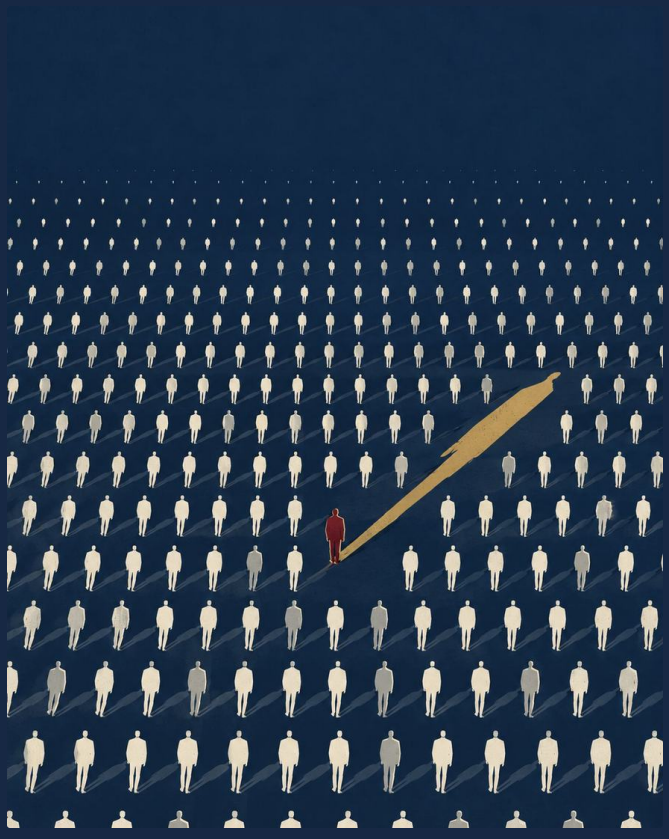
THE CONVICTION PAPERS · VOLUME 2 OF 3

Conviction *Over* Code

Why AI's greatest advantage goes to people who know who they are

What 20 years of researching Leadership in the Age of Personalization reveals about how to thrive in the age of AI.



Glenn Llopis Leadership strategist · Forbes contributor since 2010

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The discovery

AI amplifies what you bring. The scarcest asset of this decade is conviction: the earned capacity to act on what you believe before the outcome is certain.

For 20 years I have studied a single tension inside organizations: the pull to standardize people versus the need to let each person bring what only they can. That work has led me to the most important discovery I have made about the age of AI.

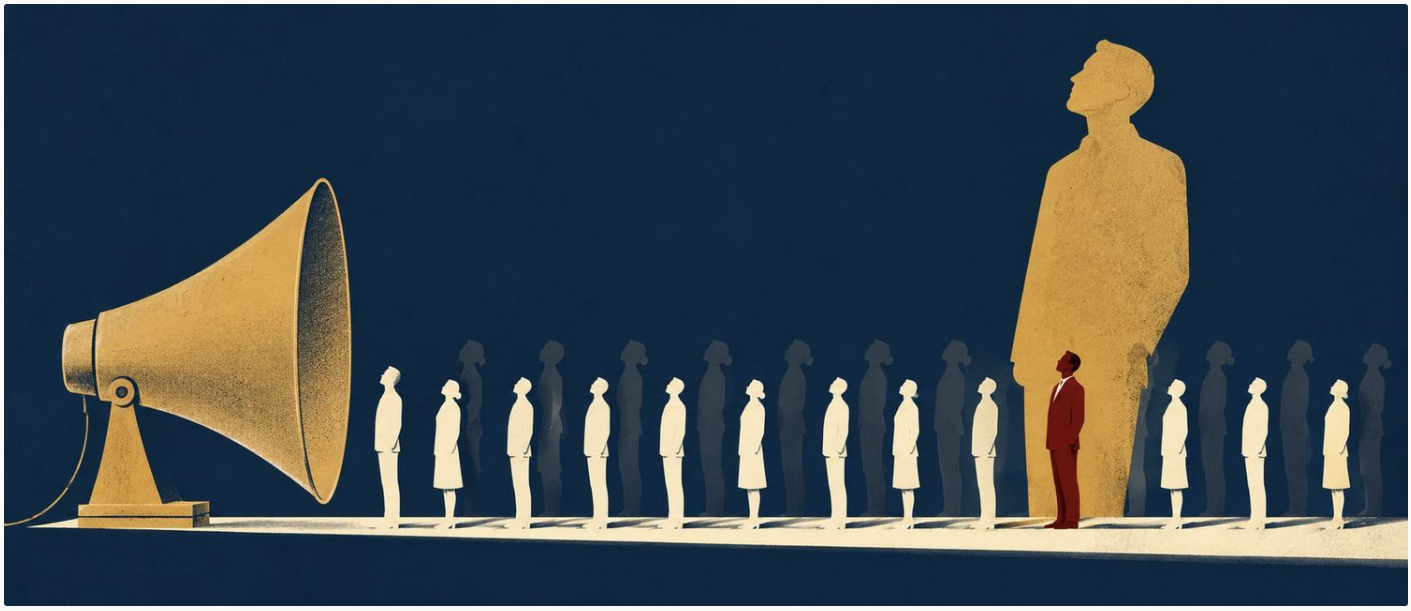
AI doesn't hand you an advantage. It amplifies the one you bring.

