

AI-POWERED LEADER

An Integration Roadmap
for Human Teams

2026 EDITION

Written and Illustrated by
Fiona Passantino



About the Author



VibeCoding? SlashCommands? FLOPs? AI is confusing, constantly evolving, and often overwhelming. But it doesn't have to be.

TEDx speaker, AI4ALL Legacy "Woman of Influence in AI", host of the podcast Working Humans, and award-winning author of the Comic Books for Executives series, Fiona Passantino is a rising voice in the AI-Human inspirational space, headlining international events for some of the world's most powerful multinationals.

After fifteen years in corporate HR, communication and employee engagement for some of the largest European multinationals, she knows exactly what keeps people up at night and what genuinely moves organisations forward.

Fiona received an MBA with AI focus at the University of Amsterdam.

For fresh comics and latest articles:
www.working-humans.com



AI-Powered Leader

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Published by Working Humans Press

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For Barry, Tilo and Sabine



Don't have time to read?
Just listen.



Working Humans is a bi-monthly podcast focusing on the AI and Human connection at work. Available on Apple and Spotify.

**WORKING
HUMANS**



Reviews for “AI-Powered Leader”

“AI-Powered Leader is not a book about AI; it’s a book about leadership in a world where AI is unavoidable. Fiona makes it clear that AI should not replace thinking, but amplify it, serving as a sounding board rather than a crutch. The real risk isn’t AI taking your job. It’s leaders who learn how to lead better with AI replacing those who don’t, and who build what AI cannot: trust.”

- **Dr. Yoram Solomon, trust researcher, author of The Book of Trust, professor of entrepreneurship SMU**

“Fiona makes a compelling case for why an AI strategy is essential. She blends humor with sharp insights and the fun illustrations in the book contribute to its lighthearted tone. The insights are backed up with practical tools and clear, relatable examples from fields like marketing, HR, and supply chain. The tone and approach are perfectly tuned to the audience: anyone serious about putting AI to work would do well not to overlook this book.”

- **Peter Becker, Lecturer master program AI translator, The Hague University of Applied Sciences**

“Does AI just happen to us? Are you going under when the Great Wave hits? Nah. Stop. Collaborate and listen. And: gain control to ride the wave like a surf pro. Will it ever stop? Of course not. So, start to rethink your leadership for the Age of AI, with Fiona’s easy to digest yet very efficient practical approach.”

- **Sven Schlijper-Karsenberg, Lead Content Strategist ABN AMRO**

“This book captures the reality of Digital Darwinism: AI is no longer a future tool, but a force already reshaping productivity, education, companies, leadership and the internet itself. Fiona explains this transition in a way that feels both urgent and practical. What makes this book valuable is that it does not only describe the technology, it shows why leaders, employees and organizations need to understand what is happening now. Company roadmaps, skills and mindsets need to be reshaped for a transition where one week can feel like six months of transformation. A timely and important read for anyone who wants to understand how AI is changing work, leadership and society.”

- **Nicolò Turri, Application Engineer, Applied AI**

“How to become an AI-powered organisation.” That’s the question at the heart of this outstanding book by Fiona Passantino. A must-read for leaders who want to embrace AI in their workplace but don’t know where to start. Written in plain language, with stories, metaphors and inspiring illustrations, it gives you practical guidelines to actually make it happen.”

- **Cyriel Kortleven, International speaker on the Change Mindset**

“A compelling overview of the leadership challenges to address and the technology-related opportunities to seize by developing an AI-powered organization. After a fascinating introduction of AI fundamentals, this book delves far more into the intricacies of setting up the organization for business success with AI. I highly recommend to any business professional and leader that wants to have a helicopter view of how AI needs us to revisit the organization while nailing the details of the transitional plan. The ‘AI-Powered Leader’ made sense of the known world we are currently in and of the unknown world we all ruthlessly move toward.”

- **George Lellis (FCIM Chartered Marketer & FIDM) Marketing & Commercial AI Transformation Leader**

“This book delivers exactly what many leaders truly need: a practical, human-centered guide that helps navigate the world of AI, which often seems mysterious to outsiders and changes from one moment to the next, and shows how to actually make it work within real organizations. All this without getting lost in jargon or overblown hype. It’s easy to understand, punchy, and genuinely useful, offering a step-by-step path that is easy to follow even without a technical background. What really sets it apart is its humor and creative approach - from the comic-strip style visuals to that unique, bird-based maturity model – which help complex ideas click into place quickly and naturally. And it’s not just about the “how”; it also nudges you to think about the bigger questions, offering a thoughtful glimpse into what the future of AI might hold.”

