

Data and AI Leadership

Under Way and
Under Pressure

In partnership with



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From hype to impact: the real leadership work behind the AI-first organisation

September 2025

In partnership with



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Richard Pope

Chief Executive Officer
DatalQ

Foreword

We launched **DatalQ Guild** in 2022 as an invitation-only think tank for those at the forefront of data and AI leadership. From the outset, our goal was clear: to unite a critical group of leaders to not only shape the future of data, but also how organisations work, make decisions, and evolve.

Four years later, both complexity and opportunity have grown. Demand on leaders is greater, scrutiny is sharper, and the acceleration of AI is outpacing the organisational structures built to manage it. Yet alongside these pressures, an abundance of new possibilities is opening up for data and AI leaders to create lasting impact and value.

Guild 2025 brought this shared reality into sharp focus: leaders are under intense pressure, navigating complex ecosystems while making sense of relentless change. They are making decisions in uncharted territory, balancing innovation with governance, and laying the foundations for progress even as the landscape continues to shift beneath them.

This report, produced in collaboration with our strategic Guild partner Databricks, reflects that work. It maps the different leadership modes shaping the AI-first organisation and explores how real progress happens, not just through technical success, but through clarity, trust, and resilience.

I hope it offers not just insight, but solidarity and a renewed sense of agency. Because while the hype may dominate the headlines, it's the judgement and commitment of those leading this agenda that will determine what AI really delivers.

Lexy Kassan

Lead Data & AI
Strategist

Databricks

Toby Balfre

VP Field Engineering,
EMEA

Databricks

Dael Williamson

Field Chief
Technology Officer

Databricks

A Word from Our Partner

We're proud to once again partner with DataIQ to be part of Guild, one of the most honest and timely conversations in data and AI leadership.

At Databricks, we meet leaders every day who are navigating extraordinary innovation without established playbooks for building an organisation that is ready to scale trusted AI apps and agents. Expectations are high, and pressure is rising, but against this backdrop, leaders are finding new ways to collaborate to create sustainable impact

What stands out from Guild is the candour of its contributors. Leaders share openly what it takes to make progress: the compromises, the breakthroughs, and the lessons learned under pressure.

As agentic AI emerges as the next major opportunity to reshape enterprise intelligence, it is vital to balance that promise with the realities of leading through uncertainty. Progress comes not from hype, but from trust, partnership, and a clear focus on value.

Our thanks to all Guild contributors for their openness, and to DataIQ for creating the space to surface these insights. We hope this report helps leaders draw on shared experience and chart practical paths forward in a fast-moving landscape.



| Introduction



What It Takes to Lead When AI Moves Faster Than the Organisation

Artificial intelligence is not a new domain. According to data gathered from the 2025 DataIQ 100, AI has a high degree of correlation with machine learning, a mature discipline within most data functions, and even more closely with generative AI (GenAI).

Yet the way these two branches of the same tree have grown inside organisations is not the same. Machine learning's rise was deliberate, designed to deliver results in a controlled way. GenAI, by contrast, shot up almost overnight. Its large foundational models captured attention instantly and spread faster than the technical and organisational roots could stabilise.

Overnight, AI moved from a specialist function to a board-level priority. It became a headline driver, source of investor pressure, and a strategic question for every business unit. Leaders want to know what it can deliver now. Teams with direct access to tools are experimenting, often without consultation or coordination. Regulators are sharpening their expectations around control and accountability.

For data and AI leaders building the AI-first organisation, the challenge is less technical and more managerial. It gets harder not because the models get smarter, but because the organisation is rarely ready for the acceleration.

That is why pressure became the keyword at Guild 2025. It's everywhere, but it doesn't look the same. Some leaders face high expectations without the authority to act. Others have strong sponsorship but are now confronting system-wide change. Many find themselves scaling fast but struggling to hold alignment as demand outpaces structure.

In most cases, the Chief Data Officer title stays the same, but the work has significantly evolved: towards business strategy, judged on value, and leading across people, culture, technology, governance, and innovation.