People who know what they bring use it to compound their judgment. People who don't use it to replace their judgment, and are slowly assimilated by it.

That makes the scarcest asset of this decade neither data nor compute nor talent with the right certificates. It is conviction: the earned capacity to act on what you believe before the outcome is certain. Every other input to AI is getting cheaper. Conviction is not, because it cannot be bought, installed or mandated.

The conclusion is uncomfortable for anyone treating AI as a technology project. The real risk is not replacement. It is assimilation: a workforce, and a generation, that sounds more polished every quarter while thinking less for itself. A machine can only assimilate a self that was never claimed.

The remedy is a matter of sequence, which I call **Conviction Over Code**. Claim what you bring before you prompt. Shape environments that want people's judgment, not just their usage. Reinvent on purpose rather than by mandate. Organizations that get the order right will see what the rest keep promising their boards. Those that don't will keep buying motion and calling it progress.



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THE EVIDENCE, PAST 18 MONTHS

Six findings point one way

Different researchers, different industries, the same human story.

44% vs 12%

The gains go to people who know who they are

Managers assigned higher-value tasks to 44% of top-quartile sales reps after AI adoption, versus 12% of the bottom quartile.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW · 236 SALES PROFESSIONALS

91%

Confidence is being borrowed

Share of C-suite executives who admit to exaggerating their AI knowledge.

PLURALSIGHT AI SKILLS REPORT 2025

60%

The repetitions are disappearing

Employees who worry AI is eroding their skills, most often critical thinking.

IBM · 8,800 EMPLOYEES, 28 COUNTRIES

13%

Adoption is not ownership

AI users rewarded for reinventing their work even when results aren't met, while organizational factors drive 67% of AI's impact.

MICROSOFT WORK TREND INDEX 2026

68 → 53

Trust is falling as AI rolls out

Percent of non-executives confident in senior leadership, 2024 to 2026.

