ghSMART

SHAPEIndex

You Don't Need More AI pilots. You Need Leaders Who Can SHAPE.

The Five Hidden Behaviors That Accelerate AI Velocity

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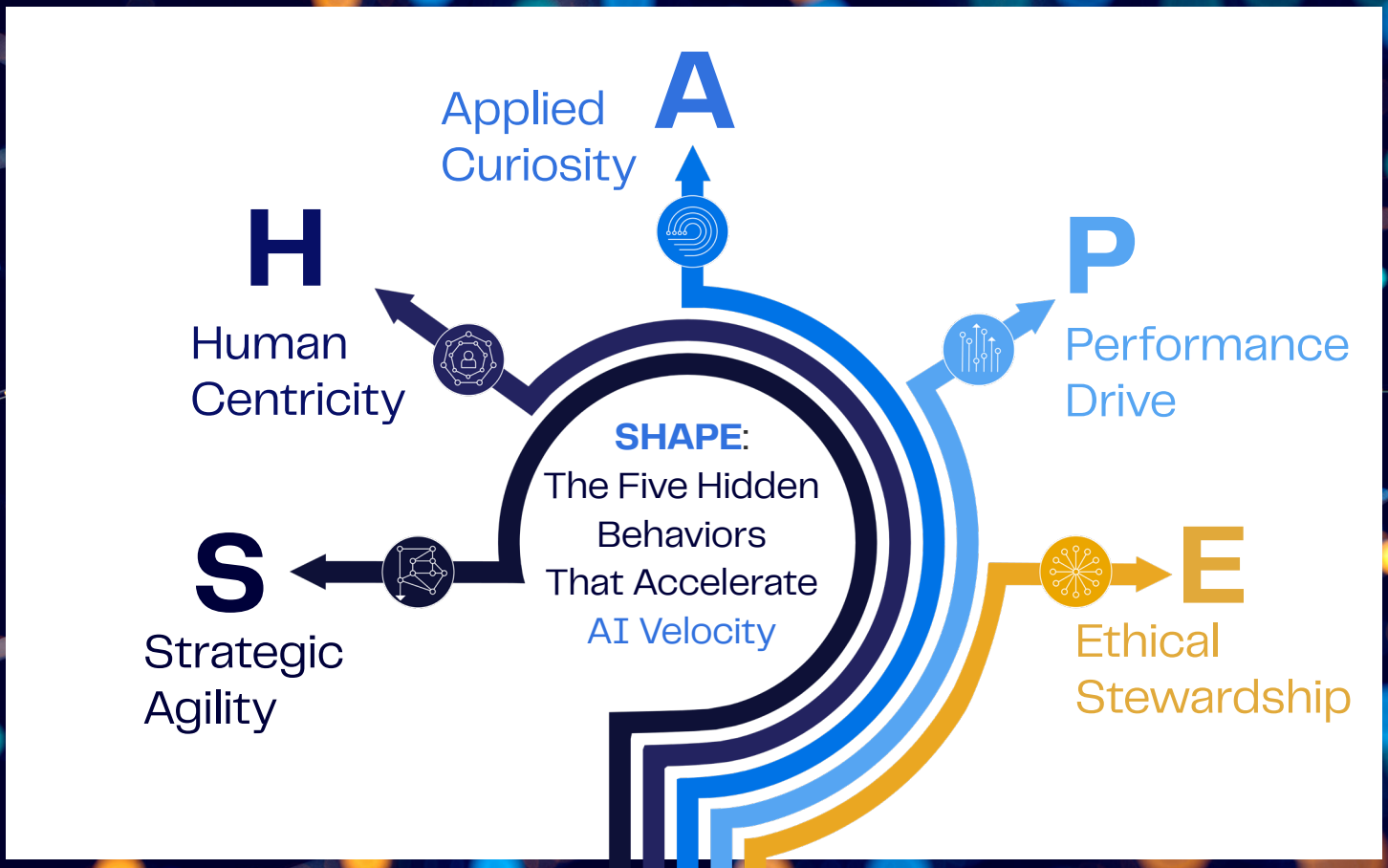


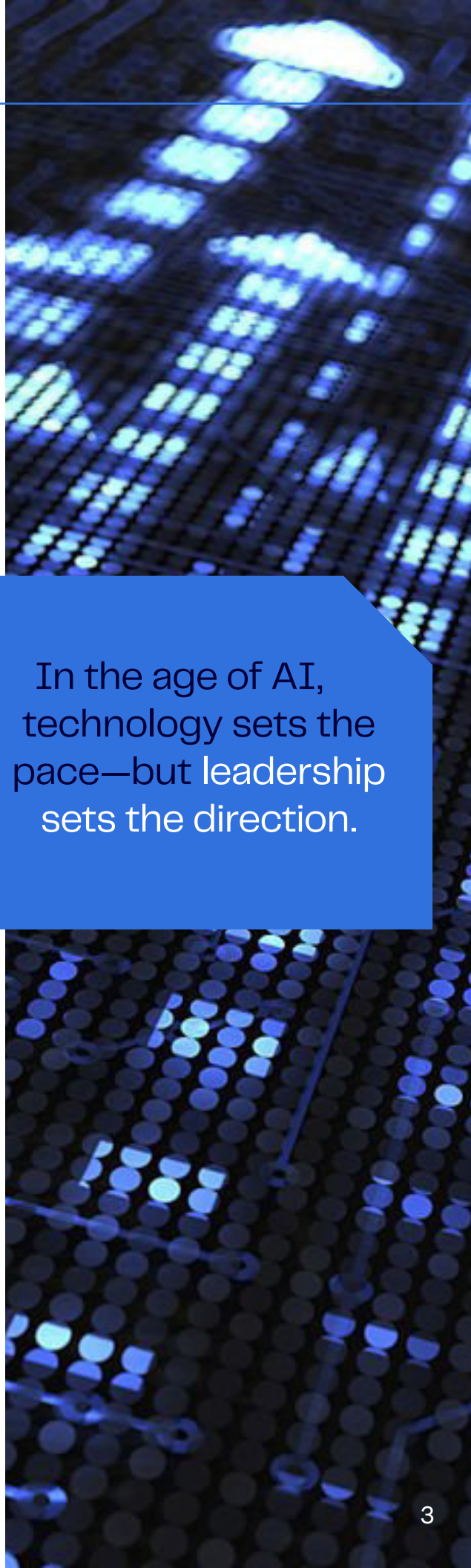
The organizations that will scale AI are not just the ones with the best models, but the ones with the right leaders.

