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## 4 Shifts Changing Leadership Today

Insights from Work the ROOM 2026 on AI, decision-making, and the evolving demands of leadership.

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The biggest changes in business today are not just technological, but operational. At Work the ROOM 2026, the conversation focused on how leaders are adapting in real time, from applying AI more deliberately to reassessing how they make decisions in complex environments.

What emerged was not a single strategy, but a clearer view of how leadership is evolving. Below are four key concepts introduced throughout the day.

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### **1. AI is Forcing a Leadership Reset**

AI adoption is no longer the challenge. Getting value from it is.

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While **88% of organizations are using AI, only 1% report mature, scaled deployment**. This points to a gap that has less to do with access to technology, and more to do with how it is being used.

As Dr. Sedef Kocak of the Vector Institute emphasized, **AI may accelerate output, but it does not replace judgment**. Leaders remain accountable for executive decisions, and must understand the limits of these systems—especially when *not* to rely on them.

That responsibility is beginning to reshape how work is structured. As Jennifer Lahey McGill of Predictive Success noted, the opportunity lies not in adopting new tools, but in **rethinking roles, teams, and workflows** to better reflect how work actually gets done.

In practice, leaders should be asking:

- What decisions must remain human, regardless of AI input?
- Where are we using AI to increase output, without having to rethink existing processes?
- Do our current roles reflect the work that will be required over the next few years?

As AI takes on more task execution, the human advantage shifts toward **cognitive agility, discernment, and self-awareness**. Those who will extract the most value from AI are not using it *more*, but using it *more intentionally*.

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## 2. Leadership is Becoming More Human, Not Less

As AI reshapes the execution of work, demands on leaders are increasing, not easing.

With **77% of leaders experiencing burnout**, the current challenge is not just workload, but the ongoing pressure to make high-stakes calls—without the time to think clearly.

As keynote speaker Dr. Samra Zafar noted, navigating this level of change does not require a new tool or tactic, but a different way of operating. Leaders need to recognize stress in real time, manage it, and continue making decisions without defaulting to urgency or impulse.

This is where **emotional agility becomes critical**. Without it, speed increases but judgment suffers; leaders fall into reaction instead of thinking, and that strain compounds across teams.

It comes down to a set of **small but consequential behaviours**: pausing before responding, creating time to think, and being intentional about how you show up when others are looking for direction. Those actions, more than any tool or tactic, are what allow leaders to operate with clarity in complex environments.

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## 3. High Performance Starts with Health

Health is no longer a personal matter. It's a leadership responsibility.

As Cleveland Clinic Canada and ProMed emphasized, the way leaders approach their health should be no different from how they approach business: **the earlier risk is identified, the more effectively it can be managed**. Yet many executives still operate reactively, addressing issues only once they begin to affect how they perform.

With **3 in 5 Canadians living with preventable diseases**, the cost of that approach is not abstract. It manifests in energy, focus, and the ability to sustain output over time.

For women in particular, this conversation is still evolving. Topics like menopause, metabolic health, and hormonal changes are often overlooked, despite their direct impact on cognitive function, consistency, and overall capacity at work. This was reflected not only in the content, but in activations across the Summit, including TMB Cosmetic Surgery's focus on women's health as a critical, and often under-addressed, component of leadership.

The implication is straightforward: **when health is treated as optional, performance becomes inconsistent**. When it's treated as foundational, leaders are better equipped to sustain capacity over time.

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## 4. Careers are Shaped by Life, Not Separate from It

Careers are not linear—they are informed by how we navigate moments of transition.

Through personal experiences shared by speakers and panellists, it became clear that leadership paths are not defined by a single trajectory. Instead, they are shaped by how individuals move through life's pivotal moments, from major milestones to managing caregiving responsibilities and reassessing priorities over time.

As discussed in a session supported by the Lang School of Business, career progression is increasingly driven by adaptability, self-awareness, and the ability to make intentional compromises, rather than following a predefined path. For many women, these decisions are further influenced by factors often left out of traditional leadership conversations, including **family dynamics, health, and timing**.

The takeaway? Don't try to control the path, but be clear on what matters when decisions need to be made.

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As Zabeen Hirji, Founder of the Purposeful Third Act Movement, noted, there is rarely a perfect time to make a career decision. **What matters is knowing what you value, and making the trade-offs that align with it.**