

Roz Usheroff Podcast 29 Roger-Quinlan 2 Transcript Parsed

Roz:

Welcome to my podcast. For those of you navigating leadership in the age of AI, you have come to the right podcast. Because AI isn't just another tool in the toolbox. It's rewriting the rules of how we lead, how we think, and how we make decisions. And it's no longer working behind the scenes. AI has moved to center stage, and leaders can no longer solely rely on instinct or experience. So leaders now have this new partner—one that can analyze, predict, and obviously act a lot faster than any of us ever could.

But the real question is, how do we share this stage without losing the human connection that we as leaders demand? The truth is, AI is brilliant, but it doesn't have emotions. It can process data, but it can't feel. It doesn't have a soul. It can advise, but it can't empathize. How fortunate it doesn't do it all. And that's where really great leadership comes in—the kind that blends human intuition with machine intelligence. The leaders who are going to thrive in this new world aren't the ones trying to outsmart AI. They're the ones wise enough to see it as a partner. And that's where real transformation happens—when leaders use this technology to elevate people, to lift them, not replace them.

So there's a lot to discuss in AI. And I am so thrilled once again to welcome my dear friend, Roger Quinlan, who's Senior Vice President of Sales for Coherent. Roger, you've built an extraordinary career leading through transformation. Before we explore your perception of AI and leadership, can you share a bit about your journey and what ultimately brought you to Coherent?

Roger:

Thanks, Roz, and thanks for having me on your podcast again. I really appreciate it. I spent 22 years at SAP in a variety of sales and service roles, which gave me a good view of what customers need in a modern world—constantly having to rethink, relearn, and look at new paradigms. In 2019, I retired from SAP and joined Coherent, which at the time was a \$1.5 billion laser optical company. We're now almost \$6 billion. We were acquired about three years ago and went through a rebranding exercise. I still run a chunk of the sales organization. Prior to the acquisition, I was the head of sales, service, and marketing. So I've had a chance to look at what we're doing now with artificial intelligence and how it impacts our field organization.

Roz:

Wow. You are the perfect individual to interview. In what ways do you see AI redefining what it means to be a leader today—and in the future?

Roger:

That's a really good question. And I think the answer today will probably be different than the answer in a year. But today, I really think AI shifts leadership from decision-making into designing decision systems. The old model was that leaders made choices based on experience, intuition, and limited data. The new model? Leaders define what questions to ask, which data to trust, what AI engine to use. It's about how AI augments the process—not how it replaces human judgment.

For example, a sales leader might no longer decide which accounts to prioritize. Instead, they'll ensure that AI's account scoring model aligns with company goals and customer values. That's how priorities get set. I also think there's an emotional intelligence component. AI will handle the analytical, predictive, and operational tasks—but not the human empathy and trust-building. That requires a leader who is radically transparent about how processes unfold, how decisions are made, and what the parameters are.

Roz:

In terms of emotional intelligence, I see that as the ultimate competitive edge. But how do you develop emotional intelligence? It's not about taking a course, yet it's going to be so critical.

Roger:

I think it comes from changing the paradigm. It's more about storytelling, mentorship, and authentic communication. That helps develop cultural coherence in an organization—especially in the midst of technological disruption. Emotional intelligence is about understanding the story we're trying to tell, educating and mentoring employees on how to tell it, and guiding the next generation of leaders.

Roz:

So critical. Interesting research by Percepts identified a new workplace phenomenon called “quiet cracking”—not quiet quitting. It's where employees continue to show up and deliver operationally, but they're emotionally disengaged. Their benchmark reveals that while 75% of employees have the resources to do the work, only 68% feel valued, 66% lack confidence in their leadership's AI vision, and just 64% see career opportunities. So they're not feeling appreciated or seeing a future with the company. What should leaders do in situations like this?

Roger:

Leaders need to preserve empathy and authenticity. The way to do that is through radical transparency. Demystify decisions. Share both certainty and doubt. Admit when outcomes are model-driven and still being evaluated. Acknowledge that we're learning together—and with your help, we'll figure out how to humanize these digital interactions. Show presence, not perfection. Replace jargon with a real desire to learn. That's the only way to keep employees engaged. Otherwise, they'll think they're just going to be replaced by an AI model.

Roz:

A good boss can make or break a culture. What kind of culture helps people adapt to working with AI and the uncertainty around it?

Roger:

A culture of curiosity, not compliance. Encourage experimentation. Teams should feel free to test, learn, and iterate without fear of failure. The new model rewards learning velocity—recognizing people not just for results, but for how quickly they integrate new tools and insights. Leaders need to signal permission: “Let's see what AI says and then let's discuss what we do about it.” Not “Here's the AI output, so that's what we're doing.”

Roz:

I really like what you said about recognizing people not just for results, but also for taking initiative. How does recognition change?

