A FranklinCovey Insight Report

AI Transformation & the Human Imperative

From Baseline to Breakthrough

Why the Organizations that Win With AI Will Be the Most Human

FranklinCovey Institute

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Most leaders, maybe even you, share a similar vision of the future: faster, more connected, and more intelligent than anything that came before. Information moves instantly. Decisions scale globally. Artificial intelligence, automation, and advanced analytics sit at the center of strategy decks and boardroom conversations, promising frictionless execution and unprecedented efficiency.

What's harder to articulate—and trickier to navigate—is the growing tension beneath that vision: the sense that while the technology keeps accelerating, the human system meant to leverage it is falling behind.

If that future already feels closer than you're ready for, and you're unsure how to confidently shape your workforce for it, you're not alone. For many leaders, that future isn't approaching—it's already colliding with the present. In our recent survey of today's workers, 70% said AI and technology are evolving faster than their culture can adapt, and 46% said they're uncertain whether their roles will still matter in the future.[1] This uncertainty often shows up as hesitation, silent disengagement, and exhaustion.

In dozens of interviews, we heard the same refrain from individual contributors and executives alike: "I'm being asked to do more with less." Not less technology—but less clarity, less trust, and less human connection. As one senior executive told us: "We've invested heavily in technology, but execution feels harder than it did five years ago. People are moving faster, but not always together."[2] That tension isn't a contradiction. It's a signal that something fundamental in the human system is being stretched and, in many organizations, deeply harmed.

This moment has fueled a dangerous misconception—that technology is the primary driver and differentiator of performance. When results stall or execution feels harder, you, as a leader, may be tempted to believe the answer is simply more: more tools, more automation, more intelligence layered into the system. Our research tells a different story. Technology can raise the performance baseline. But only leaders like you—through trust, judgment, collaboration, and execution—can raise the ceiling.

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To understand what separates organizations that merely keep up from those that break through, we launched a global, multi-method research effort focused on the real drivers of performance in a tech-accelerated world. Across industries and regions, the pattern was unmistakable: technology enables progress—but humans, and more specifically *great leaders*, mobilize technology and the people around them to drive breakthroughs.

In a world defined by relentless disruption, how well people trust one another, make decisions, collaborate, and execute under pressure determines whether performance stalls or accelerates. We adapt more quickly and innovate more effectively when we place people at the center of our most meaningful endeavors. And for leaders like you, the need to act on these insights is no longer optional. In periods of profound change, leadership decisions determine whether organizations merely endure disruption—or emerge stronger because of it.

This is the *Human Imperative*—the human side of strategy.

Section 1

Humans Leading Technology—Technology Raises the Floor, Not the Ceiling

There is no question that AI is a powerful lever. A leader from a global technology organization on the forefront of AI development described the impact this way: "Our AI tools cut time by up to 75%, reduced costs by 30–40%, and improved productivity across the board—freeing up time for more strategic work."[3]

Our survey data reinforces that optimism: 74% of employees agree that AI improves their work, and 80% can clearly articulate how it increases efficiency or output.[4] This collaboration between AI and human intelligence raises the performance baseline. Work gets done faster. Information becomes more accessible. Capacity expands.

But history makes the pattern clear: access to new technology eventually equalizes what once felt exceptional.[5] What differentiates someone today becomes table stakes tomorrow. Just as past waves of automation raised expectations across entire industries, today's AI tools will soon become standard practice.

Imagine standing in a room where the floor is steadily rising while the ceiling stays fixed. AI is that floor; it lifts everyone, but if you don't fight to raise your own ceiling—and that of your organization—the gap between "standard" and "excellence" eventually vanishes.

This is the baseline trap—mistaking early productivity gains for a lasting advantage. AI raises the floor of performance. It does not raise the ceiling.

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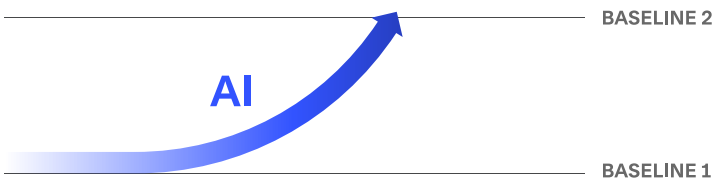
The essential leadership question is not just *How do we adopt AI?* But also *How do we elevate performance above the new baseline—and sustain it once others catch up?*



New technologies, like AI, can raise the organizational performance baseline (from Baseline 1 to Baseline 2). Earlier adoption allows a temporary advantage, but soon everyone is competing at the new baseline.

