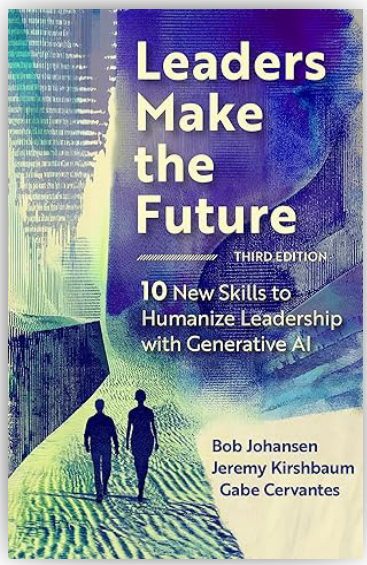
Leaders Make the Future, Third Edition

10 New Skills to Humanize Leadership with Generative AI

Bob Johansen, Jeremy Kirshbaum, and Gabe Cervantes



ISBN: 979-8-8905-7032-1
Estimated reading time of summary: 7 minutes

Key Takeaways

- Senior leaders should embrace *futureback thinking* by looking ahead to the future but taking action in the present.
- Leadership skills that can be augmented by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) include *dilemma flipping, bio-engaging, immersive learning, depolarization, commons creating*, and *smart mob swarming*.
- AI augmentation will help leaders thrive in the *brittle, anxious, nonlinear*, and *incomprehensible (BANI)* future.
- GenAI will be used to reframe dilemmas, find alternative solutions, and test complex scenarios.
- AI augmentation uses technology to amplify abilities, and leaders should be discerning about the tools they use.

Overview

Over the next decade, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will have a profound impact on leadership. In order to thrive, leaders will need to embrace *futureback thinking*. In the third edition of **Leaders Make the Future**, Bob Johansen, Jeremy Kirshbaum, and Gabe Cervantes teach leaders 10 AI-augmented skills to help them succeed in an increasingly digital world.

Generative AI as a Leadership Gamechanger

Artificial intelligence (AI) has existed for many years, but generative AI (GenAI) is relatively recent. GenAI creates things that didn't exist before, such as new actions, videos, text, and images. It will likely have profound implications for leaders over the next decade.

For leaders to be successful, they'll need to embrace AI augmentation. AI will be used as a thought partner to refine a leader's ideas or help them push boundaries. While it's unlikely senior leaders will be replaced by AI, it will change how they lead.

Over the next decade, *AI agents* will become more skilled at accomplishing tasks. An agent is a system that makes decisions and takes actions in the digital world. AI agents of the future will automatically perform tasks that constitute people's entire jobs or professions. These agents will be able to carry out actions without constant human oversight and make some decisions on their own. In the future, leaders will be responsible for managing both their teams and their AI agents.

Leaders must embrace *futureback thinking*, which involves planning for the future and working backward to achieve those goals. They need to understand the drivers of change and accept that change shouldn't be resisted but harnessed. With foresight, leaders can find opportunities for growth and innovation.

Augmented Futureback Curiosity

Curiosity is a human trait that will be needed in the *brittle, anxious, nonlinear*, and *incomprehensible (BANI)* future. Curiosity doesn't always have an immediate business benefit, but that doesn't mean that it can't lead to the creation of useful projects. Leaders who are driven by curiosity are open to experimentation and can quickly pivot when an idea isn't successful.

GenAI will help leaders explore ideas without wasting valuable resources and will create rapid prototypes. These prototypes can help leaders find ideas that work or accept their failures and learn from them. They should involve minimal planning and follow a "learn-as-you-go" style.

Augmented Clarity

In the future, *clarity* will be prized, but *certainty* will not. Clarity involves asking questions, but certainty is about getting answers. While clarity can be fueled by curiosity, certainty can be seen as rigid and resistant to change. Leaders will want clarity to know what to do and where to go, even when it's not obvious. GenAI will be used by senior leaders to find clarity and explore possibilities.

