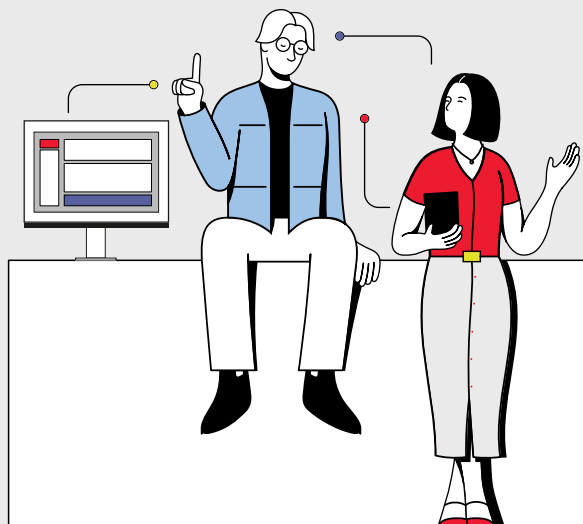


## THE NEW TEAM EQUATION

# People + People + AI



Just two years ago you could picture teamwork as a group of people sitting around a circular table—sharing ideas, debating, learning, disagreeing, and ultimately creating results together. Human beings interacting, working toward a common outcome.

Now there's a new chair at that table. In it sits an AI agent. And every team today faces the same question: how do we work with this new teammate?

Part of the challenge is figuring out AI's contribution—what it adds to the conversation, to output, to efficiency. But the bigger question is this: what impact will this new teammate have on the relationships between the rest of us?

**The old team equation was people + people = results.  
The new equation is people + people + AI = results.**

## THE ROLE OF INFORMAL CONNECTIONS

Individuals and teams run on relationships. Relationships are developed not just in formal meetings, but also through quick check-ins, casual discussions, and spontaneous moments where teammates ask each other, “What do you think about this?” These informal interactions contribute significantly to workplace culture and productivity.

There is a lot of research to support this. One study showed that [informal communication significantly improves employees' sense of being informed](#), increases their commitment, and boosts their satisfaction with

their jobs—without decreasing productivity. Another suggests that [informal connections shape employees' view of their leadership](#).

Research and common experience attest to the value those moments have in helping a team be successful. But AI may be cutting into those interactions and, in the process, negatively impacting team relationships.

## EARLY WARNING SIGNS

A recent survey of 1,500 employees found that one in four workers reported decreased trust in colleagues' integrity, competence, and work ethic since AI entered the workplace. In the same study, one in five said they now reach out to coworkers less often to discuss challenges. These may be early signs of AI's impact on social systems at work.

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Other research points the same direction. Scholars at Columbia Business School found that over-reliance on [AI can reduce the value people place on human skills](#), which in turn erodes trust in relationships.

And Harvard Business Review recently reported similar risks: [employees say much of what AI produces feels like “workslop”](#)—low-quality work that leads teammates to trust each other’s work less and spend more time cleaning up after one another.

It appears AI is likely to present at least these challenges to workplace relationships:

- Decreased trust between colleagues
- Reduced facetime with colleagues
- Devalued human skills and work
- Inefficiencies (and frustration) due to “workslop”

## SAFEGUARDING CONNECTION

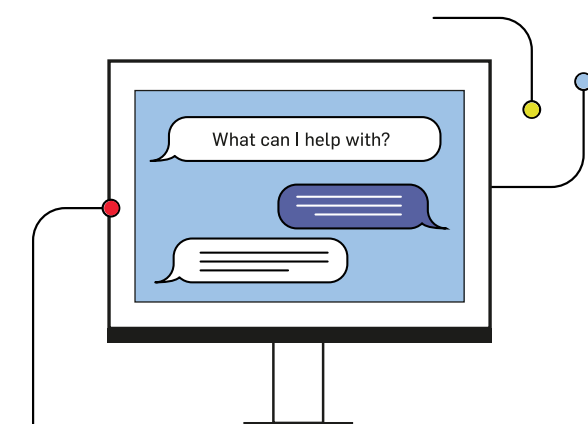
One way to guard against the relational consequences of AI is to protect moments of connection—informal conversations, quick check-ins, and side comments—because they contribute to trust, cohesion, and results.

AI is great for things like gathering information, summarizing, outlining, or giving you a head start on a draft. That kind of prep work saves time and frees people up for higher-value work.

But leaders also need to protect the space where humans do their best work—debating, dialoguing, disagreeing, and building on each other’s ideas. That’s where innovation happens. For example, leaders can promote dialogue by:

### Setting AI Boundaries.

Be explicit with your teams. Use AI to speed up the groundwork, then use each other to test, challenge, and refine those ideas. AI can accelerate the process, but it’s the human back-and-forth that makes the work meaningful, accurate, and new.



### Adopt Daily or Weekly Check-ins.

Borrow from [Menlo Innovations](#)—host a ten- to fifteen-minute check-in where each team member shares what they’re working on, one challenge they’re facing, and any help they might need. These rituals spark side conversations and reinforce that people—not AI—are the first stop for problem-solving.

### Pair Work Over Solo AI Use.

Instead of having everyone individually draft with AI, assign pairs or small groups to review AI outputs together. The review process fosters shared accountability, sparks debate, and keeps the work social.

## BUILD RELATIONSHIP INTELLIGENCE

Another big lever for leaders is building relationship intelligence—the people + people part of the equation.

Relationship intelligence is about knowing what drives yourself when things are good, why you react the way you do when things aren’t good (conflict), and learning the same about the people you work with. When you have better relationship intelligence, you can improve how you work together—not just how well you small talk over lunch.

[Our research at Crucial Learning](#) found that nearly half of a team’s performance can be explained by the strength of relationships—measured by things like: *I feel understood by my teammates, we resolve conflicts quickly, and I respect them even if they’re different from me.*

Enable your people to get to know each other beyond swapping stories about hobbies, favorite sports teams, or the latest show you binge watched. All fine, but what do you need to learn about them that would have the greatest impact on results? What makes them get defensive? What gets them excited? What drives them at their core?

That’s where the [Crucial Teams® course](#) and the [Strength Deployment Inventory® \(SDI®\)](#) become practical. The SDI helps teams map out three things: their core motives, their go-to strengths, and their patterns in conflict. Instead of guessing why a teammate reacts a certain way, people gain a shared language to explain differences and use them productively.

For example, I recently worked with a team that had lived through years of dysfunction under previous leadership. Their new leader wanted to rebuild trust and cohesion, so the group spent three days together in a virtual course walking through their SDI results. They talked openly about what drives them, how they each handle pressure, and what strengths they bring to the workplace. Something shifted. Team members began to say things like, *“I never realized why you respond that way—I actually appreciate the perspective you add.”* By the end, the leader was nearly in tears, describing how proud she was to see her team understand and value each other in ways they never had before.

This is what we mean by relationship intelligence: moving beyond surface-level harmony into a deeper appreciation of motives and differences. When leaders equip teams with this kind of understanding, they don’t just prevent breakdowns—they build the foundation for trust, resilience, and performance. And that’s what safeguards the *people + people* side of the *people + people + AI* equation.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

If leaders take measures to strengthen relationships and increase connection, they may be able to mitigate potential negative effects of AI on relationships while benefitting from the productivity and efficiency gains it can offer.

This new teammate at the table doesn’t have to weaken us. Used wisely, it can free us up to be better humans and better teams.



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