The Adoption Gap Is a Human Problem

Reaching even this higher baseline requires more than buying tools. It requires hybrid intelligence, which combines the best of human and machine strengths to amplify capability and unlock breakthroughs.[6] This is where many organizations struggle. Despite historic investment in AI, adoption often lags:

- 36% of employees disagree that their manager reinforces the use of AI in day-to-day work.
- 25% say expectations for AI use are unclear.
- 42% report that best practices are not consistently shared.[7]

Only 9% of employees say their manager explains how AI will help the business grow, and 40% are unclear about how AI will impact their jobs.[8] As a leader, you may assume resistance stems from fear of technology. In reality, it stems from fear of ambiguity.

A senior leader shared this seemingly small but revealing story:

At some point, workers came in to paint the office walls. No one said anything. Morale dropped immediately. People started speculating: "Are they selling the building?" "Are we being acquired?" "Am I going to lose my job?"[9]

The reality was simple: it was time to repaint. But without communication, it didn't matter. People filled the silence with catastrophic stories.

This same pattern shows up repeatedly in AI and technology rollouts. When you fail to communicate the *why,* the *how,* and the *impact on people*, employees fill the void themselves. And they almost always fill it with worst-case scenarios.

That's why driving AI adoption is not primarily a technical challenge. It is a human one.

AI Doesn't Define What "Good" Looks Like—Humans Do

Even when communication improves, adoption can stall for another reason: people don't know how to evaluate the technology they are being asked to use.

AI can accelerate work—but it does not define what "good" looks like. That responsibility still rests with humans. Without clear standards for quality, judgment, and outcomes, people hesitate, over-trust the tool, or disengage. In these conditions, confidence erodes and the margin for error widens.[10] Leaders often mistake this hesitation for resistance when it is actually a lack of shared understanding.

Adoption requires more than new tools; it requires your people to choose to think and behave differently. That shift happens only when the majority of leaders, including you, clearly define expectations and model what "good" looks like in practice—day after day, meeting after meeting, decision after decision.

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The Hidden Energy Cost of Technology

Even when AI is adopted successfully, leaders often overlook a second challenge: the drain on human energy and engagement. Nearly three in ten employees report feeling less motivated today than a year ago.[11] While AI often frees up time, it does not automatically restore energy or redirect effort toward higher-value work. Among employees who regularly use AI, only 35% reinvest that time in innovation, strategic thinking, or deeper client engagement.[12]

Several leaders we interviewed described a paradox: productivity rose even as engagement declined.[13] Put bluntly: productivity does not equal engagement. AI is productive, they agree, but it's also "massively energy-draining."[14] Another leader noted that reliance on AI had quietly reduced peer interaction, leaving people more isolated despite being more "efficient."[15]

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This is the overlooked cost of many tech-first strategies: they can optimize output while slowly sapping human energy. Intentional leadership—fueled by purpose, connection, collaboration, and meaning—converts technological capacity into sustained momentum.

C-Suite Reflections

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Where might I be mistaking early productivity gains from AI for a durable competitive advantage?
- If I randomly asked employees across levels to explain why AI matters to our strategy and how it helps the business grow, how consistent would their answers really be?

Questions to Ask Your Team

- What assumptions are people making about how AI will affect their roles, careers, or job security?
- When our teams use AI, do they know what "good" looks like—or are they left to guess where judgment, quality, and accountability still matter most?
- As efficiency increases, where is the reclaimed time actually going?

Section 2

Humans Leading Humans—Entering the Breakthrough Zone

In an AI-enabled world, distinctly human capabilities matter more, not less: trust, judgment, character, discernment, creativity, and collaboration cannot be automated or outsourced. As technology accelerates work and expands options, it also heightens interdependence. Decisions ripple faster. Errors spread wider. People must rely on one another—and on systems they don't fully understand—more than ever.

