

LEADER · 5 MINUTE READ

Leading AI adoption: what leaders do differently

Leaders make AI adoption work by setting rules, protecting learning time, using AI themselves, choosing problems well and keeping people accountable.

What it is

Buying AI tools is a purchase. Getting value from them is a change in how people work, and that change needs leading. The tools are often similar from one organisation to the next; much of the difference is how leaders set the direction, the rules and the pace.

Think of a new gym membership for a team. The membership does nothing on its own. What matters is whether there is time in the week to go, someone shows how the equipment works, and the manager goes too.

Why it matters

- People take their cue from what leaders do, not only from what they say.
- Without clear rules, staff either avoid AI or use unapproved tools with company data.
- Freed time is easily lost unless someone decides how to use it.
- Fears about jobs, left unspoken, slow adoption and damage trust.
- Accountability for decisions must stay with people, whatever the AI suggests.

How to do it

1. **Set clear rules and approved tools.** Say which assistants are approved and what data may never be pasted in (see guide 10). One page is enough.
2. **Protect learning time.** Schedule regular time to learn and try, and treat it as real work.
3. **Use AI visibly yourself.** Draft a memo or summarise a report with an approved assistant, and say what you checked and changed.
4. **Choose a few valuable problems.** Pick tasks that happen often and cost real time, and use what you already have before building anything new (see guide 16).
5. **Decide what freed hours are for.** This is a management decision: more customer time, less overtime, new work, or a mix (see guide 28).
6. **Recognise and spread what works.** Credit the people who find good prompts or methods, and help others reuse them (see guide 29).
7. **Measure and report honestly.** Report measured results separately from estimates, and expect results to dip before they rise (see guide 30).
8. **Keep humans accountable.** AI drafts and suggests. A named person checks the output and owns every decision that matters.

Example

Before: a department head announces "everyone should use AI" in an email. No tools are named, no time is set aside and nobody knows what data is allowed. A few people try it with personal accounts; the rest do nothing. Three months later nothing has been measured.

After: the same leader sends this note and follows it through:

From [date], [approved assistants] are approved for [types of work].
Never paste [customer data, personal data, confidential figures].
Each of us has [time] a week to learn and try, starting with made-up examples.
We will focus on [two or three tasks] first and measure time and quality.
Hours we save will go to [chosen use].
I will share how I use it myself at our [meeting].
[Only if true: no role is being cut because of this trial]; if that ever changes,
you will hear it from me first and directly.
Every output is checked by the person who sends it.

The leader shows a real example at each team meeting, names the people whose prompts were adopted and reports measured results each month.

Common mistakes

- **Mandating AI without rules or time.** Fix: name approved tools, data limits and protected learning time.
- **Delegating it all to one enthusiast.** Fix: stay involved, use AI yourself and review progress in normal meetings.
- **Reporting hopes as results.** Fix: show measured figures and label estimates clearly.
- **Avoiding the jobs question.** Fix: talk about it openly, say what you know and what you do not, and make no promise you cannot keep.
- **Letting AI make the decision.** Fix: a named person owns each decision and the check before it.

Try it this week

1. Write your one-page rules: approved tools, data never to paste, where the human check sits.
2. Book one protected hour for your team to try a real task with made-up data.
3. Use an approved assistant for one task of your own and tell your team what you checked.
4. Write down how freed hours should be used and share it.

Going further

- **Add AI to normal reviews.** A short standing item in team meetings: what worked, what did not, what to share.
- **Agree review points.** Set dates to decide continue, change course or stop for each project (see guide 30).
- **Run short loops.** Let real users learn, build and use together in cycles of a few weeks (see guide 31).
- **Ask for evaluations before big changes.** Test a change on known examples before it goes wide (see guide 27).

Key words

- **AI adoption:** the change in how people work when they start using AI regularly and well.
- **Approved tool:** an assistant your organisation has checked and allowed for work use.
- **Learning time:** scheduled time for people to learn and practise, treated as real work.
- **Freed hours:** time saved by AI, whose use is a management decision.
- **Accountability:** being the named person who owns a decision and its outcome.