

# Leadership Futures

**Redefining Leadership in the Age of AI**

Henley Centre  
for Leadership



WORLD OF WORK  
INSTITUTE



# Introduction

AI and digital technologies are reshaping organisations at speed. Decisions are being made with less certainty, work is being reorganised in real time, and leaders are increasingly required to act without established rules, roles or precedent.

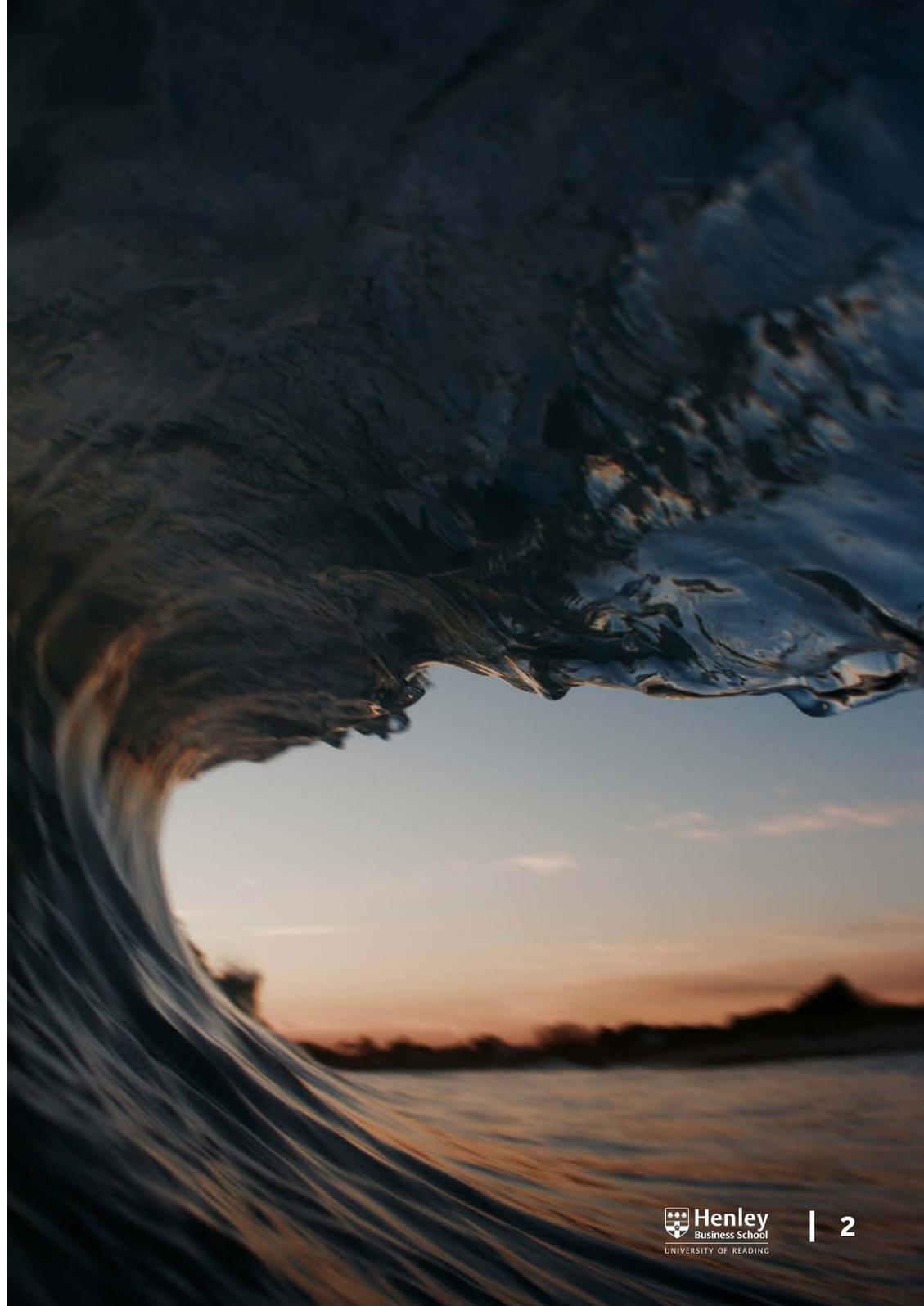
This report is for senior leaders navigating this reality. It explores how technology is changing organisations, and what those changes demand of leadership, judgement and human capability.

Drawing on in-depth conversations with C-suite executives and senior leaders, alongside insights from Henley Business School academics working across leadership, strategy, ethics, organisational behaviour and technology, the report examines how AI adoption is unfolding in practice. Together, these perspectives offer a rare vantage point, capturing how leaders are experiencing change as it happens.

The research highlights the emergence of a new managerial class, defined less by formal authority and more by judgement, curiosity, connection and the ability to lead through sustained uncertainty. It explores why early efficiency gains from AI often fail to translate into lasting value, where organisations are encountering human and structural limits, and how leadership itself is evolving in response.

Rather than treating technology as a standalone topic, the report positions it as context: the environment in which decisions are now made. It considers how leaders are balancing ambition with responsibility, maintaining trust, and building organisational value that endures.

At its core, this report is grounded in a simple conviction: while technology may reshape the world of work, leadership determines whether that change becomes genuine progress.



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**The most important impact of AI will not be technical, but human. As automation accelerates, organisations must decide how technology supports judgement, creativity and purpose at work, rather than quietly eroding the qualities that make work meaningful.**



**Professor Keiichi Nakata**  
Director of AI & Automation  
in the World of Work Institute,  
Henley Business School

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**This is not a question of optimising technology or people in isolation. The changes driven by AI require leaders to guide hybrid workforces. Managers are custodians of deeply entangled human-machine ecosystems.**



**Professor Bernd Vogel**  
Professor in Leadership and  
Founding Director of the Henley  
Centre for Leadership,  
Henley Business School

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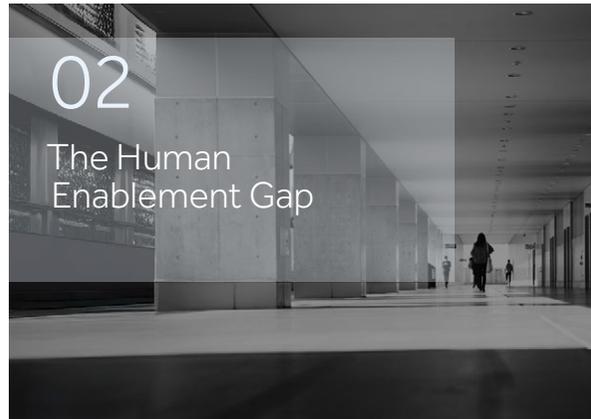


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# 01

## Navigating AI in the Real World



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AI will generate big changes in the workforce, and not only the workforce but education and the way that we humans tackle work. It is a new paradigm that we need to adapt to. There is not much we can do other than try to learn and live with it.



**Denis Bidinost**

Programme Director, AI Strategy and Implementation, Henley Business School

AI is increasingly positioned as a central driver for productivity, growth and competitiveness, shaping where organisations invest and how they operate. It is already influencing day-to-day decisions, business models and performance expectations across sectors.

