‘AI has no skin in the game.’ The Advantage Leaders Still Have



The unspoken question of the day is: With the advent of AI, what will the value of people be—particularly leaders? To get some answers, I chatted with Claude, Anthropic’s AI assistant, who was candid about the limits of AI when it comes to leadership. In Claude’s view, leaders are safe from the encroachment of AI—at least for the foreseeable future.

For starters, AI has no emotions, let alone a body. Why should this matter to leaders? Consider one way emotions guide a leader’s actions: the “salience network.” This neuronal chain, which converges on the amygdala, acts as the brain’s radar for what’s important in the moment and how we feel about it. The salience network instantly tells a leader where their attention should go, where there’s something wrong that needs attending to, and what’s to be celebrated. In short, our emotional surges guide our attention through the thicket of to-dos, people issues, strategic concerns, and the rest. Every leader depends on these gut reactions every day. AI, lacking emotion, has no such rudder.

And then there are relationships. A high-level executive in finance put it well: If people don’t trust you, he pointed out, they are less likely to fully share their information with you. And making a sound strategic decision depends on getting full information.

Leaders read people, picking up emotional messages from nonverbal responses. AI has only words to guide it. As Claude told me, in a person-to-person relationship, people pick up nonverbals like a voice tightening, someone going quiet at a particular moment, a fleeting facial expression, or a quick, meaningful look. Unlike AI, leaders know those they lead, and by choosing to pay attention to them, can make them feel seen, known, and psychologically safe. Feeling seen, Claude pointed out, means that someone who could have looked away did not. Beyond that, knowing the person—not just their role—strengthens any relationship.

Leaders build trust and loyalty by showing they care about an employee. Technically, this aspect of caring is called “empathic concern”—not only sensing how the person sees the world and feels about it, but also showing concern for them personally. AI could have this ability, or appear to, if trained for it, but most models aim instead to “optimize engagement.”

Disagreements are inevitable in any organization, and a healthy weighing of opinions and options strengthens decision-making. But when it comes to resolving heated arguments, a human being beats AI because he or she can notice, for instance, the tension building in the room. AI, on the other hand, knows only what people choose to tell it, biases and all. So AI lacks full information about heated moments.

An inspiring leader gets the best performance from those they lead. But being inspiring involves emotional contagiousness—the leader’s enthusiasm spreading throughout the room. To be truly inspiring, a leader has to show that the mission matters to them, too. AI has no “skin in the game.” While its fluency in couching a vision may seem inspiring, it lacks the person-to-person power that inspires.

There’s a long-term risk to companies from AI, one that’s little recognized. In an MIT Media Lab study, students weakened their own ability at whatever skill they relied on AI to do. The implication for companies is that encouraging wide use of AI will cause people to lose proficiency—and if AI reliance spreads to the C-suite, it may weaken an organization’s ranks of future leaders.

So yes, embrace artificial intelligence for all the competitive advantages it offers. But use caution when it comes to human basics like leadership and teamwork.



everything bagel/Getty Images

Leaders read people, picking up emotional messages from nonverbal responses.

Goleman is author of the international best-seller *Emotional Intelligence.*

Portrait by **ROB DOBI**