

When a Leader's Good Intentions Reinforce the AI Divide at Work

As AI and digital tools reshape leadership and work flows, most people leaders aim to be fair, inclusive, and future-focused. But subtle, everyday decisions can unintentionally create “insiders” and “outsiders” around technology which impacts performance. These patterns show up in who gets asked, who gets trusted, and who gets access.

As part of my PhD research, I drew on the work of German sociologist Norbert Elias*, to understand how insider-outsider dynamics are emerging as AI reshapes leadership relationships in today’s organizations.

Here are five common ways leaders can unintentionally reinforce the AI divide:

1 Using AI as a shield for unpopular decisions

Leaders can be tempted to say “the system recommended this” when making tough calls on performance, schedules, or opportunities. This shifts responsibility from the human to the tool and makes decisions that people feel can’t be questioned.

2 Assigning tech work based on age assumptions

Asking younger employees to “handle the tech” while excluding older employees from pilots or advanced training may be perceived as efficient, but it subtly labels younger workers as helpers instead of strategists, and older workers as dependent on others instead of being capable. Both groups end up confined to narrow identities.

3 Creating a new tech elite

A small group of “AI champions” can quietly become gatekeepers of knowledge, influence, and opportunity. Over time, this concentrates power and makes everyone else, regardless of age, dependent.

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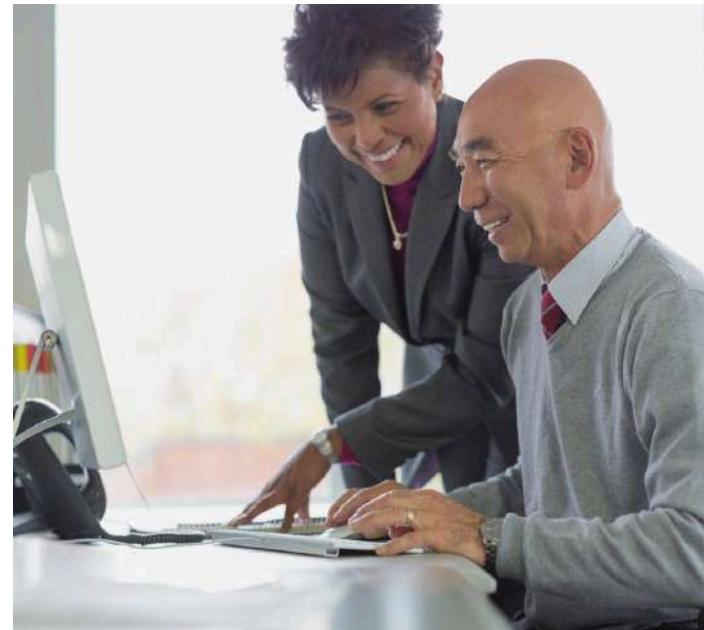
Treating someone's ability with AI as an example of leadership potential

When comfort with AI tools is taken as proof of change agility or readiness to lead, other critical leadership capabilities such as judgment, empathy, and the ability to strategically think can be undervalued. More cautious or questioning voices risk being seen as sceptical late adopters and not eager to use AI or other technology.

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Explaining hesitation as personal resistance

Comments like “Some people are good with change. Some people don’t like change” are inaccurate and personalize what we know is a natural response when we encounter uncertainty. Ethical concerns, anxiety, or fear of failure often get labelled by others (and ourselves), as personal flaws, positioning some employees as obstacles instead of learners willing to engage.



The leadership takeaway:

The more technology can do, the more intentional leaders must be about how people experience the technology, have access to learning, and still have human connection. Small daily choices that leaders do determine whether AI includes people or excludes.

Gregg Brown has spoken on hundreds of stages and engaged thousands of individuals in some of the world's leading organizations to not only help them create possibility but to create change that matters in their life, organization and on the planet. More on Gregg's work can be found here: www.BeChangeReady.com

*Reference: Elias, N., & Scotson, J. L. (1994). *The established and the outsiders: A sociological enquiry into community problems* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. (Original work published 1965)