As adoption accelerates, leaders face growing pressure to translate technical capability into meaningful improvements in how work and value are delivered, often within significant operational and regulatory constraints. This growing gap between what technology enables and what organisations can realistically deliver is now one of the defining leadership challenges of the moment.

## AI as a strategic imperative

The UK continues to experience long-standing productivity challenges, prompting renewed policy focus on technology capability, digital skills and AI fluency. National priorities increasingly frame these capabilities as essential to economic growth and workforce resilience, reinforcing expectations that organisations must modernise how work is done.

As a result, AI is rising rapidly up leadership agendas, shaping investment priorities and transformation programmes. While adoption is already underway, the critical question is whether organisations are developing the skills, confidence and perspective needed to match ambition to the scale of the opportunity AI presents.

## The first wave: efficiency over ambition

Early AI adoption has been driven primarily by efficiency. Organisations are automating routine tasks, streamlining workflows and reducing operational cost, making this the most visible and easily justified starting point for many initiatives. These gains are reshaping roles and shifting repetitive work from people to systems, reinforcing expectations that AI can deliver productivity improvements in the near term.

Our recent report, *The AI High: Feeling optimistic but overwhelmed*, based on a survey of over 4,600 full-time workers across 29 UK industries, reflects this pattern. Respondents most strongly associate AI with cutting administrative work (72 percent), automating routine tasks (69 percent) and improving workflow (66 percent), underlining why organisations first pursue AI as a route to productivity. Over half also believe AI could make shorter working weeks more achievable, reflecting expectations that efficiency gains will translate into new models of working, not only faster output (Henley Business School, 2025).

For many organisations, this focus represents a rational and valuable first step. Over time, however, when efficiency becomes the dominant lens, ambition can begin to narrow. AI risks being framed primarily as a cost or headcount lever. These gains are tangible, but they reflect only a fraction of the technology's longer-term potential.



There is an overwhelming focus on cost and efficiency. Many organisations are talking about how to reduce headcount, how to automate everything. If that is the focus, all that will happen is that organisations will reduce the number of people working there and make what they currently do slightly more efficient. It will not change how value is created.



**Angus Morrison**

Programme Director, Leading in the AI Era,  
Henley Business School



Commonly, technology projects take twice as long and cost twice as much but, if done correctly, can be transformational.

**James Sparrow**

Chief Executive Officer, UK & EMEA, Savills

## When strategy meets operational reality

When implementing AI, many organisations encounter a persistent gap between strategic intent and operational reality. Every organisation carries a hidden architecture of accumulated systems, processes and decisions built over years, sometimes decades.

When leaders talk about transformation, attention naturally turns to what comes next. In practice, change begins with what has already been inherited, shaped by past priorities and compromises. AI initiatives are therefore constrained not by vision alone, but by the foundations on which they must be built.

Legacy systems, data silos, interoperability constraints and inherited governance models determine what can be delivered in practice, how quickly change can be implemented and where risk is concentrated. More than half of business leaders report using inaccurate or inconsistent data to guide key decisions, with siloed systems and unclear ownership cited as primary causes of failure in data initiatives (Wipro, 2025). Sixty-eight percent report that legacy systems are blocking the adoption of modern technologies (Pegasystems, 2025).

Fragmentation compounds these challenges. Years of bolt-on tools and department-specific solutions make coordination difficult and change hard to scale. More than four in five organisations investing in AI report building workarounds simply to access usable data (IBM x Forbes, 2025). In these conditions, effort shifts from developing new capabilities to managing complexity, narrowing both the pace and scope of AI progress.



There is an inevitability to AI, so businesses not actively evaluating its opportunities may get left behind. I think the risks of not adopting AI are now greater than the risks of doing so, but such adoption needs to be considered, appropriate, and proportionate.

**Donna Gildea**  
Director of Operations and Technology, Grafton

## Investment decisions under uncertainty

Alongside structural constraints, leaders face growing uncertainty about where and how to invest in AI. Markets are crowded with competing claims, tools are evolving rapidly, and clarity about what constitutes sustainable value remains limited.

Returns are often unclear at the outset. Benefits emerge unevenly across functions and time horizons, while costs linked to integration, governance and change management are frequently underestimated. Leaders described the difficulty of distinguishing experimentation from foundational investment, and short-term gains from longer-term capability building.

These decisions carry material risk. Leaders spoke about the strategic, operational and reputational consequences of selecting systems that fail to deliver, alongside the personal accountability that often accompanies investment choices at board level. At the same time, regulatory expectations around data protection, auditability, explainability and ethical oversight continue to shape what organisations can adopt and how quickly.

Yet hesitation carries its own cost. The pace of technological change means delay can widen capability gaps and weaken competitiveness. In this context, the challenge is not simply to move quickly, but to invest with judgement and make choices that preserve future options while enabling progress under conditions of uncertainty.

## Asking the right question

As organisations confront the practical realities of AI adoption, including legacy systems, investment risk, regulatory obligation and organisational readiness, a deeper shift in thinking begins to take place.

Efficiency gains remain important. They deliver visible progress, measurable returns and early confidence. But they rarely justify the scale of investment, disruption and personal accountability now required of leaders. The constraints organisations face do not prevent efficiency gains, but they do reveal their limits.

In our work with leaders, a consistent theme emerges: the greater risk is not moving too fast with AI, but not moving far enough.

A more fundamental question is beginning to surface: where can AI create meaningful value, and what must organisations become in order to realise it?

This marks a turning point. Attention shifts from improving what already exists to rethinking how value is created, experienced and sustained, particularly in areas where judgement, trust and service quality shape long-term advantage.

## The second wave: relational value

As organisations begin to look beyond efficiency, AI is increasingly being used to support deeper forms of value creation. This involves strengthening services, relationships and experiences over time, rather than simply accelerating output.

This is visible both externally and internally. Externally, AI is reshaping how organisations engage with customers and users through more responsive, personalised and continuous services. It enables organisations to anticipate needs, tailor interactions and reduce friction across complex journeys. Internally, AI is beginning to support decision-making, coordination and service delivery across teams, allowing people to focus more fully on work that requires interpretation, context and care.

Used well, AI creates space for more meaningful human engagement, particularly in moments where empathy, judgement and trust matter most.

We see this as a critical point of differentiation. Growth is increasingly shaped by how effectively organisations combine technological capability with human understanding and discernment. Organisations that move beyond efficiency use AI to enhance what people contribute, not simply to reduce what they do.

This perspective was echoed in conversations with leaders. As Sandra Thompson of EI Evolution reflected, much current adoption remains focused on reduction, but she expects that “when we tire of that, we’ll see smart companies finding the opportunity to add value in a way that utilises the human element and the amazing things humans bring, but in a very different way to how we use people now in the interaction between customers and brands.”

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We have some neurodiverse employees for whom human interaction is quite challenging... technology allows them to make a significant contribution.

**Nathalie Peach**

Founder & Director, Peach Coaching Ltd

Professor Keiichi Nakata of Henley Business School reinforces this view, noting that when AI is used strategically and responsibly, it can simplify complex tasks and remove routine burdens, enabling people to focus more on work that requires judgement, empathy and creativity, improving both service quality and work satisfaction.

