

Lead Data Conversations for *AI Success*

INSIGHT

By Michael Ghilissen | HEC ULiege | May 2026

AI success is not a technology problem. It is a data leadership problem — and it is owned by the CEO.

Every week, another boardroom celebrates a new AI initiative. Contracts are signed, teams are formed, and vendors are selected. And yet, twelve to eighteen months later, the same boardroom asks the same uncomfortable question: where is the value? The answer, almost invariably, is the same. The data was not ready.

This is not a story about bad technology. The models work. The infrastructure exists. Talent can increasingly be hired. What is missing — what has always been missing in companies that fail to generate returns from AI — is executive ownership of data as a strategic asset. And that ownership must begin at the very top.

The Core Issue: Fragmented Data, Failing AI

Most companies investing heavily in AI are discovering a painful truth: their data is fragmented, low quality, or simply unusable for the machine learning pipelines they are building. An organization can spend tens of millions acquiring data infrastructure and still lack a single usable training dataset. The root cause is almost never technical. It is organizational.

AI performance is a direct function of data quality. And data quality is a direct function of leadership. You cannot fix AI without first fixing data governance, and governance is not an IT mandate. It is a business mandate.

THE VALUE CHAIN



CEO sets the agenda

Governed, trusted assets

Models that actually work

Revenue, cost, risk

Weak data produces weak AI. Weak AI produces no ROI. This is not a formula that can be circumvented with better tooling or faster computing. It is a structural dependency that runs straight through the organization and straight through the office of the CEO.

The Common Failure Pattern

The pattern is remarkably consistent across industries and geographies. Large capital is deployed into data platforms. Cloud contracts are signed. Data lakes are built. And then, nothing usable emerges.

NO OWNERSHIP AI initiatives launch without clear decision rights. Nobody owns the data. Everybody blames the data.	NO STANDARDS Data is collected across dozens of systems with incompatible definitions, formats, and quality thresholds.
NO ALIGNMENT Data strategy drifts from business strategy. Teams optimize for data volume, not data utility.	NO OUTCOMES AI remains permanently experimental. Pilots succeed. Scaling fails. ROI never materializes.

The result is a company that has made a significant investment in the infrastructure of AI transformation without ever making the organizational investment required to make it work. AI stays in the lab. Value stays on the table.

The CEO's Imperative: Three Critical Shifts

For executives who have grown accustomed to delegating AI to a Chief Data Officer or Chief Technology Officer, this next section requires a fundamental reorientation. AI is not an IT project. It is a business transformation, and business transformations are led by CEOs.

What CEOs must do differently?		
Own the data conversation Define who owns which data. Clarify decision rights. Make data stewardship a visible executive priority, not a back-office function.	Set direction, not just budget Align data investment with business priorities. Eliminate "data for data's sake." Every data initiative must serve a declared business outcome.	Anchor AI to outcomes Every AI initiative must link explicitly to revenue growth, cost reduction, or risk mitigation. If it cannot, it should not proceed.

These are not operational details to be delegated. They are governance decisions that shape organizational behavior. When a CEO makes data ownership a standing agenda item in the executive committee, something changes across the entire company. When a CEO asks, in every AI review, "What business outcome does this serve?", the culture changes. Accountability follows attention.

"You cannot 'fix AI' without fixing data governance. And you cannot fix data governance without the CEO in the room."

What Winners Do Differently

The companies generating genuine returns from AI share a small number of distinguishing behaviors. They are not necessarily using more advanced models or larger datasets. They are making better organizational choices about how data is owned, governed, and deployed.

They treat data as a strategic asset, with the same discipline applied to financial capital or brand equity. Data has an owner, a quality standard, and a use case.

They build high-quality, well-governed datasets before deploying AI models, not after. They understand that the model is downstream of the data.

They focus relentlessly on a small number of high-value AI use cases directly linked to business outcomes, rather than spreading effort across dozens of experiments.

They ensure data integration across systems, breaking down silos that lead to fragmentation and, with it, AI failure.

They hold leadership, not IT, accountable for data readiness. The CDO reports to the CEO. Data governance is on the board agenda.

Why AI Projects Fail: A Framework View

When we examine AI failures through the lens of this framework, the pattern resolves into three compounding weaknesses. Each is individually correctable. Together, they are fatal.

THE COMPOUNDING FAILURE PATTERN		
<p>Weak data readiness Unusable inputs. Models trained on noise, not signal.</p>		<p>Weak governance No ownership. No accountability. No standards enforced.</p>
<p>Misaligned ROI No value tracking. AI decoupled from business outcomes.</p>		<p>Experimental AI Permanently in pilot mode. Never scales to production value.</p>
<p>High investment. Low returns. The most common AI outcome in enterprise today.</p>		

Data readiness is the critical bottleneck: without it, every downstream AI effort is compromised before it begins. Governance is a CEO-level responsibility: it cannot be designed, mandated, or sustained from below the executive team. ROI is only achievable when data is usable, governed, and linked to declared business outcomes.

These three elements are not independent levers. They are a system. Pull one without the others, and nothing moves.

The Leadership Imperative

There is a conversation happening in most companies right now that is missing its most important participant. Technologists are debating model architectures. Data engineers are debating platform choices. Vendors are making promises. And somewhere in this conversation, the CEO is waiting for results that never quite arrive.

The missing ingredient is not more technology. It is the executive leadership of the data conversation itself. Who owns what data? What quality standard applies? Which AI use cases serve which business priorities? What does

ONE-LINE TAKEAWAY

AI transformation succeeds only when CEOs actively lead data ownership, governance, and value alignment.

Why Do AI Projects Fail?

Weak Data Readiness → unusable inputs

Weak Governance → no ownership

Misaligned ROI → no value tracking

👉 *Leads to: High investment, low return*

success look like, in revenue, in cost, in risk, and how will we measure it?

These are not technical questions. They are leadership questions. And they have leadership answers.