At the center of successful transformation are two complementary roles: **AI Architects**, who design and govern the technical foundation, and **AI Shapers**, who embed AI into workflows to drive adoption, trust, and impact.

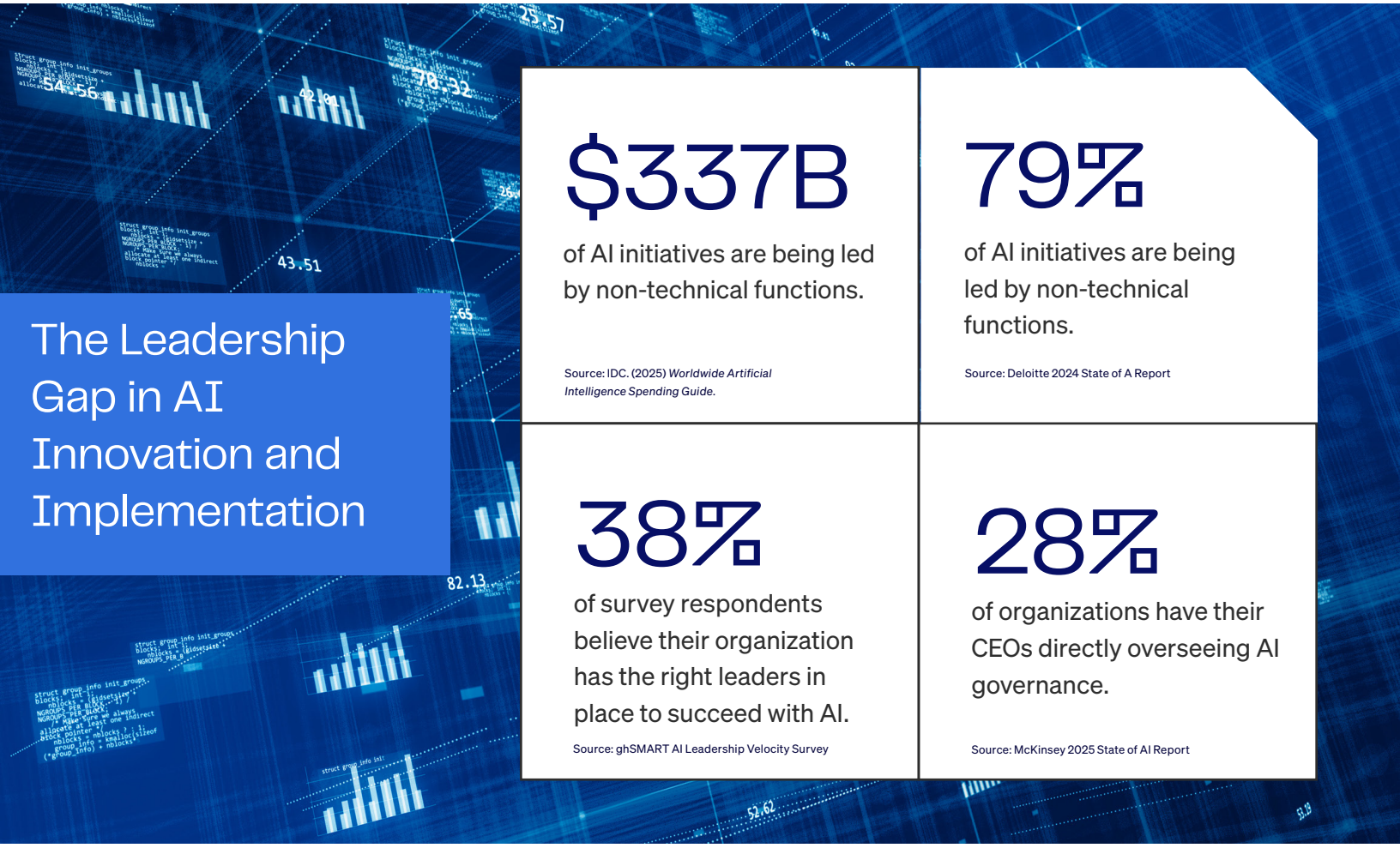
Both are essential—and their success depends on how well they work together.

To understand what makes these leaders effective, ghSMART conducted interviews with over two dozen senior executives and collected proprietary survey data across industries and sectors. The result is the SHAPE Index: five behavioral dimensions that consistently show up in high-velocity AI transformations. These aren't technical traits—they're human levers that accelerate or stall progress, often operating beneath the surface and overlooked in traditional leadership assessments.

This paper brings the SHAPE dimensions to life with real-world examples from CEOs, CFOs, COOs, CAIOs, data/analytics leaders, and others operating at the forefront of AI. Their stories offer a practical playbook for assessing, developing, and aligning leadership in an uncertain world where velocity, trust, and human judgment matter more than ever.



In the age of AI, technology sets the pace—but leadership sets the direction.



Amidst the surge in companies' AI investments--global spending on AI is project to reach $337 billion by 2025--a quiet truth is overlooked. That is, the success of AI hinges less on the models themselves and more on the leaders who envision, implement, and scale their use. While some recognize the importance of leadership in AI initiatives, they may lack clarity on how to enhance it. As the world's foremost leadership advisor, we set out to find some answers.