- **Zoltán Schőnek Dr., Head of HR Coordination Unit, Hungarian Air Navigation Services Pte. Ltd. Co.**



Foreword

dr. Hüseyin Güngör, Adjunct Professor of Artificial Intelligence University of Amsterdam Business School

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant technological promise, nor a narrow technical concern reserved for engineers, data scientists, or IT departments. It has entered the everyday language of organizations, classrooms, boardrooms, creative teams, and public debate. Yet, for many leaders, AI still arrives wrapped in contradiction: exciting but unsettling, powerful but opaque, practical but deeply human in its consequences. This is precisely why AI-Powered Leadership is such a timely and valuable book.

Fiona Passantino has written and illustrated a guide that does something rare: it makes AI strategy approachable without making it simplistic. The book covers an impressive spectrum of topics, from AI literacy, leadership lag, data governance, responsible AI, compliance, training, workflows, agents, RAGs, small language models, AI at scale, and the future of human leadership. Its scope is ambitious, but its tone remains clear, lively, and humane. The 2026 edition is especially welcome because AI is moving so quickly that yesterday's advice can already feel incomplete. This updated edition meets the moment with fresh examples, sharp observations, and practical relevance for leaders who need to act now, not someday.

One of the great strengths of this book is its format. The illustrations are not decorative extras; they are part of the thinking. They make complex ideas memorable. They create moments of recognition, humor, and sometimes discomfort. They help the reader see that AI transformation is not only about systems and tools, but also about anxiety, resistance, responsibility, trust, and imagination. The result is a book that is brilliant, visual, and unusually fun to read.

I particularly enjoyed the book's bird-based maturity metaphor: a journey that can take organizations from the ostrich, with its head in the sand, to the eagle, able to see the landscape clearly and act with confidence. This analogy captures the central challenge of AI leadership. Some organizations deny what is happening. Others experiment nervously, or chase tools without direction. The real task is to rise above the noise, develop perspective, and lead with intention. In the age of AI, leadership requires not only speed, but altitude.

This book will serve beginners very well. Readers who are new to AI will find accessible explanations, practical language, and a reassuring path through unfamiliar terrain. But advanced readers will also benefit. Those already working with AI strategy, transformation, governance, or education will recognize many of the deeper organizational challenges beneath the surface: the need for literacy, accountability, human-centered design, data discipline, and responsible adoption at scale.

I enjoyed reading this book, and I learned a great deal from it. More importantly, I can see myself using its ideas in my own teaching programs on AI strategy. It offers leaders, educators, and professionals a common language for discussing AI not as a technical trend, but as a strategic and human transformation. At its heart, AI-Powered Leadership reminds us that the future of AI will not be shaped by technology alone. It will be shaped by the quality of the questions we ask, the courage of the decisions we make, and the humanity we preserve while building what comes next. That is why this book matters.

INTRODUCTION: Intelligence vs. Wisdom

The Age of AI feels like the start of a new chapter in our species' evolution.

Will it be the utopia of our largest problems solved, our drudgery evaporated?

Or will it lead to a dark age of chaos and mass unemployment?

We don't stop to ask, we build.

Bigger, faster, higher, deeper.

We use our art, our writing, our voices, our likenesses to feed it.

More power. More compute.

Move fast. Break things.

Except the people moving fast are not usually the ones left standing on the broken glass.

The story of AI is not a story about tech.

And it's not a new story.

It's a deeply Human story and it's as old as time.

Our machines are more compelling than the life around us.

And we have disappeared into them.

"AI is easier to talk to than real people."

"AI is a better listener."

"AI understands me."

Relationships are messy, uncomfortable, imperfect, confronting, and difficult.

But without them, without each other, we cannot survive or thrive.

Is it an accident that the same minds that got us to this place, that are designing our future of more efficiency, productivity, predictability, are the same that feel uneasy in the Human domain, where things are fluid, intuitive and non-quantifiable?

What we need from our leaders now, in this Age of AI is more wisdom.

Connection, compassion...

