



Leadership Characteristics in the AI Era: Navigating Uncertainty

It Starts With You

One of the most consistent findings in change management research is that leaders go first in the change. Leaders who are personally proximate to AI, who use it, question it, and wrestle with its implications, lead transformation more effectively than those who delegate it. Consider the following ten characteristics that research and field experience associate with leaders who navigate deep uncertainty well.

1. Learner	Grows capacity not just by adding skills, but by unlearning old assumptions, treating themselves as the first student of the change. <i>Evidence: Annie Peshkam, "To Lead Through Uncertainty, Unlearn Your Assumptions," Harvard Business Review (Feb. 2026); Deloitte, 2024 Global Human Capital Trends.</i>
2. Nimble	Runs small pilots, learns quickly, and adjusts, building a test-and-learn way of working rather than waiting for a perfect plan. <i>Evidence: John Kotter, Accelerate (2014); MIT CISR Enterprise AI Maturity research.</i>
3. Connector	Spans departments, districts, and sectors to build peer networks that create shared Direction, Alignment, and Commitment. <i>Evidence: Center for Creative Leadership (DAC framework); Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, Boundary Spanning Leadership (2011).</i>
4. Communicates plainly, often	Repeats a plain-language vision across many channels. Most change efforts fail in part because leaders under-communicate. <i>Evidence: John Kotter, Leading Change (1996).</i>
5. Vulnerable	Names honestly that we don't yet know, which builds trust and the psychological safety teams need to learn in public. <i>Evidence: Brené Brown, Dare to Lead (2018); Amy Edmondson, The Fearless Organization (2019).</i>
6. Calm	"Creates perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity." Leaders set the emotional thermostat for their systems. <i>Evidence: Brené Brown, Dare to Lead (2018).</i>
7. Seeks data	Anchors decisions in the best available evidence, letting results rather than hype or fear determine the next step. <i>Evidence: Pfeffer & Sutton, "Evidence-Based Management," Harvard Business Review (2006).</i>

8. Plays the long game	Treats AI leadership as an infinite game: the goal is to keep the institution learning and advancing its mission over time. <i>Evidence: Simon Sinek, The Infinite Game (2019).</i>
9. Thinks fast and slow	Knows when quick, intuitive judgment serves, and when consequential decisions demand slower, deliberate reasoning. <i>Evidence: Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011).</i>
10. Keeps humans in the forefront	Holds a positive vision of human flourishing, dignity, agency, and relationships, as the test for every AI decision. <i>Evidence: Dr. Meghan Sullivan, University of Notre Dame, DELTA Framework.</i>