However, this form of value creation is harder to lead and measure than efficiency gains. Benefits emerge over time, across systems and through cumulative improvements in experience, service quality and trust. Realising this potential requires more than deploying new tools. It depends on redesigning services, roles and workflows so that people and technology operate in closer coordination.

Relational applications place AI directly within moments that matter to people, from everyday interactions to decisions about access and support. In these contexts, outcomes depend not only on technical performance, but on how thoughtfully systems are designed, governed and used over time.

This is where the challenge changes again. As AI becomes more embedded in how value is created and delivered, the limiting factors become less about technology itself and more about human capability: how well people understand the systems they work with, how confidently they exercise judgement, and how effectively organisations enable responsible use at scale.



Digital transformation used to sit quietly in the back office, but now it's very much front of house. Leaders don't need to be technical experts, but they do need a certain level of digital fluency - an openness and curiosity to understand technology well enough to guide strategic conversations.

**Lenna Lou**  
Director, The L Factor Ltd

## The human dimension

As organisations move beyond efficiency and begin to pursue deeper forms of value, a new reality becomes clear. The primary barriers to progress are no longer technological.

AI systems are increasingly capable. What varies sharply is how effectively organisations understand them, apply them and govern their use in everyday work. Value is shaped by people's ability to translate technical potential into practical decisions, redesign work around new capabilities, and exercise judgement where outcomes matter.

This is reflected in wider global research. As the World Economic Forum observes, AI adoption is accelerating, but success depends on empowering people, not just deploying technology (World Economic Forum, 2025).

As AI becomes more embedded in how work is done, the constraints that most shape progress are increasingly human rather than technical. They arise from gaps in literacy and confidence, from weak connections across teams, and from uneven capability to use technology responsibly at scale.

This is the human enablement gap, and it is now one of the most decisive factors in whether AI delivers lasting value or remains confined to incremental gains.

## Leadership Insight

AI and digital systems are advancing faster than organisational understanding of how to use them well. Although early efficiency gains are tangible, they represent only the first layer of impact. The deeper test for leaders lies in how they guide judgement, ambition and human capability as technology reshapes work, decision-making and value creation. Progress depends on leadership's ability to work thoughtfully with uncertainty, balancing opportunity with responsibility.

## Leadership Actions

- Ensure AI initiatives specify how work and value creation will change, not just what tasks will be automated.**

Shift approval criteria from system deployment and cost savings to the redesign of workflows, roles and customer outcomes.

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- Challenge efficiency-led business cases that risk locking in outdated operating models.**

Use AI investments as triggers to revisit whether current ways of working still make strategic sense.

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- Build board-level fluency and discipline in AI decision-making.**

Ensure boards can interrogate AI ambition, challenge trade-offs and guide long-term value creation, rather than defaulting to defensive, compliance-led or purely cost-focused oversight.

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- Redefine early success in AI programmes beyond short-term productivity gains.**

Track whether adoption is improving decision quality, responsiveness and innovation capacity, rather than only output or headcount ratios.

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- Align AI investment decisions with strategic priorities, not tool availability.**

Avoid chasing new capabilities without a clear link to competitive advantage or organisational purpose.

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- Create dedicated forums for cross-functional integration of AI decisions.**

Ensure technology, operations and commercial leaders jointly shape how AI is embedded in everyday work, rather than treating it as a functional rollout.

# 02 The Human Enablement Gap

Every organisation holds an implicit assumption about technology: that new systems, tools and platforms will naturally deliver progress. But we believe that transformation is not a technical upgrade, it's a human one. Technology creates value only when people have the confidence and competence to integrate it into their work.

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Successful chief executives are constantly learning. They're curious, motivated, and ask questions.



**Dr Narendra Laljani**

Programme Director, Henley Executive Management Programme and The Henley Leading Strategy and Execution Programme, Henley Business School

## When capability outpaces confidence

In practice, the constraints of transformation are rarely technical. They arise from gaps in understanding and preparedness, and from weak connections across teams. Leaders repeatedly described employees feeling overwhelmed by the pace of change, managers struggling to turn AI into everyday practice, and a growing divide between those who feel digitally fluent and those who feel left behind.

These dynamics are not always visible in formal metrics, but they shape how effectively organisations adapt. And while organisations continue to invest in new technologies, many are finding that people are not being brought along at the same pace.

Across the conversations, three recurring challenges surfaced.

### 1. Literacy: building shared understanding

The first challenge is literacy. Not technical depth, but the shared understanding people need to participate meaningfully in conversations about AI, automation and data. We see many organisations still relying on a small group of specialists to interpret technologies that now reach every function. When literacy is uneven, decisions become centralised, collaboration narrows and uncertainty grows.

In this context, literacy is less about how systems work and more about what they mean: their implications for roles, responsibilities and the organisation's capacity to adapt. As technology becomes more embedded, continuous learning is becoming a core mechanism through which people build confidence and contribute effectively to transformation. This need is reinforced by the scale of skills change ahead, with workers expected to see 39 percent of their existing skill sets transformed or become outdated between 2025 and 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025).

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There's digital access, digital literacy, and digital equality - and all three matter. Because if we want to transform the business in the way we intend to, we need to make sure everyone can participate.

**Jacq Longrigg**

Group People Development Director,  
Nuclear Decommissioning Authority

## 2. Mindset: curiosity as the real differentiator

The second challenge is mindset. Leaders consistently distinguished between skills and curiosity. Skills can be developed, but curiosity shapes how people engage with new technologies, test ideas and build confidence over time. Training programmes can create competence, but they do not guarantee the willingness to explore or to experiment in low-risk ways.

What we see is that curiosity accelerates adoption, while hesitation slows it. And curiosity is influenced by culture: whether people feel supported to ask questions, try new approaches and iterate in pursuit of better ways of working.

Our research, *The AI High: Feeling optimistic but overwhelmed*, reveals that more than half of workers (56 percent) are optimistic about the benefits of AI at work, rising to 64 percent among Gen Z and 63 percent among Millennials, yet 54 percent say they are not using AI to its full potential. At the same time, 61 percent find it overwhelming to keep up with the pace of AI development, with many unsure where to start or which tools to use (Henley Business School, 2025).

## 3. Translation: bridging the gap between technology and work

A third challenge is translation. A recurring pattern is that many workplaces struggle to bridge the gap between technological possibility and commercial reality. They need people who can move between the logic of data and the language of the business; individuals who can turn complexity into clarity and connect technical decisions to their practical implications.

When this capability is missing, misalignment grows. Investments stall, teams become frustrated and technology functions drift away from organisational need. Translation is therefore becoming a defining leadership capability, enabling organisations to connect insight with action and intent with delivery.

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We desperately need people who can translate between technology and business. We don't have enough of them... There's the disconnect between technology people and business people. They don't speak the same language. They all think they're heading in the same direction, but one's going north and the other's going east.

**Tim Skeet**  
Bank of China

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We know that AI or any digital transformation challenges individuals, teams or organisations within the ecosystem because they do not have the necessary skills. So working with them to develop that literacy, to develop those skills and competencies, is going to be fundamental.