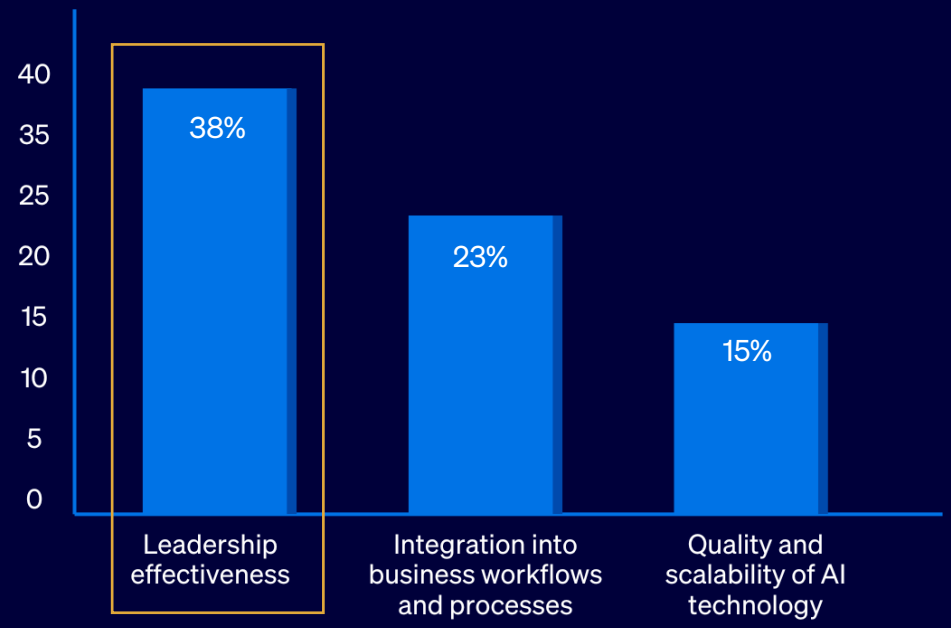
As AI becomes democratized, the competitive edge has shifted from who has the best technology to who can lead through uncertainty, inspire teams, and turn potential into progress at speed.

One AI CEO described this shift as moving beyond the "software wrapper"—the visible markers of value like code quality or UI—toward the harder-to-see leadership behaviors that enable responsible, scalable adoption. Leaders who succeed with AI don't just deploy tools; they shape the organizational cultures in which they operate to drive responsible and effective AI adoption at scale. They experiment, adapt, and earn trust. And often, their greatest work is the least visible.

ghSMART's research—grounded in firsthand client work, supported by over three dozen in-depth interviews and survey responses from senior executives, and informed by a literature review of 38 relevant studies—confirms that leadership is the true differentiator in AI success. In our ongoing Leadership AI Velocity Survey, leadership effectiveness was rated as the #1 driver of return on investment (ROI) from AI initiatives. Out of eight possible factors, 38% of respondents ranked leadership effectiveness as their first choice, and 31% ranked it as their second choice.

The second highest factor was integration into business workflows and processes, ranking as either number one or number two among 23% of respondents. Technology matters—but leadership moves the needle. This article explores the invisible levers behind effective AI leadership using the SHAPE Index framework, our proprietary model that identifies the five leadership capabilities most predictive of AI impact. Each dimension is brought to life with real stories from leaders at the forefront, and early insights from the survey.

What is the #1 Factor that is Most Important to Driving ROI on AI?



Additional factor responses:
- Talent and Skills (15%)
- Organizational culture and openness to change (8%)
- Cross-functional collaboration (0%)
- Clear success metrics and accountability (0%)
- Governance and responsible AI practices (0%)

Source: ghSMART AI Leadership Velocity Survey

The three questions that will define the next decade of leadership:

1. Do you know which of your leaders are equipped to navigate an AI-powered world?
2. Can they distinguish hype from real opportunity?
3. Can they inspire trust while moving at speed?

No one has ever led a generative AI transformation before. It's like being asked to captain a ship through uncharted waters—with no map, shifting tides, and a crew still learning the ropes. While technical teams rush to deploy large language models, most leaders are learning to lead in AI by doing—for the first time .

When organizations overinvest in technology and underinvest in the leadership needed to drive enterprise-wide change, they risk stalling progress, burning resources, and losing the trust of their teams. According to McKinsey's 2025 State of AI report, only 28% of organizations have their CEO directly overseeing AI governance—a figure that drops further in larger enterprises with revenues exceeding $500 million. According to several of the leaders we've interviewed, this lack of top-tier involvement correlates with limited returns. This reality is underscored by the fact that, despite the massive investments being poured into the technology, more than 80% of companies still haven't realized measurable EBIT impact from their AI initiatives (McKinsey).

The World Economic Forum expects nearly half of today's core job skills to change by 2030—raising the stakes for leaders (Future of Jobs Report 2025). Navigating that shift requires more than adopting AI tools; it demands leadership that can steer teams through disruption with clarity, trust, and foresight.

Why is this so hard? While AI tools are tangible and investable, trust, behavior change, and organizational alignment are not. Teams often resist what they don't understand. Middle managers

struggle to adapt legacy workflows. And too often, leaders lack the agility, empathy, or digital foresight to guide transformation at scale. Even when progress is made, it's rarely sustainable—or built upon a foundation that fully addresses ethical risk.

Our survey confirms the magnitude of this challenge: only 38% of respondents believe their organization has the right leaders in place to succeed with AI . That confidence gap is not merely a talent issue—it's a critical transformation risk and a direct threat to organizations' competitiveness.

And while 13% of companies have hired AI compliance specialists and 6% have onboarded AI ethics leaders (McKinsey, 2025), that's not enough. AI's impact touches every part of the business—not just IT.

Deloitte's 2024 State of AI report shows that 79% of AI initiatives are being led by non-technical functions, underscoring the need for leadership capabilities that scale across the enterprise.

