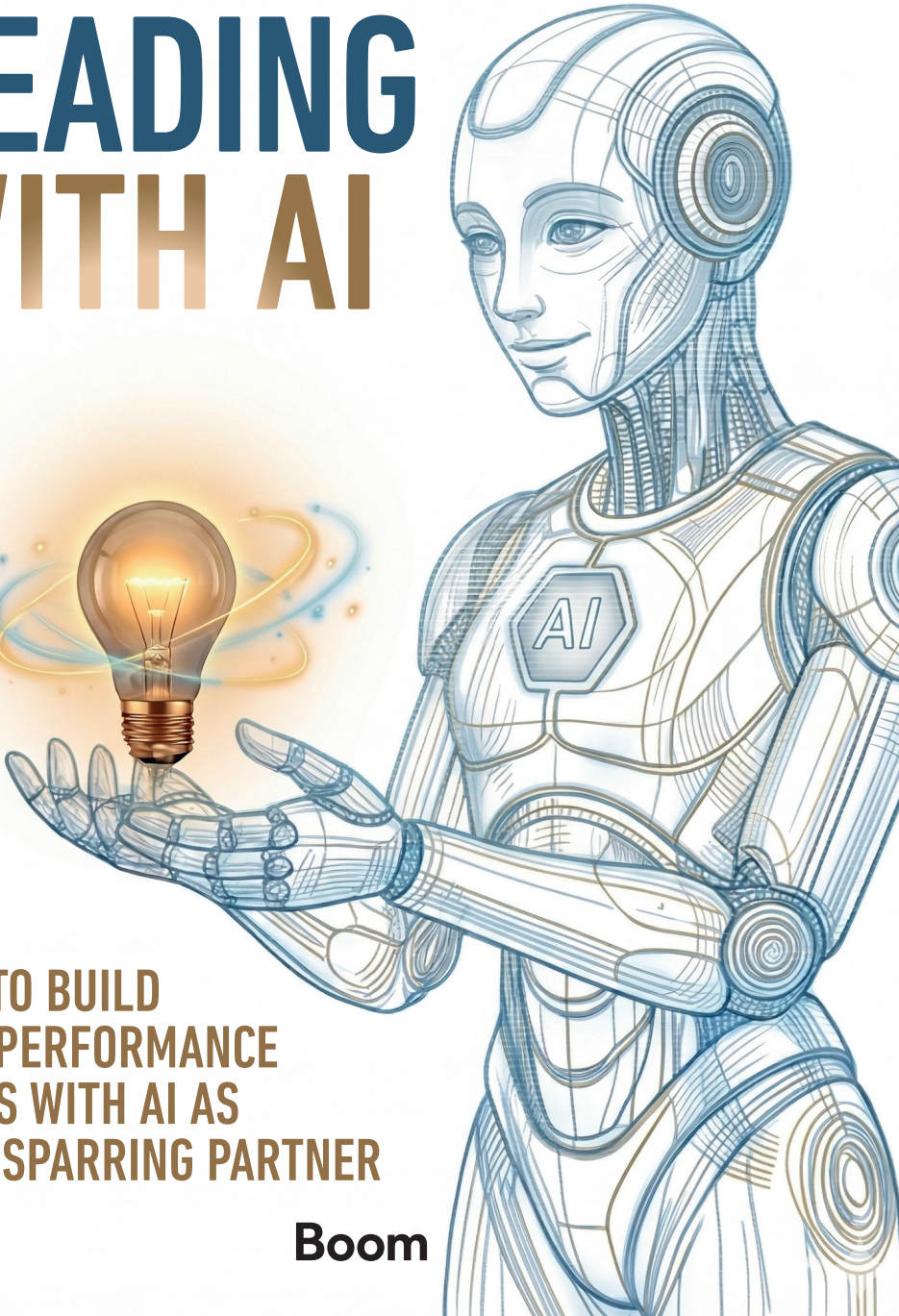


JORIS MERKS-BENJAMINSEN

LEADING WITH AI



HOW TO BUILD
HIGH PERFORMANCE
TEAMS WITH AI AS
YOUR SPARRING PARTNER

Boom

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SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP (WITH AI)

Most organizations I work with as a trainer have a clear mandate: the use of AI must increase across the board. Because even though they are aware of the risks involved, the risk and fear of being left behind is even greater. This has led to the rise of roles such as Chief AI Officer (CAIO), AI Transformation Lead, and Head of AI.

