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AI Is Rewriting the Manager's Job. Who Is Preparing the Managers?

New sales and leadership research shows AI is shifting the hardest work onto frontline and middle managers, and why coaching, transition support, and judgment matter more than ever.

By Shawn Hamilton · November 2, 2026

shawnlhamilton.com/newsletter/2026-11/

The Pracademic Pipeline
SALES & LEADERSHIP

Welcome to the first issue of *The Pracademic Pipeline: Sales & Leadership*.

I've spent more than 30 years leading sales teams, and I now direct a university sales center, teach, and do doctoral research on sales leadership. Living in both worlds has convinced me that the gap between what researchers know and what practitioners do is wider than it should be. Good research sits behind paywalls and in jargon. Good practice often runs on instinct and habit. This newsletter is my attempt to close that gap a little each month.

Each issue covers both **sales** and **leadership**. It draws on peer-reviewed journals rated A*, A, or B on the ABDC Journal Quality List (this month, all A or A*) and on leading practitioner journals such as *Harvard Business Review* and *California Management Review*. For every item you'll get what the research found, my perspective as a practitioner and researcher, and ideas for three groups: **leaders** running teams, **faculty** preparing the next generation, and **trainers** building skills inside organizations. Every source is linked so you can judge the evidence for yourself.

The big idea this month

Most of the conversation about AI in sales is about sellers: how much time it saves them and how many emails it writes. The research this month points somewhere else. **AI is quietly rewriting the manager's job.** Frontline and middle managers are absorbing new work, from checking AI output to coaching people through new tools, while the human side of their role (coaching, judgment, psychological safety, and their own transition into leadership) matters more than before, not less.

That matters to me personally. My doctoral research focuses on why newly promoted frontline sales managers struggle, and I've come to see the causes as largely structural rather than a simple skills gap. This month's research fits that view closely.

Sales research

Sales managers' perceptions of interpersonal communication competence in leading AI-integrated sales teams

Jonna Koponen, Saara Julkunen, Anne Laajalahti, Marianna Turunen, and Brian Spitzberg. Industrial Marketing Management, Vol. 124, January 2025. Open access. ABDC: A.*

What they found: Over five years (2019–2024), the authors conducted 35 expert interviews with sales managers in one large financial corporation as it integrated AI into its sales teams. The integration "brought benefits, concerns and communication challenges." The authors propose a model of the interpersonal communication competence managers need in AI-integrated teams, combining "traditional competencies (motivation, knowledge, communication skills, and adaptability)" with AI-specific context and ethical reflection. Their conclusion: "sales managers may increasingly need to place greater emphasis on their empathy and people-oriented skills." This is a single-organization case study, so treat it as a rich picture rather than a general law.

My take: This matches what I've seen across three decades of introducing new systems to sales teams: the tool rarely fails on its own; adoption fails in the conversations around it. What I appreciate here is the longitudinal view. Five years of interviews capture how a manager's job actually changes, not just how people feel at launch.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** Before your next AI rollout, plan the conversations, not just the training: who explains the why, who hears the concerns, and how often.
- **Faculty:** Open access and rich in quotes, this is a strong case reading for discussing sales management in technology-driven teams.
- **Trainers:** Add communication and empathy skills to any AI-tool training for managers. The tool training alone isn't enough.

When sales managers stop pretending to be perfect: vulnerability as a catalyst for sales coachability

Carlin A. Nguyen, Andrew B. Artis, and Jeffrey E. Anderson. Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 46(1), published online November 14, 2025. Subscription required. ABDC: A.

What they found: The authors define managerial vulnerability as "a leader's deliberate willingness to admit mistakes, express uncertainty, or seek critique." Using survey data from 350 U.S.-based B2B sales professionals, they found that vulnerability strengthened parts of coachability (the relationship with the coach, how reps cope with feedback, and openness to learning), which in turn were linked to better sales performance. But vulnerability also "directly lowers learning effort." It helps, with a trade-off.

My take: In the Army and in sales leadership, I learned that admitting a mistake earns credibility only when the standard stays clear. That's exactly the trade-off this study captures. Vulnerability opens the door to coaching; it doesn't replace expectations. I'd teach it as a pairing: own your mistakes, and restate the standard in the same conversation.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** When you share a mistake in a coaching conversation, end by naming what you still expect from the rep.
- **Faculty:** A data-backed case for teaching psychological safety in sales management, including its downside.
- **Trainers:** Practice "own it, then set the bar" as a specific coaching behavior in manager workshops.

AI-coaching and well-being in sales: a theory of tools perspective

Dayle R. N. Childs, Valerie Good, Amy Greiner Fehl, Emily Tanner, and Nick Lee. Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, published online October 8, 2026. Open access. ABDC: A.

