

RETHINK ALL THE RULES - AI AS A CO-LEADER

Author's Note

*After 14 years of writing this Leadership and HR column for the Findley Reports, I'm closing it out with one final arc. This will be a short, focused series called **Rethink All the Rules**. Each piece will explore one of the areas I've returned to again and again over the years: the team, the self, and the leader. Thank you for reading along all this time. I hope you find these last few pieces both useful and thought-provoking.*

If I had a dollar for every leader who's told me, "I want to be a better leader, I just don't have the time..." well, you get the idea.

The problem isn't ambition or motivation. It's capacity.

Every time I run leadership programs, I see the same pattern: leaders care deeply, they want to coach more, develop their people, think strategically, and lead with intention. But their hair is on fire. They're drowning in meetings, emails, decisions, and short-term noise.

And here's the hard truth: the work that makes you a great leader (coaching, aligning, solving the right problems) takes more time than just getting things done. It's faster to fix a problem than to grow the person who's facing it. Faster to send instructions than to shape understanding. Faster to push an initiative forward than to pause and ask if it's the right one.

So, I've spent the last few years asking: how do we make space for the real work of leadership?

The answer hit me sometime last year. Leaders don't just need another time management tactic. They need a partner. A force multiplier. A tool that takes some of the grind off their plate and sharpens how they show up when it counts.

That's where AI comes in. Not as a threat. Not as a gimmick. But as a co-leader. And the ones who learn to lead with it (rather than compete against it) are going to unlock a completely different level of impact.

AI Won't Replace You ... But a Leader Who Uses It Will

Let's not sugarcoat it: AI won't replace you, but a leader who knows how to unlock it absolutely will.

That's the real risk. Not that AI becomes your boss, but that you get left behind by someone who's figured out how to use it as a force multiplier. A leader who moves faster, thinks more clearly, and spends more time on what actually matters because they've automated the rest.

So no, AI won't be a better leader than you. But it can make another leader far more effective than you. Especially if you ignore it.

And that's where most people are stuck. Too many leaders still treat AI like Google searches with better grammar. They plug in a prompt and get something generic back. But that's like trying a new language, mumbling one sentence, and deciding the entire country has nothing to offer.

AI is a language. The more fluent you become, the more useful, nuanced, and powerful it becomes.

And no, this isn't about outsourcing your thinking. The best leaders won't use AI to do less. They'll use it to go further. To do more of what makes leadership matter: clarifying direction, shaping culture, coaching people, solving hard problems.

AI isn't going to lead for you. But it will redefine what good leadership looks like. If you learn to lead with it, you'll leap ahead.

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AI as Your Assistant and Your Co-Leader

After spending the past year working deeply with AI, I've come to believe it plays two critical roles for leaders.

First, AI can free up time. When used right, it offloads the busy work that eats up your day. It will give you back the space to think, lead, and focus on the parts of leadership that truly require your expertise.

Second, AI can elevate quality. It can help you communicate better, prepare more thoroughly, and even rehearse difficult conversations before you ever step into the room.

Let's break that down.

AI as Your Assistant

Think of this as your chief of staff. It doesn't do your job for you. It helps clear up tasks so you can actually do something more valuable. Here's what that can look like:

- Instead of slogging through 50 emails in your inbox, AI flags the five that are actually urgent, and drafts first responses to help you move fast.
- Instead of watching a 90-minute meeting recording you missed, AI gives you the key takeaways, decisions made, and your action items in five minutes.
- Instead of scrambling the day before a high stakes meeting you forgot about, AI reviews your calendar, flags prep time in advance, and even gathers the relevant materials so you're ready.

None of this is about replacing you. It's about making sure your time goes where it counts.

AI as Your Co-Leader

This is where things get interesting. The second role AI plays is as a thinking partner. One that helps you do the high-value leadership work better.

It's not just about saving time. It's about sharpening your leadership edge. For example:

- You're preparing to roll out a sensitive change. Use AI to simulate how different audiences might respond and refine your messaging for each one.
- You've got a tough feedback conversation ahead. Use AI to practice delivering your message, explore how it might land, and prepare for resistance.
- You're facing a complex situation with multiple unknowns. Use AI to map out scenarios, generate ideas, and explore second- and third-order consequences.