That reliance heightens the economics of trust. Technology is moving fast—but you can't keep up with it. AI adoption doesn't move at the speed of technology. AI adoption moves at the speed of trust.[16]

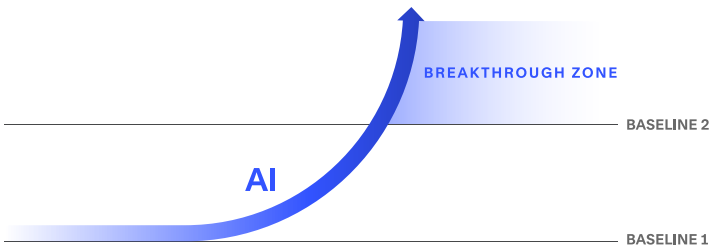
When work was slower and more linear, mistrust bred friction. Today, mistrust breeds paralysis. In environments saturated with AI tools, automation, and data, people hesitate—not for lack of information but because they are unsure which signals to trust, whose judgment to rely on, or whether acting independently will be rewarded or punished.

It's known that organizations intentionally investing in people-first leadership are nearly three times more likely to outperform their peers—not only in results but also in speed, adaptability, and engagement.[17] These organizations recognize that trust is not a cultural luxury—it is the only way to coordinate human judgment at the speed that technology now demands.

We call this the *Breakthrough Zone*—where the human side of strategy becomes a force multiplier, accelerating outcomes beyond what technology alone can deliver.

In this zone, teams move faster because friction is reduced. Decisions are made closer to the work, and energy flows toward progress rather than protection.

Technology moves the baseline. Humans create the breakthrough.



The Breakthrough Zone occurs when human capabilities like trust, judgment, and collaboration act as force multipliers and accelerate performance beyond the AI-enabled baseline.

The Perception Gap: Why Leaders Don't See the Stall

If the opportunity is so clear, why do so few organizations achieve sustained breakthroughs? One reason is a widening perception gap between how leaders believe they are showing up and how their teams experience them. In an AI-enabled environment, this gap widens faster and causes more damage.

Across our datasets, employees consistently rate leadership effectiveness much lower than leaders rate themselves. Fewer than 7% of teams describe their trust level as world-class.[18] When employees graded executive leadership overall, the average score was a failing grade.

A chief operating officer shared a moment that captures the dynamic:

We told a senior leader his team felt he was harsh and controlling. He said, "That's just their perception of me."

I replied, "As a leader, their perception is reality."[19]

In an AI-enabled environment, this isn't just a cultural insight—it's an execution constraint. When perception gaps widen, decisions slow, judgment retreats, and trust-dependent work grinds to a halt.

Technology can unintentionally widen perception gaps

This gap is rarely about bad intent. It is about impact. Technology can unintentionally widen perception gaps. AI systems obscure decision-making logic. Automated workflows reduce human interaction. Messages are pushed at scale but rarely translated with care. You might believe clarity has been delivered—because information has been distributed—while employees experience confusion, distance, or a sense of threat.

Over time, your people stop exercising judgment. They seek approval for decisions you expect them to make themselves.[20] They default to safe behaviors rather than smart ones, often turning to AI for decision-making and validation rather than collaborating with a colleague or you as their leader, due to a lack of trust.[21] In an environment where speed matters, that hesitation becomes a performance bottleneck.

In the AI era, perception gaps don't just affect morale. They directly constrain execution.

Trust Is Infrastructure

Trust is often labeled a soft skill. In reality, it is operational infrastructure—and in a high-tech environment, it is load-bearing. Low-trust environments create significant drag: approvals multiply, rework increases, and people hedge rather than commit. High-trust organizations operate differently—and the performance impact is measurable:

- 260% higher motivation.
- 41% lower absenteeism.
- 50% lower turnover.[22]
- 8.5 times more revenue per employee.
- 3.5 times outperformance in market value.[23]

As technology grows more complex, trust becomes the mechanism that allows humans—you and those you lead—to keep pace. It enables people to act without full certainty, rely on shared intent rather than constant oversight, and collaborate across systems, functions, and geographies.

