

The Jonesi Consultancy | Houston, TX

AI ADOPTION · MANAGER RESOURCE

THE MANAGER'S GUIDE TO AI CONVERSATIONS

What to Say When Your Team Asks the Hard Questions

Six conversations every manager is having right now.

1 Before the Scripts: Safety

Build Confidence Without Lowering Standards

Executives decide that the organization will use AI. Managers are the ones who have to explain it to the person sitting across the desk who is worried about their mortgage. That conversation rarely gets prepared for, and it is the one that determines whether adoption takes hold or goes underground.

Psychological safety during AI adoption means employees can ask questions, admit uncertainty, test low-risk ideas, and surface mistakes without fear of embarrassment or punishment. It does not mean lowering performance standards or removing accountability. It means creating conditions where people can learn openly enough to meet those standards.

SAFE TO ASK

Employees can say, "I do not understand this yet," without being treated as incapable.

SAFE TO LEARN

People can try approved, low-risk uses and improve through feedback rather than hiding their learning curve.

STILL ACCOUNTABLE

Human review, data protection, quality expectations, and professional responsibility remain in place.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

Psychological safety removes the interpersonal penalty for learning. It does not remove the operational consequences of negligence, policy violations, or unreviewed high-stakes work.

How To Use The Six Conversations That Follow

This guide covers the six conversations that come up most often. Each one includes what the person is actually asking, language that tends to make things worse, language that tends to work, and what to do after the conversation ends. Use the wording as a starting point and put it in your own voice. A script delivered word for word sounds like a script.

THE MANAGER TEST

If an employee found a serious flaw in an AI-assisted draft five minutes before a deadline, would they feel safer telling you immediately or quietly fixing it and hoping no one noticed? The answer says something important about the learning climate around AI.

Everything Else In This Guide Sits On Top Of These

1. Never Promise What You Cannot Deliver.

The single fastest way to lose a team is to guarantee job security you have no authority to guarantee. One broken promise makes every future statement you make suspect.

2. Name The Feeling Before You Address The Logic.

People do not accept information while they are anxious. Acknowledging the concern out loud is not a soft skill, it is the step that makes the rest of the conversation possible.

3. Separate The Tool Question From The Job Question.

Most AI conversations are two conversations wearing one coat. Answer them separately or you will answer neither.

4. Be Specific Or Be Quiet.

Vague reassurance reads as evasion. If you do not know something, saying so plainly costs you far less credibility than an answer that turns out to be wrong.

5. Follow Up, Even When Nothing Has Changed.

Silence after a hard conversation gets interpreted as bad news being withheld. Coming back with “still no decision” is more reassuring than saying nothing at all.

THE ONE THING THAT UNDOES ALL FIVE

Saying something you do not believe. People read tone far more accurately than content. If you have reservations about how this is being rolled out, raise them upward rather than performing confidence downward.

“Should I Be Worried About My Job?”**WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING**

Three questions are stacked inside this one: is my role going away, does this organization still value what I do, and are you going to tell me the truth about it. Only the third is entirely within your control, which is exactly why it is the one to answer first.

People who ask this directly are usually not the most anxious ones in your team. They are the ones comfortable enough to say it out loud. Assume the same question is sitting unasked with several others.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

“Nobody’s job is going anywhere, I promise.” A promise you have no authority to make. If it breaks once, nothing you say afterward carries weight.

“It’s just a tool, don’t worry about it.” This tells someone their concern is unreasonable, which guarantees they stop bringing concerns to you.

“You should be excited about this.” Instructing someone how to feel does not change how they feel. It only teaches them to hide it.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

“That is a fair question, and I would rather answer it honestly than just reassure you.

Here is what I actually know: [what has been decided]. Here is what I do not know yet: [what is still open].

What I can commit to is that if something changes about your role, you will hear it from me directly and not through rumor.

What specifically are you most worried about losing?”

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

› Write down what you did not know, and find out. Put a date on it.

› Go back to them by that date even if the answer has not changed.

› Assume the rest of your team heard about this within a day. Consider addressing it with the group.

“This Is A Fad, And Half Of What It Produces Is Wrong Anyway.”

WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING

There are two very different people who say this sentence, and they need opposite responses.

