

Research Paper

AI Adoption & the Need for Human Connection

The Human Advantage in an Era of Continuous AI Change



Executive Summary

Leadership today increasingly involves managing impressions rather than sustaining genuine connection across organisations. Under conditions of continuous change and transformation, particularly initiatives communicated as Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven transformation. This erosion of connection starts to introduce unmanageable, but avoidable risk. When leaders lose the ability to think, decide, and act together under pressurised conditions, coordination slows, judgment degrades, and the transformation initiative stalls.

AI intensifies this challenge. As AI becomes embedded in everyday work, it reshapes how decisions are made, how accountability is held, and how work is coordinated. While most organisations focus on a technical rollout, far fewer prepare leaders for the disruption the wider transformation initiatives create. Research consistently shows that the capabilities most critical in this environment (judgment, collaboration, adaptability, and resilience) are human rather than technical.

AI change is constant with no clear end-point in sight²⁴, so credibility in senior leadership starts to wobble.

It is against this rapidly evolving background that now, more than ever, the importance of the human side of transformation is brought to the fore.

Transformation efforts fail not because change is attempted, but because connection erodes under pressure. Collaboration gives way to compliance, disagreement becomes muted, and alignment becomes performative. These dynamics lead to slower decision cycles, reduced execution quality, and diminished gains.

The Leadership Challenge in an AI-Driven Time

Shakespeare wrote that *'All the world's a stage'*. For today's leaders, that line feels less metaphorical than it once did.

In an era that is increasingly being defined and driven by time-pressured change initiatives, and specifically wider AI initiatives, leadership increasingly loses the necessary relationships with the wider employee base. Decisions are made while environment and context are still forming. Leaders are expected to project confidence even as roles, judgement calls, and ways of working are being redefined. And this is before we even consider wider understanding and acceptance of these changes.

Artificial intelligence does not simply introduce new tools into organisations, it changes the conditions under which leadership is enacted. AI reshapes how knowledge is generated, how decisions are informed and how work is coordinated across people and technology. Unlike prior waves of transformation, it does not arrive as a discrete initiative with a clear end point. It embeds itself into everyday working experience, creating a continuous demand for adaptation and agility.

As a result, AI adoption is rarely a single act. It unfolds as a sequence of moments, e.g. in meetings, decisions, conversations, where leaders must respond to uncertainty in real time. Questions surface quickly: when to trust AI outputs, when to override them, how to hold accountability as roles evolve, and how to move forward without full clarity.

In these moments, leaders often feel pressure to perform: projecting certainty in the face of ambiguity and signalling alignment when tension remains unresolved. That performance can maintain momentum in the short term. Over time, however, it creates distance because unresolved tension and unspoken uncertainty stay hidden, creating distance between people, between perspectives, and between what is said and what is actually happening.

This is where many AI initiatives begin to lose traction and fail, not because of the technology itself, but because the human system struggles to adapt at the same pace. Pressure is constantly "on", information is unevenly disseminated, and interdependence increases, while confidence erodes.

Why AI Adoption Fails and the Cost of Failure

AI initiatives rarely stall because the technology itself does not work. More often, they stall because AI is introduced into environments that were not designed for AI-driven enablement.

As AI becomes embedded in everyday work, it fundamentally alters how decisions are made, how accountability is held, and how work is coordinated. Leaders are required to integrate AI outputs into judgment calls, manage accountability, and align action across functions whose interdependencies are increasingly complex and unclear. In these conditions, leadership depends less on efficiency and more on judgment, coordination, and adaptive decision-making under uncertainty.

Workforce research highlights a growing mismatch. While organisations increasingly recognize judgment, collaboration, and adaptability as critical capabilities for AI-enabled work, leadership remains focused on getting right the technical rollout rather than preparing leaders for the disruption AI creates in human coordination, authority, and decision-making.^{2,3}

Core skills in 2030



Note: This visual shows that as AI becomes embedded in everyday work, the capabilities viewed as becoming increasingly important are human in nature.

