

Jane Gentry & Company

Stop Buying AI Activity. Start Building AI Leverage.

A Strategic Framework for Mid-Market CEOs

Picture this.

It's Tuesday. 8:07 a.m. Fourteen people on a leadership call. Everyone has "updates." Nobody has a decision. Ninety minutes later, you've "aligned"... and the same issue gets punted to next week.

Then someone says, "We're rolling out AI."

Licenses. Tools. Training. "Adoption."

And somehow the organization is still slow, still noisy, still stuck in the same loops—just with better-looking notes.

That framing is the problem.

AI isn't primarily a technology shift.
It's a decision-making shift.

Well, you might be right that your company is "using AI." But in my experience, if AI hasn't reduced meeting load, shortened decision cycles, and freed your best people for higher-level thinking... you're not getting leverage.

You're just paying the Decision Theater Tax with nicer fonts.

The Diagnostic

5 SIGNS YOU'RE BUYING AI ACTIVITY—NOT AI LEVERAGE

If you recognize 3+, your AI spend is at risk.

5 Signs Diagnostic

- **AI is mostly used for capped-payoff work**
Emails, summaries, decks, notes. Helpful... but capped.
- **Your leadership calendar looks identical**
Same meeting load. Same "circle back" loops. Same "let's sync" reflex.
- **Nothing measurable improved in a real workflow**
No cycle time reduction. No rework reduction. No throughput gain. Just... activity.
- **AI outputs sound smart but aren't grounded in your reality**
Confident, generic answers that are quietly wrong.
- **Your culture still rewards "the person who knows"**
People protect their lane, avoid looking wrong, and use AI to justify what they already wanted to do.

If that's you, this isn't a tooling problem. It's a culture-and-operating-model problem.

The real risk isn't that AI replaces your people. It's that it replaces your organization's thinking discipline—and you don't notice until the bad calls compound.

The Two Curves: Where Most Companies Aim AI (and Miss)

The Two Curves Framework

The difference between capped payoff and uncapped leverage

Capped Payoff Curve

Most organizations aim AI here:

- Drafting internal emails
- Summarizing meetings
- Polishing decks
- Formatting documents
- "Productivity" that never hits P&L

Uncapped Payoff Curve

The missed opportunity:

- Decision velocity
- Execution follow-through
- Customer insight before churn
- Margin protection
- Manager capacity
- Handoff quality

**AI isn't a typing assistant. AI is a leadership leverage engine—
if you use it to change the system, not just the output.**

What's Actually Happening Right Now

Things I've watched organizations do with AI this month that quietly destroyed value:

- **Rolled out licenses company-wide.** No change to how decisions get made. Adoption fizzled.
- **Ran "prompt trainings."** Still drowning in meetings.
- **Built an AI pilot.** Didn't ground it in company context. Output looked brilliant. Was wrong.
- **Used AI to write faster.** Never used AI to think better.
- **Said "AI-first"** while leadership still operates on tribal knowledge and gut feel.

The common thread: AI is being used to reduce effort, not improve judgment. And judgment is where leverage lives.

The Culture Shift You Need

Stop asking: "How do we use AI?"

Start asking: "Where are we slow, blind, or inconsistent in decisions?"

Because the real ROI of AI isn't prettier work. It's:

- Faster clarity
- Better tradeoffs
- Risk surfaced early
- Fewer alignment meetings
- Fewer repeated bad calls
- Cleaner execution

AI is a mirror. If your culture is "compliance disguised as agreement," AI will amplify it. If your culture is truth-seeking, AI becomes a force multiplier.

Don't Let AI Atrophy Your Leadership Muscle

A lot of teams are using AI the way people use a shortcut when they're tired—**not to get smarter... to avoid thinking**. And that's how you end up with an organization that can produce more output with less judgment.

AI: Spotter vs Wheelchair

Two ways AI shapes your organization

THE RULE OF THE ROAD

Use AI to remove friction for "information work."

Drafting, summarizing, compiling, grunt work. **Capped Payoff**

Use AI to add friction for "transformation work."

Judgment, tradeoffs, leadership capability. **Uncapped Payoff**

Because long-term intelligence—individual and organizational—doesn't come from convenience. It comes from resistance.

AI should be a spotter, not a wheelchair.