A senior leader from Asia described trust this way:

We have defining moments every day—moments that are powerful when building influence and trust. If you're not paying attention to broader relationships, informal conversations, other little things, [these defining moments] will completely pass you by.[24]

In one organization we studied, an executive made a symbolic yet powerful decision: she gave up her private office to work alongside her team. She sent this message: *How we work has to evolve. What used to work won't work anymore. Sitting together matters if we're serious about collaboration.*[25]

Proximity—physical or relational still matters

That single act countered a subtle yet growing threat of the AI age: isolation. As work becomes more digital and automated, trust must be built more intentionally, not less. Proximity—physical or relational—still matters.

Purposeful Collaboration: Where Trust Becomes Capacity

As powerful as trust is, it is not enough on its own. In the Breakthrough Zone, trust enables intentional collaboration—the ability to think, decide, and act together across boundaries.

This matters even more in an AI-enabled world because no single function, model, or leader has full visibility. Value is created at the intersections—between human judgment and machine insight, across teams, and across disciplines. One consultant shared a story from a global medical technology company that illustrates this shift:

A sales leader noticed an aging patient population that would benefit from a newer, but more costly surgical product. The easy path was to keep selling the legacy product and hit the numbers. Instead, they challenged the status quo—working across sales, R&D, and supply chain to change course.[26]

The transition required courage, data, and cross-functional trust. It meant questioning incentives, sharing risk, and coordinating across silos that rarely collaborated. Six months later,

when demand surged, the hospital was ready. Infection rates fell, and outcomes improved. That alignment didn't just protect contracts. It saved lives.

This is what collaboration looks like when trust is real in the AI age. People don't abdicate judgment to machines or authority to hierarchy. They combine insights, challenge assumptions, and commit to it together.

In environments defined by speed, opacity, and constant change, purposeful collaboration is how trust becomes capacity—and how human systems turn technological potential into sustained breakthroughs.

C-Suite Reflections

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Where might trust—not technology—be the real constraint on how quickly I can move, decide, and delegate in an AI-enabled environment?
- How confident am I that our trust infrastructure is strong enough to keep pace with the speed and complexity of the technology we're deploying?
- Where could a gap exist between how I believe I'm showing up as a leader and how my judgment, intent, and availability are actually experienced by my team?

Questions to Ask Your Team

- When uncertainty rises, what do you rely on first—high-trust collaboration with others or AI tools in isolation—and why?
- Where cross-functional collaboration matters most, what gets in the way: unclear risk sharing, missing context, weak accountability—or something we haven't acknowledged?

Section 3

Execution Is a Human Operating System in a Technological Age

Leadership and trust create the conditions for a breakthrough. Execution determines whether that breakthrough occurs and endures.

At FranklinCovey we have partnered with thousands of teams and organizations to establish a disciplined, human-focused execution system that helps leaders make progress on their most important goals. In a world increasingly shaped by AI and automation, this this capability matters more than ever. Technology can raise the performance baseline, accelerate processes, surface insights, and automate routine work. But it cannot decide what matters most, resolve competing priorities, or ensure that hundreds of people act with shared intent. Those responsibilities remain profoundly human. And that's why great leaders capable of unlocking breakthroughs have never been more valuable.

This is the execution paradox of the AI era: as technology accelerates and expands options, execution becomes harder, not easier.

Your people are likely flooded with data, tools, and signals, yet starved for clarity. Even in organizations with strong strategies and capable talent, efforts fragment. Teams move faster but not in sync. The result is misalignment and wasted energy—not because people lack insight, but because they lack shared meaning, focus, and permission to act.

Execution is where trust is operationalized, and leadership becomes visible. It is the point at which strategy either takes root—or withers and dies.[27] Without a deliberate execution operating system, even high-trust cultures and compelling visions stall amid competing priorities and unclear ownership.

92%

of employees spend hours each week waiting for clarity or resolving misalignment

Execution is often mistaken for pressure, urgency, or intensity—especially when results lag over time. You may even be rewarding these signals as evidence of commitment, when in reality they are often symptoms of an execution system that isn't doing its job. Technology can accelerate this discipline—or reveal its absence.