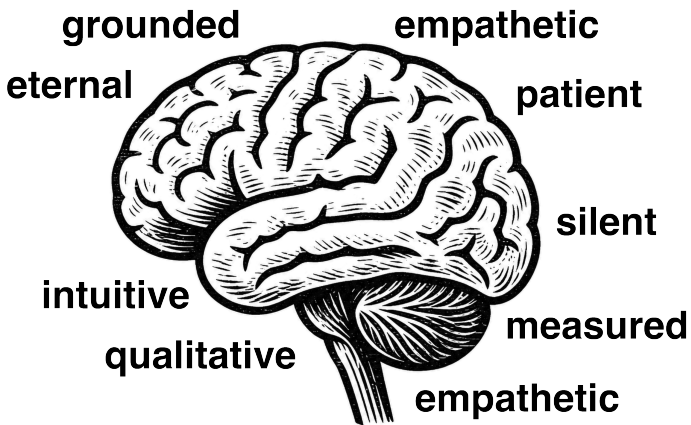
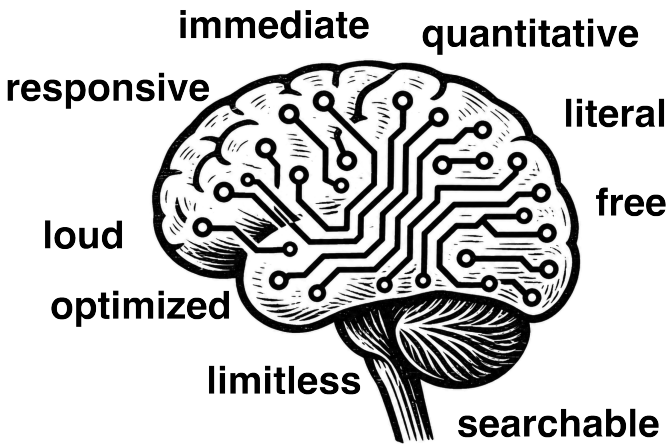
Leadership in the AI Age is about understanding this moment in time for our species.

Taking a seat at the table, making decisions with intention.

Is this the future we want?

We decide.





CHAPTER 1: AI Leadership

In a hotel conference room outside Amsterdam in early 2026, twenty-five eager professionals are learning the basics of AI literacy.

What's AI? How does it work? How can you best integrate it into your workflow?

Predictably, they are hungry, curious, and ready to experiment. They admit, sheepishly, that their workplace does not provide them with professional AI accounts, so they burn through a month's worth of tokens in their free accounts before lunch. Some are even there without their managers' explicit consent. They confess their organization has no clear rules to guide their use of AI.

Where are the leaders? In a world where mid-level managers micro-change-manage every workplace process, why aren't they getting ahead of AI adoption? Where is the stone 'Ten Commandments of AI' tablet in the lobby, stating: *"Thou Shalt Have No Other AI Before Copilot"*, *"Thou Shalt Not Deploy on Vibes Alone"*? Where are the printed beer coasters explaining data management and naming conventions?

Until now, AI adoption has largely been a bottom-up phenomenon, met mostly with silence from the top. While the frontline builds AI fluency, leaders are still stuck in last decade's playbook: reactive, aloof, letting IT experiment with a few automated solutions and leaving everyone else to figure it out alone. AI sounds like just a piece of software.