The first has genuinely tried the tools and found them unreliable for their work. That person is giving you accurate field data and should be thanked for it. The second has not tried much of anything and is protecting something: usually hard-won expertise they suspect is about to be devalued. Your first job is to find out which one you are talking to.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

“You just need to give it a chance.” Dismisses the objection without engaging it, which confirms the suspicion that nobody wants to hear the downside.

“Everyone else is already on board.” Peer pressure turns a skeptic into a quiet skeptic, which is worse for you.

“It will get better, trust me.” You are asking for faith in a claim you cannot support.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

“Tell me where it failed you. I want the specific case, not the general impression.”

[If they have a real example] **“That is useful, and you are right that it is bad at that. Let us write that down as something we do not use it for.”**

[If they do not] **“You do not have to like it. What I need is for us to be accurate about it. Pick one task you own, let us run it together, and we will both see what actually happens.”**

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

› Give them a real task from their own work, not a demonstration.

› Review the output together and let them tell you what is wrong with it.

› Record what the tools should not be used for. A skeptic who helped write the limits usually stops being a skeptic.

"I Already Automated Half My Workflow. Want To See?"

WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING

This person is the reason you will hit your adoption goals, and also the reason you may have an incident. They are moving quickly, probably skipping verification, and may already have pasted something sensitive into a tool nobody has reviewed.

The correction has to leave the enthusiasm intact. Managers routinely destroy their best adopter by treating a process problem as a judgment problem.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

"Stop using AI until we get this sorted out." You will not get compliance, you will get concealment.

Correcting them in front of the team. The audience learns that visible initiative is dangerous.

"You are going to get us in trouble." Fear produces hiding, not care.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

"You are ahead of most of the team on this and I want to keep it that way.

One thing has to change: [everything client-facing gets verified before it leaves / nothing confidential goes into an unapproved tool]. Walk me through what you actually put in when you did [specific example].

You are the right person to set the standard here rather than the one who has to be reined in."

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

› Give them ownership of the verification habit for the team. It converts a risk into a strength.

› Check what they have already put into which tools. Do it without blame or you will not get an accurate answer.

› Make sure they know which tools are approved. Very often nobody has told them.

“[Says Nothing At All]”**WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING**

The person who says nothing is usually the one you need to reach most. Silence here is rarely resistance. It is almost always the fear of being seen as slow in front of people who seem to have picked it up effortlessly.

This tends to concentrate among your most experienced staff, who have the most competence to lose and the furthest to fall in a public setting. They will not raise it, so you have to.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

Asking “why aren’t you using it?” in a group setting. This is an accusation dressed as a question.

“It is easy, anyone can do it.” Which means that if they cannot, they are not anyone.

Nothing at all. Leaving it alone reads as a decision that they no longer matter to the effort.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

[In private] “I have noticed this has not become part of how you work yet, and I am not asking you to explain why.

I want to know what would make it easier to start. Would it help if the two of us sat down and did one of your actual tasks together, with nobody else in the room?”

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

› Pair them with one person, privately, on their own real work. Not a training session.

› Give credit publicly for the result, never for the effort. “Great job trying” confirms their worst reading.

› Check back in two weeks. One conversation almost never moves this.

“Am I Supposed To Tell People AI Helped With This?”**WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING**

Underneath this question is a different one: is using this something I should be embarrassed about? Your answer sets the culture. Handle it badly and people stop asking, keep using the tools, and you lose all visibility into how the work is actually getting done.

The question also exposes whether your organization has decided anything. If you do not have a disclosure rule, this conversation is telling you to go get one.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

“Use your best judgment.” Sounds empowering. Delivers nothing, and guarantees five people apply five different standards.

“Just don’t mention it.” You have now made concealment official policy.

“Always disclose everything.” Unworkable in practice, so it gets ignored, and once one rule gets ignored the others follow.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

“Here is the line we use: routine help such as drafting, summarizing, or formatting does not need a disclosure. Anything going to a client, a funder, a board, or the public does.

Either way you own what is in it. AI assisted, you approved.

If you are ever unsure, ask me and we will decide together. Nobody here has ever had a problem for asking.”

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- › If you do not have a written policy, say so honestly and escalate it. Do not invent a rule per conversation.
- › Check whether any client contract or funder agreement already addresses this. Several probably do.
- › Repeat the rule to the whole team. Individual answers create individual standards.