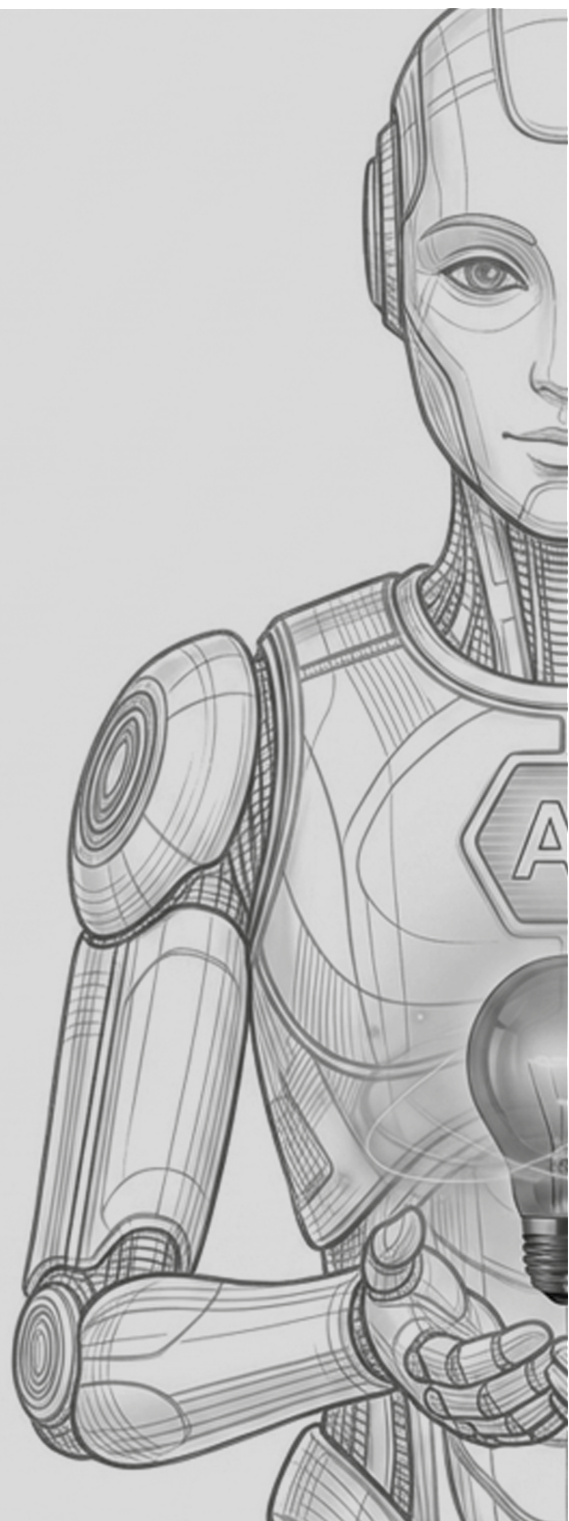
A study by Amazon Web Services among 3,700 global IT leaders predicted that we would hit the 86% adoption mark for these roles by early 2026. We have now reached that milestone. These AI executives are not just looking at bits and bytes; they are tasked with fundamentally changing how we work. AI adoption is not another IT project to be ‘rolled out’; it is a shift in how we collaborate and lead.

While the emergence of these roles is a positive step, there is also a blind spot. The people with the most influence over the speed – or sluggishness – of AI adoption are *not* the people in these new AI leadership roles, but all the managers and leaders across the organization who control prioritization, performance reviews, compensation, and promotions. They, together, determine which behaviors are rewarded and which are tolerated. If a manager consistently prioritizes short-term success over the organization’s capacity to learn, a Chief AI Officer stands no chance. A new strategy simply grinds to a halt against the team’s daily priorities.

Many organizations recognize this and have added AI-related questions to their employee engagement surveys. A common question is: “My manager actively encourages the use of AI tools to improve my work.”

The data explains why this is so critical. Research by Gallup shows that employees who agree are 6.5 times more likely to find AI useful for their role. Unfortunately, only 28% of employees feel their manager is actually doing this.

This is where the opportunity lies. But how do you take on this role as a leader when you are already stretched to the limit? And do you need to be tech-savvy? I don't think so. In Part I of this book, I discuss how to step into this role. In Parts II and III, we move toward a practical model for management and leadership. For every aspect of that model, we explore how AI can support you. This is how you become a role model for the thoughtful application of AI. Not as an additional task, but by making AI work for the core of your profession: leading your team.



2. CAN AI RUN MY TEAM FOR ME?

Try asking your AI tool the following question:



⋮ I am the manager of a team. Can you run my team for me?

What a relief: you haven't lost your job! Better yet, AI will not replace you but instead help you with almost anything. Admittedly, it does require some practice, but it is much easier than you might think.



