



The Emergence of AI in Coaching

Implications for Leadership & Talent
Development in 2026 and Beyond



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AI should not replace coaching—but it will redefine how coaching is used and enhanced in organisations. The real challenge for leaders is AI's coaching application: using it in ways that scale access while protecting the trust, judgement, and depth that make coaching actually work.



Foreword

Coaching has always been shaped by context—by the complexity leaders face, and the environments in which they operate. What we are seeing now with AI is not a replacement of coaching, but a shift in how it can be accessed, scaled, and integrated into organisational systems.

For HR and Talent leaders, the question is not whether AI has a role to play. It is how to apply it with enough rigour to preserve what makes coaching effective: trust, judgement, and meaningful behaviour change.

This report is intended to support that decision-making. It reflects what we are seeing across global organisations—where AI is adding value, where it is overreaching, and how leaders are building coaching ecosystems that combine scale with depth.

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The Context:

Why AI is Entering Coaching Now

AI is entering coaching at a point where demand for leadership development is increasing, while expectations around scale, access, and cost are tightening.

Organisations are under pressure to:

- Develop broader leadership populations
- Support managers in real time
- Deliver measurable outcomes from development investment

At the same time, coaching has traditionally been:

- High impact, but resource-intensive
- Difficult to scale without compromising quality

AI is being introduced as a response to this tension.

Across leadership development, there is a broader shift away from episodic learning toward embedded, continuous development. Coaching sits at the centre of this shift—and AI is being positioned as a mechanism to extend its reach.



The AI Coaching Market:

Categories and Use Cases

The AI coaching market is evolving quickly, but it can broadly be understood across several categories:

Conversational AI Coaching

AI-driven coaching interfaces that simulate coaching dialogue, often available on-demand. These tools focus on:

- Reflection prompts
- Goal setting
- Structured questioning

Coaching Support Tools

AI used to support human coaches and coachees, including:

- Session summaries
- Insight generation
- Pattern recognition across sessions

Behavioural Nudging and Micro-Coaching

Tools that integrate into workflows to:

- Prompt reflection in real time
- Reinforce behavioural change
- Support habit formation

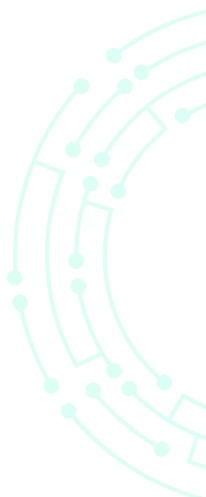
Data and Insights Platforms

AI used to aggregate and analyse coaching data at scale, providing:

- Organisational insights
- Leadership capability trends
- Engagement patterns

What is consistent across these categories is the focus on **access, consistency, and scalability**.

What varies significantly is **depth**.



The Evidence Base For AI Coaching:

What Research Tells Us

AI coaching is moving quickly into the leadership development market, but the evidence base is still uneven. The strongest conclusion from the current research is not that AI coaching is universally effective or ineffective. It is that outcomes depend heavily on **what the AI is being used for, who it is being used with, how it is designed, and whether it is being deployed alone or alongside human coaching**. The field is no longer at the point of asking whether AI can participate in coaching interactions. It can. The more important question is where it adds value, where it underperforms, and what conditions are required for it to be credible in organisational settings.



A recent systematic literature review by Passmore, Olafsson, and Tee examined 16 peer-reviewed studies covering 2,312 participants and found a research base that is promising, but still heterogeneous in design, population, and outcome measures.

The review noted that much of the evidence to date has come from mixed settings, with samples ranging from students to health populations to workplace participants, and that “AI coaching” is still being used as an umbrella term for very different interventions.

That matters for buyers, because the market often presents AI coaching as a single category **when the reality is a bundle of different AI functions**.



Some of the earlier research was more optimistic.

A 2022 PLOS One paper comparing two longitudinal randomised controlled trials found that both human coaching and an AI chatbot coach significantly improved **goal attainment** compared with control groups, and that the AI intervention rivalled human coaching on that specific outcome over time. The authors argued that the AI coach's consistency, always-on availability, and disciplined use of goal theory may have compensated for its lack of EQ in that study.

That's an important finding, but needs to be interpreted carefully: the result was strongest in relation to goal attainment, not necessarily the broader interpersonal and adaptive outcomes organisations often seek from leadership coaching.