(Curiosity, agility, flexibility and resilience)

These are precisely the conditions required for sustained AI success.

In practice, many transformation efforts fail to recognise the importance of these capabilities, let alone build and nurture them. AI simply makes this broader challenge more visible. Across major change initiatives, increased investment does not reliably translate into better performance. Adoption remains unclear, gains are inconsistent.⁴

Workforce research shows persistent gaps between leadership intent and employee experience during periods of accelerated change, gaps that slow adoption and dilute value when uncertainty about expectations, relevance, or impact goes unaddressed.

These gaps are not technical. They reflect how people respond to change under pressure, how uncertainty is absorbed, how disagreement is handled, and whether teams are able to function effectively when stakes are high. As technological advances become embedded in environments, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on sustaining human connection so people can think, decide, and act together as transformation accelerates.

When that connection weakens, productivity declines, decisions slow, and expected gains fail to materialise, even when the technology itself is sound, a pattern reflected in research linking low trust and poor coordination to reduced execution quality and higher rework rates.^{4,5,6}

The limiting factor, then, is not analytical capability. It is the human capacity to coordinate, exercise judgment, and adapt together under pressure. This is why leadership connection is fundamental during times of transformation.

Where AI Adoption Breaks Down

The mismatch is where many change and AI initiatives begin to lose momentum. Not because organisations failed to enable AI, but because connection erodes under pressure and leadership becomes increasingly disconnected from employees. As AI adoption accelerates, leaders must coordinate across greater complexity and rely more heavily on one another while roles and expectations remain in flux or sidelined. Under these conditions, even capable organisations begin to show predictable symptoms. Collaboration turns into coordination. Creativity gives way to compliance.

Disconnection rarely looks dramatic. It shows subtly: missed signals, delayed decisions, polite alignment without real commitment. Over time, energy drains. Empathy thins. Trust erodes.

The cost is measurable and substantial. Research consistently shows that when trust, psychological safety, and relational alignment decline, organisations experience slower decision-making, lower execution quality, and higher levels of rework.⁵ Teams become less willing to surface risk, challenge assumptions, or adapt plans midstream, precisely the behaviours required in fast-moving environments. Precisely the behaviours needed in the new AI-enabled world.

Large-scale research makes this cost visible. Organisations with low trust and weak connection experience slower decision cycles and ultimately a reduction in efficiency. The World Economic Forum recently reported that organisations with strong cultures of connection are more than twice as likely to outperform competitors on growth and innovation, while those with eroding trust see implementation costs rise and change initiatives⁶ stall. These costs surface in delayed programs, missed market windows, and transformation investments that fail to convert into results.

AI-driven change can amplify this effect. As new tools are introduced, uncertainty about an individual's experience, relevance, and expectations increases. When leaders focus on technical rollout without addressing how people are responding, compliance replaces commitment and adoption slows. Expected gains fail to materialise, not because the technology underperforms, but because the human capacity cannot absorb and deliver the change.⁷

Critically, this pattern is not the result of individual failure. Interpersonal friction under pressure is a systemic outcome. Understanding disconnection in this way reframes the problem. The question is no longer how to fix leaders, but how to support leaders to connect effectively while change is underway. And change is inevitably always underway.

How DoThinkDo Works: How Connection is Sustained in Real Time

DoThinkDo treats connection as a must have, not a nice to have. Drawing on research within neuroscience, psychology and organisational behaviour, our model details how connection is sustained in real time through three interdependent components: embodied action, reflective integration, and social transmission. Together, these enable leaders to remain present under pressure, make sense of complexity, and transmit clarity and trust.

The DoThinkDo model comes to life in moments that look familiar to most leadership teams, moments where pressure is high, stakes are real, and decisions must be made despite incomplete information.

Increasingly, these are moments where AI inputs, analytics, or algorithmic recommendations are part of the decision context, adding speed, complexity, and ambiguity to how judgment is exercised.

