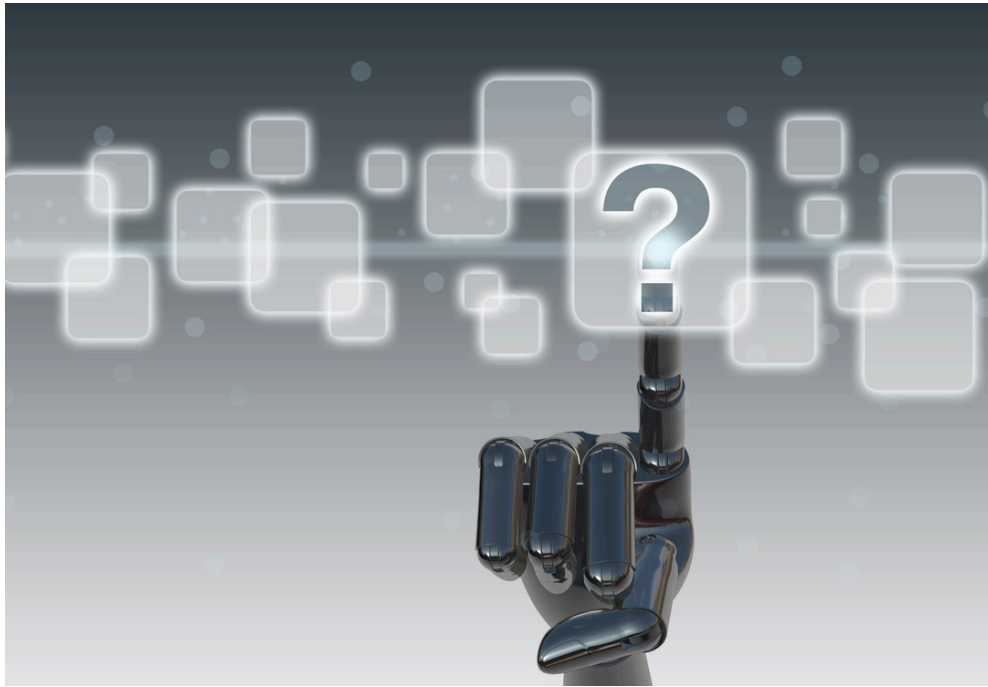# Bridging the AI Gap: Why Leaders Must Move Beyond the "What" to the "How"

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In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), knowledge is power – but only if it is actionable. Across industries, leaders are inundated with discussions about the transformative potential of AI. They learn about tools like ChatGPT or Gemini, revolutionary features, and the industries being reshaped by this technology. But here lies the challenge: knowing *what* AI can do is not enough. Without understanding *how* to implement it effectively, even the most advanced technologies become untapped potential.

This gap between theory and application is particularly pronounced in education, leadership, and governance. Whether in classrooms, boardrooms, or C-suites, there is an urgent need to shift the focus from theoretical discussions to practical applications of AI.

The Limitations of "Knowing the What"

Universities, business schools, and executive training programs often focus on the "what" – what AI is, what it can achieve, and what technologies are emerging. While this is valuable for building awareness, it leaves a critical gap: how to translate that knowledge into practice. For example, understanding that ChatGPT can streamline content creation or customer engagement is one thing, but knowing how to integrate it into an enterprise's workflows, train teams to use it effectively, and align it with business goals is another.

This disconnect can have real consequences for organizations. Leaders who understand AI conceptually but lack the expertise to implement it risk stagnation, poor decision-making, and missed opportunities. Moreover, as AI becomes a critical driver of competitive advantage, companies that fail to move from theory to practice risk falling behind more agile competitors.

Why the "How" Matters in the Boardroom

The same principle holds true at the highest levels of leadership. Boards and C-suites often engage in high-level discussions about AI's potential but struggle to operationalize these insights. What does AI mean for *this* company, in *this* industry, at *this* moment? How can AI tools address specific challenges, improve efficiencies, or open new market opportunities?

Answering these questions requires more than awareness; it requires expertise. Boards and leadership teams need members who not only understand the possibilities of AI but also have hands-on experience implementing it. These are the individuals who can guide organizations through the complexities of integrating AI into strategy, operations, and decision-making.

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Practical AI Knowledge: A Critical Leadership Competency

Practical AI knowledge is becoming a core competency for leaders. Here's why:

1. Strategic Integration: Leaders with implementation experience can identify the specific ways AI can add value to their organization. They understand how to align AI initiatives with broader business objectives, ensuring that technology investments deliver measurable outcomes.

2. Navigating Complexities: Implementing AI involves overcoming challenges such as data integration, organizational change, and ethical considerations. Leaders who know the "how" are better equipped to address these complexities and avoid pitfalls.

3. Maximizing ROI: AI investments only pay off when they're applied effectively. Leaders with practical AI expertise know how to prioritize initiatives, allocate resources, and measure impact.

4. Driving Cultural Change: Successful AI implementation requires buy-in across the organization. Leaders who understand the practical side of AI can foster collaboration, build trust, and create a culture that embraces innovation.

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Rethinking Education and Leadership Development

This shift from "what" to "how" must begin in education and leadership development. Universities, executive training programs, and leadership academies must go beyond introducing new technologies to teaching their application. This includes hands-on learning, case studies, and industry-specific scenarios that prepare leaders to implement AI in real-world contexts.

For boards and C-suites, this means prioritizing practical expertise when recruiting new members. Organizations should seek out leaders who have firsthand experience with AI implementation – whether through previous roles, project leadership, or deep technical collaboration. These individuals bring a unique perspective that bridges the gap between innovation and execution.

The Future of AI-Driven Leadership

AI's potential is undeniable, but its power lies in its application. For organizations to thrive in an AI-driven world, their leaders must go beyond understanding what AI can do. They must know how to make it work for their specific challenges, goals, and contexts. This is not just a technological shift – it's a cultural one, requiring leaders who are curious, collaborative, and willing to engage deeply with both the opportunities and complexities AI brings.

For boards and C-suites, this is a call to action: prioritize the "how" in your leadership development, recruitment, and strategy. Seek out the individuals who not only grasp AI's possibilities but also have the skills to turn them into reality. The organizations that succeed in the AI era will be those led by individuals who can connect vision with execution – bridging the gap between the promise of AI and its transformative potential.

About the Author

Dr. Isabelle Nüssli is a partner at Roy C. Hitchman AG, a leading, repeatedly award-winning Swiss executive search boutique, headquartered in Zurich since 1986. It is a member of the international Tinzon Group. Isabelle is a multilingual senior executive and board member with experience in international business leadership, corporate governance, and succession planning. A two-time Amazon #1 bestselling business book author and leadership coach for board & C-level and tech-based growth firms, she helps them recruit and onboard the right talent, build a high-performance team, and navigate change and transformation.

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