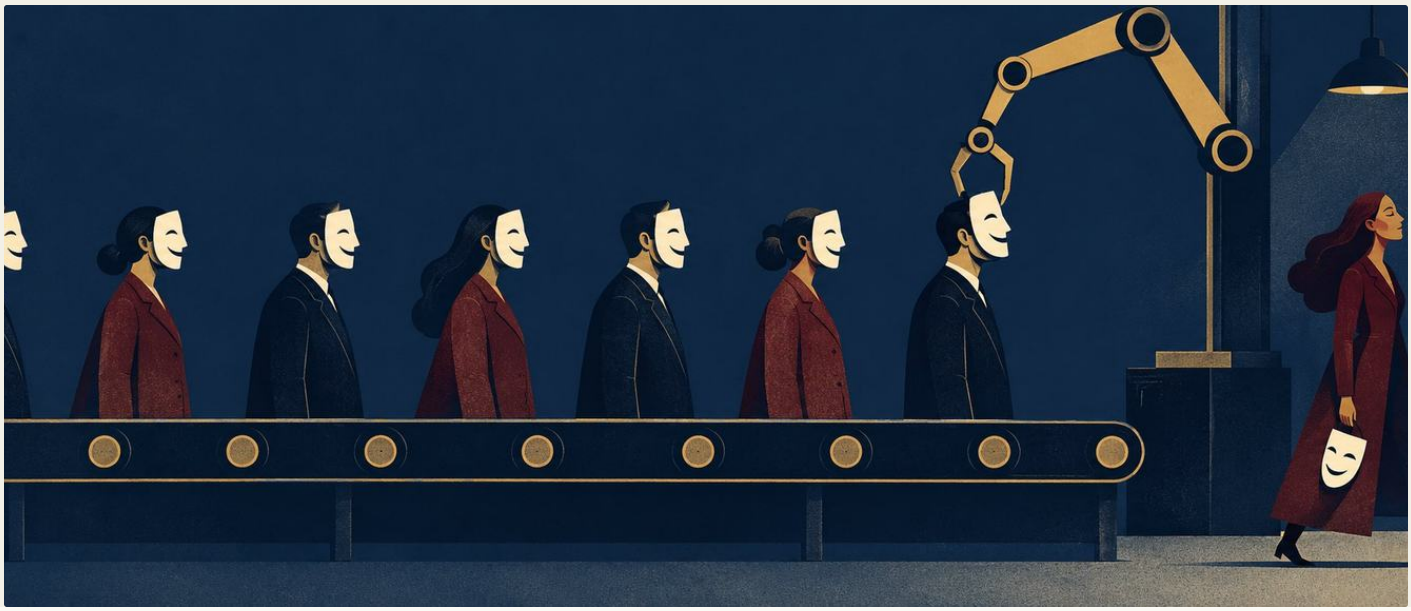
KORN FERRY · ABOUT 16,000 RESPONDENTS

0.7%

It starts in adolescence

Student requests to an AI tutor that asked for feedback on their own attempt. 73.8% sought direct answers.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND TRIAL · IZA DP 18989



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I. THE STUDY

The discovery

Every major technology shift asks a question about people. The industrial era asked whether people could be made interchangeable. The digital era asked whether they could be made efficient. The AI era asks something far more personal: whether people still know what they think when a machine can think for them.

Most organizations have not noticed the question. They are buying tools, mandating usage and reporting adoption to their boards. Meanwhile the returns stay elusive, and the people using the tools grow less sure of themselves and of their leaders.

After two decades of research, interviews and executive summits on how institutions balance standards with individuality, I have come to a simple conclusion. AI is not mainly a technology challenge. It is an identity challenge, and the variable that decides who thrives is conviction.



Why now: the great re-standardization

For most of the last century, organizations scaled by standardizing everything, including people. It worked. Quality became repeatable and growth became possible. The unspoken deal was simple: fit the mold, and we will take care of you.

Over the past 20 years that deal broke. Customers, patients, students and employees began expecting to be known as individuals. I called this the Age of Personalization, and it forced institutions to find a healthier tension between the

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standards that hold them together and the individuality that moves them forward.

