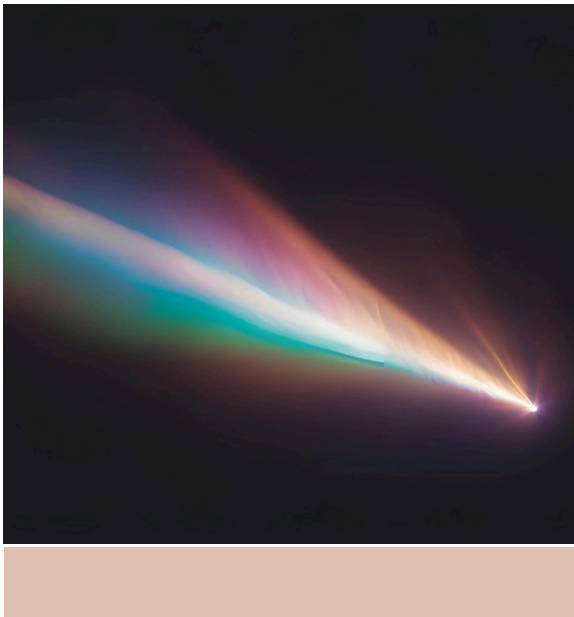




COLLABORATING AT WORK IN THE AGE OF AI

How trust, ownership, belonging, and empowerment help people work better together when technology is moving faster than relationships.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing the economics and mechanics of how we work together. It can shorten research cycles, analyze large volumes of information, draft recommendations, and accelerate implementation planning. Yet the hardest part of influencing others remains stubbornly human: building trust, making clear agreements, surfacing resistance, sharing responsibility, and helping people choose action over passive agreement.

The next advantage will not come simply from adopting better tools. It will come from strengthening the human practices that make collaboration work: clear agreements, honest conversations, shared responsibility, productive dissent, local empowerment, and commitment built through participation. trust, responsibility, resistance, and commitment.

The practical opportunity is to combine AI-enabled speed with human-centered collaboration discipline: use AI to reduce friction in the work, and use better conversations to increase ownership, candor, trust, and follow-through. Teams now have access to tools that can summarize interviews, draft recommendations, analyze data, and produce polished work in minutes. But none of that guarantees colleagues will trust one another, own the problem, or act on the recommendation. The future of work depends on the quality of collaboration as much as the quality of automation.

AI can make the mechanics of work faster. It can help us prepare, synthesize, draft, model, and organize. But collaboration has never been only about the quality of the answer. It is about whether the answer can be used inside a real human system of trust, responsibility, resistance, and commitment.



Why Human Collaboration Still Matters

At its core, effective collaboration is about influence without control. Work unfolds through agreements, discovery, feedback, implementation, and renewal. But the deeper discipline is relational: be authentic, balance responsibility, name resistance instead of avoiding it, and build internal commitment rather than mere compliance.

That is what makes these ideas so durable. They treat collaboration not as a performance of expertise, but as a relationship process. The goal is not simply to be right. It is to help people face what matters and act on it together.

“Authentic behavior has the advantage of being incredibly simple. It is to literally put into words what you are experiencing.”

Peter Block

The Data: Why the Human Side Matters More Now

Current research points to a widening gap between technical capability and human adoption. [McKinsey](#) reported that 92% of companies plan to increase AI investments over the next three years, yet only 1% of leaders describe their organizations as mature in AI deployment, meaning AI is fully integrated into workflows and driving substantial outcomes. The constraint is not merely access to tools; it is leadership, workflow redesign, adoption, and trust.

Trust is an equally urgent issue. A 2025 [global study](#) by KPMG and the University of Melbourne found that 66% of people use AI regularly, but only 46% are willing to trust AI systems. The same study found that many people rely on AI output without evaluating accuracy, creating a new consulting risk: speed without discernment.

The change-management data tells a similar story. Gartner reported that only 32% of mid-to-senior business leaders said the last change they led achieved healthy employee adoption. Gartner also found that 79% of employees have low trust in change, and that organizations with better-than-average healthy change adoption report two times higher year-over-year revenue growth. In other words, adoption is not a soft issue; it is a business performance issue.

Eagle Hill Consulting's 2025 research reinforces the same pattern: 63% of U.S. employees experienced at least one workplace change in the prior year, but only 25% agreed that their organization effectively manages change across the workforce. Nearly half said recent change increased workload, and 43% said it increased stress.

These findings point to the central workplace challenge: organizations do not suffer from a shortage of recommendations. They suffer from a shortage of commitment, trust, shared accountability, and usable influence.