By working in moments where pressure is highest and decisions are real, DoThinkDo helps leadership teams restore coordination, strengthen judgment, and sustain momentum during AI-driven change. In an era of continuous transformation, the ability to remain connected is not a soft skill, it is a decisive leadership trait.

How DoThinkDo works differently: the Human Advantage.

DO. Rather than centring on what leaders are deciding, the work focuses on how they are relating to one another while decisions are being made. Sessions are deliberately experiential. Leaders are invited to act before they analyse, often standing, moving, and engaging with one another from the outset. This is intentional. Under pressure, leaders default to familiar cognitive and behavioural patterns, especially freezing. Beginning with action disrupts those defaults and brings immediate attention to how connection is actually formed in the moment.

Through a series of simple but revealing exercises, leaders begin to notice patterns that usually remain invisible: who moves quickly and who hesitates, how people respond to constraint, where urgency turns into control or withdrawal. What initially feels playful quickly becomes diagnostic. The room reveals how influence, awareness, and alignment are shaped under pressure.

THINK. Only after this shared experience does reflection begin. Leaders are guided to make sense of what just happened not abstractly, but in relation to their own observed behaviour, their use of information, and their impact on others. Concepts such as content versus *flavour*, comfort versus stretch, and intuitive versus deliberate response are introduced as lenses rather than prescriptions. Communication is examined not only for what is said, but for how it is delivered through body, voice, energy, and presence.

DO. The work then returns to action. Leaders practice communicating real messages they need to deliver, e.g. strategy updates, change directives, performance conversations, while deliberately shifting how they present themselves to others. The same message is delivered in different ways, making visible how tone, pacing, and intention alter both how the message is delivered but also how the response is received. Influence is no longer treated as a matter of getting it right, but of developing range and noticing immediate impact.

Throughout this process, DoThinkDo does not tell leaders how they should behave. Instead, leaders help leaders see, feel, and test how their behaviour shapes interactions around them. As patterns become visible, awareness creates thoughtful responses. Conversations slow where they need to and previously hidden assumptions are allowed to surface. Disagreement becomes explicit rather than implied. People re-engage, not to smooth over tension, but to work through it productively.

These shifts can be especially useful when viewed through the lens of change and transformation. In such conversations, uncertainty about roles, relevance, and expectations often sits just below the surface. When leaders are able to surface and work with these undercurrents directly, scepticism dissipates, making room for clearer engagement. Adoption accelerates, not because concerns disappear, but because they are addressed rather than bypassed.

When connection is sustained in real time, the effects are immediate. Information moves more freely and honestly. Disagreement becomes productive rather than personal and therefore decisions land faster and are more likely to hold. Teams recover and learn from friction instead of carrying it forward.

Over time, these effects increase. Rework declines, execution strengthens, and follow-through becomes clearer. Adaptability increases and innovation improves not because people are pushed harder, but because they are better able to think together under pressure. This is how the model translates into outcomes. By working at the level of connection in the moment, DoThinkDo helps leadership teams move from stalled performance to sustained momentum, even as change continues.⁵



Strengthening Connection to Improve Coordination and Impact

MSCI sought to make its R&D function more client-centric and commercially focused. However, their teams were operating in silos across regions, so collaboration was limited, and many professionals lacked the confidence to communicate complex insights in ways that resonated with stakeholders.

In response, DoThinkDo introduced an experiential, practice-based change programme focused on collaboration and communicating insight through data. It was delivered via small-group coaching, and the programme created a space for leaders to practice how they engage, align, and communicate in real time.

