

Newsletter – October 2026

Would You Work for an AI?

Why superintelligence doesn't necessarily mean superior leadership.

At a recent CEO conference, I was asked an interesting question: Would I work for an AI?

My immediate, instinctive, System 1 answer was “nope.”

But then I started thinking about why. And the more I thought about it, the more interesting the question became.

After all, the issue wasn't whether an AI could become more intelligent than me. That's increasingly plausible, if not already the case. The real question was whether being more intelligent would actually make it a better leader. And, perhaps more importantly, whether I'd want to work for it even if it did.

To be realistic, in some ways, I'm already working for AI. Whenever we're collaborating on something that requires action in the physical world, I'm essentially its “meat puppet” - the

one who actually makes things happen. Robotics, automation and new legal frameworks will increasingly change that, but for now, there's an argument that I'm already working for AI, at least some of the time.

Of course, that wasn't what the question was really asking. We were talking about a formal organisational structure, with an AI as the CEO, Chairman or some other position of authority. An entity to which human beings would actually report.

So I decided my instinctive answer deserved a little more System 2 thinking.

And that led me to three questions.

Does Greater Intelligence Make Someone a Better Leader?

Nope. Definitely not.

And this isn't just my opinion.

A 2017 study of managers in multinational companies found that leadership effectiveness increased with intelligence up to a point, peaking at around an IQ of 120, before declining at higher levels.

That doesn't mean exceptionally intelligent people can't be great leaders. It suggests something more interesting: beyond a certain point, additional intelligence doesn't translate into the behaviours that make someone effective in the eyes of the people they lead.

Source: Antonakis, House & Simonton (2017), Journal of Applied Psychology, 102(7), 1003–1021.

Leadership is about considerably more than intelligence. If being a great leader were simply a matter of IQ, the most successful CEOs would also be among the most intelligent people in the world. Yet that's clearly not a prerequisite.

Having the right answer, faster than everyone else, doesn't make someone a great leader. Being able to establish a vision, motivate people, align an organisation behind a strategy with an uncertain outcome, and then bring that strategy to life? That's leadership.

And here's a distinction I think is often overlooked: **the intellectually optimal answer isn't necessarily the organisationally optimal answer.**

A strategy that looks brilliant analytically but has little organisational commitment will achieve far less than an imperfect strategy that people understand, believe in and execute exceptionally well.

That doesn't mean good strategy is easy or that analytical intelligence doesn't matter. It means the quality of a strategic decision is only part of the equation. What happens after the decision is made is just as important, if not more so.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about what makes a great leader, and I've consistently come back to three pillars: Strategic Vision, High Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and a Growth Mindset.

Intelligence can contribute to all three, but none is simply a measure of how intelligent you are.

Strategic Vision isn't only about identifying the right direction. It's about communicating that direction, involving people, building commitment and aligning an organisation to execute it.

High EQ is about understanding yourself and others, adapting to different people and situations, and developing the trust and relationships that allow people to perform at their best.

And a Growth Mindset requires something that can be particularly challenging for highly intelligent, successful people: intellectual humility. The willingness to question your own assumptions, recognize that someone else may have a better answer, and continue developing yourself and the people around you.

In other words, great leadership isn't simply about what you know. It's about what you do with your capabilities and, importantly, what you enable other people to accomplish.

Now, on the flip side, I'm certainly not suggesting you need to be stupid to be a CEO. But there's a joke I've used when introducing myself as a CEO at presentations that I think makes the point rather well.

> *"One of the best pieces of leadership advice I've ever received - and something I've found to be absolutely true - is to always hire people smarter than yourself.*
>
> *Now, follow that logic.*
>
> *As CEO, you hire people smarter than yourself. And because they're smart, they do the same thing, hiring people smarter than themselves. And so on, and so on, throughout the organisation.*
>
> *Which means that if everyone follows this excellent advice, the CEO is literally the dumbest person in the company.*
>
> *Not the smartest".*

It's a joke, obviously, but there's a serious point behind it. The leader's job isn't to be the most intelligent person in the organisation. It's to make the organisation more capable by bringing together, developing and enabling people whose collective capabilities exceed their own.

So, does greater intelligence automatically make someone a better leader?

No.

But I think there's an even more interesting question.

Could Greater Intelligence Actually Make Leadership Worse?

This is where the relationship between intelligence and leadership becomes particularly interesting, because sometimes having the smartest person in the room can be a significant disadvantage.

I've talked and written quite a bit about what I call the Hero Trap.

It's the situation where a leader, often highly intelligent, experienced and capable, continually jumps in to solve problems and save the day. The team encounters a challenge, the leader recognizes the issue, provides the answer, and everyone moves forward.

On the surface, that looks like effective leadership. The problem is solved, the team has direction, and the leader has demonstrated their value.

But what happens over time?

People start bringing problems to the leader rather than working through them themselves. They become less inclined to challenge assumptions, exercise judgment or take ownership, because they've learned that the leader will probably provide the answer anyway.

