.

PROMPT *"fix the flaky test"*

```
// before: checked the actual
await expect(timeOption).toHaveText("9:30 AM");
// agent fix: checked any time option
await expect(timeOption).toBeVisible();
```

The test didn’t get fixed. It got less specific.

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// CASE 2 · THE MISSING VALUE

"Hasn't told us yet" and "doesn't have one" are different facts about a person.

PROMPT *" the profile keeps throwing on null fields "*

```
const emergencyContact =
    user.emergencyContact ?? "";
// "" now means none + never asked
```

Absent and empty are different facts.
The agent collapsed them in one tidy line.

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// CASE 3 · THE CACHE

A privacy decision wearing a performance costume.

PROMPT *"the dashboard query is slow, add caching"*

```
cache.set("dashboard", data);
// no user in the key
// under load:
// Alice sees Bob's data
```

Fast. Clean. Passed every single-user test.
Shipped as a perf win, landed as a breach.

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// CASE 4 · THE HELPFUL LOG

Thorough is the thing that hurt you.

PROMPT *"log the full request to New Relic, I can't reproduce this locally"*

```
logger.info("request", { headers, body });
// logs Authorization header
// Bearer eyJ...
// readable for 90 days
```

You asked to see more.
It showed you everything, including what you can't write down.

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// THE PATTERN

Four times. Correct. Passed. Wrong about a person.

The flaky test silenced a real signal

The missing value erased what “absent” meant

The cache served Alice's data to Bob

The helpful log wrote secrets to disk

Green and clean is the new sketchy.

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// WATCH THE QUESTION WORK

The prompt before the prompt

THIN

"clean up and fix the phone validation"

Tighter regex, requires +1 country code. Rejects (312) 555-0142, extensions, and 1-800-FLOWERS.

It decided who gets to sign up. Nothing on screen says so.

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// WATCH THE QUESTION WORK

Ask what breaks

ASK FIRST

"list every real input your new rule would reject"

US numbers without +1 · extensions · vanity numbers · anything pasted with spaces or dashes. The exact people it was about to lock out.

It knew all along. It just had no reason to say so.

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// WATCH THE QUESTION WORK

Make it narc on itself

ASK

"what are you deciding that I didn't ask for?"

Must be E.164 · extensions unsupported · throw instead of returning a field-level error.
Three decisions you never made.

It confesses its overreach better than you catch it.

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// MONDAY

The habit. Two moves.



Ask it. Especially in review. Especially when it's clean and green.



Change the code, write the boundary down. A named non-goal the next agent trips over.

If nothing in the code moved, you didn't really ask it.

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// THE REVIEWER'S CHECKLIST

Three questions for every clean, green change.

1 Who is this deciding for?

A patient. A parent. Someone recovering an account under stress.

2 What distinction did it collapse?

Unknown vs none. Failed vs pending. Same tenant vs different.

3 What boundary needs writing down?

So the next agent, and Friday-at-5:30 you, trip over it.

In a PR: "what decision does this make, and is it ours?"

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Your judgment didn't expire.

Point it at the right threat.

What is this deciding for the person that wasn't its to decide?

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QUESTIONS?

ASK ME IN THE APP

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

PLEASE RATE MY SESSION