A spotter doesn't lift the weight for you. It helps you lift better—and keeps you from getting crushed.

So instead of asking AI, "What's the answer?" you ask:

- "What am I missing?"
- "What would have to be true for this to work?"
- "What are the top risks and second-order effects?"
- "If this fails in 90 days, why?"

Where Leverage Actually Shows Up

Three mid-market examples

1. Quoting: The bottleneck is rarely "writing"

In operational businesses, quoting slows down because inputs are messy and tribal. Using AI to draft follow-ups is fine (capped payoff).

Leverage comes when AI standardizes the decision process: Consistent scoping checklist • "Missing inputs" flag • Quote package forcing assumptions to be explicit

Result: Quote turnaround moves from **"weeks + rework"** to **"days + clean first passes"**

2. Service: Stop reacting; start detecting patterns

Summarizing tickets is nice. The win is when AI helps you see recurring failure points, root causes by segment, handoff breakdowns, and early warning signals.

AI doesn't reduce labor. It reduces avoidable pain.

3. Leadership: Fewer meetings, better decisions

If AI doesn't change what you decide, how you decide, and how decisions stick...then it's not leverage.

The best shift: AI does the pre-work. Humans do the tradeoffs.

Why Mid-Market Has an Unfair Advantage

Mid-market companies can test faster and cheaper than enterprise: shorter feedback loops, leaders closer to the work, fewer governance layers.

But here's the urgency: Your competitors don't need a full transformation. They just need to get **10-20% faster** at the right workflows.

That speed becomes responsiveness. Responsiveness becomes customer confidence. Customer confidence becomes pricing power.

And pricing power is oxygen.

The 90-Day AI Leverage Sprint

Do this, not "AI Adoption"

90-Day AI Leverage Sprint

A proven operating sprint framework

1. Pick 3 workflows where leverage matters

Choose where cycle time, quality, or rework hits revenue or margin:

- Quote-to-cash
- Service resolution
- Scheduling/dispatch
- Collections follow-up
- Onboarding
- Forecasting / S&OP

2. Assign one owner per workflow

Not a committee. Not "IT." A named leader with authority to change the process.

3. Split work into Curve 1 vs Curve 2

Curve 1 (capped): Drafting, research, first-pass analysis. Use AI aggressively.

Curve 2 (uncapped): Judgment, tradeoffs, accountability. Use AI as spotter.

4. Install two non-negotiable artifacts

Decision One-Pager (required):

- The decision + owner
- Inputs considered + assumptions
- Risks & 2nd-order effects
- What would change our mind

Meeting Compression Protocol (required):

- AI-generated pre-work: options, risks, questions
- Meeting agenda = tradeoffs + commitments
- Ends with: decision, owner, deadline, checkpoint

Decision One-Pager Template

A template your team can use immediately

5. Ground AI in your context

If you don't feed AI your realities, it will fill gaps with confident nonsense.

Ground it with: Process maps • KPIs • Customer segments • Pricing rules • Service data • Quality standards • Definitions of "good"

6. Build verification into the workflow

Define what must be checked, who signs off, and what gets updated when AI is wrong. **That's not bureaucracy. That's how you build trust at scale.**

CEO Scoreboard

What should be different in 30–90 days?

CEO Scoreboard Metrics

If AI is working, you should see evidence like this

If AI is working, you should see measurable improvements:

- **Fewer** leadership meeting hours
- **Faster** decision cycle time
- **Fewer** dropped handoffs
- **Quicker** onboarding

- **Higher** throughput per function
- **Fewer** repeat issues
- **Clearer** accountability

If you can't point to evidence, you don't have an AI strategy. You have AI activity.

AI is not here to make your people faster.

**AI is here to make your organization
smarter at deciding.**

Well, you might be right that you've "implemented AI." But in my experience, until your culture shows proof—less meeting load, shorter cycles, cleaner handoffs—you haven't implemented anything.

You've just bought software.

Where do you want leverage most right now?

Decisions • Meetings • Execution Follow-Through • Manager Capacity

Ready to Build AI Leverage?

Jane Gentry works with mid-market CEOs (\$20M–\$450M) to redesign operating models for scale and AI leverage. If your revenue has grown but your operating model hasn't, let's talk.

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