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The Leadership paradox in the AI age: when soft skills become the hardest edge

The AI revolution is here. But who is leading us through it?

AI is not merely another technological innovation; it's a cognitive revolution[1], a transformative change fundamentally reshaping how organisations operate, make decisions, and create value. As AI transforms not just workflows but entire business models, leadership excellence becomes the most important asset an organisation can cultivate. This is not a matter of managing technical upgrades—it's a matter of navigating a foundational shift with ethical, strategic, and human implications.

The critical question facing boards and investors today: are your leaders truly prepared?

What barriers stand in their way? Which capabilities will define the next generation of successful executives? For executive search and leadership consulting firms like Hoffman Talent Partners (HTP) Group, our mandate is clear: we must rigorously assess candidates across functional AI understanding and human-centred capabilities, anchoring our search process in a thorough assessment of organisational culture, strategic vision and general AI readiness.

In this new article, Ineke Arts, Bart Delaleeuw, and Bert Vermeiren discuss the urgency to look into the skills that, instead of being peripheral in a tech-driven world, are now the essential currencies of leadership.

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1. SETTING THE STAGE:
a revolution, also in business history

It's happening. Automation, algorithmic decision-making, and digital augmentation are no longer theoretical trends. Across the globe, major players are deploying AI across an average of four business functions at once, starting with Marketing and Sales, along with Product and Service Development, Service Operations and Software Engineering. Workflows are being reimagined, governance models rebuilt, and capital redirected in pursuit of the still-elusive promise of generative AI value creation[2].

But here lies the paradox: while the technology accelerates, leadership stalls. New research from McKinsey's *Superagency Report* reveals that many executives drastically underestimate how embedded AI already is within their own organisations[3]. Leaders believe just 4% of employees use generative AI for 30% or more of their work, but in reality, that figure is three times higher. The real barrier to adoption here is not employee resistance. It is the leadership "which is not steering fast enough".

At the foot of the mountain. Admittedly, the task is incredibly daunting. Steering any business or organisation into the future now comes with a flurry of unprecedented challenges: managing cognitively augmented teams where AI and human intelligence merge, leading hybrid workforces scattered across geographies, and making high-stakes decisions in environments of radical uncertainty—all while navigating regulatory frameworks like Europe's pioneering AI Act[4] that demand ethical implementation from the top down.

What kind of leaders do we need? What does the reality on the ground reveal? What portfolio of skills must today's leaders develop to rise to these circumstances?

2. LEADERSHIP IN THE AI AGE:
more critical than ever, more diversely skilled than ever

Revolutions need strong leaders. The Association of Executive Search and Leadership Consultants (AESC)[5] underscores this urgency: if AI is the engine propelling businesses into the future, leadership is the compass. And in an era marked by transformation rather than incremental change, that compass has never been more vital, or more complex to calibrate. The way leaders frame, communicate, and manage these shifts will determine whether their organisations flourish or falter in the face of disruption.

Yet the implementation story so far tells a different tale.

> *As AI accelerates across every corner of business, the real challenge might be leadership catching up. Navigating the future demands more than strategy; it calls for a leader fluent in technological innovation, ethics, and human complexity.*

Bart Delaleeuw

Delegating the change: a strategic misstep. Instead of being steered from the top, AI is too often delegated to IT or innovation departments—an intuitive move, but a dangerous one. According to McKinsey's *2025 State of AI Global Survey*, this approach is stifling impact[6]. The companies seeing the greatest returns from generative AI are those where senior executives—especially the CEO—actively "oversee governance, drive adoption, and model usage". In short, scalable AI success doesn't come from scattered experimentation. It stems from "top-down orchestration", cross-functional alignment, and a transformative vision championed from the C-suite.

That vision, however, demands an evolution in leadership itself.

Expanding skills both ways. Executives must now stretch in two directions simultaneously. On one hand, they need to sharpen innovation awareness—enough to shape strategy, walk the talk and ask incisive questions. This includes familiarity with the functional capabilities of data analytics, AI and machine learning, cybersecurity and data privacy awareness, technological literacy (digital tools) and agility.

But on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, they must double down on **human-centric capabilities.** As AI amplifies an organisation's cognitive horsepower, as it transforms processes, reshapes roles, and shifts expectations, the human qualities needed to lead through this change are becoming unmistakably clear: grounded presence, ethics, relational strength, the ability to inspire and create trust.

Soft skills are now the hardest edge.

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3. LEADERSHIP, REWIRED:
12 power skills for the AI age

In a context where AI is accelerating decisions but blurring the lines, complexity is the new normal—and ambiguity, the new leadership test.

Taking cues from Birkman's assessments of soft skills[7], and expanding on ongoing conversations about leadership in an AI-dominated landscape[8], we have identified 12 social, emotional, and cognitive abilities that redefine leadership excellence. We call this constellation of core and tactical capabilities "power skills".

PERSONAL MASTERY

1. Self-awareness: the anchor in the storm

Self-awareness isn't just introspective. It's strategic. Leaders who understand their own triggers and biases are better able to manage their reactions, especially under pressure. This internal clarity becomes a stabilising force allowing leaders to respond thoughtfully.

2. Emotional intelligence and empathy: sensing the human element

Job loss, dehumanisation, surveillance… AI implementation stirs a complex tangle of emotions, from excitement to existential dread. Leaders with emotional intelligence don't dismiss these undercurrents.
They create spaces for authentic dialogue, where people feel heard, seen, and involved in the journey. Within this sensitive context, leaders must balance data-driven clarity with emotionally attuned communication. A subtle but essential leadership craft.

