

OPTIMIZE TEAMWORK.COM
AI-READY LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK™

AI-Ready Leadership



The 8 Human Skills to Succeed in a Human-AI Workplace

BY

DR. RACHEL CUBAS-WILKINSON

Founder, OptimizeTeamwork.com

Grounded in research from MIT, Harvard, McKinsey, Gallup, Deloitte, Korn Ferry & Prosci

Why This Matters Now



"AI is the greatest disruptor we will likely see in our lifetime. While most technological innovation has impacted industries in pockets, AI is different. It is universal. It will affect every leader and every organization — the only question is whether they will shape that outcome or simply experience it."

— Dr. Rachel Cubas-Wilkinson, Founder & Lead Consultant, [OptimizeTeamwork.com](https://www.optimize teamwork.com)

AI Is Already Here. Most Leaders Aren't Ready.

AI is already changing what managers and leaders do — absorbing the tracking, routing, and operational oversight that once defined the manager's role. The leaders who thrive in this environment will not be the ones who master the tools fastest. They will be the ones who have built the human capabilities no tool can replicate.

The research is unambiguous: organizations that invest in human leadership capability alongside AI adoption outperform those that don't — across indicators like execution speed, team cohesion, retention, and results. The bottleneck was never the technology. It has always been the human infrastructure around it.

At OptimizeTeamwork, we help leaders build that infrastructure — before the gap becomes visible in failed rollouts, disengaged teams, and stalled results.

What Remains Is Irreducibly Human

What AI cannot do is lead people through uncertainty, build trust, coach growth, or help a team find meaning in the middle of disruption. As AI absorbs the technical and operational dimensions of management, what remains is irreducibly human.

The eight competencies in this guide represent the most evidence-supported, research-backed capabilities required to lead effectively in hybrid human-AI environments. They are not enhancements to traditional management. They are its **new core**.

These competencies are evidence-backed, drawing from peer-reviewed research and global workforce studies conducted by institutions including Deloitte, McKinsey, Harvard Business Review, MIT Sloan Management Review, DDI, Korn Ferry, Prosci, the World Economic Forum, Cambridge Judge Business School, and the NeuroLeadership Institute. Citations are listed at the end of this guide.

Competency #1: Psychological Safety Architect



Psychological safety is the foundation of every high-performing team — the condition where people feel safe to speak up, take risks, challenge assumptions, and tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

Why It Matters Now

Harvard researcher Amy Edmondson identified psychological safety as the **single strongest predictor of team learning and high performance** — confirmed by Google's Project Aristotle. In AI-augmented environments, psychological safety determines whether employees question a flawed AI recommendation — or silently comply with it.

⚠ Without it: Employees hide AI-related anxieties, disengage from new workflows, and resist the honest conversations that ethical AI governance requires. AI tools get deployed. They don't get adopted.

One Thing To Do

The next time a team member pushes back on a decision or surfaces bad news, respond with a question rather than a defense. Your reaction in that moment sets the behavioral standard for every person watching.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com uses validated tools like **DiSC®**, **Myers-Briggs®**, and **5 Behaviors of a Cohesive Team®** to help teams build the shared behavioral language and vulnerability-based trust that psychological safety depends on. Safety doesn't emerge from good intentions — it's built through structured, expert-guided experiences. Because trust develops faster with the right support than through time alone.

Competency #2: Emotional Intelligence & Full-Spectrum Attunement



Emotional intelligence & full-spectrum attunement is the ability to perceive and respond skillfully to the emotional climate of a team — the unspoken dynamics that surface long before conflict or disengagement becomes visible.

Why It Matters Now

As AI absorbs the operational layers of management, what remains — irreducibly — is the human work of leadership. Deloitte's 2026 research found that high-performing team members are 2.3x more likely to feel trusted by their leader — and cite emotional and social intelligence as the #1 driver of their team's success.

The Risk of Ignoring It

Leaders mistake data fluency for people fluency. They know what the performance metrics say but not what they mean for this particular person. They miss the frustration building behind a team member's silence, the disengagement hiding behind compliance, or the quiet resignation that precedes a resignation letter — and by the time those signals become visible, the cost is already compounding. That gap doesn't just cost teams their best talent. It costs leaders their credibility as people leaders.

One Thing To Do

Convert one status-update 1:1 this week into a developmental conversation. Ask one question you don't already know the answer to about what this person needs to grow, and listen without preparing your response while they're still talking.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com uses validated emotional intelligence and behavioral assessments — including **Emotional Quotient®**, **DiSC®**, **Myers-Briggs®**, and **EQ-i 2.0®** — to help leaders and teams build a shared language for how each person processes emotions, stress, and interpersonal friction. Because you cannot lead the full spectrum of human experience without first understanding it.