What they found: The authors argue that research on AI in sales management has been "disproportionately fixed on productivity and efficiency outcomes rather than mental health and wellness." Drawing on the "theory of tools," they examine how AI coaching might affect salesperson well-being depending on whether the tool works seamlessly, fails, or becomes something the seller has to stop and think about. Rather than reporting new data, the paper's main contribution is a research agenda naming four dimensions likely to shape whether AI coaching helps or harms: the user, the tool, the delivery, and the context.

My take: I'm glad someone is asking this question. We measure AI coaching by activity and conversion because those are easy to count. But a tool that scores every call can feel like constant surveillance to a rep who is already under quota pressure. The authors are right that this is an open question, and leaders shouldn't wait for the research to start paying attention.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** When you roll out AI coaching, ask reps how it feels, not just whether metrics moved.
- **Faculty:** Open access and current, it's an easy assigned reading on technology and the human side of selling.
- **Trainers:** Plan rollouts around all four dimensions: who's using it, the tool itself, how it's delivered, and the context.

Leadership research

Leader Role Transition: A Systematic Review and Agenda for Future Research

Xuting Jiang, Anastasiia Agolli, and Crystal M. Harold. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 47(2), 2026 (online June 2025). Subscription required. ABDC: A.*

What they found: Reviewing 136 articles, the authors describe leader role transition as "a critical stage in which new leaders learn leadership skills, develop their leader identity, and gain social validation." They identify three lines of research (adjustment, identity transformation, and social construction) and note the literature has been "developing in a rather fragmented and isolated manner," so they propose an integrated framework. Among the points they draw from prior research: "reality shock" is widely reported by new leaders, and new leaders won't complete their transition "until they win social validation" from the people around them.

My take: This is the review I wish every sales organization would read before its next promotion. The common pattern is to promote the best seller, hand over a team, and expect the transition to happen on its own. This work says the transition has three parts: learning the job, becoming a leader in your own eyes, and being accepted as one by others. Most onboarding covers only the first. That's consistent with my own research: the struggles of new sales managers are built into how we promote and support them.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** Support all three parts of the transition: skills training, a mentor for identity ("you're a leader now"), and visible backing from senior leaders to build credibility with the team.
- **Faculty:** Use the three lines of inquiry as a framework for a class on first-time management.
- **Trainers:** Add peer cohorts for new managers. Social validation is hard to build alone.

Enhancing Subordinate Job Performance Through Coaching Behaviors: A Lay Epistemic Approach

Rajeev Chib, Roger Chun-To Luk, and Jeanne Ho-Ying Fu. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 47(3), 2026 (online September 2025). Subscription required. ABDC: A.*

What they found: Using "field data collected from supervisors and their subordinates using a two-wave, multisource design," the authors compared two coaching styles: guidance (direct feedback and answers) and facilitation (inspiring people to explore their own solutions). Facilitation worked best for employees with a low need for closure: they "reported higher job-based self-efficacy, leading to improved supervisor-rated job performance." Guidance-oriented supervisors "gained the trust of their subordinates, which in turn positively influenced the subordinates' job performance." The authors note most participants worked in financial services, so results may not generalize to other sectors.

My take: Every sales manager has a default coaching style, and most of us coach the way we like to be coached. This study gives a practical reason to flex. Some reps want the answer; others want room to figure it out. The best managers I've worked with read the rep first and choose the style second.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** For each rep, note whether they want answers or room to explore, and coach accordingly.
- **Faculty:** A clean, practical study for teaching that coaching isn't one-size-fits-all.
- **Trainers:** Role-play both styles with the same scenario so managers feel the difference.

AI-Augmented Leadership: How, Why, and When Leaders' Collaboration With AI Enhances Team Performance

Pei Liu, Daniel I. Watts, Xin Li, Xiaotian Wang, and Aimei Li. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 47(7), 2026 (online February 2026). Subscription required. ABDC: A.*

What they found: Across two multi-wave field studies (hospital teams, then a replication across industries), leaders' collaboration with AI was linked to teams that reflect more on how they work and feel more confident taking on broader roles, both of which were linked to team performance. The authors report "empirical support for the mediating roles of team reflexivity and team role breadth self-efficacy," while results for reducing role overload were "mixed." The direct link to team performance appeared in the first study but was not replicated in the second, and the authors caution that the design "cannot establish the causality of leader-AI collaboration on team

performance." Leader age strengthened the links to team reflexivity and role breadth self-efficacy (but not to overload). Both samples were from China, which the authors note as a limit on generalizing.

My take: The most useful finding here isn't that AI makes teams better. It's how: through reflection and broader confidence, not just speed. The mixed result on overload is worth noticing too. AI didn't reliably lighten the load, which lines up with the practitioner research below.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** Use AI as a thinking partner in team planning and after-action reviews, not just to produce content.
- **Faculty:** A good example for teaching students to read replication results and causal limits carefully.
- **Trainers:** Show managers how to use AI to prompt team reflection, such as summarizing a deal review and asking what to change.