A newer 2026 randomised controlled study by de Haan, Terblanche, and Nowack gives the market a more demanding comparison. In that trial, 114 coachees were randomly assigned to accredited human coaches, an automated AI chatbot coach, or a waitlist control. After four weekly one-hour sessions, **the human coaching group improved significantly versus the control group on goal success, self-efficacy, and perceived stress, while the AI chatbot group did not differ from control on most outcomes.** The pattern held even when non-engagers were removed from the analysis. Attrition was also much heavier in the AI group, with some participants doing minimal chatbot coaching or requesting to switch to a human coach. For leadership buyers, this is one of the most consequential findings in the current literature: in a more demanding coaching context, human coaching produced measurable gains that the AI chatbot did not match.

That same 2026 study also reinforces two themes that matter greatly for leadership development. First, **readiness matters**. Coachees' starting levels of hope, self-efficacy, wellbeing or resilience, and stress predicted later goal success, with hope emerging as the strongest predictor and stress as a strong negative predictor. Second, **the working alliance remains an active ingredient**. The study supports a co-regulation view of coaching, where outcomes improve when coach and coachee mutually influence and adapt to one another. This is highly relevant to executive and senior leadership coaching, where ambiguity, identity, politics, and emotional load are often central to the work. ***AI may support structured reflection, but the relational mechanism still appears to matter materially.***

This does not mean AI has no role in coaching. It means the evidence points to a more bounded role of AI than some market claims suggest. In parallel with outcomes research, recent work has also examined how competently AI can perform coaching behaviours. A 2025 study using professional human coach competencies to evaluate an AI coaching agent found that **the agent demonstrated many elements associated with ICF ACC and aspects of PCC-level competence, particularly in structured coaching tasks**. At the same time, the study identified **clear gaps, especially around empathy, relational depth, and other more human dimensions of the coaching process**. This is a useful distinction: AI may now be competent in parts of the coaching workflow without yet being equivalent to a skilled human coach in the full developmental relationship.

The design question is becoming more important as the technology improves. A 2026 scoping review on designing AI coaches found that the evidence is still limited and that design choices materially shape adoption and effectiveness. Related research comparing generative and scripted coaching chatbots suggests that **more context-aware, human-like language can improve adoption and perceived efficacy**, but that does not automatically translate into stronger developmental outcomes. In other words, a smoother user experience is not the same thing as stronger coaching impact. For leaders assessing the category, that distinction is essential. A system may feel more natural and still underperform on the outcomes that matter most.

This is where the new ICF materials are particularly useful. The **ICF Artificial Intelligence Coaching Framework and Standards** does not argue for or against AI coaching. Instead, it provides a structure for judging whether an AI coaching system is credible, ethical, and fit for purpose. The framework covers **six domains and thirteen capability sets**, and it was explicitly designed to help developers, purchasers, coaches, and clients evaluate systems on matters including capability, ethics, and data privacy.



The first four domains are anchored in the ICF Core Competencies used for human coaches, while the final domains address AI-specific issues such as assurance, testing, and technical factors. For organisational buyers, this is one of the most practical developments in the market: it shifts the conversation from generic enthusiasm to evaluation criteria.

The companion ICF document, **A Practical Guide to Integrating AI and Coaching**, is particularly valuable for non-technical stakeholders. It explains that the framework is intended to help users evaluate whether AI coaching tools are ethical, effective, and trustworthy, and points readers to the companion resource, **Questions Stakeholders Should Ask**, to support purchasing and implementation decisions. The guide summarises the six domains as: Foundation, Co-Creating the Relationship, Communicating Effectively, Cultivating Learning and Growth, Assurance and Testing, and Technical Factors. It also makes an important practical point for organisational use: trustworthy AI coaching requires clarity on confidentiality, transparency, limitations, and responsible data handling. That moves the standard of discussion well beyond feature comparison.



Taken together, the research points to a more mature conclusion than either the strongest advocates or sceptics tend to offer. AI coaching appears capable of supporting some useful coaching functions, especially those involving **structure, repetition, availability, and reinforcement**. It may be effective for goal-focused, lower-complexity, or underserved populations, and it may be increasingly useful between coaching sessions or as part of broader development architecture.

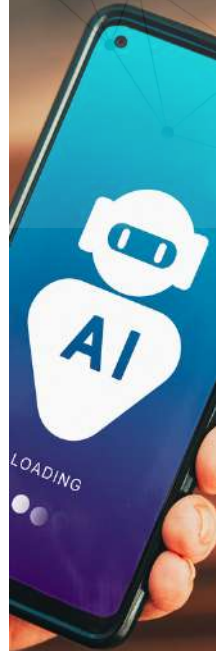
But the current evidence does **not** support assuming that AI can replace high-quality human coaching for leaders, especially where the work depends on judgement, challenge, emotional attunement, and relational trust. The more commercially credible direction is likely to be **human coaching augmented by AI**, not human coaching displaced by AI.