Most AI tools offer variations of two main modes: a 'fast mode' for efficiency with simple tasks, and a more powerful 'thinking mode' for depth. For most of the use cases as discussed in this book, the latter is essential. Most leadership tasks require complex reasoning, thorough analysis, and nuanced understanding. The fast mode often lacks the necessary processing power for these challenges, and therefore I recommend you to deliberately choose the thinking mode.

Figure 1 shows how step-by-step you will find more and more use cases for AI. It starts with simply ‘playing’ with it. Perhaps you have already used AI to create a funny picture or write a lighthearted poem. The more you experiment, the steeper your learning curve becomes. The time you invest at this level, is quickly recouped when you begin using AI as an assistant – for instance by automated minute taking or gathering and summarizing information.

In the production and creative phase, you will experience for the first time that AI doesn’t just help you work faster, it helps you work better. You don’t just save time; you reduce the mental noise. Because you have to worry less about the details, you can devote more attention to the actual substance of your emails, documents, and articles. Furthermore, AI provides tips to improve your writing and offers new, substantive ideas.

Finally, once you have experienced the value of AI as a sparring partner, you will truly understand the impact it can have. It starts with drafting strategies and goals more quickly and accurately, analyzing data, and more. Next you reach the level that was the biggest surprise for me: AI can help you with complex human dynamics – conducting difficult conversations, building trust, improving collaboration, influencing others, and more. In this book, I take you through this learning curve step by step with many examples of AI prompts that you can adapt to your own needs.

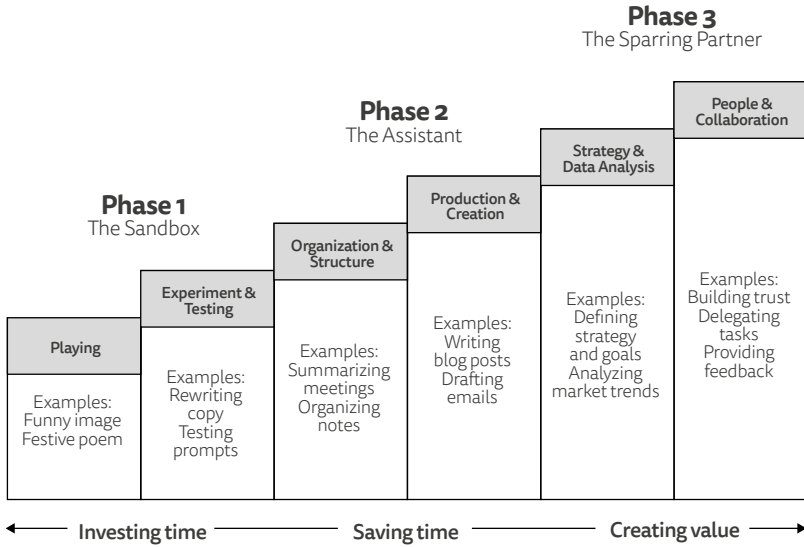


Figure 1: The learning curve of experimenting with AI

For the use cases in this book, you don't need expensive software or extensive technical knowledge; you can accomplish a great deal with the free versions of common AI tools. I intentionally avoid overly complex technology. Technology always follows the same path: from complicated (such as MS-DOS computers of the past) to invisible and user-friendly (like your smartphone today). Because AI is developing so rapidly, the technology itself is increasingly fading into the background. What remains are the timeless skills:

- 1. Intentional leadership** to build high-performance teams.
- 2. Collaborating with AI** in the right way and at the appropriate time.

The second skill builds on the first: only once you have a clear understanding of how a leader builds a high-performance team, can you fully identify how and where AI can augment your efforts. This book, therefore, does not solely focus on the use of AI; it also offers a holistic and practical model for building high-performance teams. You can see this model in Figure 2.