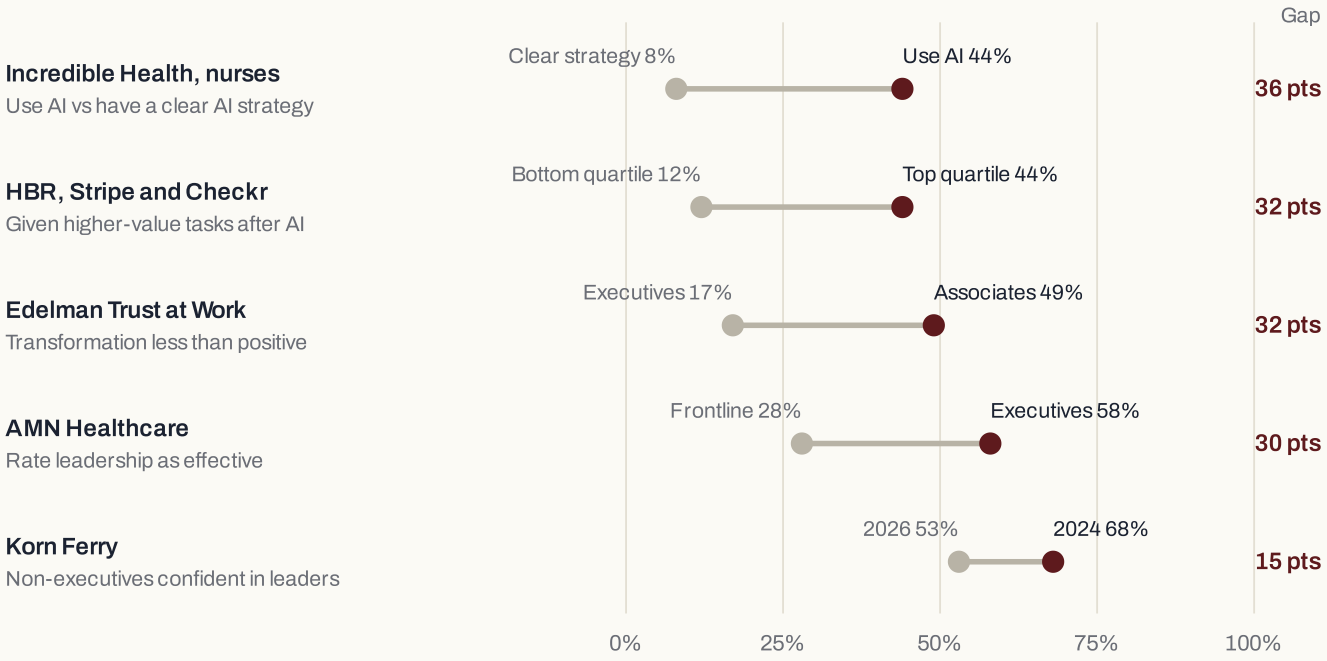
AI threatens to swing the pendulum back. It is built on patterns and probabilities. Ask it for a strategy, a memo or a performance review and it returns the most likely answer, fluent and confident. Left unchecked, it standardizes how we think, write and decide at a scale no factory or policy manual ever could.

Our own research shows how much individuality organizations had already suppressed before AI arrived: 87% of managers report that their individuality is suppressed at work. AI does not create that problem. It accelerates it.

EXHIBIT 1

PERCENT OF EACH GROUP

The AI era is widening five gaps at work



Sources: Incredible Health (July 2026), Harvard Business Review (Oct 2026), Edelman (Oct 2026), AMN Healthcare (Sept 2026), Korn Ferry (Sept 2026). Among nurses, 44% now use AI, while only 8% say their employer has a clear AI strategy for their role. People are moving faster than the leadership around them.

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II. THE EVIDENCE

Six patterns in the evidence

1 AI amplifies what you bring.

In a Harvard Business Review study that surveyed 236 sales professionals at Stripe and Checkr, managers reported assigning higher-value tasks to 44% of top-quartile reps after AI adoption, versus 12% of bottom-quartile reps. The authors found the gains came less from trust in AI, which showed little correlation with results, than from top performers who taught themselves to use it as a thinking partner. The tool did not level the field. It rewarded the people who already knew how they learn and what they bring.

2 Confidence is being borrowed, not earned.

Pluralsight's 2025 AI Skills Report found 91% of C-suite executives admit to exaggerating their AI knowledge, compared with 79% of all professionals. Meanwhile, 75% of U.S. workers tell the University of Phoenix that AI increases their confidence at work. The question no survey asks is whether that confidence was built into them or borrowed from the tool.

3 The repetitions that build judgment are vanishing.

IBM's 2026 study of 8,800 employees in 28 countries found 60% worry AI is eroding their skills, most often critical thinking, and three in four of them say the erosion has already begun. BCG found that the 14% of workers experiencing what it calls AI brain fry report 33% more decision fatigue and 39% more major errors. When the tool goes first every time, it replaces the moment judgment would have formed.

4 Adoption is mistaken for ownership.

Microsoft's 2026 Work Trend Index, a survey of 20,000 AI users, found organizational factors account for 67% of reported AI impact, against 32% for individual mindset and behavior. Yet only 26% say their leadership is clearly aligned on AI, and 13% say they are rewarded for reinventing their work even when results aren't met. Everyone gets the license. Very few are trusted to decide what it is for.

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5 Trust is falling while AI rolls out.

Korn Ferry found the share of non-executives confident in their senior leadership fell from 68% in 2024 to 53% in 2026. Edelman found trust in co-workers fell from 82% to 73%, a record low in its data series, and 49% of associates call their transformation experience less than positive, versus 17% of executives. People are being asked to change how they work by leaders they are less sure can see them.