That is where collaboration discipline creates value.

A recent Associated Press article reinforces this point: workplace experts argue that the skills most resistant to AI displacement are distinctly human, including relationship building, conflict resolution, motivating others, and ethical judgment.



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“Change is a function of participation, not persuasion.”

PETER BLOCK

Where AI Helps

AI fits naturally into collaborative work when it is used to enhance, not replace, human judgment. It can help prepare for stakeholder conversations, summarize background documents, synthesize interview notes, analyze patterns, draft recommendations, model scenarios, and turn plans into practical tools.

Used well, AI reduces the time spent on mechanical work and creates more room for the relational work that determines whether influence becomes commitment.

How Collaboration Discipline Accelerates Influence and Partnership

Collaboration discipline accelerates effectiveness because it focuses on the conditions that make expertise usable. It shifts people from being suppliers of answers to partners in ownership. That shift matters because influence without authority depends less on control and more on clarity, authenticity, mutual responsibility, and choice.

Human challenge	Collaboration response	AI-enabled accelerator
People want help, expertise, or direction but resist accountability.	Contract for shared responsibility, clear wants, and explicit roles.	Prepare contracting questions, summarize stakeholder expectations, and identify decision points.
Stakeholders agree publicly but withhold commitment privately.	Name resistance as data rather than treating it as obstruction.	Analyze interview themes and surface patterns of concern, ambiguity, or misalignment.
Recommendations are technically sound but not adopted.	Turn feedback into dialogue, choice, and ownership.	Draft options, trade-off summaries, and implementation scenarios for discussion.
One person over functions while others under-own the work.	Balance responsibility so the people closest to the issue own the problem and the action.	Create decision logs, responsibility maps, and follow-up structures.

The result is a more powerful workplace stance: AI helps people move faster through information, while collaboration discipline helps people move deeper into responsibility. For every workplace partnership, the lesson is clear: ownership must sit with the people who live with the consequences.

Where AI Stops

Collaboration breaks down when people hide behind expertise, data, or tools. AI can make that temptation even stronger. We can now generate professional analysis, polished slides, and persuasive recommendations faster than ever. But none of that resolves the core human challenges in the room.

AI cannot negotiate a real agreement with nervous stakeholders. It cannot sense the resistance behind polite agreement. It cannot take responsibility for naming what is not being said. It cannot build trust through transparency, courage, and presence. And it cannot create commitment simply by producing a better answer.

As international best-selling author and thought leader [Peter Block](#) explains: “AI is about convenience, and scale. That is its gift. That is where it's useful, but it is not a substitute for relationship building. It cannot build trust - that's a human feature.”

That should get our attention. Recent data from the [Work Ai Institute](#) underscores the tension Block is naming: workers are increasingly turning to AI first, sometimes before they turn to colleagues, managers, or even their own judgment.

- 48% reach for AI before they try to solve a problem themselves.
- 52% find it easier to collaborate with AI than with their human coworkers.
- 61% say AI helps them more with their day-to-day work than their own manager does.



The Best Use of AI

The best use of AI is as a thinking partner, not as a substitute for presence. Teams can let AI accelerate the technical aspect of collaboration while people focus on the conversations that create clarity and ownership.

That means using AI to prepare better questions, test patterns, clarify choices, and make the work more accessible. It also means resisting the urge to use AI as a shield. If AI helps people avoid difficult conversations, overproduce analysis, or present certainty where ambiguity still exists, it weakens the partnership. If it frees people to be more present, more direct, and more courageous, it strengthens the work.

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The quality of our organizations
is determined by the quality of
our relationships.”

PETER BLOCK

Three Human Practices for Better Collaboration

The human side of collaboration can be understood through three practical disciplines. The first is partnership: making clear agreements, sharing responsibility, telling the truth, and treating resistance as useful information. The second is belonging: convening people in ways that invite possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and recognition of one another’s gifts. The third is empowerment: changing the culture of work through everyday encounters where people choose mutuality, integrity, and local accountability.

These ideas matter because implementation does not happen inside a slide deck or an AI-generated summary. It happens inside a community of people who must choose to participate.

Anyone trying to influence a decision, move a project forward, or build a partnership has to help get the right people in the room, ask questions that change the conversation, and create conditions where people move from compliance to ownership.

Empowerment adds another essential layer for people trying to create change from wherever they sit in the organization. Culture changes through everyday encounters, not only through formal programs. Each meeting, request, promise, and disagreement becomes an opportunity to create the culture people want to inhabit.

