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# AI Leadership

## Amplifying What Only Humans Can Do

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### Article Info

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### Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes industries and organizations, a new form of leadership—AI leadership—is emerging. This article explores how leaders can harness AI not merely as a technological tool but as a catalyst for ethical, cultural, and strategic transformation. Drawing insights from McKinsey's Alex Singla and other thought leaders, the paper emphasizes that AI cannot replace core human skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and change management. Instead, AI leadership enhances these capabilities when guided by empathy, accountability, and vision. The article outlines five critical competencies for effective AI leaders: digital curiosity, ethical awareness, change agility, creative accountability, and strategic integration. Through case examples from Microsoft, Salesforce, Unilever, LEGO, and McDonald's, it demonstrates how successful organizations align AI adoption with human ingenuity and business goals. Ultimately, the paper argues that true AI leadership lies in amplifying what only humans can do—leading responsibly at the intersection of technology and humanity.

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## Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes industries and organizations, a new form of leadership—AI leadership—is emerging. This article explores how leaders can harness AI not merely as a technological tool but as a catalyst for ethical, cultural, and strategic transformation. Drawing insights from McKinsey's Alex Singla and other thought leaders, the paper emphasizes that AI cannot replace core human skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and change management. Instead, AI leadership enhances these capabilities when guided by empathy, accountability, and vision. The article outlines five critical competencies for effective AI leaders: digital curiosity, ethical awareness, change agility, creative accountability, and strategic integration. Through case examples from Microsoft, Salesforce, Unilever, LEGO, and McDonald's, it demonstrates how successful organizations align AI adoption with human ingenuity and business goals. Ultimately, the paper argues that true AI leadership lies in amplifying what only humans can do—leading responsibly at the intersection of technology and humanity.

## Introduction

As artificial intelligence (AI) transforms industries and redefines business capabilities, a new kind of leadership is emerging, AI leadership. This is not about writing code or building algorithms; it's about guiding organizations through the ethical, cultural, and strategic changes that AI brings, while strengthening the skills that remain uniquely human.

In an interview published in Observer (June 2023) titled "McKinsey's A.I. Chief Discusses ChatGPT's Impact on Consulting Jobs", Alex Singla, Global Leader of Quantum Black at McKinsey, stressed that AI will not replace three essential human skills: creativity, problem-solving, and change management. He emphasized that while AI may generate ideas or simulate options, it lacks the ability to contextualize or lead complex human change, both of which are central to executive decision-making.

## Creativity: Enhanced, Not Replaced

In an article by McKinsey Global Institute titled "Don't wait, create with generative AI", Singla explained that generative AI can serve as a creative accelerator, offering a starting point or range of alternatives that spark human imagination. However, the direction, refinement, and emotional quality of creative work still require human touch. Leaders who can channel AI's output into innovation pipelines hold a competitive advantage.

## Problem Solving: Strategic Thinking Still Belongs to Humans

In the same Observer interview, Singla noted that AI can support analysis, but it cannot define a company's long-term strategic objectives or reconcile conflicting stakeholder priorities. That's where human judgment and strategic reasoning come into play. These skills AI cannot replicate at a leadership level.

## Change Management: The Human Challenge

According to Singla's remarks at the Creative Destruction Lab (CDL) program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the hardest part of AI implementation isn't the technology but it's getting people to adopt it. AI leadership therefore requires not just technical readiness, but also organizational empathy, communication, and the ability to guide teams through unfamiliar ground. As Singla puts it, "technology isn't the blocker, it's the people part."

## What Makes an Effective AI Leader?

Effective AI leadership is not just about understanding the technology, it's about reshaping how leaders make decisions, influence culture, and deliver value. The most successful AI leaders embody five critical capabilities:

### 1. Digital Curiosity: Learning Ahead of the Curve

AI leaders need not be engineers, but they must understand what AI can and cannot do. This includes staying current on technologies like generative AI, predictive analytics, and machine learning so they can steer innovation and make informed strategic choices.

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, exemplifies this mindset. Under his leadership, Microsoft became an early partner of OpenAI, embedding AI across its products like GitHub Copilot and Microsoft 365 Copilot. In doing so, Nadella created a culture where digital curiosity is rewarded and scaled.

**Actionable Insight:** Create a personal learning routine, engage in AI thought leadership, host internal demos of emerging tools, or create cross-functional AI innovation labs.

### 2. Ethical Awareness: Leading with Accountability

As AI systems take on more critical tasks, leaders are responsible for ensuring they are fair, explainable, and accountable. In the article "Leading in the Age of AI" published by MIT Sloan

Management Review, researchers emphasize that ethical governance is central to AI adoption, especially in sectors where trust is crucial.

Salesforce, for instance, established an Office of Ethical and Humane Use to oversee AI deployments and ensure alignment with company values. This type of proactive governance sets a gold standard for ethical AI leadership.

**Actionable Insight:** Form an internal AI ethics board or include ethics criteria in all AI vendor evaluations and procurement processes.

### 3. Change Agility: Navigating Human Transformation

While technology is scalable, culture is not. In the Observer article, Singla noted that "technology isn't the blocker, it's the people part." AI leaders must prepare their organizations for new ways of working, including reskilling talent, redefining roles, and building trust in automation.

Unilever provides a strong example. Instead of letting AI replace recruiters, the company trained them to use AI-powered screening tools, enhancing decision-making while maintaining human empathy in hiring. The initiative improved efficiency and candidate satisfaction.

**Actionable Insight:** Launch change readiness programs alongside every AI deployment, with an emphasis on transparency, psychological safety, and inclusive design.

### 4. Creative Accountability: Empowering Human Ingenuity

AI can generate options, but it cannot differentiate what's meaningful, resonant, or bold. Leaders must nurture human creativity and use AI to inspire, not dictate.

According to McKinsey Global Institute in the article "Don't wait, create with generative AI", generative tools can accelerate the creative process by offering new combinations and rapid prototyping, but final decisions, storytelling, and vision remain human.

LEGO, for example, uses AI to identify customer trends and generate concept ideas, but relies on human designers to translate these insights into imaginative, emotionally resonant toys.

**Actionable Insight:** Run AI + creativity design sprints where product, design, and marketing teams explore new ideas using tools like Midjourney or ChatGPT.

## 5. Strategic Integration: Aligning AI with Business Goals

According to McKinsey & Company's report "The State of AI in 2023", companies that deploy AI in alignment with business priorities, rather than as isolated experiments, are far more likely to see measurable ROI and sustained adoption.

McDonald's, for instance, used AI to personalize digital drive-thru menus based on variables like weather, time of day, and traffic; directly increasing average order value and improving customer experience.

**Actionable Insight:** Link every AI investment to a measurable business outcome: customer satisfaction, margin improvement, operational efficiency, or innovation speed.

## Leading at the Intersection of Technology and Humanity

To lead in the AI era is to lead at the intersection of technology and humanity. It's not about replacing judgment with data or intuition with automation, it's about amplifying what only humans can do. As Alex Singla rightly puts it, creativity, change management, and complex problem solving will remain the domain of human leaders. The challenge and the opportunity for executives is to build organizations where both machines and people thrive.

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