The AI Leadership Lag

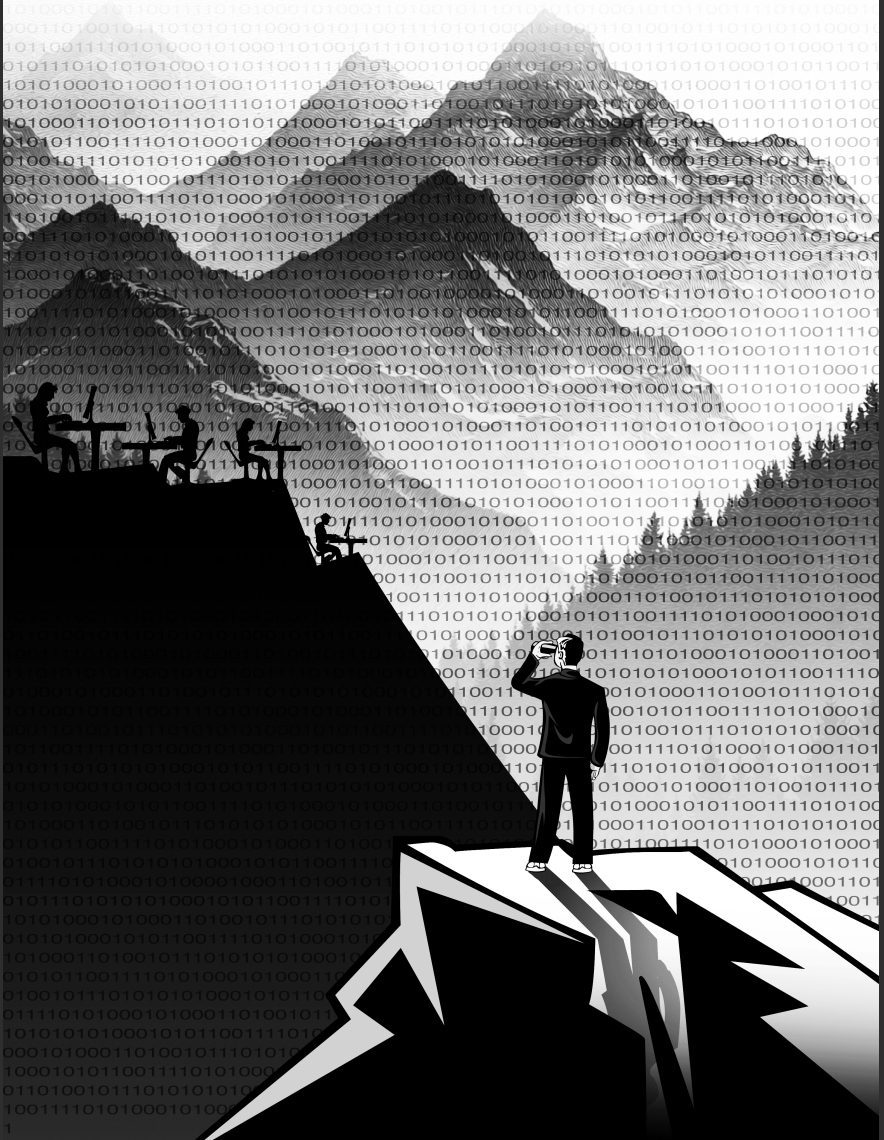
The AI Leadership Lag describes the widening gap between employees' AI literacy and that of top management. Only 15% of US employees strongly agree that their organization has communicated a clear AI strategy.¹ More than half of employees, 58%, have been building AI literacy on their own, with or without guidance, permission, or compliance approval.²

In a typical workplace adoption curve, workers often sit somewhere between early adopters and the early majority, while leaders fall into the late majority or laggard zones, especially the higher they sit in the organization.

When it comes to AI, leaders often assume that their employees will "figure things out" themselves. The young ones know everything about technology. Let them work it out with IT. While this might be true about smartphones and social media (ever watched a teenager swipe their way through TikTok?), it does not translate to AI. Maybe it's because AI use is still discouraged in many schools and formal AI skills training is still patchy in most education systems.

Millennials are generally winning the generational AI adoption challenge, reporting the highest level of expertise and usage at 62% compared with 50% of Gen Z workers, 47% of GenX workers and just 22% Baby Boomers.³

*Larry could feel the gap widening,
but he wasn't ready yet to face
the AI Leadership Lag.*



Our Disruption Roadmap

The World Economic Forum estimated that AI would contribute to the loss of 83 million jobs and the creation of 69 million new ones by 2027.⁴ As with all technological advances, jobs will be lost and transformed. Once the technology matures and takes hold in a critical number of industries, new businesses, new jobs, are created.

At least in theory.

In the past, we were disrupted by machines that would take on our manual labor. The ox and plough extended our strength, and the Industrial Revolution gave us machines to do our heavy lifting. The internet replaced our paper-based administrative economy and physical meetings. Humans still needed to think, judge, decide, and lead.

If AI develops according to the grand design of the Tech Dudes of Silicon Valley, it will replace just about every Human job we currently hold and run every process we manage. It's not unimaginable that someday we would all work for AI bosses and see one-person companies leading swarms of AI workers, marketing to AI buying agents.

Most of the AI we interact with today operates without our even noticing it. Algorithms have been quietly learning our behavior for years and adapting to our likes and dislikes. How does Netflix know that we love romantic sci-fi movies, and why does it serve us that exact strange little cocktail every time we log in? How does your phone know it's you when you reach for it in the morning, and your hair is like a cat on your head, and your face is so puffy that you can barely open your eyes?

Your device unlocks using biometrics, scanning for 30,000 invisible infrared dots and using simple pattern recognition to compare this morning with all your best and worst moments. Face ID gets it wrong just one time out of one million.⁵

We have been using AI, quietly, passively, for years now in the across education, retail, communication, entertainment, logistics, manufacturing, government and banking. In banking, AI secures transactions and detects fraud. If you purchase a first class one way flight to Tahiti or acquire a large amount of Elmo cryptocurrency, your bank's algorithms will compare this with what it has learned is your normal behavior and flag it as a risky transaction.

