

INSIGHTS IN PRACTICE

*Featuring firsthand lessons from
leaders who've lived them.*

The Unlock: The Onboarding We Skipped

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Introduction.

We onboard people. We use machines. A year ago that sounded reasonable.

Bringing a person onto a team is a discipline with well-worn stages most of us are very familiar with. Almost none of them got applied to the most significant new capability most organizations added this year, and with good reason... *or so we thought*. This is a tool. A machine. A “robot”. It has no empathy, no judgment, no lived experience.

So we treated it that way. And here we are today, policing each other over what AI wrote and what a person wrote, guarding our work from its em dashes, and a bit afraid to admit that it is already in our workflows and already writing, coding and designing close to the way we hoped it would.

That is worth testing, and testing again. Treat it like a robot and it performs like one. **Bring everything we know about human performance to the relationship instead and it gets better.** What emerges is closer to a learning partnership, colleagues who make each other sharper. What gets lost in the trade is a firm but slipping grip on a traditional definition of how knowledge gets made.

I cut my teeth in a university setting which is at its core, a culture that prioritizes continuous learning over mastery. A place where experimentation and testing are constant and pursuing questions from every angle and challenging each other's hypotheses are requirements for survival. So with that experience, I offer a hypothesis and invite you to test it, argue with it, and make it better. If we come at this from creativity and possibility rather than fear, and give “the robot” what we give to every new person who joins our organization - useful context, constructive feedback, and someone who stays in the relationship as a coach, then we get more from it and carry less risk at the same time. **Those two things were never in tension.** And whatever we build with it will amplify what we already are, which means the most important variable is still us.

“What if the tool is only ever
as good as the leadership we
bring to it?

And what if that is the most
hopeful thing about this
moment?”

Allison Williams
Chief Learning Officer, idealis.

Notes from the Field:

The Onboarding Gen AI Deserves Is the Same As What New Hires Require

Try putting the same exact frame you put around employee onboarding, around AI tool onboarding and use and see what changes in our outcomes and comfortability.

Specifically, consider this list of responsibilities that come with onboarding and managing new talent, and apply them to your work with Gen AI. Which one might you or your organization have missed or need to invest more time on.

- **Selection.** You would not post a role without knowing what the work is. Yet most AI adoption starts backward, with a tool in search of a use. Getting clear on the actual need first is what makes everything after it more effective, including knowing whether it worked.
- **Context.** A new hire participates in an orientation. They meet colleagues, learn the priorities and the land mines, and pick up what the company believes, who the customer is, how decisions get made, and what good work looks like here. AI usually gets a blank box and an inconsistent or vague request, and then we are frustrated by the output it gives us.
- **Role clarity.** Quality onboarding answers these important questions: what am I responsible for, what are others responsible for and how will I work with them, and when do I escalate. That same clarity is what keeps AI working within the boundaries you need it to and helps keep the human edge intact where it matters most. Even if your organization has not yet defined those guardrails, you can set them based on your experience and needs.
- **Feedback.** Nobody improves without it, and this is where many people give up. We treat a weak first draft as a final proof point on the tool rather than information about our instructions. Correcting the output and revisiting the input that produced it are most time-consuming and most necessary work. Just like a talented new hire, it can produce something immediately. Getting to the outcome you actually want takes reps, feedback, and more reps. Discarding the tool at the start or at the first signs of a subpar output teaches nothing, and is a fast way to end up at the back of the adoption curve.
- **Assessment.** A new hire has a 90-day review. Ask what the equivalent is here. We build program evaluations, dashboards, and executive assessments with real rigor to guide our work. This deserves the same.

Without a defined measure of whether it is working, you are left with anecdotes, and anecdotes are how the champions and the skeptics both stay convinced.

Three Easy Ways to Onboard Gen AI Better.

- **Write the job description.** Before you choose a tool or expand how you use one, write down what you need it to do, what it is not for, how you will know it is doing it well, and how you will check it against your own standards and your organization's. Hold off on deploying it until you can answer these clearly.
- **Build a context file, and a library it can draw from.** Spend an hour capturing what any new person on your team would need to know. What you believe, how you communicate, what good work looks like, what you never do. Then give the tool that same context every single time.
- **Run a short review process.** Pick one recurring task and repeat it regularly for two weeks. Each time you do it, give critical feedback on the output and correct rather than discard. Then form your opinion. Two weeks of instruction and consistent effort spent honing the process will tell you more than six months of casual use can offer.

A Final Reminder.

We are all busy, and we all want a shortcut, or something that spares us a little of the mental load. That is a human problem, and it existed long before Gen AI showed up. AI just gave us one more scapegoat, one more lightning rod, one more glimmer of hope that the hardest and most important work would get easier. Some tasks are taking less time. **That rarely happens right out of the gate, and it never lifts the burden of the hard human work underneath.**

Hard things are still hard. AI is hard. Finding the bandwidth for everything on our plates is hard. Using our judgment and making complex decisions is hard. Onboarding and coaching people well is hard.

It would be nice if there were better news in the short term. Over the long term, what we know for sure is that human effort is what has produced every breakthrough we have, including the development of Gen AI itself. Questioning, testing, giving feedback, challenging the output, bringing the same learning mindset you would bring to any new skill you wanted to learn. That is what we would give a new person we were counting on. It is what this deserves too if we want the promise of AI to become a reality. **Most importantly, the fact that it still comes down to us is the most hopeful thing about this moment.**



About the Author

Allison Williams

Allison Williams is the Chief Learning Officer at idealis., where she partners with founders, investors, and executive teams to design leadership experiences that translate insight into sustained behavior change. She works at the intersection of strategy and human capability, leading executive assessment and coaching engagements, offsites, and development journeys that help leaders navigate critical inflection points.

Prior to joining idealis., Allison was a senior executive leader and enterprise operator in higher education, where she led complex organizations, advised presidents, executive teams, and boards, and taught organizational leadership at the graduate level. She held responsibility for strategy, organizational design, crisis leadership, and high-stakes governance. That experience shapes how she partners with leaders today, bringing operational rigor and systems thinking to translate ambition into disciplined execution and durable results.

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