Roger:

Rather than coming to a meeting and saying, “Here's what we recommend,” people should come with data: “Here's the problem. Here's what the data tells us. Here are our options.” It becomes a collaborative process. Cultures that allow that kind of curiosity are the ones that will thrive.

Roz:

I was talking to a manager this morning. One of his biggest frustrations is that his people aren't taking greater initiative. He wants them to take more risks, but he also wants guarantees. How do you lead effectively when we don't know what we don't know?

Roger:

The leader who says, "We don't know the full impact of this model yet, but we're equipped to learn our way through it," is on the right path. Ask: What does the model say? What might we be missing? AI models can steer you in a direction that's incomplete or even wrong. So being in the room and asking, "What else should we be thinking about?" is key.

Roz:

I love that—asking the right questions. But from an employee perspective, if I'm being curious and asking questions, what happens if my leader feels like I'm cross-examining them?

Roger:

There has to be a safe space for those conversations. In my world, we focus on the customer. How can AI insights help us serve customers more empathetically? How do we keep technology grounded in our values—not just performance? Which AI tools do we need? These are team-level dialogues, not top-down mandates. We're moving toward "teams of teams," not rigid hierarchies. That requires collaboration across the organization to stay aligned on our mission.

Roz:

I really like what you said about collaboration. It can't have hierarchy because insights can come from any level.

Roger:

Exactly. Part of the journey is championing continuous reskilling—learning new things and using AI to figure out what to learn next. Those who embrace continuous reskilling will be in high demand.

Roz:

When they talk about a growth mindset, I think that's an understatement. It's scary out there. How do you create psychological safety for people today?

Roger:

You have to be in the trenches with them. Be radically transparent about what you're doing and why. Take input from your team—not just direct reports, but across teams. Be open about decisions, tools, and how they impact employees. That way, everyone is rowing in the same direction—toward customer success.

Roz:

Communication is essential. I like that you keep referring to telling people the "why." How do you make sure everyone's on the same page, especially with the speed of change?

Roger:

In my organization, it's about empowering leaders to make decisions and supporting them. They know they have my support, but they're responsible for the decisions. When people help make decisions, they own them. That leads to better outcomes for customers. I'm a big fan of empowering everyone—from frontline staff to executives—to make decisions where they have the most impact. Empowered people perform better.

Roz:

Even if their ideas aren't used, just having a voice matters. What new leadership behaviors will help leaders adapt in this new age?

Roger:

Leaders need to ask both analytical and human questions. What does the model say? What might it be missing? We need to bridge human and machine thinking and ensure technology aligns with our values. That sends a signal: AI and human judgment are partners, not competitors.

We also need emotional agility. We may not know the full impact of a model, but we're lifelong learners. Admitting ambiguity builds trust. Confidence isn't certainty—it's composure under change.

Roz

I love that. I'm going to coin that. I'm going to steal that from you. And I would take it one step further. To me, that falls under the umbrella of executive presence.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, I think that's true. And you of course have done executive presence training for us very successfully and we appreciate that. um And I think you know the skills that they learned you know from that program carry into this new world of AI as well. It's really thinking about and yeah the empathy, being thinking about what your customer needs, thinking about, you know, what you're trying to provide to your customer, making sure you deliver on that. And I think going through the process of being very open about the decisions we're trying to make and the models we're trying to build and, you know, how do we how do we structure, you know, customers? How do we, if you know, customer buys, buys Product A, we got another customer that buys product A and B. What are all the customers of product A that could be buying product B? AI can tell you that in two seconds, um where we used to have to rely on a person that knew all of the customers and exactly what they're doing. And so being able to have your team kind of focus on all of those, how do we execute now that we have the data rather than what are the actual facts involved? AI is going to solve the fact part of that pretty easily. Now we focus on how do we use those facts? and make sure we drive a good outcome for our customers.

Roz

I guess making sense of this complexity, you know, this landscape that we don't really know where it's going, human judgment is going to be even more critical. I'm curious to know from your perspective, what skills will separate future leaders who thrive with AI from those that become obsolete?

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, I think I think about things in three, Roz, as you know. And I think data and AI fluency is one. I think a systems level thinking is two. and coaching and development leadership is going to be the third. And I'll talk about each one briefly. Really around the data and AI fluency, the future leaders don't necessarily need to code, but they need to be able to have conversations with the people that are running the AI engine. So you need to understand how the models are trained, where their biases hide, how to interpret uncertainty, um and be able to ask the right second order questions. The data sees this and what does that tell us? So drilling into it. um you know the obsolete leaders, they'll delegate the data understanding you know entirely to specialists and they lose kind of the strategic relevance of it. And then from a systems level thinking, really um AI amplifies the complexity and the rewards for those who can see the interdependencies are going to be rich.