6 It begins long before work.

Common Sense Media rated ChatGPT for Teens an “Unacceptable Risk” after testing it with teen accounts, and found that with Study mode off it completed all 80 assignments tested. In a randomized trial at the University of Maryland, 73.8% of student requests to an AI tutor sought direct answers and 0.7% asked for feedback on their own attempt. We are raising a generation that can get any answer and is rarely asked what it thinks.

> *Read separately, these look like six problems. Read together, they are one.*

AI is exposing how few people were ever helped to know who they are, and how few environments were ever designed to want what they think.



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III. THE ARGUMENT

Assimilation, not replacement



The public debate about AI is mostly about jobs: how many survive and which go first. That debate matters, but it misses the quieter risk. The greater danger is not that AI replaces people. It is that people slowly become indistinguishable from what AI produces.

For 20 years I have watched accomplished people perform a version of themselves until the performance became the person. It often begins around 15, when fitting in feels safer than standing out. It continues in the conference room, where the polished answer is rewarded and the candid one is softened. AI is simply the newest and most powerful editor in that long chain.

> *A machine can only assimilate a self that was never claimed.*

People who know what they naturally solve for use AI to extend their thinking. People who don't use it to replace their thinking, and they rarely notice the difference until someone challenges the frame instead of the data.

The economic cost of a workforce that holds itself back is already visible. Gallup puts global employee engagement at 20%, its lowest level since 2020, and estimates the cost of low engagement at about $10 trillion in lost productivity, or 9% of global GDP. AI deployed into that environment does not fix disengagement. It automates it.

IV. THE DIVIDE

Borrowed confidence or earned conviction

The divide that will separate people and organizations over the next decade is not access to AI. Nearly everyone will have that. It is the difference between borrowed confidence and earned conviction.

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COMPARE	Borrowed confidence	Earned conviction
WHERE IT COMES FROM	A title, a tool, an approving room	Repeatedly acting on what you believe
HOW IT USES AI	The tool goes first and sets the frame	Your position goes first; the tool tests it
UNDER CHALLENGE	Defends the output or folds	Explains the judgment behind it
WHAT IT PRODUCES	Motion: more output, the same thinking	Meaning: better decisions, original work
WHAT IT TEACHES OTHERS	Perform certainty	Say what you see

Conviction is the earned capacity to act on what you believe before the outcome is certain. It cannot be installed in a training session, purchased with a license or mandated in a memo. It is earned one decision at a time, and AI has made the cost of skipping those decisions invisible until it is too late.

The returns follow the people, not the tools. Orgvue's analysis of 475 Fortune 500 companies found those investing in human-led growth grew revenue 12.2% year on year, nearly twice the 6.8% of companies trying to do more with less.



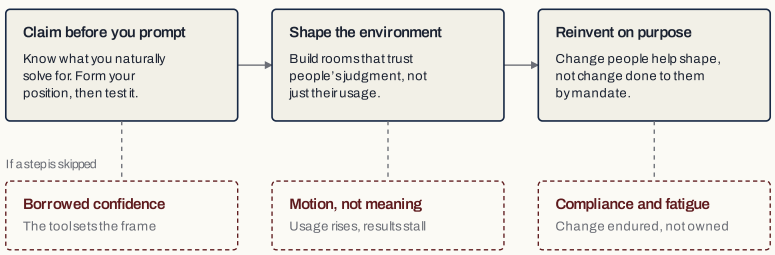
V. THE REMEDY

Conviction Over Code: the sequence that works

The answer is not to slow AI down. It is to get the order right. Organizations that see real returns tend to move through three steps in sequence, and the sequence mirrors how conviction is built in people.

EXHIBIT 2 THREE STEPS IN SEQUENCE

Get the order right: conviction comes before code



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Each step depends on the one before it. Skills, transformation programs, strategy and governance all still matter; they simply stand on a foundation most AI roadmaps never mention.

VI. THE MANDATE

What leaders must do differently

CEOs and boards

Stop measuring AI by adoption. Ask what your people now decide differently because of it, and whether the people closest to the work have been trusted to find the opportunities.