You can't hire your way into AI maturity—especially when the traits that matter most don't show up on a resume. You have to identify and develop leaders who can think strategically, lead across silos, and inspire trust.

That's where our model comes in. Effective AI leadership isn't owned by one person—having one highly technical Chief AI Officer isn't enough. It requires two complementary archetypes: AI Architects, who design and govern the technical foundation at scale, and AI Shapers, who embed AI into business workflows to drive impact and adoption. Both are essential—and together, they're what turn potential into performance.

AI Architect

Often technical leaders who design, govern, and evolve the foundational AI infrastructure of an organization. They ensure the right data architecture, tools, and governance are in place for scalable, responsible AI use. While many sit in the CTO or CIO org, in large companies they also appear across functions where technical depth is essential.

AI Shaper

Business leaders who embed AI into workflows to solve problems, drive performance, and spark innovation. They champion adoption, shape use cases grounded in business value, and help teams adapt how they work. Shapers don't need deep technical expertise, but do need the curiosity, influence, and judgment to turn AI potential into results.

Through our research, we've identified five leadership behaviors that consistently accelerate AI adoption and impact—what we call AI Velocity.

AI Velocity reflects how quickly and effectively an organization moves from experimentation to scaled, measurable results. It's not just about technical horsepower; it's about the leadership that shapes the conditions for innovation, trust, and change. These behaviors are captured in our SHAPE Index—a framework that predicts which leaders are most likely to thrive in the age of AI. While the SHAPE capabilities apply to both Architects and Shapers, they show up differently depending on the role, as exemplified in the stories below. What unites them is this: both must navigate uncertainty and chart a clear path forward—often without a map

The SHAPE Index is ghSMART's framework for assessing and accelerating leadership in the AI era. It captures five capabilities that are most predictive of AI success—behavioral, relational, and cultural levers that don't appear on resumes or technical roadmaps, but make or break AI transformation.

S	Strategic Agility	In AI, speed alone isn't strategy. Leaders need to know when to move fast — and when to stop, reassess, and let go of ideas that no longer serve the business. Strategic agility today means navigating rapid change with focus, discipline, and the courage to pivot when the value shifts.
H	Human Centricity	AI adoption moves at the speed of trust. Leaders must protect confidence, not just push tools. It means modeling responsible use, fostering psychological safety, and showing people they're valued—not replaced. AI transformation doesn't start with tech—it starts with trust, shown and shared.
A	Applied Curiosity	You can't predict every change, but you can build the muscle to respond fast. Leaders need to set up learning systems that let teams test, adapt, and scale with new tools as they emerge—not just in labs, but in daily workflows. Foresight today means building readiness, not just chasing trends.
P	Performance Drive	AI can spark excitement—but without discipline, that excitement fades. High-performing leaders build structures that turn energy into impact: clear priorities, ROI discipline, and use cases that solve real problems across functions. Innovation sticks when it's wired into how work gets done.
E	Ethical Stewardship	Responsible AI starts at the design phase, not the defense. Great leaders embed ethical principles from day one—transparency, traceability, and human-in-the-loop judgment. Governance isn't a bolt-on—it's part of the architecture. That's how you scale innovation and trust.

When activated together, these invisible levers quietly generate real AI traction. In line with our earlier metaphor, they're like the rudder below the waterline: rarely visible, yet essential for steering the organization through uncharted waters. And just like a rudder, their strength is only revealed in motion—when organizations begin to steer through disruption, these behaviors determine whether they stall or accelerate.

We'll explore a few firsthand stories from dozens of interviewees, senior Corporate, Private Equity, and Non-Profit executives spanning technical and non-technical roles across six industries, conveying how these AI leadership levers play out in practice.

S Strategic Agility

Strategic Agility is the ability to navigate fast-moving environments without losing sight of long-term business goals. In the AI era, great leaders distinguish themselves by balancing speed with judgment—knowing when to accelerate, when to pause, and when to pivot. They're not just fast; they're discerning. This means making real-time adjustments, continuously aligning AI efforts to ROI, and taking calculated risks when the upside is clear.

For a Shaper, it might mean quickly adjusting rollout plans or change management strategies when user adoption isn't meeting expectations or when new business use cases emerge that require a different AI application. For an Architect, this might mean rapidly pivoting the technical stack or development approach based on evolving model capabilities.

Case Example

One leader who exemplifies this is the Head of AI at a private equity-backed technology company. His team had spent months building a product on GPT-3.5—only for GPT-4.0 to launch and render much of their work obsolete. Instead of doubling down or getting stuck in sunk-cost thinking, he called an all-hands meeting: "Stop everything. Let's talk about how we can make this work." He scrapped the original approach and restructured team workflows to support real-time prompting and model comparison— redirecting efforts toward what would now create the most value.

As this Head of AI put it: "It's not like we failed to identify something. We're trying our best. It's a race against time."

His leadership demonstrates that strategic agility isn't about being the fastest—it's about being the fastest to learn, recalibrate, and reallocate resources to what actually creates impact. In the AI age, where the ground keeps shifting, agility is what separates experimentation from real momentum.

Our survey confirms how rare this capability is: Strategic Agility was ranked the hardest SHAPE dimension to both find and coach--even though leaders saw it as one of the most critical. That makes it even more important to identify in new hires given the challenges of developing it.

H Human Centricity

Human Centricity is the ability to drive innovation by preserving trust, fostering inclusion, and anchoring the work in shared purpose and values. In the AI era, leaders can't just advocate for adoption; they must model it visibly, inspire others, and invest deeply in their people. Human Centricity starts at the top. As one COO at a Fortune 500 technology company put it: "AI can't just be a tech initiative; it must be the company's #1 priority, backed by leadership operating rhythms. **CEO involvement is essential. If the CEO isn't in the biweekly meetings, it won't happen**."

AI transformation doesn't start with tools—it starts with people. Adoption takes hold when leaders show, not just say, what's possible. In our survey, Human Centricity ranked as the weakest area across organizations, despite being recognized as one of the most critical enablers of AI success.