Future leaders are going to connect the dots across markets, technologies and human systems. And so the people that are able to help figure out what that system looks like versus how do they make an individual decision? I think that separates future leaders um ah from the leaders of today. I think the obsolete leaders in this space, they're still managing silos. They're still optimizing a part and they're missing the system wide signals.

And I think finally, you know, this is something that that, you know, has been around forever. Really, it's around coaching and developing the next level of leadership. The best leaders are gonna coach people to navigate the learning, I the identity and the purpose in an automated world. They're gonna personalize growth the way AI personalizes recommendations. And so making sure that um we are ah you know measuring ah performance and part of that measurement is how we as leaders are developing the next level of leadership.

Roz

Talk to me more about personalizing growth.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, certainly that's something, you know, you've built a career on around, ah you know, driving, um you know, training and growth strategies for your clients. I think there's going to be more and more need for that as you think about the training streams that you're going to need in the future. You know, you might be able to find someone who's an expert on the technology that you sell. You might have someone who's a very good seller. You might have someone who's a very good, you know, ah relationship manager. As an example, you might have someone who's an expert in the market. But finding someone who, you know, is great across all four of those is going to be very difficult. And in the future, as we get more and more specific about the kind of skills that we need, being able to say, great, of those four skills that I think we need, and I would say, in a sales world, there's probably five or six, but let's just stick to four for now. um Of those four, you might find a candidate who's great in three, but maybe needs some help in the fourth. So being able to develop a training and a development program and a coaching program around that fourth item to make sure that they're kind of the whole package is going to be really, really important. And not just for the ah HR organizations. I think it's going to have to become a core competency in the sales and service organizations.

Roz

Yeah. The question I have to you, do you go to AI to get the coaching?

Roger Quinlan

Maybe, maybe, or maybe the framework, and you know, but I do think that being able to, um you know, have a coach that can, you can interact with, that can say, listen, I see how you operate with your customers. I see how you operate with your employees or with your boss. By the way, here are the things I think we probably need to develop as a, you know, as a training curriculum or as a development plan. and I don't think that's an AI question. I think that's a ah human judgment, as you mentioned before. I think that's where it falls.

Roz

Yeah, you've got to be able to understand how to talk to people. because they're not automated. And I'd being able to understand and not paint everyone with the same brush when you're coaching, that's really going to be challenging, I feel. And what I'm noticing just now is that there's so many leaders that are

focused around results that they're minimizing with taking over the importance of that human connection with their direct reports and lifting them and guiding them. I think they're getting focus only on let's do the results, let's keep up the speed of lightning, and they're getting pressured from their boards as well.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, I agree with that. And I also believe that that the leader of the future is going to redefine performance and productivity. Right. Instead of it's how much did you how much did you produce? I think the question is going to become what value did you create? So it's not just about, you know, about revenue, but it could it could very well be about, ah you know, margin. um You know, I can automate a lot of tasks, but it can't align outcomes with purpose. And I think the leaders of the future is going to be able to help do that.

Roz

I want to go back to this one. how can leaders preserve empathy, authenticity, and trust in this new world? You did mention trust earlier.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah. And, you know, the, the, the world of the future is digital first. And so, especially the You know, the employees that are that are you know newly out of training or college, um they think digital first. And so I think the way you build trust in an AI era starts with clarity. I think you have to be radically transparent. I think you have to demystify the decisions. um You know, when your algorithms influence a choice like a promotion or pricing or resource allocation, you need to explain how. and why. I think you need to share both the certainty and the doubt and admit when the outcome models ah outcomes are model driven, are probabilistic, or are still being evaluated. And then I think you need to narrate your reasoning. Here's what the data says, here's what I feel we should do about it, and here's what I think your role is in that decision. And then then it spawns a conversation. And that's the way I think you have to humanize all of this digital interaction. And of course, Roz, now we have to do it at scale, right?

Roz

Right. yeah Being able to tell a story so people understand. I think we make assumptions that people know what's going on in our heads.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah.

Roz

We call it the curse of knowledge. And it's not helpful sometimes and when you think you're making something very simple for someone to understand.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah.

Roz

Okay. Curious to get your thoughts on this. I feel that we're entering maybe into an age where emotional transparency... is absolutely critical. And I'm not sure if that's something that's going to be reinforced or it's just going to be innate and have those leaders that possess it more successful.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, I think you're right. I think it's, you know, anchoring in purpose and presence becomes more and more important. By that, I mean, the leaders who kind of retain the trust going forward are going to remind everyone, you know, why humans matter. We're going to recenter the conversation on the meaning of, you know, what are we trying to build together and why? I think we'll prioritize being over constantly doing. I think that means we have to take more time and think. And I think we also have to spend more time listening deeply about, you know, what we're hearing from our customers, what we're hearing from the markets, and what is what are the AI tools telling us about that. And then as a group, we need to recognize that the emotional steadiness, not the technical mastery, is what builds the ah enduring credibility. So the future, I think, belongs to leaders who combine digital precision with human depth.