What changes when AI enters the workflow?

Routine Task Automation: Everyone has those parts of their job they can do with their eyes closed or drunk. The dull, repetitive, mundane tasks every professional has to contend with, like filling in the CRM, scheduling meetings, or following up on client inquiries, can largely be taken up by off the shelf AI with minimal integration. The Human worker will spend more time on the edge cases AI cannot solve: the complex issues that consume 90% of our time and require intuition, wisdom, and compassion.

Brainstorming: For those moments when you are staring at a blank screen, unable to find the words you need to get started, AI powered tools can seed the creative process by asking the right questions, guiding ideation, and spitting back outlines when our brains have gone on strike. It can help with an initial draft based on a few keywords or bullet points. Even if the first ideas are terrible, and they often are, for Humans and AI alike, they can lead to better ones, and finally, to inspiration.



***If it's all
more than
you can
handle...***



***become
more.***

Communication Triage: Creative professionals are often happiest in a cocoon of ideation and visionary thinking, while back and forth communication with colleagues, contacts, and clients is distracting, time consuming, and uninspiring. With AI at work in your inbox, reading, summarizing, and bullet pointing incoming messages, long reports, CC chains, and meeting minutes, more focus can go to the creative problem solving parts of the job.

Adaptation and Learning: As AI evolves, non-technical leaders and professionals will need to stay updated on what feels like daily advancement. We will need to understand new capabilities, test new use cases, and adapt our workflows. Each change brings new challenges and new decisions about our values, ethics, and direction as an organization. Ironically, AI is the perfect teacher, trainer, and practice pony for professional upskilling, not just in AI, but in the other technological advances that form our basic digital infrastructure.

Translation: AI is, by far, a better translation tool than the Google Translate we used in the past. It can understand deeper meaning, work through idioms and expressions, and leverage natural language processing to translate across context, not just vocabulary. Human translators still have the edge in accuracy, specialization, nuance, humor, and irony. But AI has access to nearly every language imaginable, with strong syntax, grammar, and contextual understanding. When “good enough” is good enough, AI gets the job done.

Humanizing: Paradoxically, AI can make us better Humans by helping us see other points of view. Critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision making are essential parts of non-technical work. As Humans, we all carry baggage, history, and cultural perspectives so deeply embedded in our minds that we can rarely extract them on our own. We need that wider perspective as we shape AI integration strategy, set priorities, maintain brand voice, build relationships, and navigate the ethical considerations.

The Invisible Leader

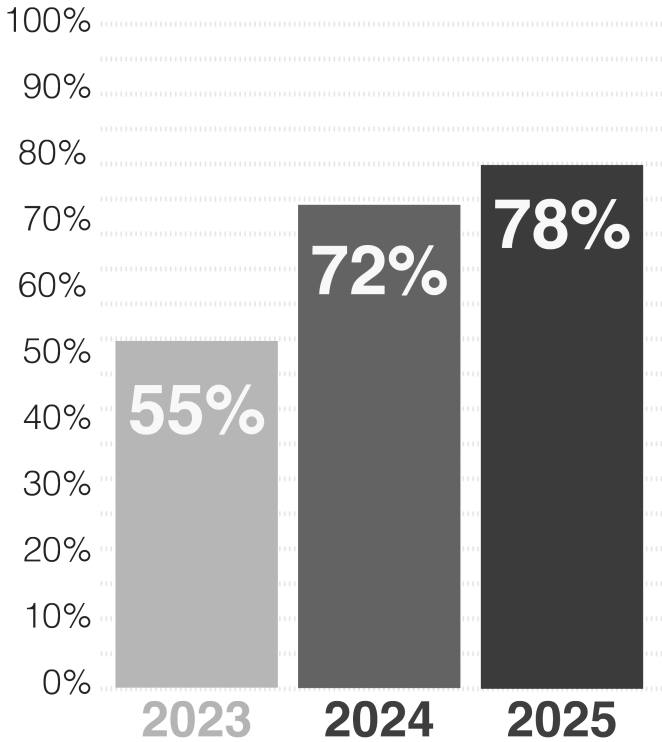
Often, senior leaders live in another world. Their days are packed with meetings stacked from morning to night, with only a knife blade of space between them to do the Human parts of their jobs. They are consumed by office politics, surrounded by other managers, stakeholders, clients, partners, and board members. The higher they rise, the more their work becomes power, positioning, and agenda management.