Leaders must not only understand the tools—they must understand their human impact. That means building cultures of safety, meaning, and mutual respect. People need to feel AI is done *with* them, not *to* them—and that their strengths are amplified, not replaced.

For an Architect, this might involve designing user interfaces that build trust or ensuring model explainability where needed. For a Shaper, it involves direct communication about AI's purpose, addressing employee fears, modeling usage, and fostering psychological safety in teams implementing AI.

Case Examples

One leader who puts Human Centricity into practice is the CEO of an early-stage AI platform, who is designing a customer success model powered by AI bots capable of handling 80% of client inquiries. He's not outsourcing relationships; he's elevating them. This mindset is reflected in how he's reimagining customer success. "How do we give tools to humans so that one person becomes worth ten?" he asks. His vision is to use AI to augment human capability—not to replace it—by ensuring his team spends more time on strategic thinking and less on repetitive tasks.

This CEO role-models the change. He uses AI tools himself in leadership meetings, shares his own learning curve with the team, and invites feedback on what's working. His visible use of the technology sends a clear signal: AI isn't someone else's job—it's everyone's responsibility and opportunity. In our interviews, this theme was echoed again and again: when the CEO uses AI, the rest of the organization leans in.

A second story comes from a product leader at a Fortune 10 global tech company. While an AI tool he launched dramatically accelerated workflows, it was met with internal resistance. The team using the tool didn't trust the output, fearing a loss of quality. Instead of pushing harder, this leader paused.

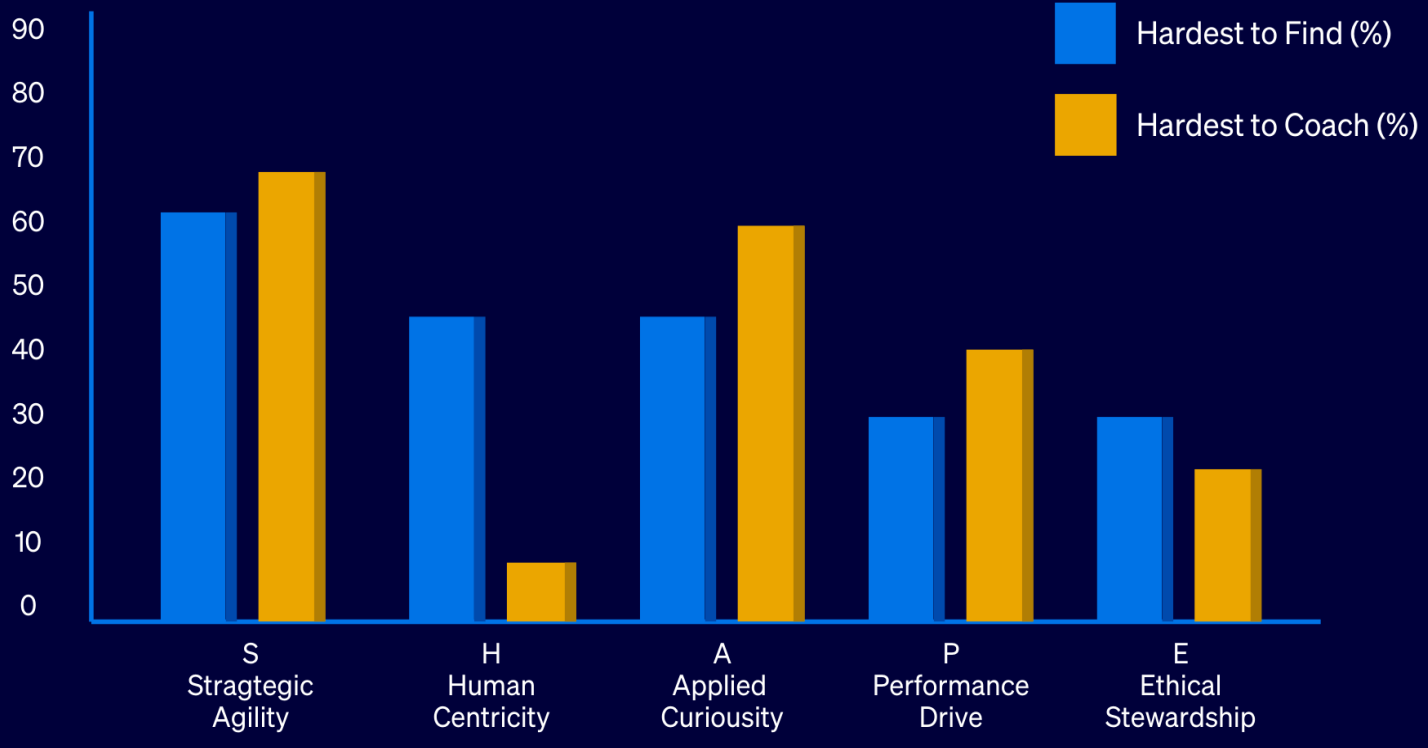
He reintegrated human checkpoints and involved the team in redesigning the rollout, restoring trust and enabling ownership in the process. “Our strength isn’t the tool itself,” he realized. “It’s the team using it.”

The same leader shared an example from the content creation team. When the AI team proposed replacing writers with a copywriting tool, he pushed back. “That’s the wrong question,” he said. “Ask the writers what steps in their process feel overly repetitive and redundant—then automate that.” By partnering with writers and editors, they used AI to handle style-guide checks and other low-value tasks, freeing people up to focus on what gives content its soul. Rather than cutting headcount, they scaled output—more languages, more products—while keeping humans at the heart of the process to preserve voice, nuance, and emotional resonance.

Our survey confirms how rare this capability is: Human Centricity was ranked the second hardest SHAPE dimension to find. However, leaders also saw it as the most coachable of the SHAPE dimensions. That makes spotting it early, and building it deliberately, all the more essential.