From the practitioner journals

AI Adoption Is Overloading Your Middle Managers

Julia Shin and Sandra J. Sucher. Harvard Business Review, June 26, 2026. Subscription required. ABDC: A.

What they found: Drawing on 18 semi-structured interviews at two major consulting firms, the authors report that while "consultants reported dramatic productivity gains," middle managers "were overloaded with new responsibilities," including "validating AI outputs, identifying errors, coaching their teams in AI skills," all "while facing unchanged or even increased delivery pressure." It's a small, qualitative study, but a pointed one.

My take: Replace "consultants" with "sellers" and this describes the risk in many sales organizations right now. If reps gain hours and the manager absorbs the checking and coaching, the system has moved the load, not removed it. Read this alongside the Gartner numbers below.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** When AI saves your sellers time, deliberately reduce something on your frontline managers' plates.

- **Faculty:** Pairs well with the leader role transition review for a discussion of where the middle layer breaks.
- **Trainers:** Teach managers to review AI output efficiently, with clear standards for what "good enough" looks like.

Middle Managers Feel the Least Psychological Safety at Work

Jan U. Hagen and Bin Zhao. Harvard Business Review, October 22, 2025. Subscription required. ABDC: A.

What they found: The authors report research showing that middle managers "feel less psychologically safe than both their bosses and their teams," and that "fear of failure, lack of peer support, and weak modeling from senior leaders" are silencing them. Among their recommendations: senior leaders should "normalize fallibility from the top." (The article page I reviewed doesn't detail the study's method or sample.)

My take: This connects directly to the vulnerability study above. If senior leaders don't model admitting mistakes, it's hard to expect middle managers to do it with their teams. Psychological safety flows downhill or not at all.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** If you lead managers, go first: share a recent mistake and what you learned in your next team meeting.
- **Faculty:** Useful for teaching that psychological safety varies by level, not just by team.
- **Trainers:** Build peer forums for middle managers, since lack of peer support is part of the problem.

The Algorithmic Middle Manager: Are We Building Managers or Checkers for Corporate America?

Ravi Kalluri. California Management Review Insights, January 6, 2026. Free to read. ABDC: A (CMR).

The argument: In this perspective piece (not an empirical study), Kalluri argues that as algorithms take over scheduling, assignment, and evaluation, managers risk becoming "checkers" who stay accountable for outcomes they no longer shape, which weakens the pipeline for developing future leaders. He recommends protecting decisions that need human judgment, rotating emerging managers through roles that require real decisions, rewarding well-reasoned overrides of the algorithm, involving managers in designing these systems, and creating low-stakes spaces to practice.

My take: This is an argument, not data, but it names a risk I take seriously. Leaders are built through decisions. If we automate away every decision a new sales manager would have made, we shouldn't be surprised when they aren't ready for the next level.

Put it to work:

- **Leaders:** List the decisions your frontline managers still own. If the list is shrinking, protect a few on purpose.
- **Faculty:** A strong debate prompt: are we building managers or checkers?
- **Trainers:** Use simulations that give new managers real decisions and real consequences, safely.

By the numbers

4.8 hours, and 72%. AI is "saving sellers an average of 4.8 hours per week," according to a Gartner survey of 210 CSOs and senior sales leaders (January–February 2026). Yet "72% of sales organizations report low reinvestment of those time savings back into high-value sales activities." *Caution: these are leaders' self-reports, not measured time studies.*

69%. In a Gartner survey of 645 B2B buyers (August–September 2025), 69% "prefer to validate AI-generated insights with sales reps." *Caution: a stated preference, not observed behavior, but a strong signal that trust is still built by people.*

79.6%. In RAIN Group's 2026 Sales Challenges & Priorities survey of more than 250 sales management, leadership, and enablement professionals, 79.6% rated developing sales managers as very or somewhat challenging, and 86.3% said the same of recruiting and hiring strong sales talent. *Caution: this measures perceived difficulty, not results.*

40%. Salesforce's State of Sales survey of 4,050 sales professionals in 22 countries (August–September 2025) found "the average seller spends 40% of their time selling," and for Gen Z reps it's just 35%. *Caution: Salesforce sells AI tools for sales teams, so read the framing with that in mind; the gap between selling time and everything else is worth attention either way.*

One thing to try this month

Run a "manager load audit." Ask each frontline manager (or each student team, or each training cohort) to list the new tasks AI has created for them, such as reviewing AI output, answering questions about tools, or checking dashboards, and estimate the hours per week. Then list which

tasks AI has removed. If the new list is longer than the removed list, you've found where your management system needs redesign. For faculty, it's a ready-made exercise on job design. For trainers, it shows where managers need efficient review habits and where they need coaching skills.

If you try it, I'd like to hear what you find. Reach me on LinkedIn.

— *Shawn*

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