

**W**E ARE ON A LONG MARCH TOWARD human obsolescence—that is, if you believe the debate around AI. The disruption of the workforce is only just beginning—and now, the focus is moving to the boardroom. How long, people are asking, before AI CEOs are the new normal? • There are already a few AI CEOs out there. China-based games company

In our excitement about AI, we may be undervaluing what is distinctly human about leadership.  
**BY JON MILLER.**

NetDragon Websoft has been run by an AI program named Tang Yu since 2023. The Polish rum company Dictador has an AI CEO called Mika. Surprisingly, many CEOs themselves think that AI could do their jobs better. In a survey of 500 CEOs conducted by EdX, 49% agreed that most—if not all—of their roles could be completely replaced by AI. **So, are they right?**

# Will AI CEOs Replace Humans?



ILLUSTRATION: NATE KITCH

# 5 REASONS why there will always be a role for human leadership in business.

## 1 FORGET AI CEOS, THINK INTELLIGENT COMPANIES

The idea of an AI CEO—complete with a name and an avatar—has its roots in a 1950s view of a future filled with robots and humanoids. That’s not how it’s going to happen. A real AI-led company wouldn’t actually need a CEO: The company itself would be an intelligent, self-optimizing network of algorithms, a system of systems. It would become, in effect, a corporate mind.

Human intelligence consists of multiple specialized systems, adapted for basic tasks like throwing, catching, avoiding predators and recognizing friendly faces, as well as advanced skills like language processing. Neuroscientists and psychologists mostly agree that what we perceive as a single mind is actually a kind of coalition of semi-independent agencies. With no clear central decider, coordination emerges from interrelated operations. As long ago as 1986, AI pioneer Marvin Minsky called this view “the society of mind.”

We may find that AI makes it possible for a company to act like such a society of mind, to manage itself as a network of intelligent inter-operational systems, negating the need for an AI CEO. But what then is the role of humans? In a word: leadership.

## 2 “CRAZY WISDOM” IN LEADERSHIP

In 1994, Jeff Bezos quit his Wall Street job, packed up his car and set off for Seattle. Of course, everyone told him he was nuts, but it was on this road trip that he had the idea to set up an online bookshop.

From a purely rational standpoint, Bezos may have made different decisions—but life isn’t purely rational and neither are entrepreneurs. As Carl Jung put it, “Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you.”

In his classic 1998 *Harvard Business Review* article, “What Makes a Leader,” psychologist Daniel Goleman describes how those with the greatest

leadership potential are motivated by tough creative challenges—doing something different, not just administering business as usual. These people are distinctly human: They are driven by a restless energy to fulfill their personal human potential.

It takes a human to follow a dream, to act on a hunch and set upon a paradigm-busting venture. This is “crazy wisdom” in action—a phrase used by the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa—and it’s evident in the biographies of many great leaders, from Winston Churchill to Steve Jobs, from Emmeline Pankhurst to Abraham Lincoln.

This is something AI will find hard to replicate, in part because it lacks the most basic requirement: physiology.

## 3 WHY LEADERS NEED BODIES

Humans are social animals, so Aristotle told us, and modern science agrees. Our bodies rely on and thrive in the presence of other bodies. Without a meaningful connection to others, our mental and physical health declines. That connection is strongest when we are together in person, in the same physical space.

Over millions of years of evolution, our nervous systems have acquired a sophisticated early-warning system, called *neuroception*, which subconsciously scans our environment for subtle signals of threat or safety.

When we are with others, without even knowing we’re doing it, we constantly track tiny changes in vocal tone, blink rate, body temperature and other physiological factors. This tells us whether we’re safe or not—and if we can’t fully do this, we can’t have a fully engaged social connection.

In leadership, neuroception has been called a “sixth sense.” It’s the gut feeling, the instinct about whether to do the deal, the sense that something’s not right, or the feeling that someone can be trusted. AI can be better at detecting some threats, but this interpersonal instinct requires an embodied nervous system. To be a leader you need a body.

**4** **ESPRIT DE CORP(ORATION)**  
On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, things were looking grim for Henry V and his army. Tired and hungry, they were outnumbered by well-equipped French forces. In Shakespeare's version of events, Henry donned a disguise and spent the night listening to the hopes and fears of his soldiers. His speech the next morning fired up his people. "We few, we happy few," he says, in the rain and mud, "we band of brothers; / For he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother."

Of course, Henry's army wins the battle and the war. This is the kind of leadership it takes to make the impossible possible, to achieve greatness. So why do surveys show almost two-thirds of workers worldwide would trust a "robot boss" more than a human? Certainly, it would probably be more consistent and reliable, never have an off day. Here we are probably talking about the difference between being a good manager and being a leader. A robot boss may give you clear instructions and a fair appraisal—but it isn't likely to inspire you to stretch yourself beyond your limits, to reach for your highest potential. It can't be your brother on the battlefield.

**5** **THE POWER OF HUMOR**  
A robo-boss is unlikely to make us laugh. That's a weakness, as studies show that humor can strengthen team spirit and boost performance, reduce divisions and increase creativity.

In fact, thinking about humor can help us grasp the strengths and weaknesses of AI. Generative AI has become great at writing jokes. Researchers have found that AI can be better than your closest family at predicting what you will find funny and what you won't. But experiments show that people find jokes funnier when shared human-to-human. This has a simple explanation: The psychological function of humor is about facilitating connection, about enabling us to bond over a shared view of the world. In the last few years, neuroscientists have proposed that the evolutionary function of laughter is to release endogenous opioids that help build long-term human relationships.

Humor is core to our social engagement systems, and thus core to leadership. This includes our ability to put things in perspective—recontextualizing or "mental shifting"—as well as our sense of fairness and our moral agility. According to neuroscientists,

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humor engages a network of cortical and subcortical structures that are involved in detecting and resolving incongruity. It helps us find coherence; it's how we know the difference between a fact and a truth. And it's related to our ability to ascribe value to things. A humorless leader, to borrow from Oscar Wilde, is a person "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

## CONCLUSION

Back in the 1980s, Marvin Minsky saw that the key to unlocking the power of AI would be to think in terms of agents—perhaps the key to the future of AI in leadership. Already multiple applications assist CEOs with strategic decision support, information flow, task prioritization, risk monitoring and other critical functions. And there is an emerging layer of "super-agents" that can work across these functions to create coherent CEO support—not unlike a chief of staff. In their *HBR* article from last year, Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms (now Brunswick's CEO) describe these as autosapient agents—able to learn autonomously and make complex judgments. The challenge for today's leaders, they say, is to understand how to work with these powerful tools.

It's easy to see why people might think these agents could replace human leaders altogether. They will probably make faster, better decisions. They will be better able to make sense of vast amounts of data, in conditions of uncertainty, in real time, and determine the optimum possible outcomes.

In September, an empirical study reported in *HBR* found advantages and disadvantages to replacing corporate leadership roles with AI and concluded: "The findings suggest that AI is more suited to augmenting human leadership rather than replacing it entirely. AI can process massive datasets and optimize short-term gains, but it lacks the human capacity for judgment, empathy and ethical decision making—qualities essential for a CEO."

We need more research and, in the meantime, AI is evolving apace. But it's clear that leadership is more than datasets, more even than some kind of multidimensional game of chess. It's also about relationships—with consumers and customers, business partners and employees. It's about inspiration—the crazy idea that makes no sense but disrupts an entire industry. It's about the aspiration to fulfill our human potential, to do something that matters.

When leadership shines with brilliance, it is not in spite of our human limitations, but because of them. This is our one wild and precious life, and we want to make it count. ♦