Roz

Very well put. It's just wonderful. We're coming to the end. and I thought there's two questions I have for the end. One is, in your experience, what do you see where most people are worried when it comes to ai

Roger Quinlan

Oh, hands down, Roz, it's losing their job. I hear about it all the time. And you can even read about it in, you know, it's articles in the Wall Street Journal and, you know, a recent announcement by a big, you know, super scaler announced they're cutting their office staff by 10%. I don't I don't necessarily think it's true that it's going to, people are going to lose jobs. I do believe that most organizations are going to be able to grow with adding a bunch without adding a bunch of headcount. And that's, that's And the AI tools will help them do that. But I think we need curious people to ask thought-provoking questions um that AI can help them answer. And I think leaders may hire for a different skill set going forward, but they'll we'll still be hiring. I think we still need humans to do most of the jobs. But the number one thing I hear from people about AI is, oh, it's going to cost a lot of jobs. I don't necessarily think that's true. I think it's going to change the kinds of jobs that we have. I don't necessarily think it's a reduction across the board

Roz

Given that as an employee, I might not know this and still be for fearful of my losing my job. What do we do to manage this uncertainty, this stress?

Roger Quinlan

RI think we go back to your point um that you asked earlier about you know training, coaching, and development. I think the way we keep our employees really engaged is sitting down with them and saying at an individual level, here's the development plan. Here's where we are going to invest in your development so you get better. So that as our organization progresses and needs you know a different set of skills, you're growing into that skill set. And I think the companies that do a good job at reskilling their team, at you know creating a culture of curiosity, I think those are the ones that are going to win.

Roz

Yeah, I agree with you. we really have to be curious because there's no certainty, right? If you were a new leader in your role, what advice would you give to someone who really wants to succeed in the right way?

31:51.58

Roger Quinlan

Sure. Well, yeah I'll frame it. There's lots of advice that I could give, but let's stick to the AI topic for a second. I would say go learn about the models that are out there um and get in the middle of them. right Learn by doing, not just by reading. Take some classes. ah There's so many great online resources where you know you can work through the ah different kinds of AI models. And then you know start talking to

your boss and your employees about what are the kinds of things we should be thinking about that we where we could leverage AI to make the experience better for our customers. but That's what I would say, because in and my way of thinking, you know people that are either close to the customer or close to the product are the ones that are making the most strategic impact to the company.

And so if you can think about how does AI help one of those two things, either makes the product better, makes it less expensive, easier to deploy, what have you, or it makes the digital interaction with our customers seamless, we become easier to do business with, you know, it allows them to, you know, to leverage more of our expertise than they could from someone else. I think those are all the things that the questions we should be asking. How does AI help do those things to help make us a better organization?

Roz

Thank you so much. My final question to you is, if you look through, and ah known how do I say this? My final question is, if it's five years from today and we're talking, what might be some of your predictions that would have happened?

Roger Quinlan

Well, the prediction I'm hoping for is that I don't have to go through 300 emails in my inbox anymore. So I'm hoping we find some AI way to solve that. But I think I think really taking a look at ah and how we interface with our customers, I think it's gonna fundamentally change. I think the touch points with customers, even for a company like us that sells you know large complex systems all the way down to small components, I think all of that has to be more and more digital as time goes on. And I don't think that's unique to us. I think it's every company out there um is going to be digital first at some point. So think about all of the individual things that we that we have to do every in our everyday life and how we interface with companies. I think a lot of that is going to become digital. So, you know, ah and the people that are coming you know out of school now, you know, they're all digital first. That's what they grew up on.

Roz

Yes, that's right.

Roger Quinlan

So, yeah. So those of us that aren't need to make sure that we have that digital first mindset and remain curious about what does that mean? And I would say, you know, the world of tomorrow is going to be radically different in five years than it is today. And again, I'm hoping that my inbox goes away.

Roz

Well, it seems very exciting with all that you've discussed, too, and looking at certain points. There's so much I wrote notes here, but championing continuous new learning, reskilling, touch points are so critical um and recognizing that people are not just about results. It's We should reward them for their initiative and asking curious questions, which I did to you today. There's so much to learn. I guess what I've heard from you today, if I compact it all together with your genius, is that we really need to have resilience and adaptability and we have faith.

Roger Quinlan

Yeah, I agree with that. I think that's a great way to sum it up, Roz.

Roz

Thank you so much, Roger. I'm looking forward to 2026 to get you back on again. as long as you're in.

Roger Quinlan

Very good, Roz. Thanks so much for having me today. I appreciate it.

Roz

Thanks. Bye for now.