Sensors are becoming increasingly common. They'll be interconnected and generate abundant data, which could create both clarity and confusion. While sensor data helps leaders understand what's really going on, augmentation will allow them to go inside the datasets, rather than merely categorizing or summarizing the information.

Augmented Dilemma Flipping

While a problem often has a solution, a *dilemma* is a recurring problem that can't be easily solved. *Dilemma flipping* is a way of seeing a challenge as an opportunity. Dilemmas can seem overwhelming, but they have potential, even when it's difficult to see.

The future will be full of dilemmas. To navigate them, leaders will need to be flexible and creative. Leaders can flip dilemmas by:

- Changing their point of view and turning the problem upside down.
- Visualizing the dilemma from the view of other domains.
- Asking "what-if" questions for many possible scenarios.
- Spending time with the people affected by the dilemma to understand their point of view.

GenAI will flip dilemmas by brainstorming alternative solutions and reframing situations. AI tools will also create scenarios that prepare leaders for unforeseen consequences that may occur.

Augmented Bio-engaging

Bio-engaging is seeing the world from nature's point of view. Leaders who bio-engage are aware of the natural cycles of the planet and respond with care. Bio-engaging requires big-picture thinking, planting seeds for the future, and anticipating what future generations will need to continue living on this planet. It's about respecting the consequences of our actions and seeing them as opportunities to make a positive difference.

Leaders who bio-engage:

- Are inspired by nature's resilience and adaptation.
- Have empathy for the environment and see people as a part of nature.
- Feel a sense of responsibility for future generations.

GenAI can help leaders think about the future and the choices they make for the planet. It can create simulations to help them understand the environment and design better solutions that harmonize with nature. GenAI will also be a useful resource for organizations to find ways to save energy, though the energy used to power AI will be detrimental to the planet if the power doesn't come from renewable resources.

Augmented Immersive Learning

First-person engagement with a world that's different than your own, such as gaming, virtual worlds, and simulation, is known as *immersive learning*. This interactive type of learning teaches new skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

GenAI will be able to create complex challenges for leaders, giving them a safe environment to practice these skills. These virtual environments are low-risk, high-return ways for leaders to try out new ideas before using them in the real world. Immersive learning will become easier in the future. As technology advances, more sophisticated learning environments will be possible.

Immersive learning requires being open-minded to new experiences, a skill that many leaders may be lacking. They'll need to step outside their existing roles and embrace very different experiences in order to learn. Leaders should seek out these experiences, even if they make them uncomfortable.

Augmented Depolarizing

Leaders must be able to calm tense situations and help people communicate with one another. *Constructive depolarization* is an attempt to turn conflict into dialogue. As the world becomes more polarized, these conflicts turn into dilemmas rather than problems that can be easily solved.

In the BANI future, extremism and polarization will become more common. Engaging with conflicting groups may prove difficult for leaders. Those who possess depolarizing skills will be:

- Active listeners who are open to other points of view.
- Empathetic and relate to what others are feeling.
- Open communicators who create a safe space for open dialogue.
- Collaborators who find ways for people to work together without conflict.
- Agile managers who are flexible to changing their approaches when needed.

GenAI will help leaders better understand others' perspectives, find alternative points of view, and discover common ground among differing groups of people. The use of AI tools will also help leaders develop empathy and learn about their own biases. These skills will be important for leaders as they learn to navigate and resolve conflicts.

Augmented Commons Creating

Commons are shared assets that benefit many people. These assets may be physical, such as parks, beaches, or markets, but they can also be shared platforms. Commons creation allows for greater competition, which may result in higher profits. Commons can benefit entire industries, not just one company.

Commons require reciprocity. While self-interest is still important, there's more focus on the value the commons brings to the community. All players must contribute even as they benefit from it. For a commons to be sustainable, leaders should trust that they'll get back more in return.