When execution systems are weak, leaders often respond by adding pressure rather than clarity. You tighten oversight, accelerate timelines, and

escalate urgency—without addressing the underlying design gaps that cause hesitation. More tools don't produce alignment. They only amplify confusion. Our data makes the cost visible:

- 36% of employees hesitate to make decisions without manager approval.
- 92% of employees spend hours each week waiting for clarity or resolving misalignment.[28]

Hesitation at this scale is not a motivation problem. It is the predictable outcome of execution systems that leave priorities ambiguous, decision rights unclear, and consequences uneven. As one executive in New Zealand admitted:

We have a great strategy. But every quarter, we lose momentum because people aren't sure what the priorities actually mean.[29]

In an AI-enabled organization, execution does not improve through effort alone. It improves only when leaders like you deliberately design systems that make clear where judgment is required, where authority resides, and which trade-offs matter most. We found that the most critical leadership activities—mobilizing people, holding others accountable, and building shared momentum—remain deeply human. AI can inform these actions, but it cannot replace them.[30]

Top six scenarios with the highest percentage of respondents selecting humans as the primary source of impact.

	Human	Tech	Hybrid/Both
Mobilizing individuals	**78%**	7%	15%
Retaining top talent	**78%**	9%	13%
Holding people accountable for commitments	**76%**	9%	15%
Delegating responsibilities	**72%**	12%	16%
Generating shared momentum towards a goal	**70%**	9%	21%
Strengthening engagement	**65%**	13%	22%

High-performing organizations design execution systems that deliberately allocate attention. Technology handles speed and scale, while humans handle meaning, judgment, and commitment. This clarity prevents one of the most common execution failures: teams working hard in parallel rather than delivering better results together.

When priorities are clear, decision rights are well defined, and accountability rhythms are consistent, people act with confidence rather than caution. Execution becomes the enabling bridge between trust and results—translating leadership intent into daily behavior and turning the Breakthrough Zone from a moment into a method.

When Strategy Fails in Translation—Even with Better Tools

One of our senior strategy execution consultants shared a cautionary example from professional sports:

The executive team rolled out a new five-year plan focused on margin, not just revenue. The chief revenue officer understood it, but the message was diluted as it cascaded.[31]

By the time it reached the field, sales teams heard "sell more" rather than "sell smarter." They worked hard—and still missed margin targets. Not because they lacked effort or data, but because they lacked understanding.

This is where technology often disappoints leaders. Dashboards, AI forecasts, and performance tools can tell teams what is happening—but they cannot ensure that people interpret the strategy the same way, make the same trade-offs, or act with the same intent.

Execution fails when you set targets without designing for shared understanding—when you assume that clarity will travel intact simply because information does.

Designing for Sustained Performance in an AI-Enabled World

Many organizations reach the Breakthrough Zone once, whether during a crisis or a turnaround, or under a charismatic leader. Then it fades. Sustained excellence requires execution systems that make high performance repeatable: systems that scale human judgment, not just machine intelligence.

High-performing organizations distribute authority so that hundreds of teams can operate in parallel—aligned, fast, and adaptive—rather than waiting for permission from the center. They do so by deliberately designing execution around the *Human Imperative*:

- ***They protect focus in a world of infinite inputs.*** Leaders are as explicit about what will not be done as about what must be done. They distinguish mission-critical priorities from steady-state work and create real margins in people's workloads. AI may create dozens of opportunities, but leaders protect teams by committing to a small set of outcomes that truly matter.
- ***They cascade meaning, not just metrics.*** Priorities are translated across layers, with each team defining how it will contribute and what success looks like in its context. This translation builds commitment and trust—people know why the work matters, how their judgment is required, and that priorities won't be abandoned midstream.
- ***They emphasize high-leverage human action.*** Rather than optimizing everything, leaders focus on the few actions that have the strongest link between effort and impact—especially those that require judgment, creativity, and relationship building. This is where humans outperform algorithms and where execution momentum compounds.

The organizations that win will be those that design execution systems around the *Human Imperative* so technology amplifies human capability rather than replacing it

- ***They make progress visible to drive learning.*** Simple, shared scoreboards turn data into insights. Teams can see how their actions affect outcomes and adjust quickly. Weekly conversations shift from "What did we do?" to "What should we do next, based on what we're learning?"—turning execution into a feedback loop rather than a compliance exercise.
- ***They sustain accountability through cadence, not control.*** Accountability is not surveillance. It is directional. High-trust people make and keep commitments—to themselves, peers, and leaders—because integrity and competence are expected. Regular check-ins reinforce focus, learning, and adaptation, not fear.