Which SHAPE Capabilities are Hardest to Find and Coach?

Survey data represents percentage of respondents who ranked each SHAPE capability #1 or #2 for “hardest to find” or “hardest to coach”.



Source: ghSMART AI Leadership Velocity Survey

A Applied Curiosity

Applied Curiosity is the ability to explore emerging technologies with both imagination and discernment—constantly learning, questioning, and applying insights that drive meaningful business outcomes. In the age of AI, leaders must stay ahead of the curve—without getting swept away by it.

What's different today is that curiosity must be systematic, not sporadic. Leaders need to know what's possible—and just as importantly, what isn't. That means building learning systems that help the organization adapt in real time, surface insights from the front lines, and separate real signals from passing hype.

For an AI Architect, it means constantly testing new models, algorithms, and platforms—building readiness while filtering out hype from real breakthroughs. For an AI Shaper, it means scanning for emerging capabilities that could unlock value, encouraging experimentation at the team level, and applying those insights to shape strategy and execution.

Case Example

We heard this firsthand from the CFO of a Fortune 50 healthcare company, who brings applied curiosity to life through his day-to-day routines. As he put it: "Leaders typically embrace AI only after it's ubiquitous. The challenge is anticipating how and when tech will reforecast the business." To stay ahead, he regularly speaks with industry experts, such as Microsoft, PwC, Cognizant, and Google, for 30 minutes every two weeks, probing trends, applications, and risks. He doesn't stop there: he also learns from younger team members. "They come up with surprising things," he shared, citing an example where a junior employee proactively tested a new workflow, proving it worked better than the legacy process. His mindset remains: "What worked six months ago probably won't today."

He's equally deliberate about what not to chase. While some peer networks proved less helpful, he prioritizes direct conversations and real-world use-case testing. When others rushed into GenAI pilots, he paused to ask: Does this solve a real problem? His culture values fast, forward learning over perfectionism. As he put it: "Smaller mistakes are totally acceptable."

Applied Curiosity was ranked the "second hardest to find and to coach" of all five SHAPE capabilities. While most leaders say they value experimentation, few create the structures that enable it—like bottom-up testing, safe-to-fail environments, and rigorous knowledge-sharing across teams and peers. Applied Curiosity may be hard to teach, but its absence is easy to feel. The most effective AI leaders don't just follow the curve—they shape it. They absorb fast, learn selectively, and build organizations that learn faster than the world changes.

P Performance Drive

Performance Drive is the ability to turn AI potential into performance—channeling energy, urgency, and resources into business results. In an era where headlines often outpace outcomes, performance-driven leaders make sure experimentation leads to real, measurable value.

Piloting for the sake of piloting is a trap. It's not about proving you touched AI—it's about scaling what works. That takes clarity on what success looks like, relentless ROI discipline, and the ability to manage stakeholders—especially when novelty threatens to outshine value.

For AI Architects, Performance Drive means building scalable, cost-effective systems that deliver real value. This might involve optimizing model costs, streamlining data pipelines, or designing infrastructure that enables enterprise-wide impact. For AI Shapers, it's about translating ambition into results—identifying high-leverage, cross-functional use cases, aligning teams around clear business priorities, and embedding AI into workflows in ways that measurably improve performance across the enterprise. Their impact comes not just from piloting solutions within a single function, but from driving coordinated change across teams, systems, and silos.

Case Example

One executive who embodies this mindset is the COO of a Fortune 50 technology company. When a new AI-driven capability was slated to take six weeks to implement, the CEO asked a simple but piercing question: "Why not today? What's stopping you?" Six days later, the solution was live. As the COO reflected: "It became everyone's priority. That's what changed."

The real shift wasn't technical—it was organizational. The CEO's clear directive cascaded into a tight operating rhythm, with the COO driving disciplined execution through cross-functional alignment, strict KPI tracking, and bi-weekly summits the CEO personally joined to reinforce urgency. This combination of performance drive and visible commitment from the top allowed the team to cut through bottlenecks. "If you don't show with operating rigor and directive, nobody will know," the COO said. "Most people have the direction; we just need to show we'll get it done." Performance Drive also requires leaders to scale with discipline. As the Head of Analytics at a Fortune 50 healthcare company noted: "Some queries cost us $20K. You need to capture momentum, but you also need to streamline." Leaders adept in this area align talent, workflows, and costs to get the most from human-agent collaboration.

In our survey, only about half of respondents said their organization consistently connects AI initiatives to enterprise performance. That gap highlights the disconnect between AI experimentation and sustained business value—and the leadership discipline required to bridge it.

E Ethical Stewardship

Ethical Stewardship is the ability to lead AI with integrity—embedding responsibility into the design, deployment, and governance of technology from the start. In the AI era, it's not just about mitigating risk; it's about scaling trust, ensuring fair access, and shaping the future—from internal processes to industry standards.

The most effective AI leaders don't wait for things to go wrong—they design with foresight. They know where human judgment belongs, and they embed governance early so it accelerates innovation rather than slowing it down later. While standing up a formal AI governance body is important, ethical leadership transcends structure. It's about creating behaviors, systems, and norms that make responsibility a daily practice—not just a board-level talking point.

For an AI Architect, this means embedding ethical principles directly into the technical foundation—designing for transparency, traceability, and strong data governance from day one. It also includes bias mitigation, security, and active engagement with the broader ecosystem to help shape emerging standards. For an AI Shaper, it's about modeling responsible use in daily decision-making. That means ensuring fair access to AI tools, embedding ethical practices into business workflows, and making responsibility part of everyday operations—not just policy.

Case Example

This mindset is exemplified by the CFO of a Fortune 100 healthcare company, who uses AI to debias decision-making—from forecasting budgets to evaluating Medicare changes. "When you build responsible AI into your processes," he explains, "it can help you debias your decisions." Governance isn't just policy—it's practice. The CFO ties AI use to performance incentives and hosts live screen-sharing sessions to show exactly how he applies AI in his own work, modeling responsible behavior at the top. He believes AI shouldn't be reserved for technically-trained experts; rather,—it should be democratized. From the C-suite to the front lines, he and his leadership team ensure that everyone has access to AI tools.

