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EXECUTIVE BRIEF

AI is removing the struggle that *develops your people.*

Four questions leaders should ask before AI takes over the work that builds expertise and judgment.

By **Joe McCormack** Originally published April 8, 2026 5-minute read

THE ISSUE IN ONE PARAGRAPH

AI speeds up work, but much of that work is how people used to learn. Drafting the memo, wrestling with the data, and handling the difficult conversation built expertise, judgment, and professional identity. In "AI Is Changing How We Learn at Work," published in *Harvard Business Review* on December 22, 2025, Lynda Gratton posed four provocations for leadership teams. This brief responds to each one and explains what leaders can do to keep development from disappearing along with the effort.

SKILLS THIS BRIEF ADDRESSES

Five of the seven elite human skills

03 **Critical Thinking & Judgment**
Judgment forms when people work through hard problems themselves. See section 1.

01 **Attention Management**
The volume of AI-generated content crowds out the focus that learning requires. See section 2.

05 **Clear and Concise Communication**
More words and more slides don't produce better communicators. See section 2.

07 **Executive Presence & Emotional Intelligence**
Empathy and composure develop in live, uncomfortable conversations. See section 3.

04 **Prioritization & Decision-Making**
People learn to decide only when they make choices and own them. See section 4.

Explore all seven skills

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1 OF 4

Is AI removing the hard work that builds expertise?

The struggle, repetition, and failure that build expertise are the experiences AI is quietly eliminating. Organizations use AI to accelerate early-career work, which is the work that has always formed mastery and professional identity. The cost stays invisible until the damage is done.

- Senior leaders almost universally trace their expertise to hours of practice, failure, mentorship, and craft.
- Accelerated learning increases output. Development forms identity. They are different outcomes.
- If AI drafts the memo, analyzes the data, or generates the first 20 ideas, the slow, demanding work that forms mastery never happens.

MY TAKE

Learning by doing is the mechanism through which people become who they are. You can't reach mastery by repeatedly handing a task to AI, and you can't develop communication judgment when a tool writes your talking points for you.

> Are we eliminating challenging developmental experiences for quick wins?

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2 OF 4

Is AI-generated content leaving your people less time to think?

AI produces content faster than people can process it. That volume crowds out calm, reflection, and deep focus, the conditions learning depends on. We've seen this pattern before: pandemic technologies increased meetings by 50% and shrank time for deep work. AI is repeating that dynamic at a larger scale and a faster pace.

- Executives describe days full of AI-generated material and few moments to think about any of it.
- Leaders hoped automation would free time for reflective, creative thinking. So far it's creating noise. As one executive put it, "We're generating more but thinking less."

MY TAKE

In BRIEF and Quiet Works training, we call this the difference between noise and signal. More words don't make better communication, and more slides don't make better thinking. AI is excellent at generating content, but does it develop clear and concise communicators or replace them?

Gratton calls for leaders to shift from asking "Can AI do this?" to "Does this add value?" I'd add one more: Is AI doing my thinking and communicating *for* me, or *with* me?

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3 OF 4

Is AI taking away the difficult conversations where leaders learn empathy?

AI isn't replacing empathy. It may be replacing the situations where empathy develops, which is more consequential. Empathy, discernment, and moral reasoning are the capabilities leaders value most and find hardest to develop.

- Empathy is learned through repeated exposure to emotional nuance, difficult conversations, and interpersonal tension, not through passive observation.
- AI can approximate cognitive and emotional empathy. Caring enough to act remains human, and it has to be practiced.
- When AI handles the difficult conversation or interprets tone before a manager tries, it removes the practice that builds relational capability.

MY TAKE

Every communication program I've run rests on one principle: you can't develop as a communicator without putting yourself in uncomfortable situations and working through them. That includes the debrief after a long, confusing client meeting, the recovery after you misread the room, and the conversation where you can feel the stakes.

Those moments are life's curriculum. When AI smooths the friction and filters the ambiguity, it doesn't protect people from discomfort. It ensures they never build the capacity real leadership requires.

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4 OF 4

If AI makes every decision, when do your people learn to decide?

When AI guides every next step, people lose the practice of choosing for themselves, and agency drives human growth. Agentic AI tools built into workflows increasingly nudge, recommend, and automate decisions that once required independent judgment.

- Embedded agentic tools can take away the chance to reflect, choose, and own a decision.
- The habit of making your own choices and owning them is quietly weakening. One executive asked, "If the system always knows the next step, when do my people learn to choose for themselves?"

MY TAKE

Professional identity is forged through choices made under pressure: the brief you delivered when the stakes were high, the recommendation you stood behind when you could have hedged, the hard thing you said in the room, and the comment you chose to leave unsaid.

When AI pre-populates answers, even good ones, it produces more efficient output without developing the person. If organizations reward every AI-assisted shortcut as a win, they may hand over decision-making and identity development without realizing it.

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What this means for leaders

Gratton closes with the right question: in an age of intelligent machines, how do we make sure people keep developing into their most capable selves?

No matter how capable the tools become, people need to work hard to grow. AI will accelerate production. It should not undermine the development that comes from honest struggle. Protecting that development takes deliberate attention from leaders.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

- Which early-career tasks have we handed to AI, and what did people learn from doing them?
- Where is AI-generated content crowding out time to think?
- Who on our team still practices the difficult conversations?
- Which decisions should people make themselves, even when a tool could make them faster?

Organizations that get this right will do more than increase productivity. Their people will become sharper thinkers, more empathetic leaders, and more capable communicators than they would have been without the technology.

Adapted from Joe McCormack's LinkedIn article, "AI Is Changing How We Learn at Work — And Eliminating Struggle as a Key to Development," April 8, 2026. Read the original on LinkedIn

Responds to Lynda Gratton, "AI Is Changing How We Learn at Work," *Harvard Business Review*, December 22, 2025.

Keep your people learning *while AI does more of the work.*

Talk with us about building judgment, focus, and communication skills in your team.

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