Competency #3: Ethical Judgment & AI Governance



Ethical judgment & AI governance is the capacity to interrogate AI-generated recommendations for bias, fairness, and contextual accuracy — and to speak up when a hiring flag, performance score, or workflow decision doesn't pass the human test.

Why It Matters Now

AI optimizes for the objectives it was given. It does not independently generate the ethical frameworks that determine what should be optimized, for whom, and at what cost. Research from Cambridge Judge Business School (2025) confirms that while AI excels at data-driven decisions, ethical judgment, strategic foresight, and contextual nuance **remain irreducibly human responsibilities** — and always must.

- ⊗ Without it: Bias gets embedded at scale. Decisions that affect people's roles, compensation, and futures are made with algorithmic confidence and insufficient human scrutiny — and by the time the error surfaces, trust is already eroded.

One Thing To Do

Establish one non-negotiable team norm starting today — **AI recommends, humans decide** — for any decision that affects an individual's role, performance, or future opportunity. Name it explicitly so it becomes cultural, not situational.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com designs and facilitates scenario-based workshops where teams practice applying consistent decision frameworks to real AI-influenced situations — hiring recommendations, performance flags, workflow automation choices. This is a learnable skill set, not an innate moral virtue, and it develops fastest when practiced together. Because the most dangerous AI governance failure is a culture where no one feels safe saying "something about this doesn't seem right."

Competency #4: Human Connection Engineer



Human connection engineer is the intentional design of human connection into the structure of team life — because in hybrid and AI-augmented environments, connection no longer happens by default. It has to be built.

2X

More Likely to quit

Burned-out employees are twice as likely to be actively looking for a new job — and AI power users are among the most at risk without intentional human connection. (Gallup, 2024)

43%

Lower Turnover

Organizations with high employee engagement — directly driven by strong human connection — show 43% lower turnover than disengaged teams. (Gallup Workplace Research)

3X

More Innovative

High-performing teams built on strong human connection and psychological safety are three times more likely to generate innovative solutions than teams operating in isolation. (Deloitte, 2026)

One Thing To Do

Audit your last two weeks of team interactions. How much was task-focused? How much was genuinely relational? If the ratio feels lopsided, protect one non-negotiable human connection moment in your team's weekly rhythm and treat it with the same seriousness as a deadline.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com uses tools like **DiSC®**, **Myers-Briggs®**, **FIRO-B®**, and **5 Behaviors of a Cohesive Team®** to accelerate the trust-building process and give teams a shared language for what healthy connection actually looks and feels like. Because connection isn't just a leadership responsibility — it's a team discipline that develops fastest when built intentionally and together.

Competency #5: Adaptive Sense-Making



Adaptive sense making is about translating complex, fast-changing signals into shared meaning, clear direction, and a stable sense of orientation for the team.

Why It Matters Now

AI surfaces more data, faster, from more sources — but data volume is not the same as clarity. MIT Sloan Management Review identifies sense-making — translating complex signals into shared meaning — as among the most critical and irreplaceable leadership capabilities of the AI era.

Prosci research identifies lack of awareness about the reason for change as the #1 driver of employee resistance — not fear, not stubbornness. McKinsey found that 70% of change programs fail largely due to employee resistance and lack of management support. Leaders who help their teams make sense of change before announcing the what dramatically reduce both.

Without It

AI makes the noise louder without making the signal clearer. Teams receive more information and feel less oriented — and a disoriented team defaults to inaction, rumor, and resistance.

One Thing To Do

The next time your team is navigating uncertainty, resist announcing the what before you've addressed *the why* and *the what it means for you*. People cannot absorb new information when they're still processing what it means for their security, role, or future.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com works with leaders to sharpen the communication skills that turn information overload into clear direction — so your team always knows where they stand, what matters most, and why. Using assessments like DiSC®, we help leaders understand how different team members receive and process ambiguous information differently, so their communication lands as clarity rather than adding to the noise. Because a team that trusts its leader's read on a situation doesn't need to fill the silence with rumor.

Competency #6: Change Leadership & Transition Intelligence



Change leadership & transition intelligence is understanding that change (an external event) and transition (an internal human journey) are fundamentally different — and guiding teams through both.

- ✓ Prosci's Best Practices in Change Management research — spanning 6,000+ change initiatives — shows that projects with excellent change management are **six times more likely to meet objectives**.

