

Why empathy, judgement and communication are your new career advantage

Written by [Dave Waller](#)

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With AI becoming increasingly adept at routine and analytical tasks, employers are placing greater value on human-centred skills. Here, Chartered Managers reveal which are the most important – and how to cultivate them



As AI busies itself with writing code, drafting reports, analysing data and diagnosing problems, where does that leave so-called soft skills? According to CMI's recent *Artificial Intelligence: Real Leadership report*, traditional human leadership capabilities "need dialling up".

Indeed, you may feel pressure to become a dab hand at manipulating the latest agentic AI, but it still takes a human to know what matters most, who will be affected by decisions and how best to deal with those consequences.

"Future employability will not depend simply on whether someone uses AI, because most people will," says Nasser Zahman Chowdhury CMgr MCMI, a CEO specialising in business process outsourcing, e-learning, AI adoption, operational scaling and global education services. "It will depend on whether they can use AI while still developing the human skills that make work reliable."

Emotional intelligence

As routine work becomes easier to automate, trust becomes a more powerful differentiator. Managers who can build confidence and relationships with clients, colleagues and stakeholders will be seen as the most valuable.

"In practice, this might mean noticing when someone in your team has become disengaged and listening properly during a difficult conversation," says Dr Koon Vui Yee CMgr MCMI, principal teaching fellow at Sunway Business School's Department of Management.

Critical thinking

Patrick O'Brien CMgr FCMI is managing director of the Amanuenses Network, which focuses on the development of soft skills. He points out that, in this data-rich age, simply gaining access to information is no longer a struggle; the challenge lies in working out which information deserves our confidence.

Artificial Intelligence; Real Leadership

Our report reveals that a striking 70% of managers seek advice from generative AI, rather than going to their managers for guidance. It reveals that the biggest barriers to successful AI adoption are not technical, but human, with a significant capability gap preventing many organisations from translating ambition into measurable business impact.

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"Leadership is not simply about finding more information," he says. "It's about identifying the information that matters and deciding what to do with it."

This means asking what's credible and relevant, what assumptions sit beneath it, what might be missing, and who or what we can trust.

"At some point, somebody has to determine what's right and appropriate in the context, accept responsibility for that choice and have the tenacity to act," Patrick adds.

Communication

Lorna Willis CMgr CCMI, chief executive of TechSkills, the UK's employer-led accreditation body for digital skills, points out that one major shift in the age of AI is that new starters now become managers immediately – instructing AI agents and other tools as if they were employees. And that means applying the same degree of clarity.

"If you're giving direction, your job is to set the best possible environment for your team to get the best possible output," she says. "Whether you're working with ChatGPT or a new agent, your responsibility is to give that tool clear direction."

Authenticity

As AI increases access to knowledge, Patrick believes that our identity as people will come more sharply into focus and become harder to hide. When the same information is readily available to everyone, "who I am" is at least as important as "what I know", he says.

"AI can help us produce an elegant email, article or presentation, but when somebody subsequently meets us face-to-face, do they encounter the same person as the digital voice they've been reading?" Patrick asks. "Or have we carefully curated an AI-assisted version of ourselves that sounds increasingly different? Authenticity, like trust, presence and the quality of our relationships, still has to come from us."

Patience

Lorna warns that, if people rely on AI to think for them, they risk losing the capacity to collaborate and coach younger employees, who need exposure to repetition, failure and feedback to grow.

The key, she says, is to hold on to your patience.

"You can spend two hours talking someone through a document, which is beneficial for both sides, or do it yourself using AI in ten minutes," she says. "The latter is a strong temptation, but it can be a tragedy."

Learning to be human

As for how to cultivate these human-centric skills, the secret lies in harnessing a trusty analogue method: practice. Dr Koon argues that you can develop these skills through your everyday interactions.

"Ask colleagues for feedback," she says. "Work with people outside your usual team, listen before offering your own view and, after an important decision, reflect not only on whether it worked but also on how it affected the people involved."

Patrick echoes these ideas, but cautions that creating new behaviours can involve some discomfort – something that may seem unfashionable in the era of AI agents.

"Human development frequently requires unlearning first," he says. "I've compared it with changing an old golf swing: before the new movement becomes natural, the old habit has to be recognised and then disrupted. Effective learning is not always friction-free."

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