

Trend Topic: **Leading in the Age of AI**

By



Barry O'Reilly

Co-Founder & Chief Innovation
Officer, Nobody Studios
Founder of Outlier Venture
Partners

Author, 'Unlearn', 'Lean Enterprise'
and forthcoming book 'Artificial
Organizations: How High-
Performance Leaders Use AI to
Achieve Extraordinary Results'

Barry O'Reilly is an entrepreneur,
business advisor, and author who
helps organizations innovate at
scale.

He is the Co-founder and Chief In-
novation Officer of Nobody Studios,
an AI-native, high-velocity venture
studio which aims to create 100
companies in five years.

Barry has authored two interna-
tional bestsellers – 'Unlearn' and
'Lean Enterprise' and will shortly
release 'Artificial Organizations: How
High-Performance Leaders Use AI to
Achieve Extraordinary Results'

He teaches at Singularity University
sharing insights on business model
innovation, organizational design,
and culture transformation to help
leaders reimagine systems for sus-
tainable growth

Explore more from
The Kyndryl Institute
kyndryl.com/institute

The AI-native leader: the new frontier of executive performance

Most management revolutions arrive wearing familiar clothes.

Lean arrived on the factory floor. Agile emerged from software teams. But the next revolution does not look like a process in the traditional sense. It looks like a new kind of leader, one who treats artificial intelligence not as a tool to implement, but as a partner to extend judgment, accelerate decisions, and increase leverage.

I call this emerging profile the **AI-Native Leader**. And having spent the last five years coaching senior executives and running a global venture studio building AI-powered companies, I've learned that becoming one is neither theoretical nor optional.

It is a practical journey many leaders are now being forced to take and one I had to make myself.

The moment leaders realize their old playbook won't scale

For most executives, the shift begins with discomfort. Decision cycles slow as information multiplies, and the gap between strategy and execution

grows wider. Many leaders describe feeling “caught between meetings,” unable to carve out time for deep thinking or reflection.

It was a feeling I recognized. Despite running a high-velocity venture studio launching multiple companies at once, I found myself drowning in my own workflows: too many inputs, too many responsibilities, too much unstructured information.

My first step was not automation. It was capture.

I began recording meetings, transcribing conversations, and using AI to synthesize what mattered. By externalizing raw information, I reduced cognitive load and created space for judgment. It gave me back hours of mental bandwidth each week.

Once that clarity emerged, a more ambitious question followed: *What if AI could not only capture my thinking but challenge it?*

That question became the gateway into a new way of leading.



Despite running a high-velocity venture studio launching multiple companies at once, I found myself drowning in my own workflows.

How AI reshapes leadership behavior, not just productivity

Executives often assume AI will change what they do. In practice, it changes *how* they think.

Across leaders who adopt AI-native practices, I see three consistent behavioral shifts:

1. They architect systems, not tasks

Rather than delegating work downstream, leaders redesign how information flows, how meetings produce insight, and how human judgment combines with machine analysis.

2. They decide sooner, not later

With AI analyzing scenarios, interrogating assumptions, and surfacing blind spots, leaders move faster – not recklessly, but with greater confidence.

3. They reclaim creativity and judgment

As routine work recedes, leaders begin to rediscover one of their most valuable functions: shaping direction rather than drowning in detail.

AI does not replace leadership. It replaces the friction that has been quietly blocking leaders from actually leading.

The four stages of becoming AI-native



1. Awareness



2. Augmentation



3. Acceleration



4. Adaptation

The four stages of becoming AI-native

Across industries from aviation to healthcare, financial services to consumer goods, leaders tend to move through four recognizable stages. This is not a maturity model, but a recurring pattern of often see.

Stage 1: Awareness

A recognition that the pace and complexity of the organization have outstripped traditional leadership habits.

Stage 2: Augmentation

Experimenting with AI to summarize meetings, prepare briefs, sharpen communication, and organize thinking.

Stage 3: Acceleration

Using AI as a thinking partner – pressure-testing strategies, modelling outcomes, and improving decision quality.