3. Learning agility: the meta-skill

In a field defined by velocity, the line between relevance and obsolescence is drawn by one trait: the ability to keep learning. This isn't about accumulating certifications but developing a growth mindset that normalises not-knowing, and constantly updating. The most forward-looking leaders experiment in the open, sharing both their wins and missteps. In doing so, they foster cultures where adaptation is not a crisis response but a reflex.

4. Ethical judgement and trust-building: human-centric leadership

Classic leadership traits like honesty, integrity, and consistency feel not just relevant, but indispensable.

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When executives embody these values, they do more than steady the ship; they create a culture of trust that acknowledges ethical dilemmas and softens the edges of technological disruption. In that climate, both employees and customers are far more willing to engage with AI and even embrace it with confidence.

COGNITIVE CAPABILITIES

5. Critical thinking and problem-solving: diagnosing with depth, acting with clarity

As AI accelerates answers, leaders must sharpen the questions. They need to interrogate underlying premises, deconstruct AI-generated insights, and weigh ethical and systemic impacts. It's intellectual scaffolding for making decisions in complexity. Through rigorous problem-solving, this ability becomes the bridge between machine breadth and speed and human judgment. In short, it positions leaders to harness AI strategically ("co-thinking"[9]) and turn data into disciplined foresight.

> *While keeping the destination in view, today's executives must excel at deep listening—to their organisation, their clients, and market signals—then decisively pivot their short-term approach.*

Ineke Arts

6. Strategic thinking between adaptability and agility: navigating incomplete maps

Effective leaders make confident decisions with incomplete information, precisely what AI implementation demands. They pivot confidently and balance risk with speed. Those who think adaptively and adjust rapidly help their teams stay future-focused as AI redraws workflows and organisational maps.

7. Creativity and curiosity: fuel for innovation

Creative leaders begin with a simple, subversive question: What if? They challenge assumptions, inviting their teams to experiment and explore. As the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report underscores, qualities like curiosity, imagination, and openness are no longer optional. They are essential to amplify what AI can do and to guide it in purposeful directions, human-centred ends.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

8. Vision and influence: framing the future

Let's face it: AI can feel cold and threatening, especially when it's reduced to little more than a tool for cost-cutting and productivity metrics. That is why vision matters more than ever. Leaders who align teams around a shared mission and clearly frame AI as a tool for human amplification, not replacement, energise people toward meaningful outcomes. Purpose becomes the antidote to technological threat and change fatigue.

9. Interpersonal communication: not just clarity, connection

While AI conquers analytical domains and data complexities, leadership crystallises into its purest form: the art of decisive communication. The ability to translate vision into compelling narratives and meaning, adapt tone for diverse audiences, and unify cross-functional teams becomes critical as technology adds layers of complexity and introduces potential interpretation gaps.

10. Collaborative inclusion: preferring tables that are round

Successful AI transformation is not a solo act. When decision-making bypasses frontline workers—the very people most affected—it breeds resistance, hesitation, and a quiet erosion of trust. Inclusive leaders take a different path, bringing diverse voices into the design, deployment and evaluation process to boost buy-in and ensure technology lands where it matters most, with relevance, resonance and respect.

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11. Change management & capacity building : future-proofing through empowerment

But inclusion is only the beginning. As every seasoned change leader knows: organisations don't change, people do[10]. In the AI-age, where transformation is constant and system-wide, sustainability takes cultivating agency at every level. It requires the deliberate work of empowering individuals to adapt, but also stretch, and potentially lead in turn. Through thoughtful mentoring and/or coaching programs, leaders build adaptive teams with durable talent pipelines. Capacity building becomes the infrastructure of resilience, enabling people to grow with change.

12. Conflict navigation: steering through the fog, not around it

This last point is probably the most critical one. When AI adoption triggers power shifts and role ambiguity, friction is inevitable. Effective leaders must be equipped to mediate conflicts, uphold a climate of trust, and maintain momentum, ensuring that uncertainty doesn't calcify into dysfunction. At the end of the day, the workplace needs stewards of trust, not technocrats.

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4. AI-READY?

At Hoffman Talent Partners (HTP) Group, we look not only for technical/innovative fluency; we seek leaders who are as grounded in ethics as they are in data. Beyond résumés and surface credentials, we thoroughly assess the soft skills that determine whether a leader can navigate not just technological complexity, but the emotional architecture of change.

Sourcing talent requires more than a single step. It demands a comprehensive, layered process. That means aligning leadership selection with culture and strategy, but also with a clear-eyed view of the organisation's AI readiness:

We offer a streamlined three-step approach to AI leadership readiness, including an executive briefing, an AI readiness assessment of the organisation, and tailored skills development solutions. (*)

Bert Vermeiren

(*) For more information, please read https://www.hightechpartners.net/the-intelligent-enterprise-flipbook

About us

Hoffman Talent Partners (HTP Group) is an executive search and consulting firm headquartered in Brussels, Belgium. HTP Group aims to build impactful leadership for tomorrow's organizations. It delivers permanent talents through executive search, interim management or As a Service, and leadership and IT consulting. The group operates through three entities: **Hightech Partners**, which specializes in executive search and leadership consulting for companies active in the area of Digital Transformation; **Hoffman & Associates**, which focuses on Executive Search and Interim Management across sectors and functions at board and executive-levels; and **Ataya & Partners**, which focuses on digital governance and provides cybersecurity and data protection consulting, including CISO and DPO As-a-Service.

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In the age of AI, Hoffman Talent Partners help clients cultivate leadership that is human, decisive, and built for what's next.

Get in touch with our experts.
We are here to help you take the right steps toward AI-ready leadership.

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