



YOUR AI STRATEGY WILL SUCCEED OR FAIL IN THE MIDDLE



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LEADERSHIP HANDOUT

Your AI Strategy Will Succeed or Fail in the Middle

The Chewy Nougat of Leadership: Where AI Strategy Becomes Reality

For Directors responsible for translating executive AI ambition into coordinated action

AI may be selected in the executive suite and used on the front line, but it becomes real through the Directors and leaders in between. If they aren't ready, the organization isn't ready.

1. The ‘Go Figure It Out’ Directive

Strategy often arrives at the Director level looking far more complete than it actually is. The familiar organizational dynamic looks like this:

- Senior leadership makes a strategic decision.
- The strategy sounds complete when it is presented.
- It arrives at the Director level with urgency and high expectations.
- The operational questions remain unanswered.
- The implied assignment is: ‘Go figure it out.’

The Director’s Experience

Earlier in my career, I learned that strategy often arrives at the Director level looking far more complete than it actually is. The presentation is polished. The direction sounds clear. The executive decision has been made.

And then comes the assignment—sometimes spoken and sometimes implied: ‘Go figure it out.’

You may not have chosen the strategy, but you have tremendous influence over whether it becomes coordinated action—or another corporate initiative people learn to wait out.

2. The Chewy Nougat of Leadership

Directors occupy what I call the chewy nougat of leadership—the essential middle where executive ambition meets operational reality.

Senior executives decide the direction. Frontline teams experience the change. Directors must connect the two. They are expected to:

- Interpret the strategy.
- Give it practical meaning.
- Translate it into priorities and workflows.
- Address employee questions and resistance.
- Coordinate across organizational boundaries.
- Produce results while daily operations continue.
- Bring reality back to senior leadership.

Directors are not simply the delivery mechanism for strategy. They are the sense-making layer of the organization.

This moves beyond conventional ‘middle management’ commentary. These leaders are not merely passing information up and down. They actively create the shared meaning that makes coordinated movement possible.

3. Why AI Intensifies the Director's Burden

The directive 'We're implementing AI' can mean almost anything:

- Improve productivity.
- Reduce costs.
- Automate workflows.
- Improve customer experience.
- Help employees make better decisions.
- Develop new products or services.
- Avoid falling behind competitors.

But the Director is left to answer the practical questions:

- What business problem are we actually solving?
- Where should we begin?
- Which workflows need to change?
- Who has authority to experiment?
- What can and can't be entered into an AI system?
- What capabilities do employees need?
- How will accuracy and risk be managed?
- What does adoption look like?
- How will value be measured?
- What happens to the work people are already responsible for?

AI doesn't create every leadership problem it encounters. More often, it exposes the problems that were already there.

AI reveals unclear strategy, slow decision-making, low trust, poor communication, approval bottlenecks, weak cross-functional coordination, accountability without authority, and a low tolerance for experimentation.

4. The Human Reality Underneath AI Adoption

Employees are not merely being asked to learn a new tool. They may be wondering:

- Is AI going to replace part of my role?
- Am I expected to know how to use this already?
- Can I trust what it produces?
- Will I be blamed if an experiment fails?
- Is using AI encouraged—or could it get me in trouble?
- Is this a serious change or another initiative that will disappear?
- If AI saves time, will I benefit—or simply receive more work?

Directors have to hold two realities simultaneously:

1. The organization needs to move.
2. People need enough clarity and trust to move with it.

Resistance is not always a refusal to change. Sometimes it is a rational response to ambiguity.

THE PRACTICAL CENTER

Three Leadership Moves

Translate the directive. Create the conditions. Close the loop.

5. Move One: Translate the Directive

The Director's first responsibility is to turn a broad AI mandate into something people can understand and act upon.

Ask

- What business outcome are we trying to improve?
- Why does that outcome matter now?
- Which workflow, decision, or customer experience is involved?
- What would meaningful progress look like?
- What is explicitly outside the scope?
- What remains unknown?

Replace the Vague Mandate

We are testing whether AI can reduce the time required to prepare client proposals while maintaining our quality and accuracy standards.

That gives people a defined problem, a place to begin, a boundary, and a basis for measuring value.

People cannot create coordinated movement around a directive that means something different to everyone who hears it.

6. Move Two: Create the Conditions

Translation creates clarity. Leadership creates the conditions in which people can act. This is where the four pillars appear naturally.

Trust and Autonomy

- Give people room to test appropriate use cases.
- Define decision rights.
- Make the boundaries of experimentation clear.
- Avoid requiring approval for every minor adjustment.

Communication and Transparency

- Say what is known.
- Say what remains uncertain.
- Address legitimate concerns honestly.
- Do not make promises about roles or outcomes that leadership cannot guarantee.

Growth and Innovation

- Treat early implementation as organizational learning.
- Encourage small, responsible experiments.
- Share what works across teams.
- Distinguish a failed experiment from irresponsible execution.

Systems of Accountability

- Assign ownership.
- Define what will be measured.
- Review adoption, quality, risk, and business value.
- Create a regular learning and decision cadence.

Empowerment is not giving people unlimited freedom. It is giving them meaningful authority within clear boundaries—and holding them accountable for what happens next.

7. Move Three: Close the Loop

Directors cannot simply receive the strategy and carry all the ambiguity downward. They must bring operational intelligence back upward.

Senior leadership needs to know:

- What teams are learning.
- What assumptions are proving incorrect.
- Where governance is missing.
- Which capabilities or resources are needed.
- What risks are emerging.
- Which decisions require executive ownership.
- Whether the expected business value is realistic.

This is leadership upward—not complaint or resistance.

Upward Communication Structure

3. Here is the outcome we understand you want.
4. Here is what we are learning from implementation.
5. Here is what is preventing or slowing progress.
6. Here is the decision, resource, or clarification we need from you.
7. Here is what we recommend doing next.

Organizations cannot hold Directors accountable for AI transformation while withholding the context, authority, resources, and executive air cover required to lead it.

8. What Directors Can Control

Directors May Not Control

- The original AI decision.
- The selected technology.
- The implementation timeline.
- Every budget or staffing decision.
- The organization's appetite for change.

But They Can Influence

- How the directive is interpreted.
- Whether the team has a clear outcome.
- The quality of communication.
- The boundaries for experimentation.
- How quickly learning moves through the organization.
- Whether operational reality reaches senior leadership.
- Whether people experience AI as something being done to them or something they can help shape.

You do not need complete authority to exercise meaningful leadership—but you do need to be clear about the authority, information, and decisions required to succeed.

9. The Larger Leadership Lesson

AI is changing quickly. Specific technologies and use cases will evolve. But the organizational challenge will remain:

Can leaders translate strategic intent into common meaning, responsible action, organizational learning, and measurable results?

A useful definition of leadership:

Leadership is the activity of influencing others in order to co-create coordinated movement in pursuit of a worthy ideal.

AI implementation requires exactly that. Not compliance. Not a tool rollout. Coordinated movement.

10. Leadership Challenge

Take this practical question into your next leadership meeting:

What has senior leadership decided—and what are we still being asked to invent?

Use three follow-up questions to turn ambiguity into action:

- What outcome are we actually trying to create?
- What conditions will our people need to move responsibly?
- What must senior leadership hear or decide before we can move forward?

11. The Bottom Line

AI may be selected in the executive suite and used on the front line, but it will be made real by the leaders in between.

If your Directors are expected to 'go figure it out,' equip them to do more than implement a tool. Give them the clarity, authority, resources, and executive support to lead real transformation.

Because if your Directors aren't ready, your organization isn't ready.

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