And why wouldn't they? The leader is often right, and going directly to the person with the answer is usually the fastest and easiest route.

The leader may feel increasingly indispensable, while the team becomes increasingly dependent. Development slows, initiative declines, and the organisation becomes constrained by the very person who believes they're making it more effective.

The leader's intelligence has become a constraint on the intelligence of the organisation.

To illustrate the distinction, imagine two leaders presented with exactly the same problem.

The first immediately recognizes the issue and provides the correct answer. The team implements it, and the problem is solved.

The second leader also recognizes the issue and knows the answer. But instead of immediately providing it, they ask the team to work through the problem, challenge their assumptions, consider alternatives and develop a solution.

The first leader will be faster today. But the second is building a much more capable organisation for tomorrow.

Neither approach is always right. Sometimes circumstances demand an immediate decision, and there are situations where withholding an answer would be irresponsible.

But great leaders understand that solving the immediate problem, and developing the people solving it, are two different objectives. They know when to provide direction and when to create the space for others to think.

Now imagine taking the Hero Trap and adding artificial superintelligence.

A leader with access to extraordinary amounts of information, exceptional analytical capabilities, near-instantaneous responses and, potentially, a better answer to almost every question.

Why would anyone bother struggling through a problem when the boss can solve it in seconds?

That may sound speculative, but we're already seeing some of the underlying behavioural patterns in the way people use AI today.

In a randomized study involving nearly 1,000 Turkish high-school mathematics students, researchers examined what happened when students were given access to generative AI while practising mathematics.

Students using a standard AI assistant performed substantially better during practice phase - approximately 48% better than the control group. But when the AI was removed and students were tested on their own, they performed approximately 17% worse than students who hadn't used it.

The students had become better at completing the assignments with assistance, but not necessarily better at understanding and independently solving the underlying problems.

There was, however, another interesting finding.

The researchers also tested a more carefully designed AI tutor that provided guided assistance rather than simply supplying answers. Those students benefited from AI during practice without experiencing the same decline in independent test performance.

That's a fascinating distinction.

The difference wasn't simply whether students had access to artificial intelligence. It was **how that intelligence was being used**.

One approach helped them complete the task. The other was designed to help them learn how to complete the task.

Source: Bastani et al., PNAS, 2025.

And it's not just students.

In research involving 758 BCG consultants, generative AI significantly improved performance on tasks that fell within its capabilities. Consultants were faster and produced higher-quality work.

But when given a task where the AI was likely to make mistakes, the results reversed. Consultants working without AI arrived at the correct answer 84.5% of the time, compared with roughly 60 - 70% for those using AI.

The researchers observed that participants became overly reliant on the technology, accepting its recommendations rather than independently evaluating them.

Source: Dell'Acqua et al., HBS Working Paper 24-013, 2023.

Now, these studies weren't about AI leadership. They were about people using AI as a tool, and we shouldn't pretend they directly demonstrate what would happen in an organisation led by an AI.

But they raise a question that I think is extremely relevant.

If people can become overly dependent on a tool that consistently provides answers, what happens when that same capability becomes their boss?

When the source of the answers also becomes the source of authority?

We already know that people can defer too readily to perceived expertise. We also know that human beings are quite happy to conserve mental effort when an easier option is available. Put those tendencies together with a leader who almost always has the answer, and you have the conditions for an extraordinary version of the Hero Trap.

Of course, this isn't inevitable.

An AI could be designed to behave more like the effective tutor in the Turkish study: asking questions, challenging assumptions, encouraging independent thinking and helping people develop their own capabilities. In principle, it might even do those things more consistently than many human leaders.

And that's really the point.

The intelligence itself isn't what makes the difference. It's how that intelligence is applied to the people being led.

Superintelligence doesn't automatically produce superior leadership. Used poorly, it could actually undermine the development, judgment and independence of the people in the organisation.

Which brings me to the third question, and the one that ultimately matters most to my personal answer.

Even If AI Could Become a Great Leader, Would I Want to Work for One?

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that we solve the problems I've described.

We develop an AI that doesn't fall into the Hero Trap. It knows when to provide an answer and when to coach someone toward one. It can establish a compelling strategic direction, adapt its communication to different people, recognize emotional cues, provide thoughtful feedback and consistently encourage learning and development.

In other words, it demonstrates the behaviours we associate with great leadership.

Would I work for it then?

I still think my answer would be no. But now we're moving away from intelligence and performance into something more personal, and perhaps more fundamental.

What do we actually value in a leadership relationship?

Trust is an obvious place to start.

We often talk about trust as though it's one thing, but there are different dimensions to it. For this discussion, I think two are particularly important: trust in competence and trust in commitment.

We trust a leader's competence when we believe they understand the business, have sound judgment, can make good decisions and possess the capabilities to help the organisation succeed.

An advanced AI might be exceptionally good at earning that kind of trust. It could demonstrate a strong track record, provide well-reasoned recommendations, communicate consistently and perhaps outperform many human leaders on a wide range of tasks.

But there's another dimension to trust.

