

Defining and Developing the AI-Augmented Leader

AI won't replace you, but
a human using AI will

Thought Leadership

The launch of generative AI in late 2022 supercharged the AI revolution, and the emergence of agentic AI has added even greater urgency. But what does this evolution mean for organizations and their leaders?

AI is demanding a new approach to leadership. As AI agents and advanced models gain traction, today's leaders need to be skilled not just in managing people, but also in leveraging machine intelligence. Below, Korn Ferry outlines a framework for identifying and developing a new kind of executive: the AI-Augmented Leader.

BUT FIRST...

WHAT IS AGENTIC AI?

Agentic AI is a form of artificial intelligence designed to act with autonomy—that is, making decisions and taking actions without continuous human input. Rather than simply creating content, AI agents act independently to solve business problems and create value that aligns with an organization's goals and vision.

Unlike generative AI, these new capabilities don't require detailed human prompts. Instead, they work independently to optimize broader business objectives like reducing IT costs, increasing product sales, or promoting a new corporate culture. AI agents can also work together on specific tasks, with an audit agent overseeing and suggesting improvements.

THE NEW LEADERSHIP REALITY

Soon, every leader will oversee hybrid teams of people and AI agents, which is a radically different context. As AI agents become more autonomous and efficient, human leadership will need to evolve along with them.

This is the paradox of AI. With the rise of this technology comes the rise of human-centered leadership. As machines take on more technical roles, leaders will need to strengthen their uniquely human capabilities, such as setting direction, driving vision, influencing, and making meaning—all while inspiring commitment, building trust, sustaining resilience, allaying anxiety and fear, and guiding teams through change.

At the same time, leaders must build AI literacy because you can't lead AI if you don't understand it. Organizations will need to define expectations on the level of AI fluency needed.

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MEET THE AI-AUGMENTED LEADER

What does a highly effective leader look like in the age of AI? Meet the AI-augmented leader: someone who brings together people and AI agents in hybrid teams to amplify productivity and impact. Here are a few key principles they follow:

1. Future-focused at their core. The AI-augmented leader acknowledges that what they know is less important than *what they want to know*. They're driven by curiosity and inspire teams and organizations to adopt an AI-first mindset. They have the courage to challenge assumptions, unlearn and relearn, and reimagine the impossible.

2. They define problems, not solve them. It may seem counterintuitive, but AI-augmented leaders lead with questions rather than answers. They know how to identify and define problems with relentless drive and intuition, then deploy their hybrid teams to prototype solutions rapidly. Because these solutions are being constantly upgraded, the best leaders stay focused on asking the right questions.

3. It's about augmentation, not automation. Although *automation* may be a byproduct of AI and can solve today's problems, *augmentation* elevates the human role and creates new possibilities. The AI-augmented leader knows the purpose of AI agents is to *enhance* human capability, not replace it. And according to Korn Ferry's Workforce 2025 survey, employees are far more likely to embrace AI when they've received training on how to use it.

4. AI literacy is now fundamental to success. For the AI-augmented leader, understanding and rapidly integrating new technologies into their hybrid teams is a table-stakes capability. In fact, a recent study found that AI literacy is the top in-demand skill across the global talent market.

HOW TO BUILD AI-AUGMENTED LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Now is the time for organizations to invest in AI-augmented leadership, whether by developing leaders internally or attracting new talent. We recommend the following three steps to get started:

1. Understand where you are today.

Start by taking a critical look at your organization's AI fluency. How well do your leaders understand and utilize AI today? Where are the gaps in this literacy? And who within the enterprise has the potential to become an AI-augmented leader?

2. Build a plan to grow AI-augmented leaders.

Develop a clear vision for what leadership looks like in an AI-driven future, incorporating people, machines, and your overall business strategy. Introduce AI-augmented leadership principles to your executive team and challenge leaders to rethink traditional team structures and to embrace AI-powered transformation. Redesign existing teams and management structures to integrate AI agents in a new organizational model.

3. Build a strong succession pipeline by developing AI-augmented leaders for executive roles.

Refocus internal talent efforts around the success profile of the AI-augmented leader. Make AI literacy a must-have capability in hiring and succession planning. Mentor entry-level and mid-career AI-augmented talent, preparing them for broader leadership roles across the organization. Prioritize external candidates with deep AI literacy and a strong future-focused and problem-oriented mindset. Build an enterprise strategy centered on human-agent interaction and be ready to move on from AI laggards and embrace early adopters of agentic AI.

THE NEED FOR THE AI-AUGMENTED LEADER IS NOW

The agentic AI revolution is here, and with it comes the need for the AI-augmented leader. Organizations that develop and empower these leaders will sprint ahead and get the most out of these new technologies, while those that don't will struggle to keep up. Just as "internet-augmented" leaders of the 2000s thrived, leaving laggards behind, today's leaders must become "AI-augmented" to succeed in this new world.

HOW WE HELP

Korn Ferry partners with CEOs, boards of directors and C-Suite leaders to help them navigate the complexities of the AI revolution. Our consultants specialize in delivering talent acquisition and leadership advisory solutions that are tailored to meet the unique challenges posed by agentic AI and other emerging technologies.

To learn more about how we are partnering with organizations to help build AI-Augmented leaders, contact one of our experts:

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ABOUT KORN FERRY

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm, bringing together strategy and talent to drive superior performance for our clients. We work with clients to design their organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward, develop and motivate their workforce. And we help professionals navigate and advance their careers.