

The Jonesi Consultancy | Houston, TX

AI ADOPTION · LEADERSHIP RESOURCE

# WHAT EMPLOYEES NEED FROM LEADERS DURING AI ADOPTION

9 Things That Decide Whether Any of This Takes Hold

*Access and permission are not the same thing.*

## Why Leadership Behavior Decides The Outcome

Employees do not need leaders to have every AI answer. They need leaders to make expectations visible, learning legitimate, responsible experimentation safe, and human accountability clear.

AI adoption is decided in the gap between the announcement and the following Tuesday morning. The announcement is leadership work. Tuesday morning belongs to whoever is standing in front of the team, and what happens there is determined almost entirely by whether people were given the things in this guide.

Adoption is not only a technology decision. It changes how people learn, make decisions, ask for help, share work, and interpret what their organization values. Employees watch leadership closely for signals about what is encouraged, what is risky, and what will happen when they make a mistake. When those signals are inconsistent, employees respond rationally: they avoid AI, use it privately, over-rely on it without asking questions, or wait for someone else to define the rules.

## What Employees Are Often Trying to Understand

Is AI use actually encouraged here?

What am I allowed to put into these tools?

Will I look incompetent if I ask basic questions?

How will AI change what is expected of my role?

## The Pattern, And What It Costs

### THE PATTERN TO REMEMBER

Employees need both permission and boundaries. Permission without boundaries produces risk. Boundaries without permission produce avoidance. Sustainable adoption requires both.

### WHAT THIS COSTS

None of the nine conditions in this guide require budget. Most require a decision and then the discipline to keep making it visible for longer than feels necessary. Leadership does not eliminate uncertainty. It gives employees a stable way to work through it.

## 1. CLARITY

*A specific statement of why this organization is doing this and what it is meant to change.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** "We are doing this because our intake process takes eleven days and it should take four."

**WITHOUT IT:** People fill the silence themselves, and what they fill it with is usually headcount.

## 2. PERMISSION

*An explicit statement that using AI on real work is expected, not merely tolerated.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** "I want to see this in your work. If it saves you an hour, that hour is yours."

**WITHOUT IT:** Use goes underground. Private use cannot be improved, shared, governed, or measured.

## 3. SAFETY TO BE BAD AT IT

*Room to be visibly unskilled in front of colleagues without it becoming a story about their competence.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** A manager saying out loud that their first three attempts were useless.

**WITHOUT IT:** The most experienced people, who have the most to lose from looking slow, quietly opt out.

## 4. ROLE RELEVANCE

*Examples drawn from the work they actually do, not a generic demonstration.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** A session where each person leaves having built something for their own job.

**WITHOUT IT:** Everyone agrees it is impressive and nobody can name what they would use it for on Monday.

## 5. TIME TO LEARN

*Protected hours that are not carved out of an already full week.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** A recurring block that a manager defends when something urgent arrives.

**WITHOUT IT:** Learning becomes a personal expense, paid in evenings, by the people who can afford it.

## 6. MEANINGFUL GUARDRAILS

*Clear boundaries about tools and information, given as guidance rather than warning.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** "Here is what you can use, here is what never goes in, here is who to ask."

**WITHOUT IT:** Cautious people freeze and confident people improvise. Both outcomes are expensive.

## 7. FEEDBACK ON THE WORK

*Somebody who looks at what they produced and tells them how to make it better.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** A review of the actual output, not a satisfaction survey about the training.

**WITHOUT IT:** People repeat their early mistakes indefinitely because nothing tells them otherwise.

## 8. REINFORCEMENT

*The topic appearing in the ordinary weekly conversation where work gets directed.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** A manager asking, without ceremony, how it went.

**WITHOUT IT:** It becomes a thing the organization did once, which is how most of these end.

## 9. VISIBLE LEADERSHIP USE

*Leaders using it themselves, in view, including the parts that go badly.*

**SOUNDS LIKE:** An executive describing a case where the tool was confidently wrong and what they did about it.

**WITHOUT IT:** Staff conclude that this is something leadership wants done rather than something worth doing.

## THE PATTERN IN THE RIGHT-HAND COLUMN

Every failure listed above produces silence rather than complaint. Nobody sends an email saying they have quietly stopped. That is why adoption problems are usually discovered two quarters after they began.

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## Leadership Signals Employees Notice

### Small Behaviors Become Cultural Instructions

Employees infer the real rules of AI use from what leaders reward, question, ignore, and punish. Nothing in the right-hand column is unreasonable. Most of it is what a busy, well-intentioned manager does by default, which is exactly why it is worth naming.

#### THIS BUILDS CONFIDENCE

Naming what is uncertain along with what is decided.

Asking someone to show you how they did something.

Describing your own failed attempt in a group setting.

Correcting a mistake privately and specifically.

Giving one team the time and watching what happens.

Publishing the boundaries before people ask for them.

Crediting the result and naming who produced it.

Asking what is not working with this.

#### THIS QUIETLY COSTS IT

Projecting certainty about things leadership has not actually decided.

Praising output without ever looking at how it was produced.

Only ever demonstrating the version that worked.

Correcting it in front of the team, however gently.

Announcing an organization-wide expectation with no time attached.

Waiting for an incident and then publishing rules that read as punishment.

Crediting the tool, which tells people where they now rank.