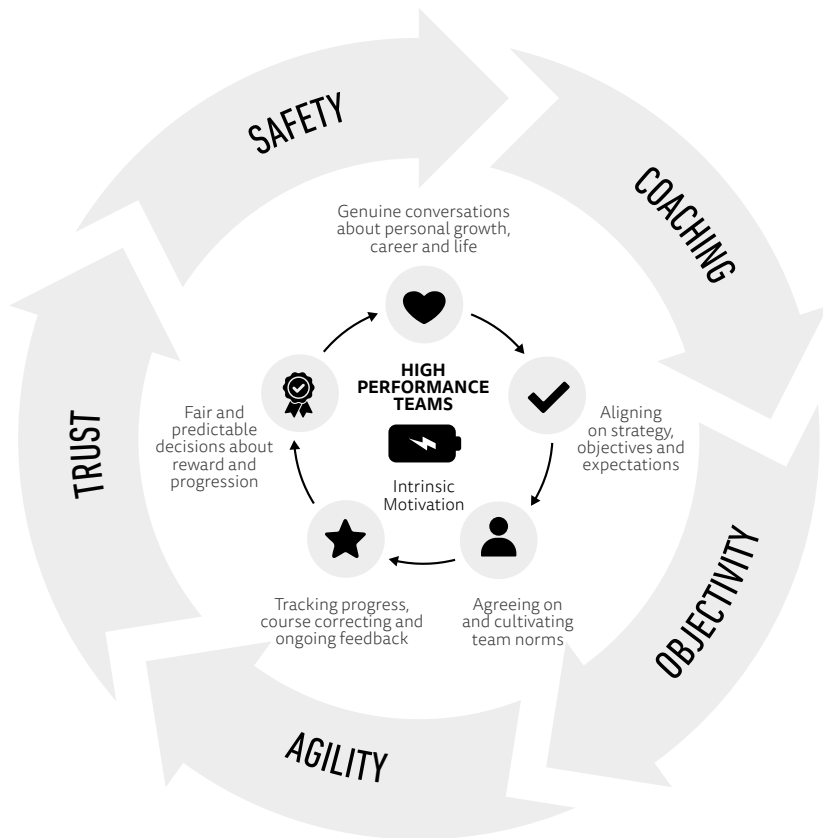


Figure 2: Holistic framework for building high-performance teams

It is not your proficiency in individual components, but the **coherence** of the entire model that defines your impact as a leader. This consistency is often the first thing to go when the whirlwind of daily demands takes over.

The five subjects at the center of the model are the so-called ‘Brilliant Basics.’ These basics form the foundation of leadership and are covered extensively in Part II. I call them Brilliant Basics because they account for the lion’s share of the work in building high-performance teams.

If this foundation is shaky, your team will likely not show their resistance immediately, but you will eventually see it reflected in lower intrinsic motivation and effectiveness. Upward feedback helps you identify gaps in your leadership early, enabling you to focus on the areas that matter most for maintaining leadership consistency. In Chapter 6 on building high-performance teams, I discuss how to gather upward feedback.

Once the foundation is solid, you can take the team to the next level with five enriching skills: trust, psychological safety, coaching, objectivity, and agility. These are covered in Part III of the book. The book concludes with finding your personal leadership style, because no model or AI application can have real impact if it undermines the authenticity of your leadership.

Step by step, I will guide you through the model. At every stage, I'll show you how AI can help you work both more efficiently and smarter. Throughout this book, you'll find more than 100 prompts to start experimenting with immediately. A prompt is essentially a question you ask your AI. Some are straightforward, human questions. Others are longer and more complex.

Think of it as a menu you can choose from rather than a mandatory plan. As a leader, you're busy enough as it is. Take what is of value to you here and now and feel free to leave the rest; you can always come back to it when the situation requires.

These prompts have been extensively tested in the field. Whether you lead a small non-profit team or a large department in a multinational corporation: the principles are universal. Feel free to make them your own by tweaking and customizing them. This book is designed to help you do just that: in Part I, you'll learn the fundamentals of writing effective prompts on your own.

You Don't Have to be Technical

The best part is that you don't need to be a technical expert to use AI effectively. If you run into a technical issue, just ask the AI to resolve it for you:



I am working with **[the AI tool(s) you are using]**. I am trying to **[what you are trying to achieve]**. Can you explain step by step how I do this?

If my tool lacks the functionalities essential to reach my objective, can you provide tips on which tool(s) I should consider?



If your AI tool generates a different output than expected, inform the AI that this is not what you intended. Explain your objective and ask the AI to try again. If the language is too technical, you can explicitly ask it to use simpler terms.

AI for Small Organizations

If you work in a smaller organization, this often means that you do not have the luxury of the support models and HR processes that larger corporations enjoy. This is where AI offers you an additional advantage, as it allows you to bridge that gap by building your own tools.

From outlining clear expectations to structuring coaching conversations, career guidance, and even establishing a salary structure, AI enables you to develop tailored solutions. I encourage you to let AI translate the tools and frameworks from this book into your daily workplace practice. I strongly suggest, however, that you view the initial output as a first draft. Only by refining it through follow-up questions will you shape the result into something truly useful. You might prompt the AI with instructions such as: *"Make this shorter"* or *"This does not fit our culture because..."*.