This is what most leaders don't realize: AI isn't just for admin tasks. It can help you make better decisions, communicate more clearly, and lead with more confidence. But only if you know how to use it.

Building Fluency - Four Habits That Change Everything

If you want AI to actually help you lead better, you need to become fluent. That doesn't mean reading more how-to articles or waiting until the tech "settles." It means treating AI like a language; one you learn by using.

Here are four habits that have helped me (and the leaders I coach) actually unlock AI's power.

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1. Speak, Don't Type

AI works best when it hears how you think.

I don't write prompts anymore. I talk. Stream-of-consciousness voice dumps. These are unfiltered, imperfect, and 3-5 minutes long. Yes, I'll say something twice. Yes, I'll contradict myself. That's the point.

Because what I get back isn't just a summary, it's a mirror. A cleaner, sharper version of the thinking I just offloaded. From there, I can tweak, clarify, or even riff another short voice reply. It's infinitely faster (and richer) than spending 20 minutes trying to write the "perfect" prompt.

Start using the voice input. Let your thoughts spill. Then refine.

2. Build Reps on Real Problems

Fluency doesn't come from watching AI tutorials. It comes from throwing real work at it.

The next time you're prepping for a tough meeting, writing performance feedback, or trying to craft a complex message, don't do it alone. Use AI as your thinking partner.

Yes, it might take longer at first. But with each rep, you'll learn what inputs generate the best outputs, and that builds real skill.

3. Treat It Like a Sparring Partner, Not a Search Engine

AI is not just a faster Google. It's more like a junior partner with a ton of range and zero ego.

When I treat it like a collaborator (explaining who I'm talking to, what I'm trying to achieve, and what's not working) I get exponentially better results.

Don't ask it to "write this for me." Ask it to help you think, to critique your draft, to sharpen your intent. The clearer you are, the more useful it becomes.

And when it misses? That's your cue to redirect and not give up.

4. Separate Your Conversations

This is one of the simplest habits with the biggest payoff: start and maintain separate conversations for each key topic.

I've got one thread for brainstorming newsletter ideas. Another for refining leadership program content. Another for quick admin help. Why? Because each thread builds context, and that context compounds.

AI gets smarter when it's learning inside a single thread. Reopening that thread is like resuming a conversation with someone who already knows the backstory. Starting from scratch every time? Wastes energy.

Whether you're using ChatGPT, Copilot, or something else, make it a habit: dedicate conversations by topic or project. Let them evolve over time.

From Skeptic to Superuser - Why This Matters

Two years ago, I was one of the biggest AI skeptics out there.

I had tried the early tools, typed in a few prompts, and saw the generic output. I remember thinking, "There's no way this is going to replace what I do." And I was right... but also wrong.



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What changed my mind wasn't a tech demo or a viral video. It was a leader I knew, someone preparing for a high-stakes interview. Over lunch, he walked me through how he used AI to refine his thinking, craft his narrative, and prep for tough questions. It wasn't about shortcuts. It was about sharpening his edge.

That conversation flipped a switch for me. I realized AI wasn't a tool you "used," it was a language you could learn. So, I set out to become fluent.

What's happened since? Honestly, it's like someone poured jet fuel on the bonfire of my brain. My ability to write, consult, coach, and create has skyrocketed. Not because AI replaced my work, but because it amplified my best work. I spend more time on the parts that matter, and less on the parts that don't.

So no, I wasn't an early adopter. I came into this late, skeptical, and unsure. But now that I've seen what's possible, I can't imagine working without it.

That's why I'm sharing this with you, not as a tech evangelist, but as a fellow leader who knows how much pressure you're under. If you want to spend more time doing the high-quality leadership work you wish you had time for, this is your moment.

The leaders who learn this language will outpace those who don't. Not because they're better, but because they're willing to build a new kind of fluency.

So ... are you?

Author's Note

This is the final arc of my Leadership and HR column for The Findley Reports, but I'm continuing the conversation in a new format.

*You can connect with me on LinkedIn and subscribe to my newsletter, **Rethink All the Rules**, where I'll keep sharing the same kind of provocative and practical guidance to help you improve yourself, your leadership, and your team's performance.*

If this piece resonated, I'd love to see you there.

Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp, the world's leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master's degree in Business Administration.