Mostly invisible to the naked eye, these leaders pass through like comets: quarterly, briefly, and just in time for an all hands webinar to share profit and loss numbers that rarely connect to the daily reality of anyone on a regular payroll. After their high profile internal events, they take a few questions and disappear. Back to Olympus. Back to their offices on high. They are rarely seen in lunchrooms, coffee corners, factory floors, or the flowing river of company social feeds.

We Humans believe in the things we can see. Our reality is built from what our limited senses can gather. The chair you see in front of you is a solid, real thing. We can trust it to support our full weight. We can stub our toe on it, and we can move it around. And yet, like everything in our world, that chair consists mostly of empty space, held together by the furious spinning of unfathomably small particles.

A company operates much the same way: mostly empty space, with culture and purpose held in the minds of its people. When we see and feel the presence of leadership in our daily working lives, we are

Percentage of organizations adopting AI:



Definitely time to think about our AI Integration policy!



SOURCE: Alexandria (2025) "How many companies use AI in 2026? Key statistics and industry trends" Hostingr

swept into the vision more powerfully than any motivational poster in the lobby could manage. When leaders are visible, engaged, communicative, working alongside you, and ready to listen, they build trust, and the company begins to feel real.

What's "AI Leadership"?

AI Leadership is both method and mindset. It's about turning every Human in your working community into an empowered team of two, one based in silicon and one in carbon, using the talents, skills and worldview of the other. If all goes well, this workflow leads to better decisions, stronger performance, and more joy for the Humans involved; freeing people from the 'bitch work' of their jobs so they can offer more of what actually makes them valuable.

From sales to finance, supply chain to marketing, administration to the teams driving delivery trucks, watering the lawns, or preparing coffee in the lobby, there are few workers in the organization who cannot benefit from AI empowerment. The number of organizations using AI in at least one business function has grown from 78% in 2024 to 88% in 2025, and the trend is unlikely to slow down into the future.⁶

Despite this, getting everyone on board is still an enormous undertaking. Becoming an AI-Powered Organization at scale is a massive, years long transformation process, the mother of all change management. Change at scale of any kind brings its usual array of leadership challenges, and becoming AI-Powered brings the additional struggle of overcoming surprisingly strong resistance from the Analogue Old Guard.


As an AI-Leader, you have stakeholders to convince, employees to inspire, supporters to gather, customer expectations to manage, because things will not always run like clockwork during the transition, and the very Human task of finding the time and energy to do all this on top of your actual job.

Why AI Integration Fails

About 80% of AI transformation efforts fail, roughly twice the rate of other large scale change projects.⁷ Why? The C-suite is largely sold on the promise of AI: wildly efficient teams, higher productivity, better output. Nearly all leaders, about 96%, believe that AI adoption will enhance productivity, while only 65% of employees agree.⁸ Most failures come down to unclear vision, shallow understanding, poor training, and internal resistance.⁹

In practice, the efficiency fantasy collides with reality. When asked about the real demands of AI adoption, 38% of employees report feeling overwhelmed.¹⁰ Without proper AI training, adoption simply adds another layer of work; 77% of employees report working more hours, and nearly half, 47%, do not know how to meet expectations for increased productivity.¹¹ Only one in four companies have a structured AI training program, and only 13% have an AI implementation strategy.¹²

What is all that extra work about? Employees are spending that extra time reviewing AI output, 39%, and learning how to use the new tools, 23%.¹³ One in four workers believe their company is asking too much when it comes to AI, and this push for greater efficiency appears to be feeding burnout, 71%, and attrition risk, with one in three saying they may quit within the next six months.¹⁴