The programme had a significantly positive impact on the business:

- 92% of participants strengthened their ability to communicate complex insights with clarity and impact
- 88% were more confident in delivering value in stakeholder and client interactions
- 50% more leaders presented directly to clients as a result of the programme

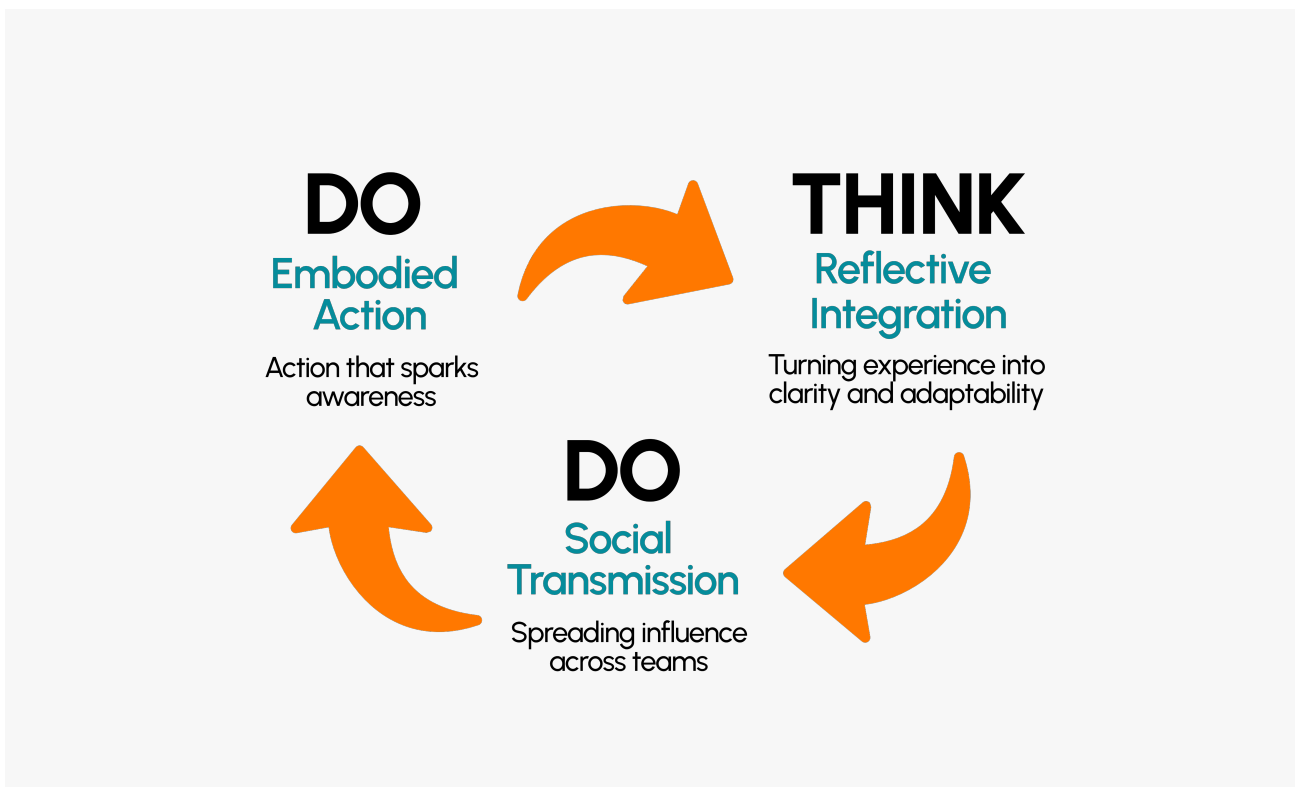
As connection strengthened across teams, MSCI leaders were better able to think, decide, and act together, reinforcing the point that effective coordination, and therefore performance, depends on **sustained connection**.



Connection at the Core of DoThinkDo's Approach and Process

Connection is often treated as a cultural aspiration or a leadership quality. In practice, it plays a significant role in performance. When leaders are connected, organisations are able to think, decide, and move together under pressure. When connection weakens, performance declines, sometimes unnoticeable at first, then more visibly as friction grows.

At the core of DoThinkDo's work is a model refined over more than two decades of application inside organisations undergoing significant change, including large, complex enterprises. Shaped through repeated use in real leadership contexts, the model explains how connection is formed moment by moment under pressure.