Chief people officers

Protect the repetitions. Design roles so early-career people still write the first drafts, run the analysis and sit in the hard conversations where judgment forms. Plan the workforce around what each person naturally solves for, not only around tasks.

Managers

Make it safe to say “I don’t know yet.” A room that punishes uncertainty teaches people to let the tool speak for them.

Educators

Grade the thinking, not just the answer. Ask students what they would have said if the tool were not there.

Parents

Notice who your child is beside the screen. Ask what they find hard, what they care about and whose ideas they are building on.

Every professional

Decide what you think before you ask. Credit the people whose work you build on. Know the problem you want to be known for solving.



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VII. BEFORE THE NEXT AI DECISION

Ten questions every leadership team should answer

01 If AI disappeared tomorrow, what would our people still know how to do?

02 Are we measuring usage, or what people now decide differently?

03 Who in this organization has been trusted to decide what AI is for?

04 Which repetitions are our youngest people no longer getting?

05 When someone challenges an AI-assisted recommendation, can its author defend the frame?

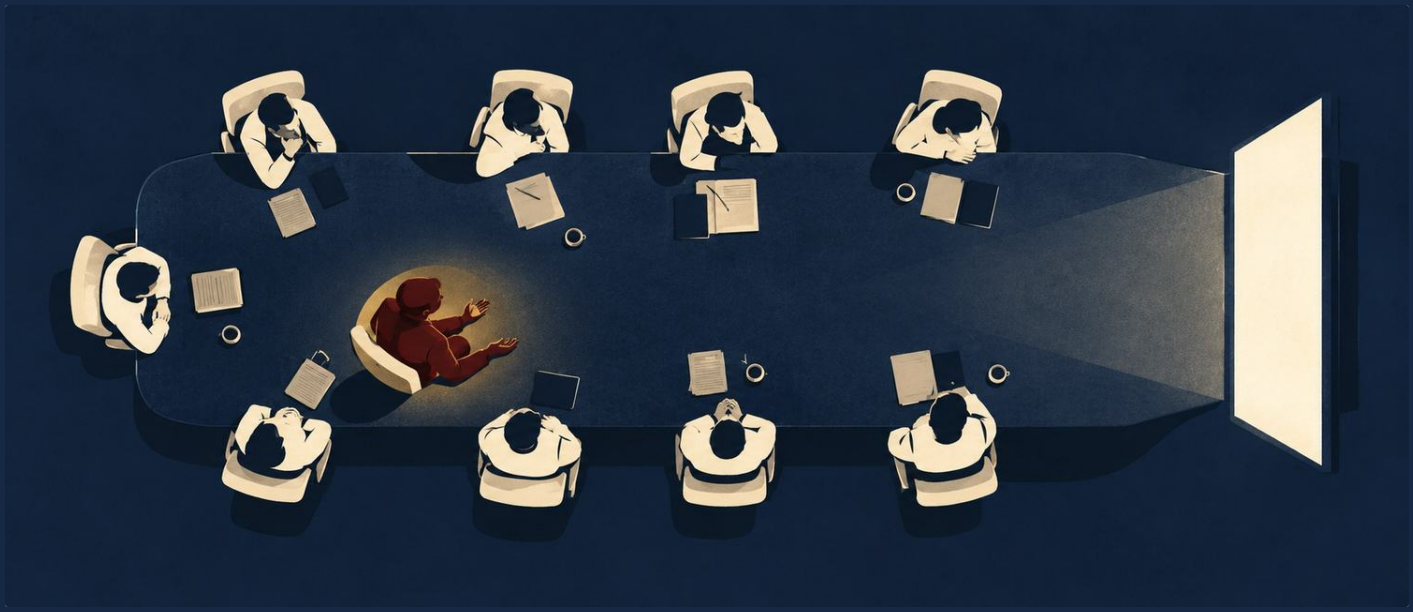
06 What part of themselves do our people leave at the door, and will AI widen that gap?

07 Is our AI strategy making us more like our competitors or more like ourselves?

08 Where are we rewarding the polished answer over the candid one?

09 What would our people build if they were asked instead of told?

10 What are we teaching the next generation about whose thinking counts?



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VIII. THE OUTLOOK

Glenn Llopis's projections for AI across industries

These are my projections, not findings from the research above. They come from 20 years of watching which institutions evolve and which simply swap one tool for another. In every industry, the same pattern will decide who wins: AI will flatten whatever can be standardized and raise the value of whatever cannot.