**Dr Mona Ashok**  
Associate Professor of Digital Transformation, Henley Business School

## Leadership as integrator

Technology often exposes underlying human tensions: unclear expectations, weak communication and fractured teams. Transformation therefore requires leaders who focus as much on connection and clarity as they do on systems. The conversation has shifted from whether to adopt AI to how to do so responsibly, inclusively, intentionally and with appropriate governance.

These pressures point to something deeper. Transformation is revealing structures, habits and assumptions that once enabled organisations to function but now limit their ability to adapt. Teams work in isolation, decisions fall between functions, and systems designed for linear workflows are stretched across environments that demand fluidity. Technology does not resolve these issues; it brings them into sharper focus. In practical terms, this lack of alignment can hinder progress significantly, with some companies reporting project delays of up to ten months where teams struggle to collaborate effectively with AI or data specialists (IDC, 2024).

Integration should be treated as a core leadership responsibility. Leaders are uniquely positioned to build shared language across disciplines, clarify ownership and decision pathways, and create conditions where questioning and experimentation are supported in ways that are safe and constructive. Over time, these signals shape everyday norms around learning, challenge and collaboration. The focus is on aligning ways of working, governance and capability-building so that they actively support adaptation.

At the same time, organisations remain clear that competitive advantage will not come from automation alone. While optimism around AI is high, 65 percent still believe that human strategic decision-making, intuition and creativity remain essential to maintaining advantage (World Economic Forum, 2025). This reinforces the importance of leadership approaches that integrate technological capability with human judgement, alongside sustained investment in skills and confidence across the workforce.

## Leadership Insight

The central constraint on transformation has shifted from technological capability to human readiness. As systems advance, gaps in confidence, understanding and connection are becoming more visible and more consequential. Literacy, mindset and translation have become core enablers of progress. Organisations that fail to invest in these human capabilities risk widening divides, slowing adoption and limiting the value of their technological ambition. Leadership now depends on the ability to integrate people, technology and purpose into a coherent way of working.

## Leadership Actions

### **Invest in shared AI and data literacy across management levels.**

Ensure managers who design work and allocate resources can participate meaningfully in AI-related decisions, rather than relying on small expert groups.

### **Build learning and responsible experimentation into performance expectations.**

Reward learning, experimentation and responsible risk-taking, not only flawless execution against fixed plans.

### **Develop and recognise translation capability across management roles.**

Identify and promote individuals who can connect technical insight with operational and commercial realities.

### **Align learning investment to future value creation, not just current roles.**

Prioritise capabilities that support evolving ways of working, not only today's job requirements.

### **Support integration through cross-functional learning and problem-solving.**

Use real transformation initiatives as development platforms to build shared language and mutual understanding.

### **Take part in our Enterprise Architecture and Transformation Skills Survey**

[Hly.ac/HEATS](https://hly.ac/HEATS)

By participating in the survey and extending the database, leaders can:

- Receive an overview of their Personal, Architecture and Enterprise capabilities.
- Compare results with peers across industries, roles and cultures.
- Identify their development priorities to thrive in the AI era.

# 03 Transformation Without Losing Humanity

The same technologies that amplify capability can also expose new vulnerabilities. Leaders are increasingly balancing the benefits of convenience, such as faster decisions, automated processes and reduced administrative burden, with the need to preserve empathy, judgement and human connection.

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There may be a moment when we look at what we are doing with AI and say: this is not the route we want to take. We need to think more carefully about the direction we are heading as human beings in the workplace.



**Angus Morrison**  
Programme Director, Leading in the AI Era,  
Henley Business School



## The risk of losing what makes us human

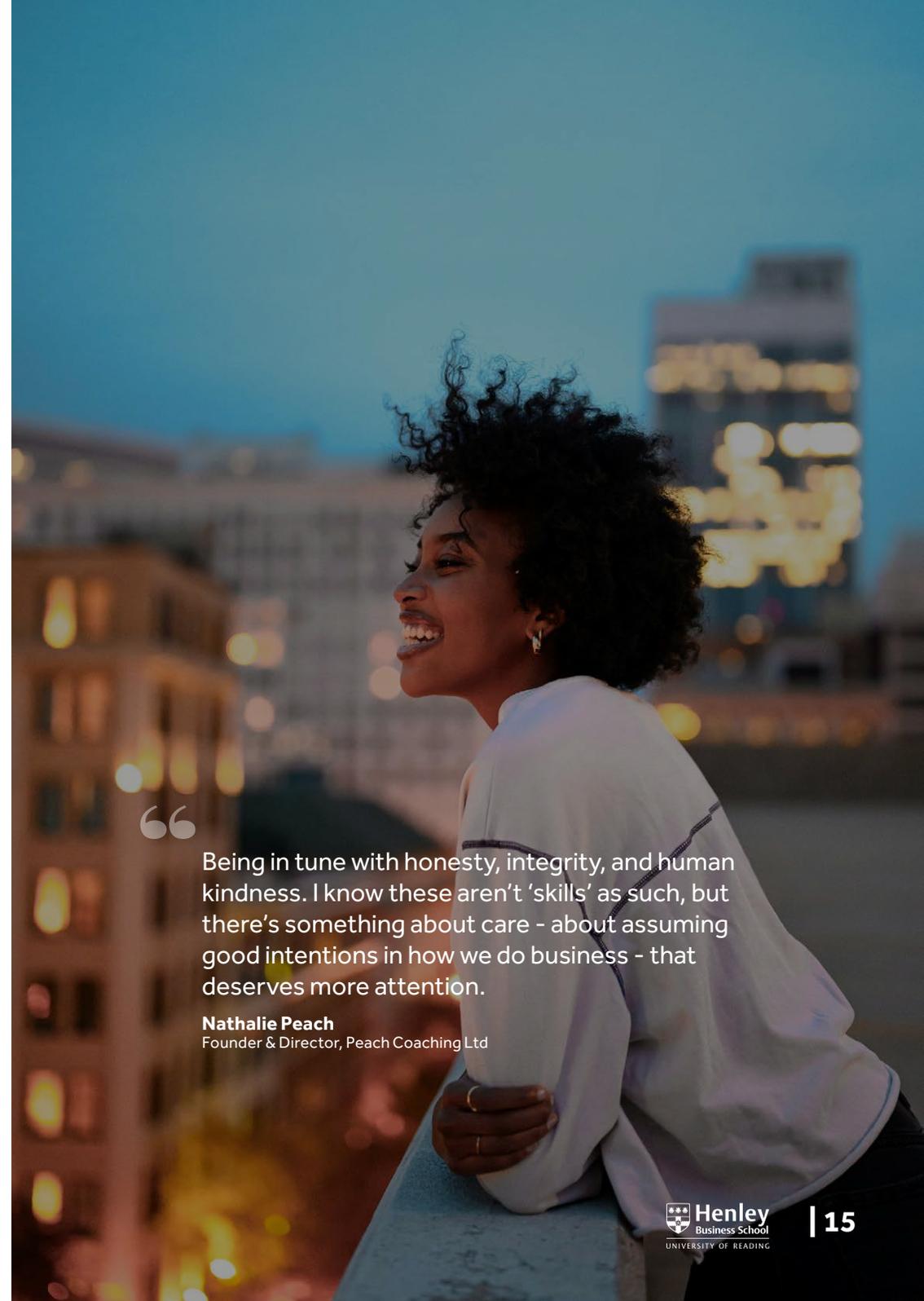
As organisations lean further into AI, automation and digital systems, a different kind of risk comes into view. From our perspective, this risk is not rooted in capability, cost or competitive advantage, but in what may be lost along the way.