This is where many leaders say, *“I’m thinking better than I ever have.”*

Stage 4: Adaptation

AI becomes embedded in how leaders work.

Decision-making becomes continuous rather than episodic. Teams bring AI-informed insights before issues escalate upward. The organization’s rhythm changes.

No two leaders follow this path identically. But the progression is consistent and the benefits measurable.

The real obstacles: ego, habit, and trust

The barriers to becoming AI-native are rarely technical. They are emotional. In fact, they are an identity challenge.

Ego

Leaders who built their identity on expertise often struggle when AI matches or exceeds them in specific tasks. This discomfort intensifies when junior analysts or early-career employees, armed with AI fluency, produce high-quality synthesis faster than expected. The challenge is not capability, it is interpretation.

Habit

Legacy workflows persist long after better alternatives exist. Many leaders still rely on manual note-taking and recall. The practices that once worked but now struggle under scale. The opportunity is not to abandon these habits, but to augment them with systems that capture, recall, and test thinking in real time.

Trust

Leaders worry AI will be wrong, sometimes overlooking how often human judgment is incomplete or biased under pressure. High performers don't defer decisions to AI; they integrate it into their workflows to challenge assumptions, explore scenarios, and reach dead ends faster.

Isolation

Becoming AI-native is easier with peers. In a leadership community I co-created with Slack's CIO, over 200 senior technology leaders learned together through open dialogue, shared experimentation, and collective problem-solving. No one knew everything. Everyone learned faster.

The shift is cultural before it is technological.

What my own organization taught me

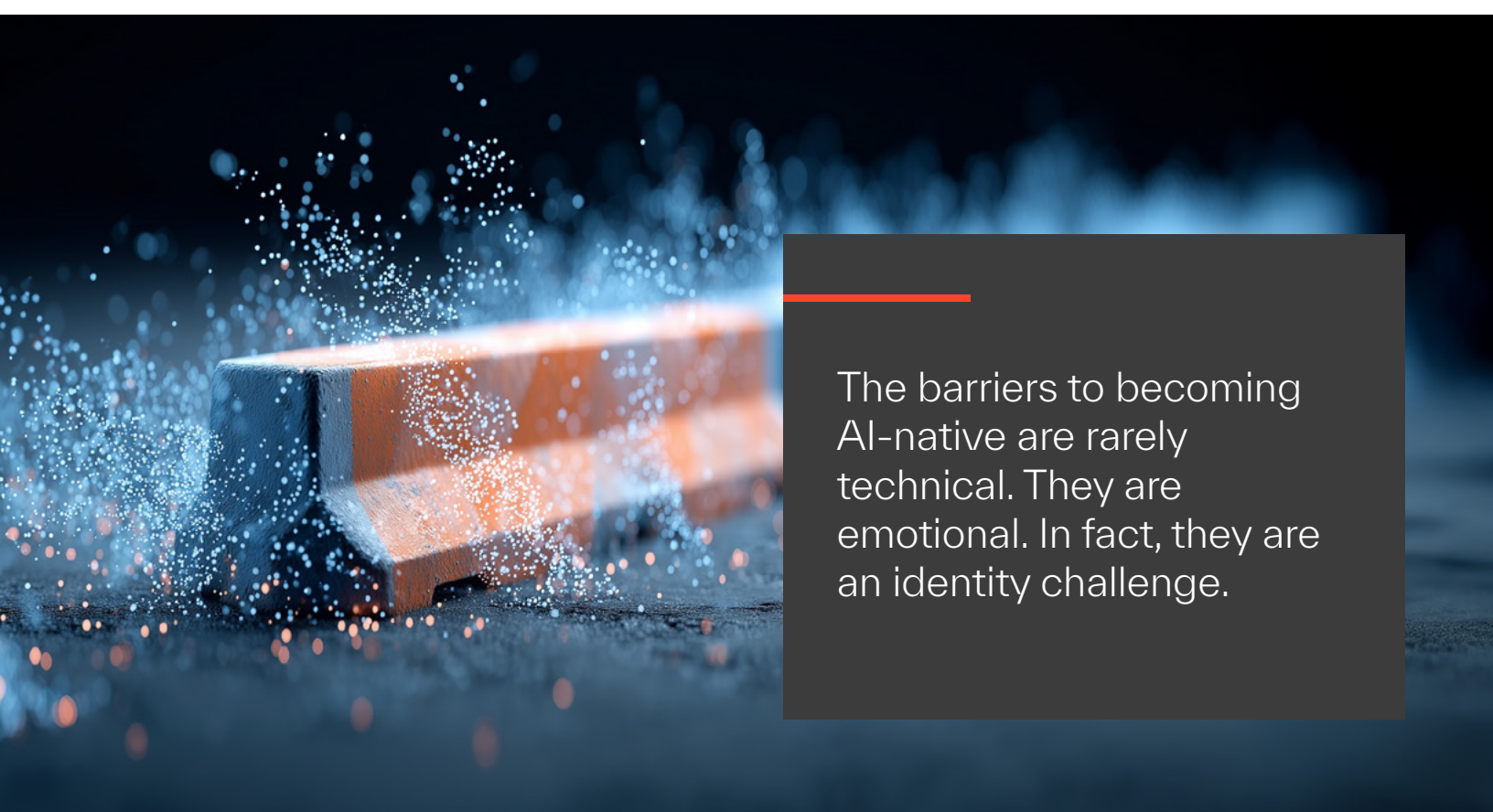
At Nobody Studios we build companies at a pace that would strain traditional management structures. We've launched more than twenty ventures with a team of fourteen with the goal of launching a hundred AI companies over the next five years. Not because we are exceptional, but because we are deliberately leveraged.