**Don't tell the boss
about AI Leadership
training...**

**...otherwise he'll
replace us all!**

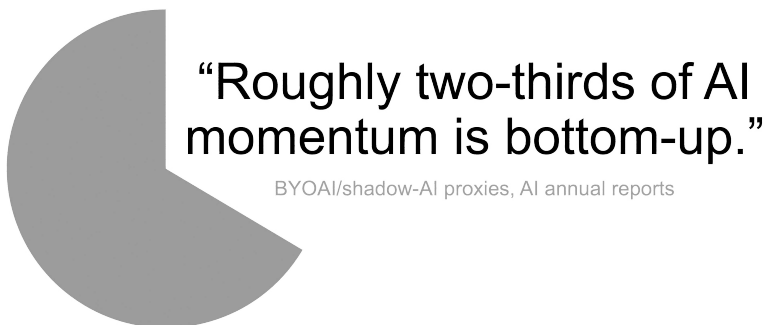
Leadership Education

The best way to describe the AI brain to a leader is to compare it to an extremely bright, endlessly cheerful intern, fresh out of school. Full of energy and good intentions, they lack context, nuance, experience and the kind of dark humor you only acquire after a few years on the job. AI has no life experience of its own. It can only make estimates based on the recorded experiences of Humans. AI only works when both the problem and expectations are clear; if the assignment is fuzzy, the output will be inconsistent and scattered.

The first thing leaders need to learn is that AI is not a magic brain that does everything equally well, and that it's often spectacularly incorrect, spinning facts out of whole cloth. It is much closer to a new type of employee than a static "if this, then that" piece of software that is predictable and reliable. AI is a prediction engine that makes guesses based on probability, thinking more like a linguist than a mathematician. An AI model breaks problems into patterns and rules of language, whether it is working with code, data analysis, translation or text.

Any Human working with AI knows it requires a sharp critic, constant pushback and a refusal to accept the first result. It does not replace thinking but rather demands more of it: sharp management and determined guidance. Be very clear about Human accountability; the organization, not the AI, is held responsible for mistakes and misleading output. Leaders need to map accountability clearly, down to each individual user.

The second fact is that your new cheerful machine worker will need to be fed with quality input, just like your best programmers require a steady diet of pizza and Red Bull. Good data is the fuel for learning systems. Your data needs to be cleaned, organized and made accessible. Leaders must understand what data is, what makes it valuable, how to protect it, how to delegate ownership and how to defend its purity with the same intensity that the brand or stock value is protected.



Mayer, Yee, Chui, Roberts (2023) "Superagency in the workplace: Empowering people to unlock AI's full potential January 28, 2023 | Report" McKinsey

Leaders say...

**Use AI
to be more
efficient!**



Managers hear...

**"Use AI
to replace
people!"**



Workers think...

**AI is taking
away our
jobs!**



Third, the ethical use of AI is not optional. AI Leaders understand bias, privacy, copyright, transparency and decision accountability. In many jurisdictions, this will increasingly be enforced by outside regulation from 2026 onward. Organizations will be held accountable for the actions of their working community, whether they're behind a desk or out in the field. Leadership AI training is less about learning how to prompt and create assistants, and more about policy and data safety, ethical considerations, operational governance and community support.

The AI way of working does not fit easily into old processes. Leaders will need to redesign how the work gets done, who does what, what the new team structure will look like, what tasks get automated or simplified, and what processes remain Human. People cannot make these changes quickly. They need time and space to learn; it will be a year of investment, experimentation, training, making mistakes and getting back on track again.

Co-Creation

The goal of the AI-Powered organization is operational co-creation. Every member of the community will work as a combined AI-Human team, and getting there is about both method and mindset. AI systems work with Human guides and managers as a shared working brain, as partners, completing the other to improve overall performance.

AI systems excel in crunching large amounts of data and giving advice or ideas. They are great at pattern recognition, complex analysis, can hold and retrieve large amounts of information, numbers and insights. Humans are still the masters of contextual understanding, creativity, critical thinking, and ethical judgment. They bring the spark of inspiration, that little bit of crazy, and naturally excel at the live, Human-to-Human interaction. No virtual assistant can choose your party outfit better than the friend who loves you enough to say, absolutely not, and no AI video talking head will be more engaging than a live trainer.