Healthcare

TIME RETURNED TO CARE

AI will take on more documentation, scheduling and triage, and give caregivers back hours. The systems that pull ahead will spend those hours knowing patients and caregivers as individuals. The rest will fill them with more volume, and burnout will follow. **Watch the nurse manager:** that role will show first whether a system is using AI to restore humanity or to remove it.

Financial services

ADVICE BECOMES A COMMODITY

When every client can get the same well-reasoned recommendation in seconds, the recommendation stops being the product. **Trust will move to the advisors who can explain their judgment and stand behind it**, especially when markets turn and the model's answer is not enough.

Education

ASSESSMENT GETS REBUILT

Schools that keep grading answers will find AI grading them instead. **The institutions that grade thinking, reflection and voice** will produce the graduates employers compete for, because those graduates will know what they bring before they ask a tool to help them bring it.

Professional services

THE PYRAMID FLATTENS

Consulting, law and accounting firms will automate much of the junior work that once trained future partners. **Firms that protect the apprenticeship**, and redesign entry roles so young people still earn their judgment, will own the next generation of leaders. Firms that don't will have no one ready to lead in a decade.

Consumer brands and retail

PERSONALIZATION MOVES INSIDE

Every brand will be able to personalize at scale for the consumer, so customer personalization alone will no longer differentiate. The next advantage is personalizing for the people inside: the employee, the advisor, the leader. Most organizations personalize everything they sell while still managing their own people as a standardized workforce. **The brands that win will know their people as individuals**, because people who feel known are the ones who can know the customer best.

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Manufacturing and operations

TACIT KNOWLEDGE BECOMES SCARCE

AI will optimize the line, the schedule and the supply chain. What it cannot capture is what experienced operators notice before the data does. **Leaders who ask the frontline what they see** will find the next round of gains while competitors wait for the dashboard.

Technology

ADOPTION IS THE BOTTLENECK

The companies building AI will learn that capability is no longer the constraint; human adoption is. **They will start hiring for judgment, curiosity and self-directed learning** the way they once hired for code, and the leaders who can build trust around change will become their scarcest talent.

Government and nonprofits

BEING KNOWN BECOMES THE STANDARD

The cost of standardized service will fall, and the public's expectation of being treated as an individual will rise. **Trust will go to institutions that use AI to see people more clearly**, not to process them faster.

Across every industry

> *Within five years, the most valuable thing on a résumé will not be the tools someone uses. It will be the judgment they can prove.*



THE CONVICTION PAPERS · VOLUME 3 OF 3

What comes next: Behind the Mirror

This paper shows what leaders must do now. Behind the Mirror asks who will still be standing behind the mirror: why the identity crisis in the C-suite starts at 15, and what families and institutions must change in the age of AI. Read it at theglennllopis.com/behind-the-mirror.

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IN HIS WORDS

Glenn Llopis on survival, renewal and reinvention in the age of AI

Survival

Protect what the machine cannot copy

The machine will always know more than you. Your job is to know what you stand for.

Form your position before you open the prompt. Whoever goes first sets the frame.

If you cannot defend your best AI-assisted work without the tool, it was never yours.

Speed is not a strategy. A thousand fast answers to the wrong question are still the wrong answer.

The most dangerous sentence in an AI rollout is “everyone else is doing it.”

Never trade your judgment for convenience. Convenience compounds into dependence.

Polished is not the same as true. Learn to tell the difference before your customers do.

Renewal

Recover what was edited out

Most of us were not born without conviction. We were edited out of it, one reasonable compromise at a time.

Exhaustion is often the cost of performing a self you no longer believe in.

What you set aside to fit in is usually what the next chapter needs most.

Saying “I don’t know yet” is not weakness. It is where real thinking begins.

The people who tell you the truth early are the most valuable people you will ever lead. Thank them in public.

A room that rewards the safe answer will eventually be full of people who have stopped thinking.

Renewal starts the moment you ask what you would say if no one were keeping score.

Reinvention

Move on purpose, not by mandate

Reinvention is not becoming someone new. It is reclaiming who you were before you learned to hide it.