1

Ending Stage

Team members grieve what's being lost and need acknowledgment before they can hear enthusiasm about what's coming next.

2

Neutral Zone

The in-between space of uncertainty. Leaders must provide orientation and psychological safety to bridge the gap.

3

New Beginning

Teams embrace new roles, workflows, and possibilities — but only after the previous stages have been honored.

Without It: Most change initiatives don't fail at the strategy level — they stall in the *Neutral Zone* or never fully leave the *Ending Stage*. The visible symptoms are missed deadlines and low adoption rates. The real cause is silent: disengagement disguised as compliance, resentment mistaken for adjustment, and people who technically show up but have never psychologically moved. Leaders who can't diagnose where their people are can't give them what they need — and what someone in the Ending Stage needs is fundamentally different from what someone approaching a *New Beginning* requires.

Build this with your team: OptimizeTeamwork.com helps leaders develop the skills to identify where each team member is in the transition — and the coaching skills to meet them there. Using tools like DiSC®, we help leaders discover how different change reactions show up across styles, so they can respond with precision rather than assuming everyone is at the same stage at the same pace. Because a rollout that works on paper but fails in the Neutral Zone isn't often a process or technology problem — it's a leadership gap.

Competency #7: The Coach-Leader Mindset



The coach-leader mindset is a fundamental shift from directing and monitoring to asking, developing, and empowering — deriving leadership value from the growth and agency of each team member.

Why It Matters Now

DDI's 2024 Global Leadership Forecast found that **85% of HR respondents** say coaching will be critical in the next three years — yet **40% of employees** report inadequate coaching from their current manager. As AI absorbs task-tracking and execution oversight, coaching becomes the manager's primary irreplaceable function.

⚠ Without it: The traditional justification for the management layer erodes. Leaders who cannot develop people aren't just less effective in an AI-augmented environment — they are increasingly difficult to justify in that role.

One Thing To Do

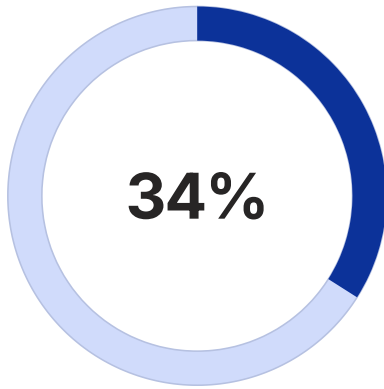
For one week, replace your default answer-giving with question-asking. When a team member brings you a problem, ask **"What do you think the right move is?"** before sharing your view. Notice what it builds in them — and what it frees in you.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com builds coaching skills systematically across leadership teams — from individual coaching development to organization-wide coaching culture design. Using tools like **CliftonStrengths®** and **DiSC®** to help leaders understand what each person needs to grow, and pairing that insight with the coaching skill-building leaders need to act on it — because insight without skill is just awareness. Because one trained coach-leader can change a team's trajectory — an organization of them changes the culture.

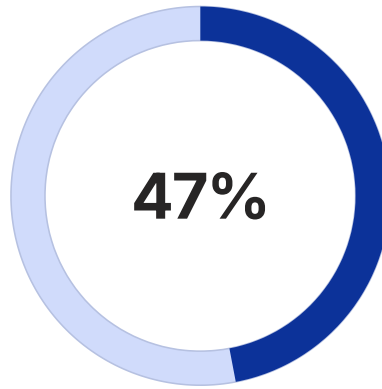
Competency #8: Growth Mindset & Learning Agility

Growth mindset and learning agility is the personal conviction that abilities and intelligence can always be developed — combined with the agility to learn quickly from new experiences and build that belief as a shared team discipline.



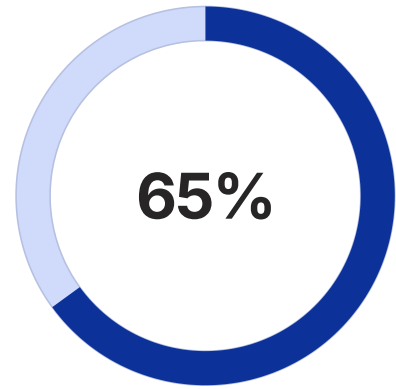
Greater Commitment

Research shows employees in growth mindset cultures are 34% more likely to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment. (Dweck/HBR)



Greater Trust

Teams with growth mindset cultures report 47% greater trust in leadership. (Harvard Business Review, Dweck et al.)