“We Are Going To Start Using AI.”**WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY ASKING**

The group announcement is the conversation you have the most control over and the one people most often get wrong. Opening with efficiency is heard as headcount, no matter how you phrase it afterward.

Expect the meeting to surface almost nothing. People do not voice job anxiety in front of colleagues. The real conversations happen one to one in the week that follows, which means the announcement is the beginning of the work rather than the end of it.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

Leading with productivity, efficiency, or doing more with less. Every one of those phrases has a second meaning in the ear of the person hearing it.

“Any questions?” at the end of a group meeting. The silence you get back is not agreement.

Announcing it and then not mentioning it again for a month.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

“Here is why we are doing this and what it is meant to fix: [the specific problem, in terms of their work rather than the organization’s cost base].

Here is what has been decided. Here is what has not been decided yet. Here is what I expect from you, and here is what is off limits.

I am going to talk with each of you individually over the next week, because I do not expect anyone to raise their real questions in a room like this.”

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

› Book the one to one conversations before you leave the room. If they are not on a calendar they will not happen.

› Write down the questions you could not answer and take them upward that week.

› Say something about it again within ten days. A single announcement reads as an announcement, not a direction.

9 Language That Builds Safety

Two Phrasings Of The Same Intent, And The Different Climates They Create

DO MORE OF THIS

"Ask before you guess. If a boundary is unclear, bring it forward."

"Show us what you tried and what happened."

"The first version does not have to be perfect; the final work still has to meet our standard."

"Tell us when the tool gives you something questionable."

"We are learning where AI belongs and where it does not."

"I am learning this too. Here is one place I changed my own approach."

AVOID THIS

"You should know this by now."

"Why would you use AI for that?"

"If AI makes a mistake, stop using it."

"Do not bring me problems unless you have already fixed them."

"Everyone needs to be using AI more."

Pretending leadership already has all of the answers.

THE STANDARD

Strong managers combine two messages: "It is safe to learn here" and "We still own the quality, judgment, and consequences of the final work." Psychological safety and accountability reinforce each other when both are explicit.

When to Escalate Instead of Answering

There is a category of question you should not answer, and improvising through it is how managers lose their teams. Anything touching job security, restructuring, headcount, or performance consequences belongs to leadership. If you have not been told the answer, you do not have one, and a confident guess that turns out to be wrong will follow you for years.

Saying that you do not know costs almost nothing when it comes with a commitment and a date. Here is language that holds up:

ESCALATION LANGUAGE

"I am not going to guess at something this important. I do not have that answer today. I will ask, and I will come back to you by [specific day] with either the answer or an honest account of why there still is not one."

Then do it. The follow-through is the entire value of the sentence. A manager who returns on the stated day with no news is more trusted than one who provided comfortable answers that did not hold.

Before You Walk Into Any of These



Do I know what has actually been decided, in writing, versus what I am assuming?



What am I not allowed to say, and do I know why?



What is the honest answer if they ask whether anyone is losing their job?



Am I prepared to hear something I do not want to hear without becoming defensive?



What is the one thing I want to be true after this conversation ends?



When am I following up, and is it on my calendar right now?

Use This Page As A Discussion Starter, Not A Score

START

One management behavior I will start:

STOP

One management behavior I will stop:

CONTINUE

One management behavior I will continue:

WRITE IT DOWN BEFORE YOU LEAVE THIS PAGE

The AI-related question I want my team to feel safer asking is:

The boundary or expectation I need to clarify is:

The learning behavior I will model publicly is:

The team practice I will reinforce over the next 30 days is:

Roughly seventy percent of what determines whether AI adoption succeeds is people and process rather than technology, and most of that runs through frontline managers. Your team will read this change from how you handle these six conversations, not from a strategy deck they saw once.

None of it requires expertise in the technology. It requires honesty about what you know, specificity about what you expect, and coming back when you said you would. Managers who do that get told the truth by their teams, which is the only thing that makes this manageable.

© 2026 The Jonesi Consultancy. All rights reserved.

We train managers to have these conversations.

Our leadership sessions are built and delivered by a licensed clinical social worker and a CPA, because this work sits between the human side and the business side.