Rather than treating connection as a one-and-done moment, the model describes it as something that is continuously shaped through three interdependent components. Each component addresses a different aspect of the human threat response, and each is necessary but insufficient on its own.

Embodied Action (DO)

Under pressure, connection is shaped first in the body, not in thought. Embodied action describes the purposeful bodily movements and physical states used to understand, learn, and interact with the world. When leaders perceive threat (time pressure, conflict, reputational risk), the nervous system narrows attention, suppresses curiosity, and prioritises protection.⁸⁹ This is why teams under strain feel urgent but stuck: cognitive effort increases, but flexibility and adaptability decreases.

And, in AI-enabled environments, embodied threat responses are often triggered not only by time pressure, but by the introduction of machine-generated judgment into human decision-making. Research shows that when leaders are asked to act on algorithmic outputs they do not fully understand, or to override them without clear accountability, physiological stress increases, narrowing attention and reducing cognitive flexibility.^{10,11}

Without restoring control and regulation, leaders may continue to “act” while their capacity to engage, evaluate risk, or adapt judgment in the presence of AI remains constrained. And so, embodied action counteracts this response by re-engaging physiological systems that stress shuts down. Research on embodied cognition shows that physical movement, posture, breath, and changes in pace can reduce threat activation and restore access to prefrontal cognitive control.^{12,13}

When leaders re-engage the body through movement, breath, posture, or deliberate shifts in pace, the threat response softens and cognitive flexibility returns. Leaders regain access to presence and awareness rather than reaction.

When connection weakens, the opposite effect spreads. Guarded behaviour becomes the norm, people defer rather than challenge, and information starts to move more slowly and less honestly. In practice, this is the difference between acting urgently and being able to act wisely. Leaders move from over-analysis, withdrawal, or control and back into connection with one another.

What Embodied Action Provides: presence, energy, reduced reactivity, and the renewed confidence to act under pressure.

Reflective Integration (THINK)

Despite the benefits detailed above, action alone is not enough. In complex environments, leaders must integrate experience into meaning. Reflective integration refers to the capacity to slow things down just enough to make sense of what is happening internally and relationally without losing momentum.

Research on sense-making, dual-process cognition, and meta-cognition shows that reflection enables discernment rather than reflex.^{14,15,16,17} Without it, teams vacillate between over-analysis and under-analysis and early closure. Familiar positions harden, conversations loop without resolution, and decisions are made either too late or without sufficient alignment. The result is not just frustration, but degraded decision quality and weak outcomes.

AI adoption places new demands on leaders' sense-making capacity. Leaders must continuously calibrate when to trust AI-generated insights, when to interrogate them, and when to override them, often without shared standards or historical precedent. Research on automation bias and algorithm aversion shows that without reflective integration, teams oscillate between over-reliance on AI and early rejection, leading to inconsistent decisions and weakened outcomes.^{18,19}

When reflective integration is present, leaders are able to surface assumptions, monitor mistakes, and reframe narratives together. Experience turns into shared understanding. And direction becomes clearer, not because uncertainty disappears, but because it is actively managed rather than avoided.

What Reflective Integration Provides: clearer judgment, adaptive decision-making, and direction without false certainty.

Social Transmission (DO)

Connection does not remain contained within individuals or within single interactions. Research on emotional contagion, social networks, and psychological safety shows that trust, confidence, and norms spread through environments, shaping coordination and execution far beyond individual intent.^{20,21} This is how alignment scales.

In AI-driven change, trust in technology is rarely formed in isolation; it is socially transmitted. How leaders speak about AI outputs surface uncertainty, and model judgment shapes whether teams adopt AI with confidence or comply superficially while resisting in practice.²⁴ As a result, AI adoption often stalls not because tools fail, or that they aren't fit-for-purpose, but because leadership behaviour does not establish shared norms for how AI is reviewed and integrated into everyday work.