Across conversations, attention repeatedly returned to the human dimensions of work: integrity, care, emotional intelligence and the sense of belonging that shapes how people engage with their organisations. These qualities are harder to measure than productivity or speed, yet they exert a powerful influence on trust, engagement and long-term performance. For leaders, the challenge is how to adopt technology without weakening the conditions that allow people to feel connected, valued and respected.

Three themes surfaced consistently: empathy, critical thinking and emotional intelligence. This is reflected in the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report, where analytical thinking remains the most important core skill, but attributes such as resilience, flexibility, curiosity, lifelong learning, leadership and social influence are all rising sharply in importance. Taken together, this reinforces our view that how people think, relate and adapt is becoming as important as what they know.

As more aspects of work are mediated by systems and automation, organisations face a subtle but significant question: what happens to care, responsibility and judgement when efficiency removes friction from everyday decisions? In our experience, this is where unintended consequences often emerge, particularly when technology makes it easier to move quickly than to pause, reflect and question.

At the same time, increasing automation does not necessarily translate into less human involvement. The greater opportunity lies in redesigning roles, rather than replacing them outright. Research on human-centric AI suggests that when routine and analytical tasks are supported by systems, people are better able to focus on strengths such as empathy, creativity, critical thinking and innovation (World Economic Forum, 2025).



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Being in tune with honesty, integrity, and human kindness. I know these aren't 'skills' as such, but there's something about care - about assuming good intentions in how we do business - that deserves more attention.

**Nathalie Peach**

Founder & Director, Peach Coaching Ltd

## The erosion of empathy

From our perspective, and echoed in conversations with leaders, empathy, integrity and care are not peripheral to transformation; they are central to how change is experienced and sustained in everyday work. Yet they are rarely made explicit in transformation plans, even though they shape trust, decision-making and how people relate to one another under pressure.

Across organisations, technology is highly effective at streamlining activity and reducing friction. But in doing so, it can also smooth away the nuance that human judgement depends on. Friction is often where empathy lives: where context is negotiated, meaning is surfaced and relationships are formed. As more aspects of work are mediated by automation and systems, organisations risk weakening the very capacities that anchor them in care, responsibility and human connection.

This is why a “human above the loop” approach remains essential. While AI can support analysis and routine tasks, humans remain better equipped to navigate open-ended decisions involving responsibility, accountability and ethical judgement. Without deliberate attention to how decisions are made and reviewed, efficiency gains can come at the expense of relational and ethical awareness.

## The value of critical thinking

What is becoming clear is that as technology makes decisions easier, judgement can start to give way to convenience. Our expert academics and leaders reflected on how automated insight can accelerate analysis, but also reduce the space for questioning, encouraging acceptance rather than evaluation.

When workflows become frictionless, pace can begin to feel more important than sense. The time needed to interpret, challenge and reflect is compressed, narrowing the conditions in which discernment is formed.

This matters because when people rely on AI tools to think for them rather than with them, they may begin to outsource mental effort in ways that weaken memory, problem-solving and critical thinking over time, a process often described as cognitive offloading. As the University of Reading’s Professor Patricia Riddell notes, what increasingly matters is not just what AI produces, but how people prompt it and how critically they evaluate what it returns.

In response, organisations are placing renewed value on critical thinking and integrity. These capabilities help people test assumptions, notice what does not fit and remain attentive to context. They act as a counterweight to technological ease, ensuring decisions are shaped by thoughtful interpretation rather than automatic response.

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It’s important not to accept the outputs from AI tools wholesale and assume they’re always correct. The need for critical thinking hasn’t disappeared because of the convenience of AI - arguably it’s even more important, but I am seeing some leaders becoming less reliant on this vital capability, especially when under significant time pressure.



**Nick Roy**  
Executive Fellow,  
Henley Business School

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Everything is one click away now, so it’s easy to take the quick route to problem solving. I think we need to value and celebrate critical thinking - testing and stress-testing what we say - so that decisions are based on data and calculated risk, not just emotions.

**Nathalie Peach**  
Founder & Director, Peach Coaching Ltd



## The rise of emotionally intelligent decision-making

Emotional intelligence surfaced consistently in conversations as a stabilising force. It enables leaders to remain grounded when technology accelerates faster than understanding, helping them sense misalignment, read between signals and reconnect decisions to purpose.

While AI may increase speed, emotional intelligence restores balance. It brings human experience back into the decision-making process, ensuring judgement is informed not only by data, but by awareness of impact, consequence and meaning. This growing focus is also reflected in wider leadership priorities, with 67 percent of CEOs now citing emotional intelligence as a top-three leadership trait for navigating AI-driven change (Forbes, October 2025).

## A deeper cultural question

Alongside these individual capabilities sits a broader cultural consideration. Technology has a tendency to centralise power in systems, dashboards and automated processes. Yet organisations continue to function through relationships: trust, conversation and shared understanding.

There is therefore a responsibility to ensure these relational foundations do not thin as digital tools become more capable. This includes not only trust between people, but also confidence in the data and systems that increasingly shape decisions. When that trust is missing, collaboration weakens and teams become more cautious, fragmented or overly dependent on automated outputs.

The risk is not simply that AI replaces people, but that it subtly distances them from one another, weakening the shared judgement that allows teams to think, decide and work well together. As the World Economic Forum observes, “the organisations that will thrive aren’t those with the most sophisticated AI, but those who understand how to implement the technology effectively, enabling it to assist, augment and transform human potential.” This reinforces the importance of cultural conditions that support collaboration, learning and trust, alongside technical capability.

## Leadership Insight

As AI and automation become more embedded in everyday work, the most significant risks of transformation are increasingly human rather than technical. Efficiency, speed and convenience can quietly erode empathy, judgement and connection if left unchecked. The organisations best positioned for long-term success are those that recognise humanity as a strategic asset. Preserving critical thinking, emotional intelligence and trust ensures that transformation remains responsible, resilient and sustainable.

## Leadership Actions

- Design decision processes that keep human accountability visible.** Ensure responsibility, review and ethical oversight where automated systems influence significant personal, financial or social outcomes.
- Protect space for reflection, challenge and contextual judgement.** Avoid governance and performance models that reward speed and automation at the expense of critical thinking and human sense-making.
- Develop emotional intelligence as a stabilising capability under AI-driven acceleration.** Strengthen leaders’ ability to sense strain, misalignment and unintended consequences, and to reconnect decisions to human impact when pace and complexity increase.
- Monitor cultural and relational impacts of technology adoption.** Track how digital systems affect trust, collaboration and psychological safety, and intervene early when erosion appears.
- Redesign roles to strengthen human contribution, not just reduce effort.** Use automation to shift people toward interpretation, relationship-building and complex problem-solving, rather than simply removing tasks.

