

What Leaders Get Wrong About AI Adoption, and What the Research Shows.

Through the ActivateAI research program, we interviewed 24 leaders and executive coaches about how AI is reshaping leadership credibility, communication and adoption. We analyzed 1,190 coded responses across 249 defined codes to identify the patterns that separate AI adoption that sticks from AI adoption that quietly fails.

FIVE FINDINGS

01 Using AI and using AI well are two different things.

Intentionality separates real value from noise. The best leaders are not the heaviest users, they are the most deliberate ones.

SO WHAT Coach for judgment and discernment, not volume of use.

83%

OF PARTICIPANTS

02 Leadership modeling is the single most powerful adoption lever.

When leaders learn visibly and share honestly, adoption follows. When they are absent from the learning curve, adoption stalls.

SO WHAT Make your AI learning public. Adoption is downstream of leader behavior.

83%

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03 The biggest credibility risk is distributing obvious, unedited AI output.

The risk is not using AI. It is what you send without adequate review and personalization.

SO WHAT Set a personal review and voice standard before anything goes out the door.

58%

OF PARTICIPANTS

04 Fear of replacement is the dominant emotional barrier.

The most effective antidote is direct address, not minimization. Name the anxiety and demonstrate through action that AI augments, not replaces.

SO WHAT Lead with empathy, then show the augmented future in real work.

83%

OF PARTICIPANTS

05 Experimentation is the most effective enablement approach.

People who try AI in low-stakes, permission-giving contexts discover value, and value discovery creates momentum. Efficiency and time savings are the most reliable on-ramp (54%).

SO WHAT Build permission-giving sandboxes. Start with time-back use cases.

83%

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