What endures: Michael Yadgar on five leadership principles for the AI era

News

May 11, 2026

Category: company news

Tags: ai, consulting, culture, leadership, trust

AI is changing how organizations work. It is changing the economics of professional services, the shape of enterprise transformation, and the expectations leaders place on technology investments. Work that once took days can now be drafted in minutes. Data can be synthesized faster. Options can be generated almost instantly.

But amid the acceleration, it is important to remember something simple: the foundations of high-performing organizations are still deeply human. While technology changes, what separates the winning organizations is the people who focus on the human element.

In a recent conversation, Michael Yadgar, Executive Advisor at acceligence, shared a perspective shaped by more than three decades leading enterprise transformation across Fortune 500 organizations, including senior leadership roles at Accenture and EY. As EY's Americas SAP Leader, he architected one of the consulting industry's most successful SAP practices, not by chasing every trend, but by building a culture people genuinely wanted to be part of.

His philosophy was never about being universally liked or avoiding difficult decisions. It was about understanding that trust, respect, and culture are not "soft" leadership ideas; they are business advantages.

As AI accelerates execution, leadership advantage increasingly shifts toward judgment, resilience, adaptability, and the ability to build teams capable of navigating constant change. Technology may evolve rapidly, but the human work of leadership remains the differentiator between exceptional organizations and average ones.

Here are five leadership principles Michael believes will matter even more in the AI era.

1. Know your people before you try to lead them

One of Michael's most enduring leadership lessons came from John McCain's book, *Faith of My Fathers*. In it, McCain describes his grandfather, John S. McCain Sr., a four-star admiral who led military operations at enormous scale during World War II. Despite overseeing thousands of servicemen and servicewomen, he made a point of knowing people at every level of the organization – who they were, what they were working on, and what mattered in their lives.

The lesson stayed with Michael throughout his career: *scale is not an excuse for distance.*

Leadership becomes personal when people feel seen. In large organizations, hierarchy can easily create separation between leadership and the people doing the work. But leadership is not only about setting direction from the top. It is about staying close enough to understand what people are experiencing throughout the organization.

That principle became especially important during COVID. As uncertainty spread across teams and organizations, Michael intentionally kept his calendar open from seven in the morning until eleven at night.

"I'm open the same hours as a 7-Eleven (minus the Slurpee)."

He could not solve every concern people brought to him, but he could listen. Over a three-year period, he held nearly a thousand one-on-one conversations with people across all levels of the organization.

The lesson for executives is straightforward: *leadership proximity is not a soft skill; it is an operational necessity.*

Dashboards and analytics can tell leaders what is happening. Relationships reveal why it is happening, where trust is weakening, where energy is building, and where intervention is needed before problems appear in the numbers. In an AI-enabled enterprise, leaders will have more data than ever before. But more information does not automatically create more understanding. The leaders who stand out will be the ones who combine intelligence from systems with insight from people.

2. Make culture a strategy, not a slogan

When EY's SAP practice was scaling rapidly, other firms had larger teams, stronger market positions, and deeper investments. EY could not simply outspend competitors. So the team chose to compete on something much harder to replicate: culture.

The goal was not only to build a larger business. It was to build a team people genuinely wanted to join and thrive as they stayed.

The message internally was simple…

“We may not be the biggest, but we’re going to be the best.”

That focus on culture showed up in practical ways. The team created “Culture Coins” to recognize individuals who consistently demonstrated the values that defined the organization: respect, teaming, integrity, and courage.

Over time, the coins became deeply meaningful. People framed them, displayed them in their offices, or carried them as reminders that recognition from peers often means more than formal awards or titles. That lesson matters even more now. AI will make tools more accessible and methodologies easier to replicate. Culture is far harder to copy.

The way organizations make decisions, develop talent, handle pressure, share credit, and recover from setbacks becomes a strategic capability. Culture is not a slogan or a poster on a wall. It is the operating environment that enables talented people to do their best work together.

3. Build trust by seeing people, then acting on what you see

People want to know they matter. They want to feel their work, their story, and their contribution are visible inside large organizations.

Before town halls or remote meetings, Michael often spent time learning about the people who would be joining the call; where they went to school, what mattered to them personally, or what small detail might create a genuine human connection.

Sometimes that meant wearing a university baseball cap connected to someone on the call. It was never intended as a gimmick. It communicated something powerful…

“I see you. I care about you. You are making this team better.”

Over time, the ritual grew. Team members began sending hats from their own universities, and meetings evolved into opportunities to celebrate the people behind the business, not just the metrics. “People love to see their name in lights because it signals they are seen,” Michael shared.

But recognition alone is not enough. Recognition notices people. Trust is built when leaders act on what they notice, that distinction matters. Employees quickly recognize the difference between performative leadership and authentic investment in people.

AI can identify patterns, generate recommendations, and surface insights. It cannot decide to care; that remains a leadership choice.

4. Take the long view when the world gets faster

Michael often used a simple question as a leadership filter:

“How will this decision be remembered twenty years from now?”

Not next quarter. Not year-end. Twenty years from now. That perspective changes decision-making. It forces leaders beyond short-term optics and toward a more enduring standard: do the right thing, even when it is difficult.

He wanted to be able to look back on his decisions with a clear conscience, and to know people felt they had been treated fairly. This long-term view also shaped how he spoke about work itself. His teams regularly heard the same message…

“Work is not your priority; it is your family and your health.”

For many people, hearing that from a senior executive was unexpected. But reinforcing those priorities strengthened culture, trust, and loyalty inside the organization.

In periods of rapid acceleration, judgment becomes increasingly important. Leaders need clear principles before pressure arrives. They need to know what they will not compromise, where human judgment must remain central, and what kind of legacy they are building through everyday decisions.

The long view is not about moving slowly; it’s about staying grounded while everything else speeds up.

5. Preserve productive struggle

Resilience is built through struggle, not by being protected from it. That belief shaped how Michael approached talent development throughout his career.

People need opportunities to fail early enough to learn that failure is survivable. They need to experience setbacks, recover, and continue building confidence in the face of adversity.

That does not mean leaders should be reckless with risk. Michael often distinguished between situations in which teams needed to “get an A” and those in which it was acceptable to “get a C.”

“You can’t get an A in everything. Know what needs to be an A, and what can be a C.”

Some moments demand precision: major pursuits, critical client commitments, or decisions that define trust. Other environments should function as learning zones, places where people can experiment, make mistakes, improve, and grow without fear or downside consequences.

This may become one of the most important leadership lessons of the AI era. AI can eliminate inefficiency, accelerate research, and reduce repetitive work. Those are meaningful advantages. But leaders must be careful not to eliminate the very experiences that develop judgment: ambiguity, difficult feedback, client pressure, team conflict, and the iterative work required to transform rough thinking into sound advice.

The goal is not to preserve friction for its own sake. The goal is to preserve the productive struggle that develops resilient people.

What endures

Over the next decade, AI will reshape enterprise transformation. It will compress timelines, alter delivery models, and fundamentally change how organizations develop talent. Michael Yadgar’s career offers a reminder that durable leadership is not anti-technology. It is what allows technology to create lasting advantage.

The real test for leaders will not be how quickly they adopt AI. It will be whether they can embrace it without losing the human disciplines that make organizations strong in the first place: judgment, trust, resilience, accountability, and genuine care for the people doing the work.

The tools will continue to evolve. The leadership people remember will still be human.

Although Michael has retired from full-time consulting, one message continues to define how he views the people he worked alongside throughout his career…

“Wherever you go, no matter where I go, you’ll always be part of my team.”