# 04 The Next Frontier: A New Managerial Class

Technology is altering how organisations function and, in turn, what leadership requires. Under conditions of complexity, uncertainty and acceleration, a broader managerial class is emerging, referring not to job titles or hierarchy, but to the expanding group of leaders responsible for shaping decisions, culture and direction across organisations.

Managerial roles are evolving alongside the capabilities required to lead effectively, as responsibility for navigating technological, ethical and environmental change is distributed more widely than in traditional leadership models.

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We need a new managerial class for the future - one that can deal with these issues, cross international borders, understand regulatory frameworks, acknowledge where we're going with climate change, understand the pace of technological change, and be open and adaptive.

**Tim Skeet**  
Bank of China

## Beyond traditional leadership models

As these shifts take hold, a deeper transformation is underway, centred on the nature of leadership itself. Within this broader managerial class, leaders are increasingly expected to understand technology without being technologists, to operate confidently despite uncertainty, and to translate complexity into meaning for others.

They are required to hold ethics, climate responsibility, culture and commercial logic within the same frame, often with limited precedent to draw on. Traditional models built on predictability, hierarchy and control no longer align with the environment in which leadership is now exercised.

This creates a widening capability gap. While AI and automation are becoming more autonomous and sophisticated, many organisations lack leaders who are equipped to integrate these tools effectively into how work is organised and decisions are made.

Alongside these pressures, expectations of leadership are rising. The proportion of leaders who say the ability to lead through constant change is critical has increased from 58 percent in 2024 to 71 percent in 2025 (Harvard Business Impact, 2025). This reflects not just a change in skills, but a shift in how responsibility and decision-making are distributed across organisations.

## A new managerial class

A new managerial class is now taking shape, defined less by narrow functional expertise and more by breadth, creativity and integrative thinking. As technology becomes embedded across both operations and everyday decision-making, leadership increasingly depends on the ability to connect technical insight with human and organisational context.

This view was reinforced across the interviews, where leaders described the growing importance of moving fluidly between strategic direction and operational detail, understanding the logic of technology while remaining grounded in the realities of people and teams. Rather than working within silos, effective leaders are required to think in systems, recognising how decisions in one area ripple across others.



When I graduated from business school in 1980, I was taught that what leaders do is plan, organise, direct and control... That now feels like quite a quaint idea, from a world far away.



**Dr Narendra Laljani**  
Programme Director, Henley Executive Management Programme and The Henley Leading Strategy and Execution Programme, Henley Business School

## Contextual intelligence

What most clearly differentiates this group is contextual intelligence: the ability to sense patterns, interpret ambiguity and make sound judgements without relying on established playbooks. As AI moves from improving efficiency to shaping meetings, decisions and professional roles, the need for this capability becomes more acute. As the World Economic Forum notes, AI is no longer simply augmenting tasks, but increasingly augmenting human intelligence and reshaping entire professions (World Economic Forum, 2025).

In these conditions, leaders must make decisions that are immediate and grounded in real-world constraints, even when information is incomplete or rapidly changing. Matthew Kutz, author of Contextual Intelligence, similarly notes that leaders now operate in environments where decisions must be “instant, pragmatic, and offer real solutions for real problems,” reflecting the growing need for judgement that integrates multiple perspectives rather than relying on linear analysis alone.

This also helps explain why expectations of leadership are rising alongside investment in AI. With 74 percent of organisations now identifying AI as a top-three strategic priority, and more than one in five calling it their top priority (Bain & Company, 2025), the ability to interpret, challenge and apply technological insight becomes as important as access to the technology itself.

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Even if you are using AI, you still need contextual intelligence, because AI won't understand the hidden messages you gain by interacting with people.



**Dr Ergham Bachir**  
Associate, Henley Centre for Leadership,  
Henley Business School



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There's been a long-standing belief that leaders deal with the big picture while someone else handles the detail. In reality, all the successful chief executives I know are comfortable with both. They can operate at the strategic level and are equally capable of getting into the operational detail when needed.



**Dr Narendra Laljani**  
Programme Director, Henley Executive Management  
Programme and The Henley Leading Strategy and  
Execution Programme, Henley Business School

## Lateral thinking, creativity and sense making

Creativity is becoming essential to how the next managerial class leads and makes decisions. Leaders of the coming decade will not succeed by maintaining the status quo or optimising what already exists. They will succeed by imagining alternatives: new models, new experiences and new ways of creating value.

We believe this form of creativity is not about artistic flair, but about sense-making: the ability to challenge assumptions, combine ideas in unexpected ways and design responses that reflect the complexity of real organisational systems. It involves thinking laterally, seeing patterns where others see noise, and moving between strategic vision and operational detail to connect insights across boundaries.

This capability is becoming more important as work is increasingly shaped by AI and data-driven systems. Redesigning roles and workflows so that human creativity and critical thinking are combined with AI-driven insight is now seen as essential to effective performance, rather than a future aspiration (World Economic Forum, 2025). In this sense, creativity is not separate from productivity, but a core enabler of it.

The growing emphasis on creative and lateral thinking is also reflected in workforce trends. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report identifies creative thinking as a core skill for the future workforce, cited by 57 percent of employers, alongside analytical and technological capabilities. Together, these shifts point to leadership roles that demand both cognitive flexibility and practical judgement.

What ultimately distinguishes this new managerial class is not only what they know, but how they think. Their strength lies in breadth, insight and the ability to navigate both detail and direction with equal confidence, shaping decisions that are informed, adaptive and grounded in real-world complexity.

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When it comes to implementing large-scale digital and AI change, leaders need to bring an entrepreneurial drive rather than relying solely on traditional day-to-day management approaches.



**Andrew Gaule**  
Programme Director, AI Strategy and  
Implementation, Henley Business School

## An entrepreneurial mindset

An entrepreneurial mindset is becoming an essential leadership quality in environments defined by rapid change and uncertainty. In our view, this is about how leaders approach change itself: with a bias towards action, comfort with ambiguity and the resilience to test, learn and adapt at speed, without losing strategic direction.

Leaders emerging now recognise that progress is rarely linear. They act with intention, learn quickly and adjust course while remaining anchored in purpose. Their agility is grounded in judgement rather than haste: the ability to experiment responsibly while maintaining coherence across people, processes and priorities.

This was reflected in conversations about the nature of transformation in established organisations. As Andrew Gaule, Programme Director for AI Strategy and Implementation at Henley Business School, observed, when it comes to implementing large-scale digital and AI change, leaders need to bring an entrepreneurial drive rather than relying solely on traditional day-to-day management approaches. He also highlighted that new technologies often come with different business models and ways of working, requiring leaders to think about how these can be scaled within existing organisations.

In this way, entrepreneurial leadership becomes a mechanism for sustaining change, not just initiating it, enabling organisations to move forward with confidence as well as speed.

## Translators, culture shapers and communicators

Another defining characteristic of this emerging managerial class is the ability to translate across disciplines, languages and organisational layers. These leaders understand how technology influences culture, how governance shapes innovation and how human behaviour ultimately determines whether systems take hold.

Translation here is not simply a communication skill. It is a leadership capability that connects what is technically possible with what is organisationally workable. Leaders with real impact are those who move beyond facilitating implementation to actively shaping how technology supports strategic goals, building shared understanding across boundaries and enabling people to work confidently with new systems.