AI helps us interrogate ideas, assess risk, and identify patterns early. One example, Evalify.ai, analyses patents, compliance risks, and strategic weaknesses in minutes rather than weeks. This is not about replacing legal or strategy teams. It is about preventing costly mistakes earlier and giving leaders clarity at critical decision points.

The lesson is consistent: organizations that thrive with AI are led by leaders who adopt it first.

What actually moves the needle in executive coaching

The leaders who transform fastest tend to adopt three simple practices:



The barriers to becoming AI-native are rarely technical. They are emotional. In fact, they are an identity challenge.

1. Capture everything.

Meetings, ideas, reflections, decisions.
Uncaptured thinking cannot be improved.

2. Convert raw material into insight.

AI organizes and critiques. Leaders
apply judgment.

3. Close the loop deliberately.

Reflection, refinement, repetition.

Together, these practices shift leaders from operators of work to orchestrators of outcomes.

Where to begin

A pragmatic starting point many leaders choose is this:

- AI-enable one workflow, such as meeting preparation or follow-up.
- Ask AI to interrogate your thinking: *“What am I missing?”*
- Share your process openly with your team.
- Treat AI as a partner, not a passing trend.

Small changes compound quickly.

The next era of leadership

AI will not replace leaders.

But leaders who delay adaptation may find their influence diminishing as others learn to see, decide, and act more clearly.

The next generation of executives will not be defined by pedigree or tenure, but by their ability to combine human creativity with machine capability – to think more clearly, decide more wisely, and scale impact more effectively.

This is the age of the AI-Native Leader.

And the journey starts with a single decision:
to lead differently. —

References

O'Reilly, Barry *Why AI Maturity Models Don't Work*

O'Reilly, Barry *Winning Your Minutes and Moments Back With AI*

O'Reilly, Barry *Metrics for AI Transformation*

Gartner Executive Insights, *CIO Agenda: AI in Decision Making*, 2024

McKinsey Global Institute, *The Future of Work with AI*, 2023

Deloitte, *State of AI in the Enterprise*, 2024

Harvard Business Review, *The New Science of Decision Velocity*, 2023

MIT/Fortune, *Why 95% of AI Pilots Fail—and What That Means for the C-Suite*, 2025

PitchBook, *Gumloop and the Rise of Ultra-Lean Unicorn Teams*, 2025

Nobody Studios, *The Crowd-Infused Venture Studio*

Nobody Studios Portfolio: *SleepGlide*, *Evalify*, *AI Know A Guy*