

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 143 · WORKSHEET

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The Line You Cannot See

Half your team uses the new AI tool every day. The other half quietly does not touch it at all. And the work still lands on your desk exactly the way it did before. McKinsey's latest survey says nearly nine in ten businesses use AI — but only about a third see any difference in their financial results. This episode maps the jagged frontier between what the tool can do and what it cannot, and gives you four moves to lead your team across it.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The Gap

McKinsey's latest State of AI survey found nearly nine in ten businesses using AI in at least one part of the business — and only about a third say it has made any difference to their financial results at all. Eight in ten people say AI has made them personally more productive. So your people are faster, and the business is not. The few who break through — about six in a hundred — did one thing differently: close to three-quarters redesigned their workflows around the AI, against a quarter of everyone else.

2. Start From the Work

Moderna, the drug company, decided AI fluency was everyone's job, not a specialist skill. Its chief executive, Stéphane Bancel, made it the expectation for the whole company. Then it put its people team and its technology team under one leader, Tracey Franklin — one person in charge of both who does the work and what the tools do. Franklin's move was to start from the work itself — she called it work planning: first, what needs doing, then decide what a person should do and what a system should do. Most leaders start with the purchase and work backwards; Franklin started with the work. And to be honest: Moderna has not published a financial return it credits to the tools — this is a story about adoption, not a victory lap.

3. The Jagged Frontier

Ethan Mollick and his colleagues gave an AI assistant to 758 consultants at one firm and set them real tasks — some the tool could handle, some it could not. The capability is not a smooth slope: it is a jagged frontier, an uneven, invisible line, and nothing in the tool's tone tells you which side of it you are on. Inside the frontier, the consultants with the tool finished about twelve percent more tasks, about twenty-five percent faster, at significantly higher quality. Outside it, they were nineteen percent less likely to get the right answer. Same people, same tool — and it sounds just as sure when it is wrong as when it is right. So here is the line to carry into your week: find the frontier before you cross it.

4. Centaur and Cyborg

Joe Dutkiewicz
CRAYON LEADERSHIP
crayonleadership.com



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Mollick gives two ways of working across the line. The centaur is a clean split: you keep the parts you are strongest at, hand the tool the parts inside its frontier, and check its work. The cyborg is interleaved: you hand it a fragment, check it, correct it, hand it the next fragment. The wrong move is treating the whole job as inside the frontier when only part of it is. Klarna learned that from the other side — it handed its assistant most of its customer chats, and then its chief executive said cost had counted for too much, and brought people back in. One variable, optimised. The wrong line, drawn.

5. Two Levels Up
The leader is not the person with the best tool. The leader is the person who can see where the tool stops working — and who rebuilds the work around that line, before anyone asks them to.

The picture: Half your team is using the new AI tool every day. The other half is quietly not touching it at all. And the work still lands on your desk exactly the way it did before.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — map the frontier.** Take one real task your team does every week, and test it with them — not as a demo, as real work. Does the tool get it right, and can you tell when it does not? Sort your tasks one at a time, inside or outside, and write the line down where everyone can see it.

One task to test, and where the line falls:

- [ ] **Step two — name the split.** For each task inside the frontier, say out loud whether it is a centaur split or a cyborg one — a clean handover you check at the end, or a back-and-forth you stay inside. A split nobody names is a split nobody owns, and the tool quietly takes the parts it should not.

A task and its split (centaur or cyborg):

- [ ] **Step three — redesign the work.** Change the workflow around the split — who checks what, when, and what good looks like now. If you bolt the tool onto the old way of working, you get the old results at a slightly faster speed. The redesign is the adoption.

What changes in our workflow:

Joe Dutkiewicz
CRAYON LEADERSHIP
crayonleadership.com



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- [ ] **Step four — share the learning.** The frontier moves as the tools improve, so a task outside it today may be inside it next quarter. Make it normal for your team to say what worked, what failed, and what they caught the tool getting wrong. The team that talks about the line is the team that keeps finding it.

Something we caught the tool getting wrong:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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