In environments where authority is distributed and expertise is diffuse, influence increasingly matters more than hierarchy. Leaders can no longer rely on positional authority or specialist knowledge alone, but must develop the ability to mobilise others and bring them with them. In this context, culture is shaped not through instruction, but through how leaders listen, communicate and model new ways of working.

This view was echoed by interviewees, who emphasised the importance of leaders who can build shared purpose and momentum across diverse expectations and perspectives.

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We need leaders with the ability to listen, to influence culture, to lead and inspire people - people from everywhere, with different expectations and perspectives.

**Tim Skeet**  
Bank of China

“

(Great leaders) are able to create a sense of trust and excitement around them. If you only have trust, people can become comfortable, even complacent. If you only have excitement, it's like swimming with a shark nearby - it creates anxiety. The best leaders create both. They convey clarity of purpose and direction, and with it, excitement and high expectations.

**Nathalie Peach**  
Founder & Director, Peach Coaching Ltd

## Learning, openness and an adaptive mindset

The expectation that leaders should hold all the answers is gradually receding. In its place sits a mindset grounded in curiosity, openness and adaptive learning, where asking better questions becomes as important as providing direction.

Leaders spoke about the importance of inviting challenge, encouraging dissent and treating feedback as a source of strength rather than threat. In conditions where uncertainty is high and precedent limited, diversity of perspective helps reduce blind spots and strengthens judgement. Productive disagreement, when held within strong relationships, becomes a source of insight rather than friction.

This changes how learning itself is understood. Development evolves from mastering a fixed body of knowledge, to building the capacity to learn, unlearn and recalibrate as situations evolve. For senior teams in particular, this increasingly involves learning that is closely connected to real business challenges, where trade-offs must be navigated, consequences are visible and alignment is tested under pressure.

Alongside more structured development, shorter interventions, peer learning and cross-organisational exposure can also play a role, allowing leaders to learn with and from others, and to apply insights quickly in their own contexts. In these settings, learning is not abstract or theoretical, but directly connected to how decisions are made and how teams perform.

This also reframes the role of tension in effective leadership. High-performing teams are not those that avoid disagreement, but those that can work productively through it. When trust is strong, periods of tension and debate strengthen judgement and improve decision quality, rather than undermining cohesion. In this sense, adaptive learning is not only about acquiring new skills, but about strengthening the collective capacity to think, decide and adjust together.



## Ethics, responsibility and judgement

As systems become more powerful, the scope of leadership responsibility expands. Decisions about technology now carry implications beyond organisational performance, shaping public trust, fairness and environmental impact. This places ethical judgement at the heart of strategic leadership, rather than treating it as a parallel or downstream concern.

Responsible adoption therefore becomes a design principle, shaping how technology is selected, deployed and governed from the outset. Ethical reasoning is no longer confined to risk management, but increasingly influences how decisions are framed in the first place. This reflects a wider shift in expectations, with recent research showing that ethical judgement is now seen as more important than technical competence for senior leaders by 74 percent of corporate directors (Harvard Business Review, 2025).

This adds to complexity rather than simplifying it. Holding commercial, technological and human considerations within the same frame demands mature judgement and a willingness to navigate difficult trade-offs. But the consequences of failing to do so are increasingly visible. Studies suggest that organisations deploying AI without ethical oversight experience significantly higher levels of compliance incidents, reinforcing that responsibility is not only a moral concern, but a practical one as well (Future Business Journal, 2025).

Under these conditions, leadership is defined less by the ability to optimise systems, and more by the capacity to exercise sound judgement when impacts are uncertain and stakes are high.



Embedding public value generation, societal responsibility, sustainability and responsible AI as your design requirement, as your core requirement, is really important.



**Dr Mona Ashok**

Associate Professor of Digital Transformation, Henley Business School

## Leadership Insight

Leadership is no longer concentrated at the top of organisations, nor defined by formal authority alone. As technology reshapes how work is organised and decisions are made, a broader managerial class is emerging, carrying responsibility for integrating technological capability with human judgement, ethical consideration and organisational context. What distinguishes this group is the ability to connect across boundaries, interpret complexity and act with intent when certainty is limited. In this environment, leadership effectiveness is measured by contextual intelligence, sense-making and the capacity to hold competing demands within a single frame.

## Leadership Actions

**Redefine leadership criteria and promotion pathways.**

Move advancement and recognition away from narrow functional excellence towards the ability to integrate strategy, operations, technology and people.

**Design leadership development around complex, cross-boundary challenges.**

Complement structured learning with real transformation initiatives, using live organisational priorities to deepen integration and applied judgement.

**Build succession pipelines that value breadth and adaptability.**

Ensure future leaders have experience across functions, systems and stakeholder environments, not only deep expertise in single disciplines.

**Strengthen translation as a formal leadership capability.**

Identify, train and reward leaders who can turn technical possibility into organisational clarity and coordinated action.

**Embed ethical and contextual judgement into leadership assessment.**

Evaluate not only what outcomes leaders achieve, but how they navigate trade-offs, uncertainty and impact on people and society.

**Align rewards and status with collaborative sense-making, not just individual execution.**

Align performance management with behaviours that surface interdependencies, invite challenge and integrate diverse perspectives.

**Position leadership as stewardship, not entitlement.**

Expect leaders to build capability, culture and confidence for those who follow, not only to deliver short-term performance.

# 05

## The Leadership Imperative

Technology may be moving at extraordinary speed, but it is people who determine whether that change becomes progress.

AI, automation and digital systems can inform decisions, streamline processes and open new possibilities. They cannot decide what matters, what is right, or what kind of future organisations choose to build. That responsibility remains with leaders.

“

AI is a leadership question, not a technology project. Lead the organisation, not the tool. It's about organisation-wide change, not just the technology that you're implementing.



**Angus Morrison**  
Programme Director, Leading in the  
AI Era, Henley Business School

## AI is a leadership question

This moment calls for a shift in how leadership, capability and accountability are understood. The organisations that thrive will not be those chasing novelty, nor those relying on inherited models of authority. They will be led by people able to work with complexity, remain ethically grounded as volatility increases, and treat transformation not as an event to complete, but as a continuous discipline of learning and judgement.

This reflects a growing recognition that scaling AI is not a technology challenge alone, but a leadership and workforce one (World Economic Forum, 2025). While technology expands what is possible, leadership determines how those possibilities are prioritised, governed and translated into action.

AI becomes a lens for broader questions of organisational design and culture. The task for leaders is not only to enable adoption, but to shape the conditions in which people can exercise sound judgement and adapt responsibly as expectations evolve.

## Amplifying human potential

One of the most important insights to emerge through this work is that the human role is not diminishing; it is deepening. As systems take on more routine and analytical work, qualities such as critical thinking, contextual intelligence, empathy and moral courage become more important, not less.

These capabilities act as the counterweight to automation. They ensure that technology expands human potential rather than narrowing it. In a world where information is abundant, discernment becomes the differentiator. This aligns with wider evidence that while AI adoption is accelerating, success depends on empowering people, not simply deploying technology (World Economic Forum, 2025).