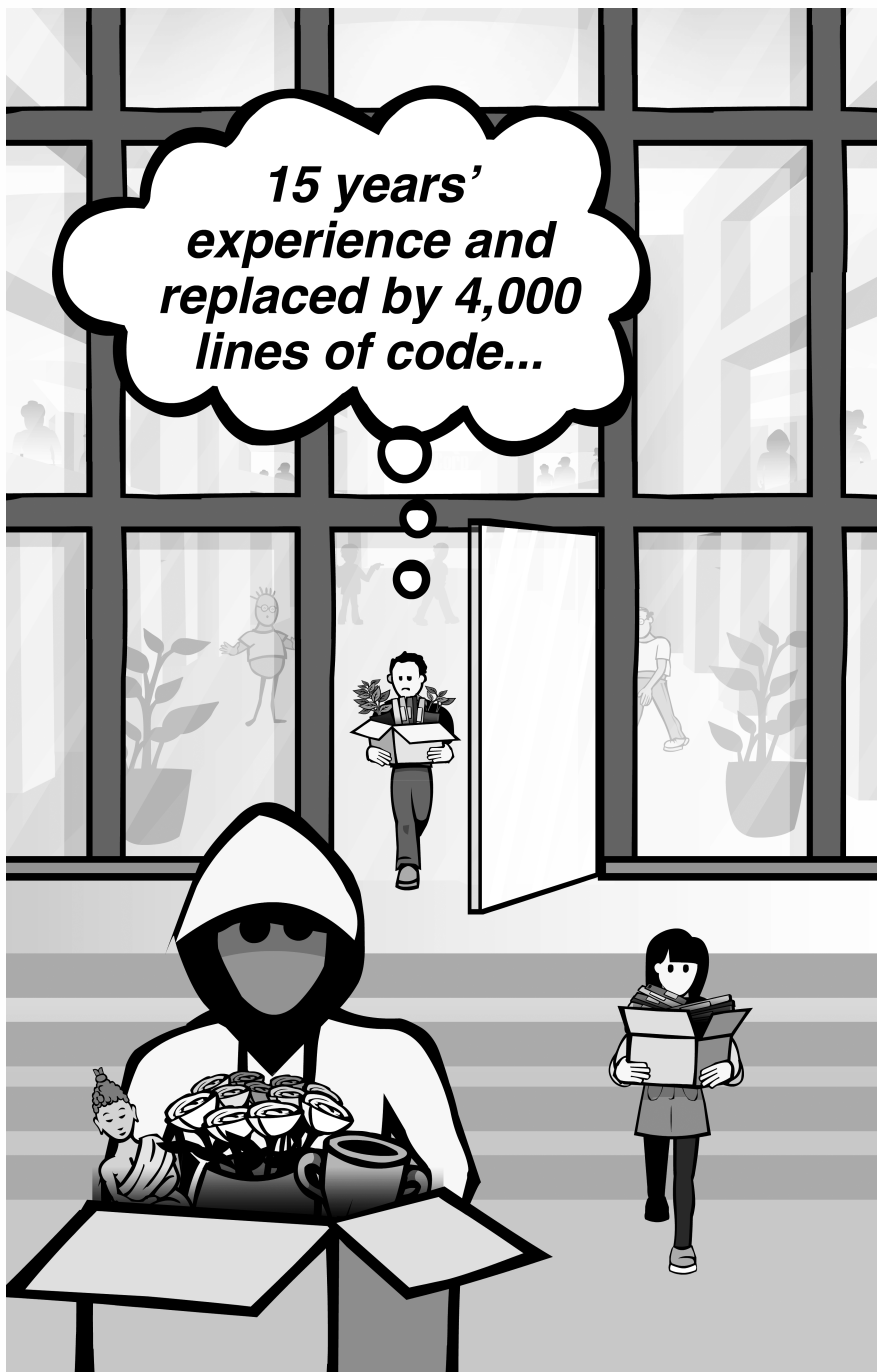
The copilot alone will not usually make decisions independently, but is there to recommend approaches, suggest paths forward, and guide the Human with data and evidence the Human can verify. This is balanced by Human decision-making, using heart, gut, lived experience and specific company context.

For most Humans, this is simply a better way to work, which explains why AI adoption is largely a bottom-up phenomenon. The selling point of change is the vision of being freed, partially or fully, from the drudgery of dull, repetitive assignments to focus on the more creative, connective and visionary parts of the job they signed up for.

Taking on AI transformation is a big ask. No exceptions; everyone will have to work harder, change old habits, learn a few new ones and likely undergo a reorganization. Each employee will need a different mix of convincing, support and reminding. Leading that full range of Human personalities, strengths, weaknesses, hopes and anxieties requires creativity, imagination, compassion and strength. It will feel like an uphill struggle all the way.

Leadership in the AI Age requires as many Human skills as before, maybe more. Intuition, instinct, deep listening, expert communication and cultivating a community of trust count far more than technical skill, industry knowledge (AI can teach just about anything now) or any of the traits and skills that got you where you are.

15 years' experience and replaced by 4,000 lines of code...



You will no longer be able to maintain direct oversight or control over every day to day decision in your community; it will simply be impossible. You will have to rely heavily on a culture of trust in your people, trust in your intuition, and faith in your vision. There is no model in the world that can do this for you.