Change done to people produces compliance. Change built with people produces commitment.

Don’t ask what AI can do for your job. Ask what problem you want to be known for solving, then make AI serve it.

When everyone has the same tools, the person who knows the work becomes the advantage.

The future will not reward the most informed person in the room. It will reward the one willing to act on what they know.

Every new tool is a test of identity before it is a test of skill.

Skills can be trained. Tools can be bought. Conviction has to be earned, and it is the one advantage no competitor can download.

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SOURCES

The research behind every figure

Each figure was checked against these pages on October 23, 2026.

FINDING	SOURCE	SAMPLE AND DATE
44% vs 12% of reps given higher-value tasks	Harvard Business Review, What Top Performers Do Differently with AI, by Christopher Stanton, Justin Shriber and Simon Rudat	Survey of 236 sales professionals, Oct 8, 2026
91% of C-suite exaggerate AI knowledge	Pluralsight, AI Skills Report 2025	1,200 US and UK respondents, 2025
75% say AI raises their confidence	University of Phoenix, 2026 Career Optimism Index	5,000 workers, 1,000 employers, Apr 14, 2026
60% worry AI is eroding their skills	IBM CHRO study	8,800 employees, 28 countries, Sept 21, 2026
AI brain fry: 14%; 33% and 39%	BCG, When Using AI Leads to Brain Fry; figures via Search Engine Journal	1,488 US workers, Mar 5, 2026
67% organizational; 26% aligned; 13% rewarded	Microsoft, 2026 Work Trend Index	20,000 AI users, May 5, 2026
Confidence in leaders 68% to 53%	Korn Ferry, The Confidence Gap Undermining AI Transformation	About 16,000 respondents, Sept 30, 2026
Co-worker trust 82% to 73%; 49% vs 17%	Edelman, Trust at Work 2026	10,000+ employees, Oct 6, 2026
ChatGPT for Teens rated Unacceptable Risk; 80 assignments	Common Sense Media; EdTech Innovation Hub	Oct 7, 2026
73.8% of tutor requests sought answers; 0.7% feedback	IZA Discussion Paper 18989, University of Maryland trial	2,379 undergraduates, Oct 2026
Nurses' AI use 15% to 44%; 8% clear strategy	Incredible Health, 2026 State of Nursing	2,240 healthcare workers, July 7, 2026
Leadership effective: 58% of executives vs 28% of frontline	AMN Healthcare survey	4,040 professionals, Sept 15, 2026
12.2% vs 6.8% revenue growth	Orgvue, reported by HR Dive	475 Fortune 500 companies, July 2026
20% engaged; $10 trillion cost	Gallup, State of the Global Workplace	141,444 employed respondents, 2025 data
87% of managers report suppressed individuality	Glenn Llopis research	Survey of 850 managers and directors, 2025

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Llopis on leadership in the age of AI

Glenn Llopis is a leadership strategist who has spent 20 years studying the question AI has now put in front of every organization: what happens to people when institutions reward sameness over who they are. He named the Age of Personalization before most leaders saw it coming, and built Leadership in the Age of Personalization, a methodology for balancing the standards that hold institutions together with the individuality that moves them forward. Its throughline is conviction, which he defines as the earned capacity to act on what you believe before the outcome is certain.

His authority is earned in operating, strategy and leadership roles, not only in research. The son of a Cuban immigrant, he took his first executive role at 25, became the youngest senior executive in the history of a 100-year-old company and reached the C-suite in his early thirties. With his father he founded Luna Rossa Gourmet Foods in 1997 and grew it into more than 6,000 stores across North America. For nearly 30 years he has advised Fortune 500 leaders through transformation.

A Forbes contributor since 2010 and a past Harvard Business Review author, Llopis has written six books on opportunity, individuality, reinvention and conviction, most recently Earning Conviction (2026), along with a healthcare leadership manifesto. Since 2019 he has designed and moderated nine executive summits with institutions including City of Hope, Clemson University, Fairfield University and the University of Phoenix, and has recorded more than 500 hours of interviews with leaders. Today he writes about AI, identity and the human advantage in Conviction Chronicles and on Forbes.com.

Learn more about Glenn at theglennllopis.com.

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