From a leadership perspective, this represents an important capability shift. Organisations are only beginning to grapple with how work itself can be done differently, including approaches that were previously seen as impractical, unaffordable, or not yet imagined. The opportunity is not only to do existing tasks faster, but to rethink what is possible when human judgement and machine intelligence are deliberately combined.

In this sense, AI does not narrow the human role, it raises the bar for it. What matters most is not how much work can be automated, but how effectively people are equipped to add value where automation reaches its limits.

## The capability shift

Our analysis suggests that organisations are underestimating the scale of the capability shift now underway. The opportunity is not simply to do the same things more efficiently, but to do different things altogether, including work that was previously unimaginable, unviable or overlooked.

Responding to this shift requires leaders to look beyond tools and towards how work itself is changing: how value is created, how decisions are made and how people are enabled to contribute in new ways. This requires leaders to rethink how work is organised and how human judgement and machine capability are combined in everyday practice, rather than treating new tools as an overlay on existing structures.





Those three words - learn, unlearn, and relearn - are crucial. They define the essential executive skill for navigating today's volatile world.



**Dr Narendra Laljani**  
Programme Director, Henley Executive Management Programme and The Henley Leading Strategy and Execution Programme, Henley Business School

## Learning, unlearning and relearning

Our belief is that sustained transformation depends as much on how leaders evolve as on how organisations restructure. In conditions where change is continuous rather than episodic, effectiveness is shaped by the ability to reassess assumptions, update mental models and remain open to alternative ways of working.

In this sense, learning is not a periodic activity but an ongoing leadership discipline. It involves letting go of familiar habits, questioning what previously worked and developing the capacity to adapt thinking as situations shift. This demands humility as well as curiosity, and a willingness to remain unsettled in the face of complexity rather than defaulting to established answers.

Ultimately, this is not only an organisational challenge, but a personal one. Leaders are being asked to decide whether they are prepared to keep evolving, even when it means letting go of approaches that once served them well.



## AI as a reflection on humanity

This moment invites a deeper question: what do we want work to feel like? As AI becomes more embedded in daily activity, leaders are increasingly reflecting on meaning, purpose and connection, not as abstract ideals, but as practical design considerations. Technology can make work more efficient, but only people can make it meaningful.

The decisions organisations make today will shape how work is experienced for years to come. They will influence whether workplaces feel more humane or more transactional, and whether curiosity, openness and care are reinforced or eroded. This is not a distant concern. Research shows that while 77% of executives report productivity gains from AI adoption and employees say they are around 40% more productive using AI tools, the most productive AI users are 88% more likely to report burnout and disengagement and twice as likely to quit (Upwork Research Institute, 2025). These findings highlight the risk that efficiency gains do not automatically translate into better working lives.

From a leadership perspective, this places responsibility not only on how work is accelerated, but on how it is designed. Sustained performance depends on creating roles, routines and ways of working that support the activities where people add the most value, not simply increasing output. In this sense, AI becomes a mirror for leadership priorities, revealing whether technology is being used to enhance human contribution or to intensify pressure.



I wonder whether the race towards AI may make people reflect more on what it means to be human, and what they want work to feel like again.



**Angus Morrison**  
Programme Director, Leading in the AI Era, Henley Business School

## Equipping people for what comes next

Preparing people for tomorrow's work is a core obligation of leadership. Across the interviews, leaders spoke about responsibility not only for current performance, but for the capabilities and confidence of those who will inherit the organisation. Leadership, in this sense, is increasingly understood as stewardship rather than possession.

This extends beyond technical training to how people are supported to grow, adapt and contribute as roles evolve. As the World Economic Forum notes, organisations that thrive will not be those with the most sophisticated AI, but those that implement it in ways that assist, augment and ultimately expand human potential (2025). Equipping people, not simply upgrading systems, becomes the defining investment.

## What legacy will you leave?

Transformation is ultimately judged over time, through the capabilities organisations build, the cultures they sustain and the people they enable to carry the work forward. Leaders in our research spoke clearly about this responsibility: to make decisions that hold today's pressures alongside their longer-term consequences for organisations and society.

We see legacy not as an end-of-career concern, but as the cumulative outcome of everyday leadership decisions. Priorities, incentives and behaviours send powerful signals about what truly matters, and these signals compound over time, shaping who stays, who progresses and how future leaders are formed.

Technology and complexity will continue to define organisational life. The central question for leaders is how effectively they build the capability, judgement and conditions required to operate within them, not only for today's performance, but for those who will inherit the consequences.



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This is a pivotal moment for society, for truth, for these big questions. Managers today are more interested, more engaged. Years ago, people waited until retirement to reflect. But that's too late - networks fade fast. You have to shape the future while you're in it...

Our mission - yours and mine together - is to say: look, I'm only here for now; someone else will take this seat next. I need to make sure those people can do this job. We have to think about the future and make sure people are equipped to deal with it. That's our responsibility - no one else's.

**Tim Skeet**  
Bank of China



## Leadership Insight

AI has brought leadership questions into sharper focus rather than resolving them. As technology accelerates, the differentiator is not access to tools, but the quality of judgement applied to their use. The organisations most likely to thrive are those that recognise leadership as a human discipline: one that integrates technological possibility with ethical awareness, learning capacity and care for how work is experienced. In this sense, AI is not simply transforming work; it is exposing what leadership values, prioritises and chooses to sustain.

## Leadership Actions

**Govern AI as a continuous organisational system, rather than a time-bound transformation programme.**

Align strategy, workforce design, ethics and performance management around how technology reshapes decisions, roles and accountability.

**Redesign operating models and roles, not only workflows.**

Revisit where judgement sits, how value is created and how teams are structured, rather than automating existing hierarchies and processes.

**Make human capability a protected strategic investment.**

Prioritise judgement, systems thinking and ethical reasoning in budgets, talent strategy and leadership development, even when short-term pressures favour technology spend.

**Embed continuous learning, unlearning and relearning into leadership expectations and evaluation.**

Build adaptation, reflection and the willingness to revise assumptions into senior role design and performance criteria, not as optional behaviours but as core leadership responsibilities.

**Hold leaders accountable for the quality of working lives they design.**

Track whether technology adoption strengthens trust, inclusion and sustainable performance, not only speed, output and cost.

**Act as stewards of long-term organisational capability.**

Ensure today's technology and workforce decisions expand, rather than constrain, the capacity of future leaders to operate responsibly and effectively.

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#### **World of Work Institute**

Henley's World of Work Institute helps businesses face the future of work by applying innovative research to real workplaces.

<https://www.henley.ac.uk/world-of-work>

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The Henley Centre for Leadership is a globally recognised voice and catalyst of leadership and leadership development. Together, we empower people in organisations, academia and society to lead with purpose, adaptability and integrity in a rapidly evolving world - for a sustainable future for all.

<https://www.henley.ac.uk/research/centres/henley-centre-for-leadership>

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Henley is a triple-accredited business school and part of the University of Reading. With campuses, offices and partnerships around the world and over 100,000 alumni from 160 countries, we are a truly international institution. As a trusted partner, we help organisations tackle complex challenges and develop in-house capability through insights, development programmes, coaching and consultancy. Our courses are aimed at students and professionals at every career stage - from undergraduate and postgraduate to PhD, MBA, DBA and executive education.

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# Redefining Leadership in the Age of AI

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