Together, these practices broaden this message: AI may accelerate information work, but influence grows through belonging, empowerment, local accountability, and the quality of the room we are in now. The human side of collaboration is not a soft companion to the technical work. It is the operating system through which technical work becomes useful.

Human practice	Core idea	Implication for AI-enabled work
Partnering	Influence without authority depends on authenticity, contracting, resistance, feedback, and shared responsibility.	Use AI to strengthen preparation and synthesis, while protecting the human work of trust and commitment.
Belonging	Belonging is built through intentional conversations, possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts.	Use AI to support convening, but design conversations where stakeholders become citizens of the change rather than consumers of advice.
Empowerment	Empowerment begins locally through everyday choices, integrity, mutuality, and the culture created in each encounter.	Use AI to reduce administrative burden so people can spend more time creating ownership in the rooms they already influence.

A Practical Playbook

The following steps translate these collaboration practices into practical action for AI-enabled work.

1. **Start with the agreement, not the tool.** Before using AI to analyze or recommend, clarify the desired outcome, wants, offers, assumptions, and responsibilities.
2. **Ask for wants in both directions.** Make explicit what each person or group wants from the other, including access, candor, sponsorship, support, and timely decisions.
3. **Use AI to prepare better questions.** Generate stakeholder-specific questions, risk hypotheses, and alternative explanations, then test them through human conversation.
4. **Treat resistance as information.** When people delay, disagree, comply passively, or ask for more data, explore the concern underneath the behavior rather than pushing harder.
5. **Move from presentation to dialogue.** Use recommendations as a starting point for ownership conversations: What do you see? What concerns you? What are you willing to do?
6. **Balance responsibility visibly.** Create a simple responsibility map that distinguishes your work, others' work, shared work, and unresolved decisions.
7. **Build commitment before implementation.** Do not confuse approval with commitment. Ask stakeholders what they will personally change, support, stop, or protect.
8. **Use AI for follow-through.** Convert agreements into action plans, decision logs, meeting summaries, learning aids, and progress checkpoints.
9. **Convene for belonging, not just alignment.** Design meetings so people speak to possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment, and gifts—not only risks, updates, and approvals.
10. **Change the culture of the room you are in.** Treat every meeting as a place where trust, empowerment, and accountability can either be strengthened or weakened.

Questions That Accelerate the Human Side of the Work

Anyone who needs to influence others can use the following questions to keep AI-enabled work grounded in partnership, ownership, belonging, and empowerment:

- What problem do the people closest to the work truly own, and what problem are they hoping someone else will carry?
- Where is there public agreement but private hesitation?
- What would have to be different for the recommendation to matter?
- What resistance is being expressed indirectly through silence, delay, excessive detail, or requests for certainty?
- What decision needs to be made before more analysis becomes useful?
- How can AI reduce administrative load so people can spend more time in courageous conversation?
- Who is missing from the room whose voice would increase ownership, possibility, or dissent?
- What small act in this meeting would create more empowerment rather than dependency?

The Real Test

AI can help us prepare. AI can help us synthesize. AI can help us draft, model, and organize. But trust is still built person to person. Commitment is still created in conversation. And anyone who wants to influence others still has to do the courageous work of naming what matters.

AI may make work more efficient. It does not make partnership automatic.

Implications for Anyone Who Needs to Influence Others

For leaders, managers, project owners, functional experts, sales professionals, HR partners, transformation teams, educators, and community builders, the next differentiator will not be who can produce the fastest analysis. It will be who can combine AI-enabled speed with the human ability to create trust, shared ownership, and practical commitment.

Influence without authority is now a daily reality for people across organizations. Cross-functional work, matrixed teams, hybrid workplaces, distributed expertise, and fast-moving change all require people to partner across boundaries. That means learning to make clearer agreements, invite dissent, share responsibility, and create ownership in the everyday encounters where culture is actually formed.

The organizations that benefit most from AI will be those that also invest in the relational capabilities that make AI useful: trust, discernment, accountability, collaboration, and courage.

The question for anyone trying to influence others is this: are we using AI to become more present with colleagues, partners, and stakeholders, or to avoid the harder conversations that make real change possible?

Use AI to accelerate the mechanics of work. Use human collaboration practices to accelerate influence, partnership, ownership, belonging, and commitment. The future of work belongs to organizations that can do both.

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- Leader As Convener[®]: Lead through conversation, accountability, belonging, and commitment rather than control.
- Empowered at Work: Help people move from passive compliance to local ownership, accountability, and purposeful action.