For senior leaders, this dynamic is especially important. Because influence is not exercised one conversation at a time. It is transmitted through tone, attention, and patterns of engagement that others quickly mirror. When leaders are clear and willing to engage directly with tension, that state propagates. Issues surface earlier, people are more inclined to raise concerns, decisions travel faster, and execution becomes more reliable.

Research on social networks and organizational performance shows that trust and psychological safety are not evenly distributed; they cluster and cascade.²² When connection is strong at key nodes, coordination costs fall and adaptability increases. When it erodes, fragmentation spreads quickly, amplifying delays, rework, and misalignment across teams. This is why AI adoption efforts succeed or stall not based on strategy, but on how leadership behaviour transmits through the organisation. Social transmission determines whether insight and clarity embed (or dissipate) once leaders leave the room.

What Social Transmission Provides: alignment at scale, lower coordination costs, and the embedding of change beyond the room.

Bringing the Components Together

Together, these three components explain how DoThinkDo creates connection instantaneously in the room. Embodied action preserves physiological presence and energy so leaders regain access to response rather than reaction (DO). That sense of awareness supports reflective integration, where experience can be interpreted, assumptions surfaced, and direction clarified (THINK). And, as meaning stabilises, social transmission allows insight, trust and alignment to travel, allowing action to amplify rather than stall (DO).

When this cycle holds, connection holds. When it breaks, people default to a norm. Under sustained pressure, familiar patterns emerge: analysis replaces action, withdrawal replaces engagement, and control substitutes for influence.

Most leadership interventions focus on content, e.g. strategy, skills, or behaviours to adopt. DoThinkDo works at a different level. We allow connection to remain intact while leaders are making real decisions and moving forward under pressure.

In AI-enabled organisations, these three components shape whether AI becomes a source of sustained advantage or business drag.

Connection in an Era of Continuous Transformation

Organisations no longer experience change as a discrete phase to be completed and left behind. Change is ongoing and ever-present. Pressure is persistent. Decisions are made with partial information, across increasingly interdependent contexts and environments, while expectations continue to rise.

In this context, the differentiator is not intelligence or speed. It is whether leaders can remain connected and trusted while decisions are being made. When connection holds, organisations are able to think together, surface disagreement, and act without reactivity. When it erodes, even well-designed strategies lose coherence as they progress.

This capacity cannot be automated. Technology can accelerate analysis, surface insights, and optimise execution. It cannot generate trust, exercise judgment, or create shared meaning. As AI absorbs more analytical and predictive work, the quality of human interaction becomes more exposed, more decisive and ultimately more important.

By supporting leaders to act with awareness, reflect with clarity, and influence through connection rather than control, the work enables organisations to continue moving through change without coming apart.

DoThinkDo: We hold together what change pulls apart.

About the Author

Dr. Janet Ahn PHD

Dr. Janet Ahn is a behavioural science expert and experimental social psychologist with a rare track record of impact across academia, consulting and business leadership over two decades.

She specialises in designing evidence-based interventions that move behaviour and translating those shifts into measurable outcomes for organizations and the people who power them.



After beginning her career as a tenure-track professor, Janet transitioned to become the Chief Behavioural Science Officer and later the President of the Americas at a global behaviour change consultancy. There, she built a world-class R&D function and led product innovation and measurement, translating academic insight into scalable solutions. She was responsible for commercial and operational leadership, overseeing client delivery, marketing, and strategy for Fortune 500 and S&P 100 clients.

As founder of Perilla & Co., a boutique behavioural science advisory, she partners with business leaders to align people strategy with performance, focusing on the behaviours that drive results. She also advises vendors on GTM strategy, product positioning, and thought leadership in the culture and performance space.

A prolific author and sought-after speaker, Janet's work has been featured in Forbes, Business Insider, NPR, Women's Health, The Atlantic, and more.

Outside of work, you can find her hiking, on a yoga mat, or in a cold plunge, exploring new food ventures, or grilling outdoors with her husband and two daughters.

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