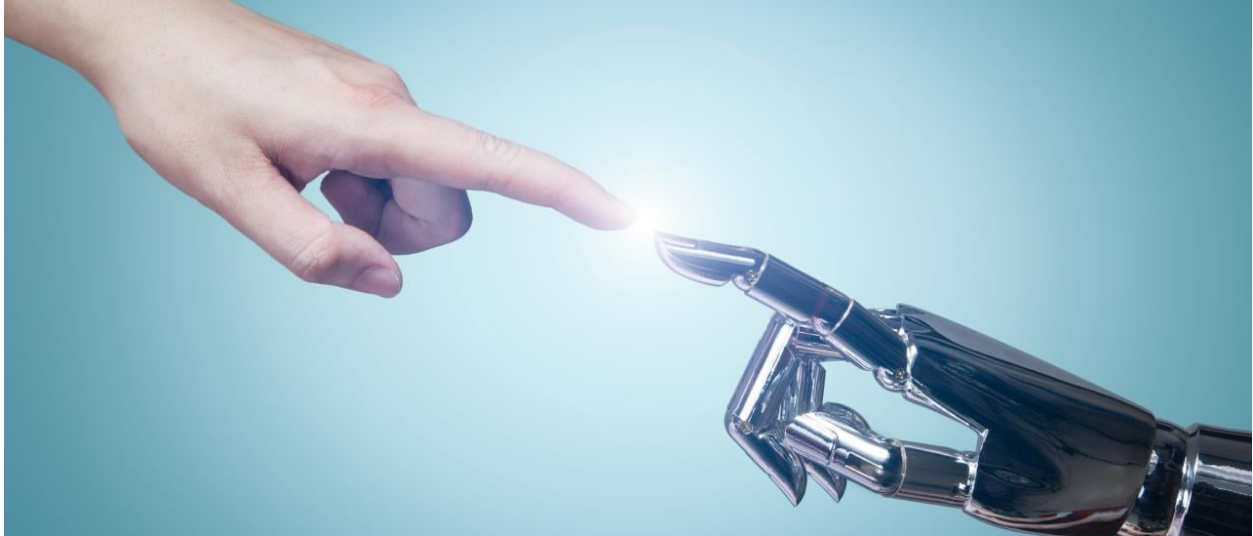

Navigating the Future With a Human Touch



By [Graham Ward](#) , INSEAD

How human-centred leadership is key to addressing the challenges and opportunities of AI

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to significantly impact organisational leadership by transforming decision-making, team management and innovation processes. As we explore its incredible potential, it becomes clear that leaders must adapt to leverage these technologies effectively and address the new ethical and cultural issues they raise.

AI has the potential to unleash creativity, foster human connection, imagine new ways of learning, enable the automation of existing tasks, and promote new adaptive tasks that require human ingenuity and empathy. That's quite a list. A list that raises just as many challenges as opportunities.

What's clear is that leaders will remain indispensable in helping their teams and firms negotiate this brave new world. To do so successfully, it is vital that they adopt a dual mindset, while helping to maintain and create

moments of deep, thoughtful human interactions.

A dual mindset

In Ronald Heifetz's **Adaptive Leadership framework**, he distinguishes between “technical” and “adaptive” challenges. You need both the technical prowess to utilise and deploy AI tools and also the adaptive **strategies** to leverage them for competitive advantage. Leaders must excel in both domains at the same time to navigate the AI landscape effectively.

AI does not think, reason or rationalise like a human and cannot be used (at this juncture at least) as a replacement for these activities. This is precisely where the human factor is indispensable. Leaders must calibrate AI's outputs to minimise disruptions and ensure the least harm.

They need to be able to understand and explain when to accept a recommendation by AI and when a human might need to override an AI's decision, thereby improving the algorithms and making it more effective and trustworthy. In 2020, Instagram's AI mistakenly removed posts related to the Black Lives Matter movement, deeming them as a violation of community guidelines. The AI algorithm struggled to differentiate between harmful content and posts discussing social justice issues. Instagram faced significant backlash from users and had to apologise. The social media platform committed to improve its content moderation algorithms and increase transparency in its policies. Nevertheless, one can presume there was significant brand damage.

Putting an AI on autopilot with your customers could be fatal. In 2018, an Uber self-driving car struck and killed a pedestrian in Tempe, Arizona. Investigations revealed that the AI had failed to correctly identify the pedestrian and did not take timely action to avoid the collision. As a result, Uber paused its autonomous vehicle testing and implemented more rigorous safety protocols and human supervision to improve the AI systems' reliability and safety. It will be some time before autonomous vehicles are on our streets. The human factor is still required.