We also want to believe that our leader cares about us, is committed to our success and will support us when things become difficult.

We want to know that they'll stand behind us when we've taken a reasonable risk that didn't work out. That they'll challenge us when necessary, but also support our development. That they won't simply sacrifice our interests because doing so would improve some short-term performance measure.

Those are not merely questions of competence. They're questions of commitment and relationship.

As social beings, we've evolved to depend on relationships with other people. And part of trusting another person can come from believing they have something personally at stake in that relationship.

They have a reputation. They have their own experiences of success and failure. They understand uncertainty not only as a concept, but as something they've lived through. They may share in the personal consequences of the decisions you make together.

Could an AI reproduce the behaviours associated with that kind of commitment?

Quite possibly.

Could people come to trust it as a result?

I wouldn't rule that out either.

But would the relationship mean the same thing?

That's where I struggle.

I've had the privilege of working with some exceptional leaders, including one with whom I helped build a billion-dollar start-up from scratch.

I certainly trusted his competence. I wouldn't have wanted to work with him otherwise. But looking back, that wasn't what made the relationship particularly valuable.

It was knowing that we could count on each other.

We had a shared objective, a common commitment and a willingness to divide and conquer whatever challenges appeared. There were difficult decisions, disagreements, uncertainty and plenty of situations where neither of us had all the answers.

We weren't simply exchanging information or executing a series of tasks. We were navigating something difficult together, with a shared sense of responsibility for what happened.

That relationship made the experience more meaningful, and I believe it made us both more effective.

Would an AI have been able to provide better analysis, make faster recommendations or even help us avoid some mistakes?

Very possibly.

But I don't believe that would necessarily have made the experience better.

And this is where I come back to the distinction between a behaviour and a relationship.

An AI might provide thoughtful feedback, recognize when someone is struggling, respond empathetically and offer precisely the kind of support that person needs. From a behavioural perspective, it could look very much like excellent leadership.

It might even produce excellent results.

But I think there are two different questions here.

Does the behaviour produce the same outcome for the individual, team or organisation?

And does the relationship itself carry the same meaning?

We shouldn't automatically assume the answers are identical.

Part of the value of human leadership lies in the relationship itself, not just in the outcomes that relationship produces.

A great mentor doesn't merely transfer knowledge. A great colleague doesn't merely contribute expertise. And a great leader doesn't merely provide direction.

We value the shared experiences, challenges, trust, growth and sometimes even the disagreements. There's something meaningful about navigating difficult situations together, knowing that the other person has their own experiences, vulnerabilities, ambitions and responsibilities.

I sometimes think about this in the context of sport.

Imagine watching a robot run around a track significantly faster than the world's best human sprinter. It would be an impressive demonstration of engineering and technology.

But would it make me stop watching human athletics?

Of course not.

Because watching sport isn't simply about observing the fastest possible movement around a track. It's about the human achievement behind it: the preparation, courage, pressure, disappointment, determination and emotion.

The fact that a machine could perform the physical task better wouldn't necessarily diminish the value of watching humans do it.

I think something similar applies to leadership.

Even if an AI could eventually perform every leadership behaviour better than a human, that wouldn't automatically mean the human leadership experience had become less valuable.

Now, I recognize that other people may see this differently.

Someone who has worked for inconsistent, self-serving or emotionally destructive human leaders might find the prospect of an AI boss extremely attractive. A leader that's patient, fair, consistent, available and genuinely focused on helping them succeed could be a substantial improvement.

And I wouldn't dismiss that perspective.

In fact, it reinforces something important: human leaders don't automatically deserve our trust or loyalty simply because they're human. They still have to earn it.

But for me, leadership isn't only about achieving the most efficient outcome. It's also about the relationships we build and the people we become through the experience.

And I value the messiness of that human experience - the imperfect communication, the different personalities, the occasional conflict, the shared challenges and the satisfaction of accomplishing something difficult together.

Not because it's always easy.

Precisely because it isn't.

So, Would I Work for an AI?

My immediate, System 1 answer at the conference was no.

After spending considerably more time thinking about it, my System 2 answer is still no.

But I now have a much clearer understanding of why.

It isn't because I believe human beings will always be more intelligent, more capable or even better at every leadership behaviour.

I don't.

It's because greater intelligence, even superintelligence, doesn't automatically translate into better leadership. And when that intelligence is used primarily to provide answers, it can actually weaken the capabilities of the people being led.

The purpose of great leadership isn't simply to have the best answers. It's to build an organisation capable of finding, challenging and executing better answers - without always depending on the leader.

An AI might eventually become exceptionally good at doing that. Perhaps even better than most humans.

But that still leaves the question of whether I would want to work for one.

And even if an artificial intelligence could deliver extraordinary leadership outcomes, I suspect I'd still prefer the imperfect, unpredictable, sometimes frustrating experience of being led by - and leading - other human beings.

Not because it's necessarily more efficient.

Because, for me, the human experience is part of the point.

So my answer is still no.

Although, in the spirit of intellectual humility, I'm not going to pretend that answer could never change.