In the future, leaders may rely on GenAI to create new commons. These tools can help leaders explore new ideas, test scenarios, and assess risks. However, the overuse of GenAI could mean the loss of the human touch, which is important for successful commons.

Leaders who are skilled at commons creating have:

- The vision to see the potential of the shared asset.
- A collaborative spirit and the desire to work with others.
- The ability to see beyond today's competition to comprehend the benefits of collaboration.

- The technological ability to create prototypes that make commons creation possible.
- Empathy and sensitivity to build trusting relationships.

Augmented Smart Mob Swarming

Smart mob swarming brings large groups of people and AI agents together for a common purpose, such as nurturing business or creating social change networks. Smart mob swarms are intelligent, unpredictable, and too complex for any one actor to control them.

Smart mob swarms will become more common in the next decade, and organizations may soon comprise thousands or even millions of them. Leaders will need the skills to organize and influence them. Leadership teams or associations may reimagine themselves as smart mob swarms, changing how organizations operate.

Not all smart mobs have good intentions. Some mobs, such as terrorist groups, often have access to more sophisticated tools than more moderate groups. Cyberwarfare is already a threat, but new variations, such as meme warfare, may be used by terrorist groups in the next decade. Unfortunately, smart mob swarms will allow them to spread.

Augmented Strength with Humility

Leaders need strength to thrive, but they should also practice humility. The best leaders often don't receive recognition for their ideas and are content to lead without getting attention for themselves. Though top leaders might have to deal with some level of notoriety, they shouldn't try to become celebrities. Instead, humble strength will be a desirable skill.

Leaders who are strong and humble:

- Are able to balance clarity with self-awareness.
- Listen carefully and are empathetic.
- Consider other points of view.
- Take responsibility for their actions.
- Share information and encourage feedback.
- Work for the success and welfare of their organization.

A leader who's strong and humble is usually also transparent. As the use of sensors and wireless connectivity increases, there will be more opportunity for transparency, and it will be harder to hide from wrongdoing. People will have an increased desire for transparency in the future, which may be seen as more of a dilemma than a problem that can be easily solved.

Human Calming

Calm leaders often make the best decisions. Leaders should be grounded in their own values and ethics before deciding to augment with AI. While it may be difficult for leaders to find and exude a sense of calm, it's a vital skill.

Leaders may use GenAI as a tool, but they shouldn't rely on technology to achieve success. The best leaders will be discerning with the technologies they use. They'll understand that

while technology should be used to amplify their abilities, they're still the ones making the decisions.

About the Authors

Bob Johansen has worked for more than 50 years as a professional futurist, focusing on the human side of new technologies. He was one of the first social scientists to study the human and organizational impacts of the Internet, dating back to when it was called the ARPAnet. Johansen served as president of Institute for the Future (IFTF) from 1996 to 2004 and is a distinguished fellow. He now invests his time with IFTF sponsors, writing, delivering public speeches, and facilitating top-executive workshops across a wide range of organizations.

Jeremy Kirshbaum is a GenAI developer, venture builder, and strategist who's been working with clients to understand, plan, and implement generative AI projects since 2019. As the founder of genAI consultancy Handshake, he develops genAI systems for nonprofits, research groups, companies, and governments. Kirshbaum has collaborated with senior leaders at Walmart, Kellogg, Deloitte, and other companies, guiding them through the evolving landscape of genAI and emerging technologies.

Gabe Cervantes is a strategist in scaling foresight. He's collaborated with a variety of stakeholders and partners in different industries, sectors, and geographies to create custom forecasts. As a lead in IFTF's Foresight Essentials programs, he supports leaders in learning, understanding, and implementing foresight projects. He pioneered a program that teaches executives how to apply futureback thinking to develop present-day strategy on what to do next. Before joining IFTF, Cervantes helped Silicon Valley start-ups in understanding consumer needs and developing stronger sales and go-to-market strategies.

Purchase the Book