Treating any criticism of the tools as resistance to change.

### How The Message Has To Be Constructed To Survive Contact With A Real Team

#### 1. BE SPECIFIC.

"Use AI responsibly" is too vague. Name approved tools, prohibited data, review expectations, and examples of appropriate use.

#### 2. SEPARATE EXPERIMENTATION FROM PERFORMANCE.

Early practice should include room to learn. Employees will not experiment openly if every imperfect attempt is treated as a competence failure.

#### 3. KEEP ACCOUNTABILITY HUMAN.

AI can assist with work, but the employee and the organization remain responsible for what is approved, sent, decided, or acted upon.

### A Five-Minute AI Check-In

**1**

What did you try?

**2**

What worked?

**3**

What needed human correction?

**4**

What should we reuse or change?

#### WHERE THIS BELONGS

In the one-to-one, not in an all-staff message. Five minutes in the meeting where work already gets directed does more for adoption than a second round of training.

### Put These In Your Own Words Before You Use Them

#### NORMALIZING THE QUESTIONS NOBODY IS ASKING

*"I want to make something explicit. Nobody here is expected to already be good at this. If you try something and it produces garbage, that is the normal experience and I would rather hear about it than not. The only thing I actually care about is that we check what it gives us before it leaves this team."*

#### RESPONDING WHEN SOMEBODY GETS IT WRONG

*"Thanks for telling me. Walk me through what you asked it and what came back. I am not looking for an explanation, I am looking for what the rest of us should learn from it. What would you do differently?"*

#### ENCOURAGING EXPERIMENTATION WITHOUT INVITING RECKLESSNESS

*"Try it on anything that stays inside this team. Draft it, test it, break it. The line is that nothing goes to a client or into a system of record until a person has checked it, and the person who sends it is the person who checked it."*

### Two More, And A Note On Delivery

#### TWO MORE WORTH HAVING READY

**When people are using tools privately:** "I would rather know where AI is being useful than have people hide it. If a tool or use case is outside our current guidance, bring it forward so we can evaluate it instead of guessing alone."

**When AI feels personally threatening:** "I cannot promise that work will never change. I can be clear about what we are trying to improve, what human judgment still matters here, and how we will support people in building the skills the work now requires."

#### A NOTE ON DELIVERY

Delivered verbatim these sound like a script, which undoes the point of saying them. Managers do not need scripted perfection. They need language that makes expectations and learning visible.

### Mark Only The Ones An Employee Could Point To

What you believe is not the test. This is a reflection tool rather than a maturity score, and its value is in identifying where the signals are still ambiguous.

- ☐ Our people could state, in one sentence, why this organization is doing this.
- ☐ Someone in authority has said out loud that using AI on real work is expected.
- ☐ A leader here has publicly described something they got wrong with it.
- ☐ The training people received used examples from their own jobs.
- ☐ There is time in the week for this that a manager will defend against something urgent.
- ☐ The boundaries are written down and people can find them without asking.
- ☐ People know what information should never be entered into an unapproved tool.
- ☐ Somebody reviews the actual work product and gives specific feedback on it.
- ☐ It comes up in one-to-ones, not only in all-staff messages.
- ☐ Employees have seen a senior leader use these tools in front of them.
- ☐ Teams have a way to share useful, approved applications instead of keeping them private.
- ☐ The people who have not adopted it have been asked what would make it easier, privately.

### READING THE RESULT

The unmarked boxes are your work list, and they cost less than whatever is currently being proposed as the solution.

## No More Than Three Improvements For The Next 30 Days

Specific changes are more useful than broad commitments. Pick the three an employee would actually notice, write them down, and put a date on each.

### WRITE IT DOWN BEFORE YOU LEAVE THIS PAGE

One expectation we need to make clearer:

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One learning condition we need to improve:

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One leadership behavior we need to model more visibly:

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The date I will check whether any of this is visible to my team:

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### START

One leadership behavior I will start:

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### STOP

One leadership behavior I will stop:

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### CONTINUE

One leadership behavior I will continue:

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### THE TEST YOU CANNOT FAKE

Employees learn what the organization truly expects by watching what leadership makes clear, makes possible, and reinforces over time. Anything you write here that they never see does not count.

## Rather Than A Training Initiative

Organizations routinely hand AI capability to learning and development, which is a reasonable place for the curriculum and the wrong place for the outcome. Training teaches a skill. It cannot give permission, protect time, define boundaries, review work product, or put the subject in a weekly conversation. Every one of those sits with a manager.

This is also why AI adoption exposes existing management problems rather than creating new ones. A team with unclear expectations and no feedback loop will not adopt AI well, and the reason will have little to do with AI. The tools make the gap visible faster than the last initiative did.

The organizations that get this right are rarely the ones with the best technology. They are the ones where somebody decided capability was a management responsibility and then held managers to it.

### WHAT TRAINING CAN DO

Introduce the skill, build initial fluency, and give people a shared vocabulary for the tools.

### WHAT ONLY MANAGERS CAN DO

Grant permission, protect the time, publish the boundaries, review the output, and keep the subject alive week to week.

## CAPABILITY-BUILDING IS A LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY

Training can introduce skills. Leaders determine whether those skills become normal, safe, supported, and connected to real work.

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## Building the management layer this depends on.

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.

