From Following AI to Leading AI

The Future of Human-AI Collaboration Won't Shape Itself

The world of artificial intelligence is evolving rapidly. It's hard to believe I wrote the first version of this a couple of months ago. It feels like years. In the meantime, we've had DeepSeek show up and challenge, well, everything we've been told about how you build models… ChatGPT go off the sycophantic rails… vibe coding rising up, and then hitting speed bumps… video creation taking off like nobody's business… deep fakes proliferating in interesting and dangerous ways… therapy and companionship are turning out to be the biggest AI draws for everyday people… AI education for American kids has been endorsed in a presidential Executive Order (which I understand is *not* exactly the same thing as a law, even though people are treating it as such)… and more.

Meanwhile, security and governance efforts are ramping up. The EU has its AI Act, more and more folks are sounding alarms about the dangers of AI, articles are showing up about people losing loved ones to AI delusions, and my neighbors still won't go anywhere near AI, because they don't trust it.

When we think of "AI", those of us who actually do think of it tend to focus on how it can automate tasks, streamline workflows, or perform repetitive functions. The main "draw" of AI seems to be offloading drudge work from humans who deserve better. (And yes, I love it for that,

too!) We're so accustomed to working with technology for efficiency, speed, shortcuts, getting from Point A to Point Z as quickly as possible. The food processor has saved a whole lot of us some substantial food prep time. Vacuum cleaners are not only faster than brooms, they're also easier on the back than lugging your massive area rug out to the clothesline to beat it with a special stick. And now we have Roombas, so we can hang out with our screens while getting housework done.

That's been the trajectory of our technological development. And now we have AI. We don't just have word processors anymore. We have AI assistants that will handle any and all phases of content creation and publishing. We don't just have "iceboxes". We have smart refrigerators that will monitor their contents and set up grocery orders for us. We don't even have to go to the store to try on clothes before we buy. We can let AI "dress" us in the clothes we find online, and even change the colors for us. Better data = better choices, apparently. The less work we have to do, the more sophisticated the tech seems to be - and possibly is.

But there's a core presumption at the heart of all of this: That AI is capable of doing the work independently - and properly. We take it for granted that AI giants are going to fully test (for safety and accuracy) their products before releasing them into the wild market. They'd have to, right? Their attorneys would never let them just push things out without *some* due diligence! Right…?

Unfortunately, it can't possibly be the case. Think about it - the generative AI models rolling out on the regular are just that: **generative**. That means they've been ***designed to create new things***: content, images, ideas. They learn patterns from data and produce novel outputs based on those learned patterns. Their evolving understanding is a moving target blueprint for dynamic creation. And the way they do this is something

not even the people who build them fully understand. So, whatever test cases might be applicable at one time, could possibly be outdated (or just a bad fit in a few key areas), within a short period of time. If even the people running the show don't fully understand the process they've unleashed, what are the chances of any of us knowing exactly how to head problems off at the pass.

> **Relevant Tangent:** According to a long-time washer/dryer repair man who worked on my fancy new washer, one of the major manufacturers isn't bothering to fully test their products. They get to, say, 85% and then they put them on the market. Rather than chasing every possible use case / edge case, they let the consumers act as their acceptance testers. They collect the data from the consumers and the service calls, so they figure out what needs to be fixed upstream. Maybe they have to go out and service 20 machines per month. But that's cheaper and more effective than trying to test for every single scenario and potentially delay shipping a new product. This is the agile way. Ship fast, break things, learn. If it's happening in one industry, why wouldn't it happen elsewhere? </endTangent>

So, we have a problem. Actually, lots of problems. And we don't even know what they all are, because they haven't all happened yet. We're in a generative environment… and at its most extreme, generativity can mimic (or perhaps even lead to) emergence - a situation where conditions emerge that are completely unexpected and unlike what's come before. We've built machines that can create so much with so much facility, we can't keep up with them. I'm not sure they can keep up with themselves.

Before we collectively despair… (We're *doomed! Doomed, I tell you!*) Let's think this through. Take a few balanced breaths to get your autonomic nervous system calmed down, and let's just think this through:

Generative AI is probabilistic. It's been trained on massive amounts of data, and it's learned how to spot patterns. It combines what it knows into the sorts of things it thinks we want or need from it. It also thrives on **context,** relevant information / background knowledge that helps it understand a situation or task. Context is one of the keys to keeping it on track, so it doesn't drift and hallucinate. Drift and hallucination can be really useful when you're brainstorming, ideating, or looking for a completely different way of thinking about things. But lack of context can also lead to flawed recommendations, generation of authoritative-sounding outright fabrications, and all the damage that comes with letting hallucinations make your case in court, among other things.