More Engagement

Growth mindset cultures produce 65% more engagement and commitment across teams. (Microsoft)

Why It Matters Now

Korn Ferry's 2025 World's Most Admired Companies research found that 59% of top-performing companies prioritize learning agility as their #1 hiring criterion. In the AI era, the ability to learn faster than the environment changes is the only sustainable competitive advantage.

 Without it: Each AI-driven change to roles, workflows, and responsibilities becomes a threat rather than a learning laboratory — and teams that experience change as threat disengage, resist, and fall behind.

One Thing To Do

Make your own learning visible. Share one thing you're currently learning, struggling with, or experimenting on with your team this week. When leaders model being learners, they give everyone else permission to prioritize growth over the appearance of already knowing.

Build This With Your Team

OptimizeTeamwork.com designs personalized, assessment-powered development experiences that build genuine growth mindset and learning agility across your entire team — using tools like **CliftonStrengths®**, **DiSC®**, and **Myers-Briggs®** to reveal how each person learns and adapts most effectively. The goal isn't just skill-building — it's cultivating the shared belief that every person's capabilities are expandable and worth investing in. Because awareness is the starting point, not the destination.

What Comes Next



Every competency in this guide is a **learnable, developable skill** — not a fixed personality trait. The gap between where your leaders are today and where they need to be is not a talent problem. It is a training debt — and it is repayable.

Assessment-Powered

Using validated tools like DiSC®, CliftonStrengths®, Myers-Briggs®, Emotional Quotient®, EQ-i 2.0®, TKI® Conflict Modes, FIRO-B® Interpersonal Needs, and 5 Behaviors of a Cohesive Team® to uncover distinct work styles and measure team performance

Expert-Facilitated

Interactive, engaging, and expert-guided experiences that create lasting behavioral change — not just awareness. Because insight without application doesn't move teams forward.

Systematically Built

OptimizeTeamwork.com works with leaders and organizations to build this human infrastructure systematically — across every level of your organization. Because the gap doesn't close itself — it closes when someone decides to close it.

This guide is an excerpt from **The Human Skills in a Human-AI World Playbook** — a full framework by OptimizeTeamwork.com featuring in-depth research, evidence-backed competencies, development strategies, and practical implementation guidance for success in the human-AI hybrid workplace.

✔ The leaders who build these capabilities now will not just survive the AI transition. **They will lead it.**

Start the conversation today at OptimizeTeamwork.com

Research

- Ancona, Deborah. "Sensemaking: Framing and Acting in the Unknown." MIT Sloan Management Review, 2011.
- Bradberry, Travis & Greaves, Jean. Emotional Intelligence 2.0. TalentSmart, 2009.
- Bridges, William. Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change. 3rd Edition. Da Capo Press, 2009.
- Cambridge Judge Business School. Research on emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness, 2023–2024.
- CPP, Inc. Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive. CPP, Inc., 2008.
- DDI. Global Leadership Forecast 2023/2024. Development Dimensions International, 2024.
- DDI. "New DDI Analysis Finds Manager Coaching Lacking, Doubling Risk of Turnover." Press release, July 2024.
- Deloitte. 2024 Global Human Capital Trends. Deloitte Insights, 2024.
- Dweck, Carol S. Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. Random House, 2006.
- Dweck, Carol S. "How Companies Can Profit from a 'Growth Mindset.'" Harvard Business Review, November 2014.
- Edmondson, Amy C. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." Administrative Science Quarterly, 1999.
- Edmondson, Amy C. The Fearless Organization. Wiley, 2018.
- Gallup. State of the Global Workplace Report. Gallup, 2024.
- Google. Project Aristotle: Understanding Team Effectiveness. Google Re:Work, 2016.
- Korn Ferry. Fortune World's Most Admired Companies 2025 Report. Korn Ferry, 2025.
- McKinsey & Company. McKinsey Organizational Health Index. McKinsey Global Institute.
- McKinsey & Company. Superagency in the Workplace: Empowering People to Unlock AI's Full Potential. McKinsey Global Institute, 2025.
- Microsoft. Work Trend Index Annual Report. Microsoft, 2024.
- MIT Sloan Management Review. Research on sense-making as a critical leadership capability in the AI era.
- NeuroLeadership Institute. GROW: The Neuroscience of Growth Mindset. NLI Research Report.
- Prosci. Best Practices in Change Management. 11th Edition. Prosci, 2023.
- Thomas, K.W. & Kilmann, R.H. TKI Conflict Mode Instrument. CPP, Inc., 1974; updated 2023.
- Wiley. Everything DiSC® Workplace Research Report. Wiley, 2023.
- World Economic Forum. Future of Jobs Report 2025. WEF, 2025.