What still needs more research

Several gaps remain. The literature still needs more executive and organisational field studies, more like-for-like comparisons across different AI modalities, stronger evidence on long-term behaviour change, and clearer understanding of when blended human-plus-AI models outperform either mode alone.

The systematic review also calls for more research into **text versus voice bots, embodied conversational agents, and unintended consequences such as dependency or trust distortion**. For HR leaders, that means the market is investable, but not settled.

The organisations that will use AI coaching well are likely to be the ones that treat it as an evolving capability with governance, testing, and human oversight built in from the outset.



Where AI Adds Value In Coaching And Where It Doesn't

AI is proving valuable in areas where consistency, accessibility, and reinforcement matter.

Where AI Adds Value

Increasing access to coaching across broader populations

Supporting reflection between sessions

Reinforcing behaviour change through prompts and nudges

Providing data at scale on engagement and themes

Where AI Has Clear Limits In Coaching

Navigating complex interpersonal dynamics

Supporting identity-level or mindset shifts

Managing sensitive or high-stakes leadership challenges

Building trust-based developmental relationships

This distinction matters.

Coaching effectiveness is not only about insight—it is about **what a leader does differently as a result.**

That development shift in coaching often requires:

- Challenge
- Trust
- Contextual understanding

These remain difficult to replicate through AI alone.

Risks, Ethics, and Standards (Including ICF Guidance)

As AI coaching adoption increases, so does the importance of governance.

The ICF and other bodies have highlighted several critical considerations:

Confidentiality and Data Use

Leaders must understand:

- How coaching data is stored
- Who has access
- How insights are used at an organisational level

Quality and Validity

Not all AI coaching tools are grounded in:

- Coaching psychology
- Behavioural science
- Evidence-based methodologies

Ethical Boundaries

AI systems may:

- Provide advice outside appropriate boundaries
- Miss ethical nuances in leadership scenarios

The ICF (2023) reinforces that **coaching—whether human or augmented—must adhere to clear ethical standards**, including confidentiality, client autonomy, and professional integrity.

What Leaders Should Look for When Buying AI Coaching

For HR and Talent leaders, the decision is less about adopting AI coaching, and more about **how to evaluate it rigorously**.

Key considerations include:

1. Evidence Base

- Is the approach grounded in coaching psychology?
- Are outcomes measured beyond engagement?

2. Role of Human Coaches

- Where does human coaching sit in the model?
- Is AI augmenting or replacing core coaching interactions?

3. Data Governance

- How is data used, stored, and protected?
- Are there clear boundaries on organisational visibility?

4. Behaviour Change Capability

- Does the solution support sustained behaviour change, or just reflection?

5. Integration into Leadership Systems

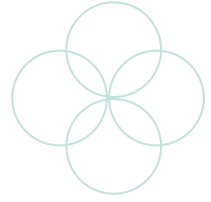
- Is the solution embedded into broader leadership development?
- Or is it operating as a standalone tool?

The risk is not adopting AI too slowly.

It is adopting it without sufficient rigour.



The Next 2–5 Years: Direction and Open Questions



AI in coaching is likely to evolve in several ways:

Increased Personalisation

AI will become more tailored to individual leadership contexts and goals.

Deeper Integration

Coaching will be embedded into:

- Workflow tools
- Performance systems
- Leadership development journeys

Improved Insight Generation

Organisations will gain more sophisticated views of:

- Leadership capability trends
- Behavioural patterns at scale

However, several areas require further research:

- Long-term impact of AI-only coaching on behaviour change
- Ethical implications of data use in coaching contexts
- The role of AI in high-stakes or executive-level coaching
- Cultural implications across different markets

The trajectory is clear. The evidence base is still catching up.



The BOLDLY Perspective:

Human Coaching, Enabled by AI

At BOLDLY, we take a clear position: AI is not a substitute for coaching. It is an enabler of it.

The current evidence base reinforces this stance. As outlined earlier, human coaching continues to outperform AI-only approaches in complex leadership contexts—particularly where outcomes depend on judgement, self-awareness, relational depth, and behavioural change over time. At the same time, research and practice both point to a persistent challenge: even high-quality coaching struggles with **scale, consistency, and sustained behaviour change between sessions.**

This is the gap BOLDLY is designed to address.

Our model is built on three interconnected principles:

- High-quality, evidence-based human coaching
- Scaled through technology
- Supported by data and insight

Rather than positioning AI as an alternative, we integrate it deliberately into the coaching system—extending the impact of human coaching into the moments where leadership actually happens.

