

FRONTLINE AI LEADERSHIP

How to Use AI to Free Up Time,
Strengthen Judgment, and
Develop People

MACHINES DO.

MANAGERS DECIDE.

LEADERS DEVELOP.

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The Manager Just Got Five Hours Back. Now What?

Early in operating my restaurant, I overestimated administrative demand. Work I expected to fill a forty-hour role settled closer to ten hours a week. After the person in that role moved to another opportunity, the remaining work came to me.

Corporate emails, vendor responses, invoices, payroll, and team member onboarding and offboarding still had to be handled. None of the work disappeared simply because it did not justify a full-time position.

I made a deliberate decision to keep that work away from our operational directors. I wanted them managing shifts, serving guests, and leading their teams, not spending hours behind a computer completing administrative tasks simply because someone had to do them. So the work fell to me.

At first, that seemed manageable. Ten hours spread across a week does not sound overwhelming. But the work was repetitive, fragmented, and relentless. It interrupted higher-value work and consumed an unreasonable portion of my schedule. Every week, I found myself doing tasks that were necessary but did not necessarily require me.

I considered hiring an executive assistant or virtual assistant. At the time, I was using AI the way much of the country was using it: as a thought partner and research assistant. I asked questions, gathered information, and improved drafts. I did not think of AI as something that could actually complete work.

That changed during a late Saturday-night drive home. My commute is roughly an hour each way, and I try to use that time productively by listening to podcasts, interviews, documentaries, and audiobooks. That night, an entrepreneur dismissed my preferred AI tool as old news and best used for beginners. Ouch! I was offended enough to keep listening.

Would You Like Me to Do It?

His explanation led me to download an AI desktop application that claimed it could do more than provide information: it could take action. I tested it on our onboarding process, where four new team members were moving through a fifteen-step checklist. Some steps required little more than a click; others involved more complicated actions and decisions.

I asked the tool to examine the spreadsheet on my screen and tell me the onboarding status of each new hire. It reviewed the process, recommended

combining several steps, and rearranged others into a more logical sequence. That was useful, but it was still the kind of advice I had come to expect from AI. Then it ended with a question I had never seen before.

"Would you like me to do it?"

I hesitated before typing a single letter: Y.

I watched cautiously as the tool began editing files in front of me. It asked clarifying questions, proposed next steps, and waited for my approval before acting. When it made mistakes, I corrected them and let it try again. Over the next hour, after several rounds of revision and a few missteps, we redesigned and automated roughly 90 percent of the repeatable, administrative steps in onboarding.

The remaining work stayed with a person intentionally: confirming work authorization documents and holding a one-on-one welcome meeting with the new hire. The system handled the repeatable administration, while a person retained responsibility for the consequential and relational work.

Across those recurring steps, I estimated that the workflow returned roughly five hours in a typical week. What did I do with them? I wish I could tell you that I immediately reinvested every recovered hour in coaching team members, developing leaders, or spending more time on the restaurant floor. I did not. I spent the time looking for more ways to use AI.

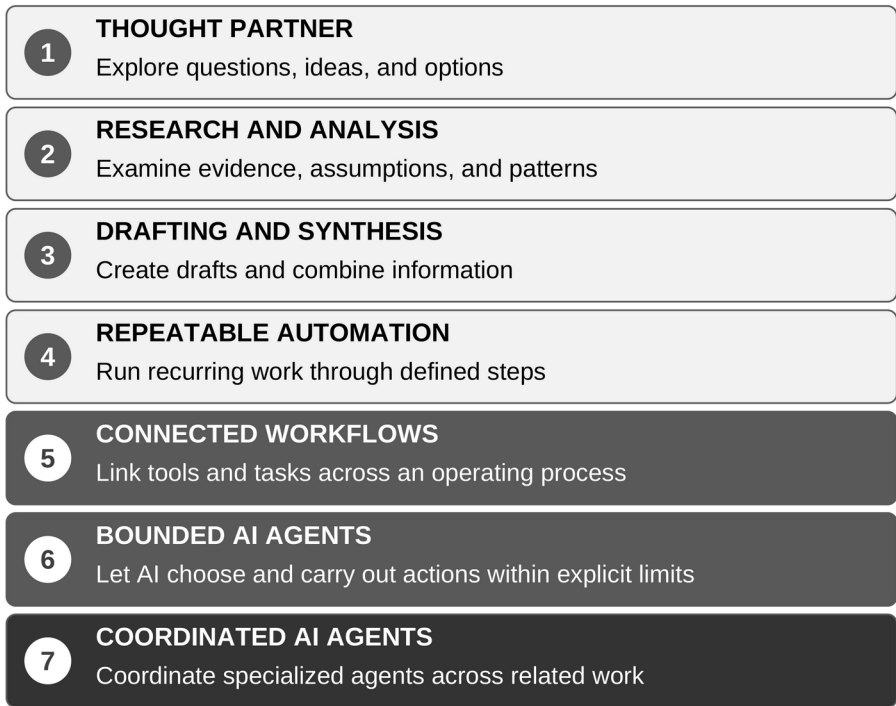
From Answering to Acting

The onboarding experiment changed my sense of what AI could do. It could help carry out a workflow while I set boundaries, corrected mistakes, and remained responsible for the result. Chapter 7 returns to that experience to examine the estimated time saving and what I did with it.