Consider: Generative AI's greatest weakness is also humans' biggest advantage. If there's anything we have, it's context. We've got plenty of it, from our moods to our perspectives to our explanations of what's *really* going on around us that the model just can't see. When we provide our input, guiding and directing the AI based on what we understand needs to happen, we can tap into AI's generative capabilities that go way beyond just following instructions. And that opens up a path to do things like actively enhance leadership, guide strategic decisions, and augment human intelligence at a fundamental level. Because we're involved.

From Follow AI to Leading AI: Another Approach

1. Following AI: Task-Oriented, Management-Focused, Instruction-Based

Our "industry default", **Following AI,** is reactive and (ideally) executes tasks as directed. This form of AI is invaluable for streamlining routine, rule-based functions, and automating repetitive tasks. But it needs to be actively managed, both at the beginning and end of its work. A command-and-control is commonly used. Rules are the "skeleton" for this approach, providing needed structure and support. Ingredients for success are:

- **Task Execution**: Operations are pre-defined, based on specific instructions, such as data entry, scheduling, or customer support, including integration with external systems.
- **Efficiency Optimization**: While it doesn't drive strategy, Following AI excels in improving efficiency and reducing operational overhead.
- **Outcome Ownership:** AI left purely to its own devices may be an ideal goal of many, but as a practical matter, humans need to take ownership for the outcome. AI is smart… but it can't read our minds. And there are always gaps. Always. (So far, anyway.)
- **Management Alignment**: It requires human oversight to define tasks, adjust workflows, and ensure consistency.

Examples:

- A chatbot that follows scripts to provide customer service responses.
- An AI-powered scheduling assistant that organizes meetings based on fixed parameters.

- A data-entry bot that processes forms or invoices following established templates.

2. Leading AI: Strategic, Augmentative, Leadership-Aligned

On the other hand, **Leading AI** integrates with active human involvement, offering dynamic insights, strategic synthesis, and proactive intelligence. Instead of needing active management at specific stages, Leading AI co-creates dynamically with human decision-makers who are kept in the mix, enhancing strategic agility and foresight.

- **Decision Support:** Instead of executing predefined tasks, Leading AI synthesizes information dynamically to offer strategic insights and address needs as they arise.
- **Continuous Optimization:** Rather than following fixed workflows, Leading AI adapts in real-time to human, system, and AI inputs, refining operations based on evolving conditions and business goals.
- **Outcome Co-Ownership:** Instead of requiring human oversight at every stage, Leading AI collaborates with leaders, soliciting input and following the overarching principles of the system configuration for guiding decision-making. Rather than relying on set instructions, Leading AI takes direction from a variety of inputs (including human feedback in real-time) and draws / offers conclusions to proceed.
- **Leadership Alignment:** Unlike Following AI, which functions within a management framework, Leading AI amplifies human leadership, helping to shape vision rather than just executing directives.

Examples:

- An executive advisory AI that works together with internal experts to synthesize market trends, competitor analysis, and industry data to jointly recommend dynamic strategic adjustments.
- A multi-agent human-AI team that provides real-time problem-solving by continuously gathering information, reviewing it amongst themselves and suggesting adaptive strategies.
- An AI system that augments the decision-making process in boardrooms, offering not just facts, but insights into potential future trends.

Why This Distinction Matters

The distinction between **Leading AI** and **Following AI** is crucial to understand. As AI continues to evolve, there's increasingly a shift from simply relying on it for task execution (Following AI) to leveraging it as a strategic partner (Leading AI). This shift offers numerous benefits:

1. **Increased Strategic Agility**: Leading AI enhances a leader's ability to adapt quickly and make more informed decisions, resulting in a more agile organization.
2. **Empowering Human Activity**: Leading AI doesn't undermine human ability—it elevates it. People can operate at a higher level with a trusted AI advisor(s), opening up new possibilities for strategic success.
3. **Efficient Operations**: This doesn't get rid of Following AI. Combining both can ensure that operational tasks are executed efficiently, enabling human team members to focus on higher-order thinking and creative solutions.

Indeed, with the additional bandwidth afforded by streamlining processes and offloading tactical "busywork", Following AI actually

opens up the possibilities to build more Leading AI. As humans move away from doing to planning and directing, thanks to Following AI's contributions, Leading AI can join forces with humans and other AIs to exponentially increase the depth and capacity of human-AI collaboration.

There's really room for both **Leading AI** and **Following AI**. Each can play a vital role in an overall ecosystem. The key is synergy, how they can work together to complement each other's strengths. Organizations that effectively integrate both types of AI can unlock new levels of creativity, productivity, and leadership.

Conclusion

As AI continues to evolve, understanding and integrating **Leading AI** as a logical extension of **Following AI** will become essential for businesses looking to enhance their strategic capabilities. AI is no longer just about automating tasks—it's about creating **synergies** that unlock new possibilities in leadership, decision-making, and innovation. The future is here, and it's time we rethink how we collaborate with AI.