While most leaders we surveyed acknowledged its importance, Ethical Stewardship consistently appeared last on lists of priorities. That's the paradox: what often shows up last is what should come first. Responsible AI isn't a layer to add once the model is trained; it's the foundation on which everything else should be built.

The most forward-looking leaders lead by example and view ethical leadership as a catalyst for progress—not a brake on it. They shape their industry and regulatory landscape by going beyond compliance, engaging peers and advocating for new standards for responsible innovation.

While AI Architects and AI Shapers operate in distinct ways, their success is deeply intertwined. For each SHAPE dimension, we've identified high-impact behaviors tailored to each role. The table below highlights a representative sample—not the full model, but a practical lens into what high AI Velocity looks like in action. Behind this snapshot is a more complete behavioral framework—our SHAPE Index—which we use to assess and develop leaders driving AI transformation at scale.

AI Architect

Often technical leaders who design, govern, and evolve the foundational AI infrastructure of an organization. They ensure the right data architecture, tools, and governance are in place for scalable, responsible AI use. While many sit in the CTO or CIO org, in large companies they also appear across functions where technical depth is essential.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS:

S	Translate business strategy into AI architecture, pivoting fast with evolving model capabilities.
H	Design systems with trust built in (e.g., explainability, usability, human-in-the-loop design).
A	Continuously evaluate and test emerging models and platforms, filtering signal from hype.
P	Build scalable infrastructure with attention to cost, risk, and performance trade-offs.
E	Embed ethics, bias mitigation, and governance into the core architecture and engage externally to shape standards.

AI Shaper

Business leaders who embed AI into workflows to solve problems, drive performance, and spark innovation. They champion adoption, shape use cases grounded in business value, and help teams adapt how they work. Shapers don't need deep technical expertise, but do need the curiosity, influence, and judgment to turn AI potential into results.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS:

S	Identify high-ROI use cases and quickly align domain priorities with AI possibilities.
H	Model responsible AI use and foster a culture of experimentation and inclusion.
A	Encourage experimentation and actively draw on team insights to shape how capabilities evolve within the business
P	Drive enterprise-wide alignment and embed AI into workflows across teams.
E	Integrate responsible AI practices into business processes and ensure equitable access..

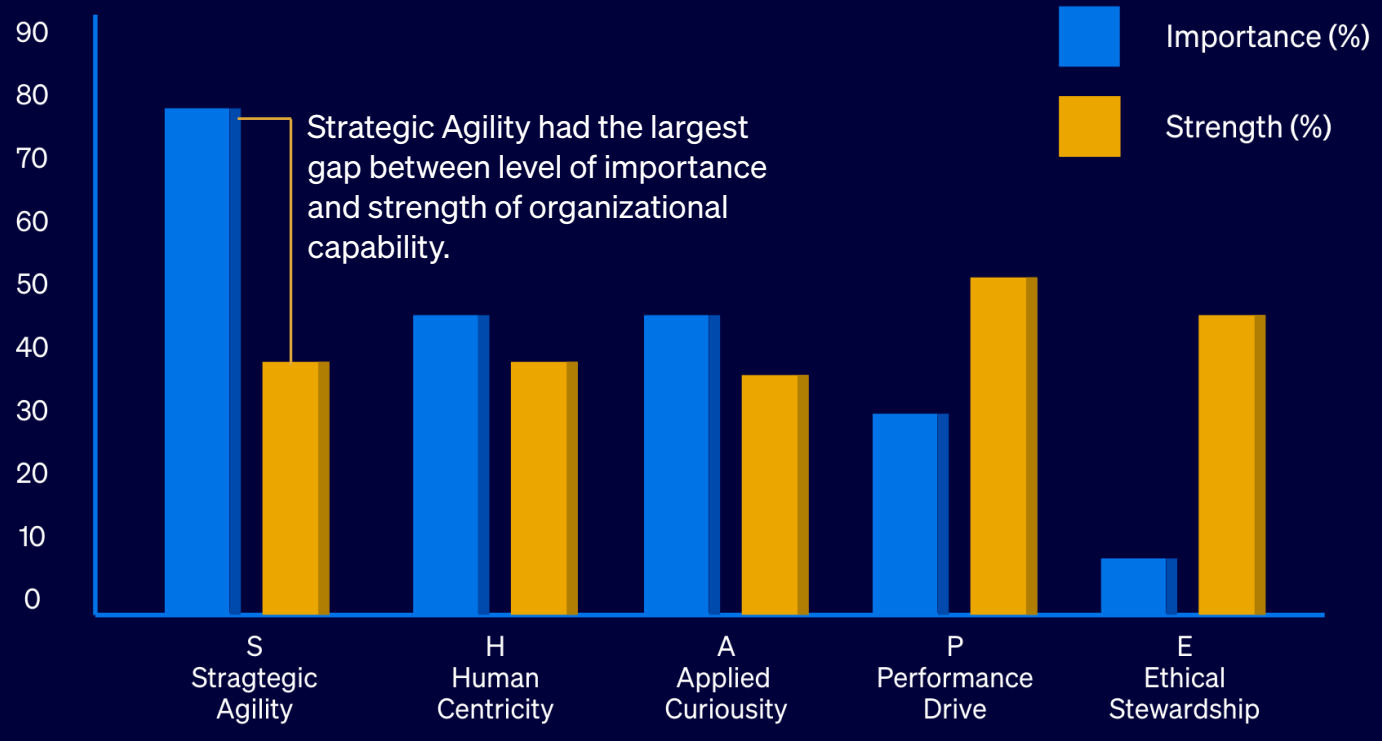
Achieving true AI velocity and enterprise-wide transformation requires seamless collaboration between AI Architects and AI Shapers. While Architects design and govern the technical foundation, Shapers embed AI into workflows to drive adoption and impact. Their success is mutually dependent—and breakdowns in one role often undermine the other.