The experiments produced better workflows and more capacity. But they also exposed something I had not anticipated: AI can give time back faster than we learn how to use that time well.

My AI Journey

Looking back, I can see how my use of AI expanded, from helping me think to carrying out work and coordinating related tasks. Figure 1 summarizes that experience. These uses overlap; I still use AI as a thought partner alongside automated workflows.



Greater technical autonomy does not automatically create better leadership.

Figure 1. The AI Journey.

Specialist agents can handle tasks in areas such as finance, marketing, and operations, with a coordinating agent managing their handoffs. The agents can analyze, prepare, monitor, route, and act within boundaries. Human managers still set objectives, establish decision rights, approve boundaries, make consequential decisions, and own the results.

This book is for supervisors, managers, and owners who lead frontline teams, and for the senior leaders who support them. My examples come mainly from a restaurant, but the same leadership questions matter in retail, hospitality, healthcare, and other frontline settings.

Readers will recognize different parts of their own experience in this journey. Some are still using AI to answer questions. Others have automated workflows or begun experimenting with agents. The goal is not to race toward the most autonomous system. Technical sophistication and leadership maturity are not the same thing.

My biggest realization came after I had learned to use AI in much of my management work. I had spent most of my AI journey asking how the technology could help me complete work, shorten timelines, monitor performance, and make

better decisions. Then I asked a more important question: *Could AI help me become a better leader of people, not merely a more efficient manager of tasks?*

Productivity Is Only the First Result

Saving time and improving how work gets done are worthwhile goals. If a manager spends three hours every week creating something that an approved AI system can safely help produce in thirty minutes, preserving the manual process does not make the organization more human. It makes the organization inefficient.

But suppose we succeed. Suppose AI really does remove five hours. The business could immediately fill those hours with more work and call the project successful. Sometimes that is exactly what the business needs. If margins are collapsing, the responsible management decision may be to reduce cost. If demand is growing faster than the organization can serve it, the best use may be more output. But if those are the only outcomes we can imagine, we are thinking too narrowly about what technological progress can create.

In a November 2024 survey of U.S. workers who had used generative AI at work during the previous week, about one in five estimated saving at least four hours that week, while roughly one in three estimated saving an hour or less. Those estimates make recovered capacity a practical management question.¹

AI can also lead people toward a wrong answer. In a study involving 758 Boston Consulting Group consultants, people using AI completed more tasks, worked faster, and produced higher-quality work when the assignments matched AI's strengths. But when researchers gave them a complex problem that AI did not handle well, the consultants using AI were 19 percentage points less likely to reach the correct answer.² Speed does not replace judgment. People still need to recognize when AI may be wrong, verify important work, and remain responsible for the consequences.

The same honesty is required when the conversation reaches jobs. Neither warnings that AI will eliminate every job nor assurances that everyone will simply move into higher-value work amount to a serious strategy. Jobs are bundles of responsibilities. When technology changes that bundle, managers decide what work remains, what standards apply, and what consequences follow, while leaders help people build the capabilities the new work requires. Trust begins with telling the truth about both possibilities.

Two Futures

I can imagine two versions of the AI workplace. In the first, machines become extraordinarily capable and organizations become more efficient. Every productivity gain becomes more output or lower cost. Managers oversee more activity with fewer

people. Employee communication moves through automated systems. Recognition sounds personal but is generated. Coaching is simulated. Human judgment becomes a rubber stamp because the machine is usually right. The organization becomes incredibly efficient and increasingly impersonal.

In the second, machines still become extraordinarily capable. Organizations still automate, reduce unnecessary work, improve service, and pursue financial returns. Managers retain judgment and accountability. Frontline employees gain better tools and more access to useful information. Leaders spend more time coaching, recognizing, listening, and helping other people strengthen their judgment. Technology becomes more capable, and people do too.

The Five-Hour Question

That brings us back to the onboarding checklist. AI gave me approximately five hours a week. My first move was to invest those hours in more AI. I had learned how to recover time, but I had not yet learned how to protect it from the next project or deliberately invest it in people.

The conflict at the heart of AI leadership is not humans versus machines. It is extraction versus investment. Most organizations will need a mix of additional output, lower cost, operating improvement, and investment in people. The defining question is whether that mix is intentional and honest.

When AI gives frontline managers back time, responsible managers decide how that capacity will improve performance. Responsible leaders ensure that some of it also helps people grow.

Some of those five hours may need to increase output, solve a recurring operational problem, or reduce costs. Those are responsible management choices. But if even one recovered hour is invested in another person, it can become encouragement for a new hire, recognition for a quiet team member, or coaching for a future leader.

Months later, that person may handle something that once required the manager and eventually teach someone else to do the same. The hour is gone, but its value keeps moving. This is the moment a manager becomes a leader in the era of AI.

Put the ideas to work.

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