In this environment, agility is redefined. It is not the ability to abandon commitments when new information

arrives. True agility is the discipline to revisit commitments regularly and adjust intelligently. Technology informs those adjustments; humans make them.

AI can accelerate insight, automate routine work, and point out patterns humans might miss. But the organizations that win in this era will be those that design execution systems around the *Human Imperative*—clarity, judgment, accountability, and trust—so technology amplifies human capability rather than replacing it.

Breakthrough becomes the standard—not when execution is automated, but when human systems are intentionally designed to perform at scale, under pressure, and over time.

C-Suite Reflections

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Where am I investing in data, tools, or dashboards to address execution problems that are actually caused by unclear priorities, decision rights, or shared meaning?
- If execution feels harder as technology accelerates, where might our execution system be amplifying confusion rather than converting trust into coordinated action?
- Where am I relying on pressure, urgency, or escalation to compensate for execution systems that lack clearly defined ownership and decision authority?

Questions to Ask Your Team

- Where do you hesitate, seek approval, or work in parallel because you're unsure whether you have permission to act—and what would make that permission unmistakable?
- When strategy reaches your team, where does meaning get diluted, and which trade-offs feel unclear or inconsistent across the organization?

Conclusion

Embracing Humanity in an AI Age

Your people are exhausted. The exhaustion isn't from a lack of technology—humans have never had more of it. It's driven by the growing gap between what technology enables and what our human systems can support.

For years, leaders have told their organizations to "do more with less," while relying on smarter tools to close the gap. But our research makes clear that the real constraint is not capacity—it is alignment, clarity, trust, and the human experience of work in a world moving faster than our leadership systems have evolved to keep pace.

AI will continue to raise the performance floor. It will automate routine work, accelerate insights, and expand what organizations can achieve. But AI does not decide what matters most. It does not build trust across teams. It does not translate strategy into shared meaning. And it does not sustain momentum under pressure. Only great leaders can help raise the ceiling.

The most durable organizations through the next decade will not just be those with the most advanced tools, the largest data sets, or the most aggressive automation strategies. They will be the organizations that also invest with equal intention in their human infrastructure—trust-rich cultures, purposeful collaboration, disciplined execution, and great leaders who know how to mobilize people in motion.

These organizations understand some fundamental truths:

- Trust is structural.
- Collaboration is how complexity is resolved.
- Execution is about designing human systems that work at scale.

In a world where technology accelerates everything, you must slow down long enough to make clarity, judgment, and accountability non negotiable. The future does not belong to organizations that simply adopt AI faster. It belongs to those who integrate it wisely, using technology to amplify human capabilities rather than replace them.

The work of leadership has never been more human, more consequential, or more necessary

You are already making a choice—by design or by default. You are either building human systems strong enough to turn speed into progress or allowing technology to accelerate confusion, hesitation, and erosion of trust.

The work of leadership has never been more human, more consequential, or more necessary. This is a business necessity. This is the ***Human Imperative***.

Notes

1. FranklinCovey Institute, *Global Leadership Survey*, 2025. Survey conducted October 2025 with more than 500 managers and individual contributors globally. Respondents represented diverse industries, functions, and job complexity; 90% reported medium- to high-complexity roles.
2. FranklinCovey Institute, *Global Leadership Panel and Consultant Interviews*, 2026. Virtual interviews conducted by the research team with 63 Global Leadership Panel members (director- to executive-level leaders worldwide) and 18 senior FranklinCovey consultants. Quotes and stories anonymized.
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Methodology

This report draws from FranklinCovey's ongoing research of leadership effectiveness, integrating findings from extensive literature reviews, quantitative survey data, and qualitative insights conducted through virtual interviews.

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Statement on the Use of AI:

The FranklinCovey Institute is composed of a team of researchers who are all human. All ideas, stories, and graphics in this Insight Report originated with the authors and their teams (including many sticky notes and whiteboards). We recognize and celebrate the progress of technology in combination with the principles of human effectiveness. And we appreciate the use of AI tools to summarize meeting notes, identify themes, or help with standard editorial tools. However, we don't believe they are a substitute for human insight or authorship.

This report represents human thought, collaborative research, and shared experiences in an effort to provide meaningful insight into today's workplace and the impact we have from working together.

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