When either role falls short in key SHAPE capabilities, friction builds and progress stalls. For example, an Architect may build a technically robust, scalable AI system—but without Shapers who model trust, foster experimentation, and embed new tools into daily workflows, that system may never take hold. The result: a powerful foundation that fails to drive value, eroding momentum and wasting investment.

The reverse is also true: when Shapers surface valuable use cases, they rely on Architects to deliver secure, scalable solutions with speed and discipline. Without strong Performance Drive and Strategic Agility on the technical side, even the most promising AI efforts can collapse under the weight of poor infrastructure or delays—leading to pilot fatigue and missed opportunities.

True AI transformation depends on both roles—and on how well they work together. Organizations that assess, develop, and align both Architects and Shapers across the SHAPE dimensions will be the ones that turn ambition into sustained, enterprise-wide change.

Which SHAPE Capabilities are Most Important, and on Which is Your Org Strongest?



Source: ghSMART AI Leadership Velocity Survey

For all the money poured into AI strategy decks and technical pilots, many organizations still lack a roadmap for building the leadership muscle that actually makes AI succeed. They're missing the people part of the equation. Even where the technology is sound, leaders often lack the structure, incentives, or behavior change needed to drive transformation.

The following four imperatives offer a leader-first playbook for moving from experimentation to enterprise-wide impact:

1. Assess

Not all leadership roles are equally critical to an AI transformation. Some set enterprise strategy or build the technical infrastructure; others model use and embed AI into day-to-day operations. The first step is clarity: which roles matter most—and do you have the right people in them? Use the SHAPE Index to assess not just technical fluency, but the leadership behaviors that drive trust, execution, and change. Ask yourself: *Do we have a clear view of which leaders in our organization are truly positioned to drive AI transformation?* Look beyond roles and titles to identify the mindsets that matter most: Who are your Architects (those designing and building the systems)? Who are your Shapers (those embedding and applying them across the business)? Just as importantly, who is accelerating progress—and who may be quietly holding it back? Fewer than half of organizations in our survey believe they have the right leaders in place to succeed in the age of AI. That confidence gap represents both a risk and an opportunity. Go beyond individual assessments, too, to examine how your leadership teams are structured, how your board is engaged, and whether your broader culture and organizational design enable or hinder AI velocity.

2. Hire

Hiring for AI Shapers and Architects isn't just about finding technical experts; that's the easier part. The harder challenge is identifying leaders with the mindsets and behaviors that are challenging to teach: adaptability, digital foresight, ethical judgment, and the ability to build trust. Prior AI experience is rare, so the focus must shift to those who learn quickly, tolerate ambiguity, show curiosity, and work across siloes to drive change. Ask yourself: *Are we hiring for where the business is going—or for where it's already been?* Use the SHAPE Index to assess for these traits and to hire holistically—not just for individual roles, but for a leadership bench equipped to sustain AI transformation.

3. Develop

Even the most forward-looking leaders need support to grow in the face of constant disruption. AI transformation isn't just about learning the tools—it demands strengthening leadership across all five SHAPE dimensions. Some capabilities, like Applied Curiosity and Strategic Agility, are harder to build quickly, so use SHAPE to focus development where it's most likely to stick. Create stretch roles, coaching opportunities, and tight feedback loops grounded in real business context. Equally important, give leaders space to experiment safely, reflect openly, and engage in cross-functional learning. Ask yourself: *Are we building the capabilities that will help our leaders adapt, not just adopt?*

4. Role Model

Culture shifts when leaders lead visibly. In AI transformation, nothing signals the gravity of these efforts like CEOs and senior executives using the tools themselves. Leadership teams and boards can't delegate innovation—they need to engage directly, share what they're learning, and embed AI into how they make decisions. When leaders role-model experimentation and AI-literate behavior, they normalize change and lower the barrier for others to follow. It's tempting to treat AI leadership as someone else's job—an add-on for the CAIO or technical leads. But our research shows the opposite: leadership is the most critical and underleveraged driver of AI success. Ask yourself: *What are our leaders doing in plain sight to show that AI is on their scorecards too?* Transformation sticks when it's not just mandated, but modeled.

The value of AI depends entirely on who is leading its design, implentation, and adoption.

The most successful companies in the next decade won't just be the most technically advanced; they'll be the **most humanly led**. Great AI leaders don't just shape code; they shape conditions.. And their work—often invisible, sometimes uncomfortable—is what ultimately accelerates AI velocity. The SHAPE index brings structure and clarity to the less tangible parts of AI leadership, helping organizations identify and elevate the leaders best equipped for this moment.

But the leadership challenge doesn't stop with adoption. In the near term, success will depend on embedding AI into workflows and building trust across teams. In the longer term, it will hinge on something more complex: leading people who are no longer merely human in capacity. As one AI leader at a global private equity firm points out: "We also need to be thinking ahead to a new kind of leadership question: "How do you lead people who are themselves powered and augmented by AI? When people are accessing information faster, making decisions faster, getting more done...what does leadership look like in a world where your team is suddenly superhuman ?" That is the next frontier.

"We also need to be thinking ahead to a new kind of leadership question: "How do you lead people who are themselves powered and augmented by AI? When people are accessing information faster, making decisions faster, getting more done...what does leadership look like in a world where your team is suddenly superhuman?"

Are you ready to identify and develop future-ready leaders who can SHAPE AI?

Organizations that assess, develop, and align both AI Architects and AI Shapers across the SHAPE dimensions will be the ones that turn ambition into sustained, enterprise-wide change. *Now* is the time to accelerate AI Velocity across your leadership.

To learn how SHAPEIndex can help your organization, email Expert Partner:

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