

# The Lawyer's Human Advantage: Preserving Authority, Trust, and Slow Thinking in the AI Era

By NATALIE LOEB AND DAVID SARNOFF



If you want to understand the emotional minefield that AI has introduced into the workplace, talk to mid-level managers. They are the ones supervising quality control of the AI-enthusiast (but inexperienced) junior staff they oversee; explaining AI use to senior leadership they report to; and confronting AI-generated suggestions by clients they work for.

Those conversations and relationship dynamics can be tough and awkward to navigate. But they can also help sharpen the leadership

skills needed now. As companies continue to operationalize AI, we believe four skills will become more critical than technical knowledge: judgment, active listening, empathy, and the discipline to enforce technology boundaries. Those skills never went out of style, but they've become more urgent today.

## THE AUTHORITY SHIFT: WHEN CLIENTS BRING THEIR OWN AI

Before the AI era, professionals like lawyers, accountants, and consultants relied on information

asymmetry for their authority. They knew more than their clients. Information was their power.

In the AI era, the knowledge gap is closing fast. Clients now arrive at meetings loaded with their own AI analysis, questions, and even conclusions.

Information is not the same thing as judgment or wisdom. Patients today have more medical data than ever, but that doesn't qualify them to direct an operation. Expertise is in application, experience, and a bedside manner.

But information can be wielded to undercut trust and put experts on the defensive. A client armed with an AI answer is ready to push back. That's why leaders must be ready to communicate about how they think, not just what they conclude. Today's knowledge work is as much about presentation as substance; it requires an understanding of how to build trust in an information-abundant environment.

## JUDGMENT AND SLOW THINKING AS A COMPETITIVE EDGE

AI has created well-known cautionary tales: [fabricated legal precedents](#), [phony academic studies cited in expert reports](#), [judicial sanctions](#). Those tales underscore a key workplace dynamic:

AI has changed our expectations for speed and efficiency, but the consequences of getting it wrong are still the same.

The late behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman's famous formulation of System 1 and System 2 thinking is especially relevant today. The slow thinking he identified as System 2—deliberate, analytical, logical—is crucial for resisting the pull toward premature confidence that AI-generated work can induce.

But leaders need to create space to flex their slow-thinking muscles, especially when the pressure for speed is high. AI's jagged edge means that its strength depends on the task and inputs, making it harder to know when it's more prone to error.

### ACTIVE LISTENING: THE SKILL THAT CANNOT BE OUTSOURCED TO AI

As AI continues to absorb work that humans used to do, committing to the human areas that cannot be outsourced will become crucial. One of them is active listening.

Active listening, like slow thinking, requires a focused effort. Our brains naturally want to wander or search for shortcuts. While someone else is talking, we want to formulate our response. But leadership requires the opposite instinct. It requires choosing to be present.

The ubiquitous AI-generated transcripts that now accompany meetings can help. Because they pick up everything that is said, leaders can focus on everything that is not—the hesitation before a client agrees with a recommendation, the frustration behind an employee's carefully chosen words, or the uncertainty that surfaces in a momentary pause. Those signals often matter as much as the conversation itself.

### EMPATHY IN A TIME OF ANXIETY AND DISRUPTION

The uncertainty and anxiety sparked by AI has reached every corner of the business world. Employees worry about relying on AI too much or too little. Senior leaders feel pressure to meet client expectations without compromising quality. Clients wonder what value they're getting from [AI-assisted work](#).

These feelings are why effective leaders spend as much time talking about trust as they do about efficiency.

Empathy is their superpower. It helps them understand client concerns before they become objections and gives employees direction before confusion sets in. When organizations are experiencing industry disruption, empathy can give employees the emotional safety to work effectively and feel connected.

### SETTING BOUNDARIES: A THREE-TIER FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE AI USE

In moments of profound change, leaders can help build trust by establishing clear rules and expectations. An internal framework for when to use AI can help:

1. **Permission-based work:** These are high-stakes tasks where AI use requires approval before deployment. Examples might include legal analysis used in a client matter, regulatory advice, strategic recommendations, or any work product where errors carry reputational, financial, or legal consequences.
2. **Judgment-based work:** In this category, professionals decide on a case-by-case basis whether AI meaningfully improves the work. Drafting an article summary for



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a client, preparing an initial research outline, or organizing information may benefit from AI assistance, but professional discretion determines the appropriate level of reliance.

3. **Autonomous work:** These are low-risk administrative functions where AI can operate with minimal oversight. Scheduling meetings, organizing calendars, creating transcriptions, or formatting documents are examples of tasks where efficiency gains can be captured with relatively limited risk.

The framework itself is less important than the mindset behind it: thoughtful deployment rather than indiscriminate adoption. Boundaries create clarity and build trust.

### THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE

Managing people through change is nothing new. But this technological revolution is different. Mid-level managers will keep standing in the crossfire between AI-fluent juniors, cautious executives, and AI-armed clients. The experiences may be uncomfortable, but they will sharpen their leadership skills by making them more human.

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Natalie Loeb and David Sarnoff are co-authors of "[Beyond the Courtroom: Proven Strategies from the Legal Field for Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, and Well-Being in the Modern Workplace](#)," published by [PLI Press](#) (Practising Law Institute).