From Insight to Action: Closing the “Between Sessions” Gap

One of the most consistent findings across coaching and adult learning research is that insight alone is insufficient. Change happens when insight is applied, repeatedly, in real-world contexts.

Yet this is precisely where traditional coaching models are weakest.

Leaders leave a powerful coaching session with clarity and intent—but return to environments defined by time pressure, competing priorities, and cognitive overload. The result is predictable: good intentions decay before they translate into consistent behaviour.

momentLeader is designed to intervene at exactly this point.

Our companion app brings coaching into the **flow of work**, supporting leaders not in abstract reflection, but in the **specific moments that shape performance**—a difficult conversation, a high-stakes decision, a moment of self-doubt, or a leadership interaction that could go either way.

momentLeader focuses on five core micro-skills:

- Noticing the moment
- Shifting perspective
- Identifying what is within control
- Taking intentional action
- Reflecting to embed learning

Micro-Coaching in the Flow of Work

momentLeader operationalises coaching into short, structured experiences that fit within the realities of leadership work.

These include:

- 1-minute pauses to reset attention and intention
- Micro-coaching tools (under 10 minutes) for common leadership challenges
- Real-time reflection prompts to convert action into learning
- Behavioural nudges to reinforce habit formation over time



The design is grounded in well-established evidence from adult learning and neuroscience:

- Learning transfer increases significantly when applied in real contexts
- Short, focused interventions improve retention and engagement
- Reflection materially improves performance outcomes
- Even brief pauses can shift cognitive processing from reactive to intentional states

This matters because leadership does not improve through knowledge accumulation. It improves through repeated, intentional action in real situations.

momentLeader makes those repetitions visible, structured, and measurable.

Extending the Coaching Relationship

Importantly, momentLeader does not replace the coaching relationship—it strengthens it.

Human coaching remains the space where:

- Complex challenges are unpacked
- Identity and mindset shifts are explored
- Assumptions are challenged
- Accountability is created
-

momentLeader extends this by:

- Reinforcing coaching themes between sessions
- Helping leaders apply insights in real time
- Capturing reflections and patterns for deeper coaching conversations
- Building the discipline of pause, intention, and reflection



The Strategic Implication for HR Leaders

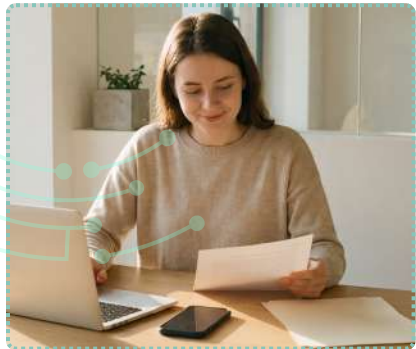
For HR leaders, the implication is not to choose between human and AI coaching.

It is to design **integrated leadership development ecosystems** where:

- Human coaching is used where it has the greatest impact
- AI-enabled tools extend that impact into daily practice
- Behavioural data informs both development and organisational insight

The market is moving beyond substitution.

The organisations that will see the greatest return are those that build intentional combinations of human and AI capability—grounded in evidence, aligned to leadership context, and designed for real behaviour change.



Our Conclusion:

Augmenting, Not Replacing Coaching

AI is reshaping how coaching is delivered, but not what makes it effective.

For CEOs and HR leaders, the focus is shifting toward:

- Scale with integrity
- Access without dilution
- Data without compromising trust



Organisations that approach AI coaching as a replacement risk eroding the very outcomes they are trying to achieve.

Those that approach it as augmentation—extending the reach of high-quality, human coaching—are better positioned to build leadership capability at scale.

The competitive advantage will not come from adopting AI.

It will come from **how thoughtfully it is integrated.**

At BOLDLY, we believe the future of coaching is not artificial or human.

It is thoughtfully combined.

We hope this report has provided both clarity and practical direction as you navigate this evolving landscape.

If you would like to explore any of the ideas further, or discuss how a human-plus-AI coaching model could be applied within your organisation, we would welcome the conversation.

The future of leadership will be shaped in the moments that matter.

We look forward to being part of that journey with you.



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Thank You

Thank you for taking the time to engage with this report.

We recognise that leadership development is one of the most important—and most complex—investments organisations make. The decisions being made now about coaching, capability, and technology will shape not only leadership pipelines, but culture, performance, and long-term organisational success.



We acknowledge Aboriginal people's custodianship of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing seasonal, cultural connection with landscapes, waterways and the sky world. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging today.

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