



SETH KAHAN ON
GRAND
CHALLENGES

Leadership Competencies in the Era of AI

In 2010, *Getting Change Right* introduced a new way of thinking about leadership. It argued that successful change does not come from top-down directives or rigid plans, but from energizing people, creating conversations, and paying close attention to how human beings actually experience change. At the time, the book was a fresh counterpoint to models that focused on project plans and milestones. It placed people, relationships, and dialogue at the center of transformation. It immediately became a business bestseller.

Now, with the extraordinary speed of AI evolution, leaders are once again at a crossroads. The environment has shifted so dramatically that older models of leadership and change management are no longer sufficient. AI is not only a new technology but also a force that reshapes human roles, compresses decision cycles, and raises ethical questions that cannot be ignored. Leadership today requires integrating the original human-centered insights of *Getting Change Right* with the demands of an AI-driven world.

What follows is a new set of competencies designed to guide leaders through this transformation. Each builds on the foundation of human connection while expanding into the capabilities required to lead in a world where humans and machines learn, decide, and act together.

1. Communicate for Understanding in a World of Machines and People

The first competency remains communication. In *Getting Change Right*, leaders were urged to communicate so people “get it and spread it.” That remains vital, but the context is new. AI is changing the way information flows and the speed at which it spreads.

Leaders now must be able to translate between human narratives and machine outputs. AI generates insights, recommendations, and even stories, but it cannot judge which explanations will build trust or inspire action. The leader’s role is to frame AI-driven insights in ways that people understand, believe, and share. Communication must be clear, transparent about the role of AI, and sensitive to the anxieties people may feel. This competency combines traditional storytelling with the new responsibility of making the invisible workings of AI visible enough that people can place confidence in the results.

2. Energize People by Partnering Them with AI

The second competency is energizing the most valuable players. In the past, this meant recognizing the people who had influence, passion, and credibility, and helping them lead change. In the AI era, energizing people also means equipping them to thrive in partnership with intelligent tools.

Leaders must help individuals see AI as an amplifier of human potential, not simply as a replacement for labor. This requires investing in skill development, creating safe spaces to experiment with AI, and celebrating wins that come from human-AI collaboration. Energized people are those who feel confident in their own relevance. Leadership development therefore becomes less about teaching fixed skills and more about fostering resilience, curiosity, and adaptability in the face of rapid technological change.

3. Understand the Territory of Change When the Terrain Shifts Daily

Understanding the territory was once about mapping stakeholders, assessing organizational readiness, and recognizing hidden currents of resistance. That remains true, but now the landscape is shifting at an unprecedented pace. AI is accelerating disruption across every industry, creating new markets and collapsing old ones.

Leaders must become adept at sensing change in real time. They need to use AI itself as a diagnostic tool, analyzing sentiment, predicting adoption curves, and monitoring signals in the external environment. Yet they must also complement these data-driven insights with human judgment, recognizing the subtleties of culture, values, and trust. The competency is not just to understand the territory, but to understand it as it is constantly being redrawn by both technological and social forces.

4. Accelerate Change Through Communities that Learn with AI

In *Getting Change Right*, accelerating change meant cultivating communities that perform, building networks of people who supported each other in pursuit of transformation. That remains essential. The difference now is that communities must learn how to work with AI as part of their collaborative fabric.

Leaders must enable communities of practice where experimentation with AI is normalized, lessons are shared, and insights flow quickly across boundaries. Communities must be safe places where people can admit uncertainty, share ethical concerns, and test new ways of working. The goal is not only performance, but collective learning about how AI reshapes the work itself. This requires leaders to design communities where trust and technology reinforce each other.

5. Use Conversation to Build Human-AI Commitment

Conversation was at the heart of your original framework. It is still the crucible of commitment, but now conversations must also address the presence of AI in the room. Employees are asking questions such as: What does this tool mean for my job? How much can we trust its recommendations? How do we know it will not be misused?

Leaders must be prepared to engage these questions directly. Commitment arises when people feel heard, when their anxieties are taken seriously, and when decisions are made transparently. Conversations must be structured not only around human collaboration but also around how AI is integrated responsibly. Leaders who avoid these dialogues risk losing trust. Those who engage them honestly can create a culture where AI adoption strengthens, rather than undermines, commitment.

6. Pay Attention to New Moments of Truth

Moments of truth are those critical times when the reality of change meets the experience of people. In the AI era, new moments of truth are emerging. They include the first time a team relies on AI to make a high-stakes decision, the moment an employee realizes a task they once performed has been automated, and the point at which customers interact with AI on behalf of the organization.

Leaders must recognize these new thresholds and prepare for them. They must coach teams through their first interactions with AI, create rituals for celebrating human-AI success, and address failures openly. By paying attention to these moments, leaders can shape experiences that build trust and confidence rather than fear or resentment.

7. Use All Available Channels, Including AI Itself

In the past, leaders were urged to use every available communication channel to reinforce change. Today, AI itself is part of that network of channels. AI chatbots, personalized communication tools, and adaptive platforms can be used to scale dialogue, provide tailored learning, and monitor feedback.

The challenge is not simply to use all channels, but to use them wisely. Leaders must avoid overwhelming people with AI-driven communication or creating the sense that machines are speaking instead of humans. The competency is to design a balanced communication ecosystem where AI tools extend the leader's reach while human presence remains authentic and visible.

8. Make Ethical Stewardship a Core Competency

A new competency must be added to the original list. The speed and power of AI bring ethical challenges that cannot be ignored. Leaders are now responsible for ensuring that AI is used fairly, transparently, and in ways that protect privacy and dignity.

Ethical stewardship is not a side issue but a central leadership responsibility. Leaders must set standards for AI use, communicate them clearly, and hold themselves accountable. They must

also prepare their organizations to respond quickly when AI creates unintended consequences. By modeling integrity, leaders ensure that the pursuit of innovation does not erode the values that hold organizations and societies together.

9. Lead Through Co-Creation, Not Control

Finally, leadership in the AI era requires a mindset shift from command to co-creation. AI democratizes access to knowledge and insight. Authority no longer comes from controlling information but from facilitating collaboration. Leaders must guide diverse groups of people and technologies to solve problems together.

This requires humility, openness, and the ability to convene voices across boundaries. It is less about being the smartest person in the room and more about being the person who can orchestrate the collective intelligence of humans and machines. This kind of leadership is fluid, inclusive, and adaptive, and it represents the future of organizational success.

Conclusion

When *Getting Change Right* first appeared, it argued that people, not plans, are the heart of successful transformation. That truth remains unchanged. What has changed is the context in which leadership now operates. AI accelerates the pace of change, reshapes work, and raises new ethical and cultural questions.

The new leadership competencies for the AI era build directly on the original foundation. They call for leaders who can communicate clearly, energize people, understand shifting territories, accelerate change through communities, use conversation to build commitment, pay attention to moments of truth, and employ every available channel. To these we must now add ethical stewardship and the ability to lead through co-creation.

These competencies form a framework for leadership that is both timeless and timely. They remind us that while technology may change the landscape, leadership is still about human beings. The task today is to guide those human beings into a future where they work side by side with intelligent machines, not only to adapt but to thrive.