Leaders therefore have to step forward and be the human gatekeeper when AI threatens to “hallucinate” in this way. Maintaining this balance will be crucial in maximising the benefits of the technology while preserving the value of human judgment and expertise.

Assuaging anxiety

The integration of AI into the workplace creates anxiety. Employees may be reluctant to incorporate AI into their working lives, in fear that it could undermine their roles: damned if you do (redundancy) and damned if you don't (dinosaur). There is also a risk that AI might begin to generate both questions and answers, potentially leading to a crisis of meaning.

Over the short term, the truth is that AI will create redundancy by automating routine tasks, which in turn, is likely to increase worries around redundancy. Imagine never having to answer another email! So much time liberated, yet such interactions are often what make people feel productive and valuable. Leaders must help employees to navigate this transition carefully, because hiding within the vacuum of redundancy is the potential for creation and meaning.

Take creative fields like marketing or entertainment: AI might actually serve as a baseline, challenging humans to surpass its suggestions. This dynamic can drive higher standards of creativity and innovation if leaders encourage teams to use AI as a springboard for their own ideas.

Leaders must ensure AI complements human intelligence rather than overshadow it, maintaining a balance that fosters meaningful engagement and creativity. By encouraging open dialogue and collaboration, leaders can create a culture where AI is seen as an **ally** rather than a threat.

For example, if the goal is to develop innovative solutions that integrate AI, leaders can organise interdisciplinary hackathons that involve teams comprising members from diverse backgrounds, including technical, creative and business roles. By working together, participants can gain firsthand insights into how AI can be a valuable tool rather than a threat, promoting teamwork and creative problem-solving. Hosting regular debates or panel

discussions on the ethical implications and societal impacts of AI can also allow employees to voice their opinions and concerns, and consequently allay fears. This open dialogue can help demystify AI and build a shared understanding of its potential and limitations, and help them to see AI as an ally.

Shift in identity

Another factor driving employees' increased anxiety is competence. While AI excels in answering questions and even formulates new ones, it can also aggregate far greater volumes of information to provide instant insight than any human. Identity shifts may therefore be required: Being a subject matter expert may no longer carry weight when a machine has the same level of expertise. What is the role of a lawyer or a banker if every single precedent of law or merger and acquisition transaction is immediately available to a client?

Employees may need to shift their mindset from "I am a person who solves problems" to "I am a person who seeks new frontiers and discovers solutions." The human element remains crucial in fine-tuning the direction of travel, and ensuring it aligns with the strategic, emotional and contextual nuances of each situation.

Historically, automation has shifted the economic focus from manual labour to more innovative sectors. The identity shift from problem-solvers to frontier-seekers will define the future workforce. Leaders must guide this transition, helping employees find new purposes and roles in an AI-driven world.

Creating "human" moments

True empathy and the human connection are irreplaceable. Leaders must prioritise human interaction, using AI as a complement, rather than a replacement for such interaction. Generation Z, growing up with AI, faces unique [challenges of loneliness and anxiety](#).

Leaders must address these issues, fostering an environment where AI enhances rather than diminishes human connections and meaning. Human

moments may need to be “manufactured” as remote working persists, and machine learning automates mundane tasks like writing email. In-person strategic meetings, well-facilitated ideation sessions and cross company collaborative discussions will become ever more vital.

Addressing decentralisation

AI will likely lead to more distributed leadership models, where decision-making is decentralised. Leaders will need to put aside their egos, at times jettisoning historical ways of doing things in favour of new methods of organisational learning.

AI will increase surveillance in lower-status jobs, while giving higher-status roles more autonomy. Leaders must navigate these dynamics carefully, ensuring fairness and equity across all levels of the organisation. Power and influence are likely to become increasingly fluid, making traditional hierarchies obsolete.

Engagement survey data will be a critical lever for leaders to enhance human well-being and productivity. By understanding and responding to employee sentiments, leaders can create a more supportive and engaging work environment. However, the values we espouse in a post-AI world will matter more than ever, guiding how we use technology to enhance human well-being and organisational success.

Leading engagement

AI is already dramatically reshaping the landscape of leadership and organisations. The challenges and opportunities lie in balancing technical proficiency with adaptive strategy, fostering creativity and human connection and conviviality, and redefining our roles, identities and values in this evolving digital era.

Despite the rise of AI, leaders remain indispensable in creating moments of profound human engagement, guiding their organisations through the complexities of this technological revolution. Their ability to harness AI’s potential while preserving that human touch will be the key to sustained success and meaningful progress.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/navigating-future-human-touch>

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About the series**AI: Disruption and Adaptation**

Delve deeper into developments in artificial intelligence, especially the disruptions across value chains. This series examines AI's impact on a range of sectors, including business consulting, education and the media. It also sizes up the regulatory and ethical questions tied to this game-changing technology.