This report is about that shift. It maps three distinct leadership modes observed across Guild contributors—Orientation, Scaling, and North Star—and explores how each reflects a different response to the pressures triggered by GenAI, and to what's coming next. Because while GenAI has opened the floodgates, Agentic AI is already gathering offshore. For now, there's no final blueprint: only the challenge of leading forward through conditions that remain unclear and unfinished.

"GenAI has lowered the barrier to entry, enabling everyone to use it. On one hand, this gives us a lever to push to improve data quality and governance upstream. On the other, it's created a lot of hype and expectations that bring huge challenges related to readiness."

George Papadatos, Global Head of Data Strategy, Syngenta

Why the Same Title Means Very Different Work

One thing became clear at Guild: no two leaders are operating under the same conditions.

They may all carry similar titles—Chief Data Officer, Head of AI, Director of Data and Analytics—but the context shaping their roles differs widely. For some, data and AI are embedded in corporate strategy while others remain adjacent, with influence earned case by case. Some operate in centralised structures with clear oversight. Others work in federated models with distributed ownership. Regulatory exposure, business complexity, funding models, and technology stack are all factors that bend the shape of the job.

What matters is not whether conditions are “right” or “wrong,” but how leaders respond to them.

Condition	What It Looks Like in Practice	
Strategic Mandate	Strong C-suite / P&L owner sponsorship	→ Limited executive ownership
Organisation Structure	Centralised model with direct ExCo access	→ Federated, edge-led model
Technology Readiness	Stable, connected, iterative platforms	→ Federated, edge-led model
Cultural Environment	Appetite for innovation and tolerance of risk	→ Risk-aware and cautious
External Pressures	Constructive regulatory and investor engagement	→ Heavy scrutiny and demand to “show AI”
Resource Model	Strong internal team with balanced skills	→ Vendor-heavy or consultancy-dependent
Business Complexity	Streamlined brands/markets with aligned systems	→ Fragmented portfolios and transformation in flight

Three Modes of Leadership

While the role is being reshaped by pressure, the leadership response is driven by where that pressure lands, what the organisation makes possible, and how leaders navigate the surrounding ecosystems.

What emerged at Guild was a set of leadership practices centred around three key variables:

- **Mandate** – how much authority they hold, and how clearly their purpose is defined
- **Momentum** – how fast the organisation is expecting change
- **Means** – how well-equipped the business and data team are to act on what’s being asked



These variables forge three distinct leadership modes: Orientation, Scaling, and North Star. Each one reflects a different blend of pressure, possibility, and leadership work, driven by context.

Modes of AI Leadership – At a Glance

Mode	Defining Context	Ecosystem Dynamics	Leadership Focus	Pressure Point
Orientation	AI is on the agenda, but means, mandate, and clarity are weak	Informal networks, fragile alignment	Build trust, define goals and value, establish permission to lead	High expectation, low authority
Scaling	Momentum is strong, and foundations are partly in place	Fragmented priorities, vendor strain	Co-create value, embed guardrails, coordinate delivery	Demand outpaces means
North Star	Data and AI are embedded in strategy and operating model	Strategic fabric, co-design with partners	Align systems, shape future capability, lead through others	Strategic visibility, sustained complexity

Leadership Mode 1



Orientation



Defining Context

Orientation leaders often step into roles where AI is high on the agenda but poorly defined. The organisation sees potential but hasn't clarified what it wants to achieve, how it will measure success, or where data and AI fit into the broader strategy. The role is frequently treated as technical or adjacent, while still carrying high expectations for visible business outcomes.

The critical task here is agreeing the strategic goal with the business. Is the requirement primarily to deliver data services: dashboards, self-service tools, and data quality improvements? Is the data strategy expected to enable business and process optimisation? Or is the ambition nothing less than the transformation of the core business and operating model?

Creating clarity at the outset, and the ability to revisit it, are essential. Without it, expectations quickly outpace mandate and pressure mounts. Leaders are asked to demonstrate business impact from AI, but without the sponsorship or access needed to deliver it. Guild contributors describe this as a familiar pattern: accountability without authority, or ambition without the conditions to act.

"We're seeing more and more pressure for AI, but the pressure doesn't always come with the necessary investments and support. A lot of organisations are feeling the pressure is asking us to run before we can walk." —
Group discussion, Guild 2025

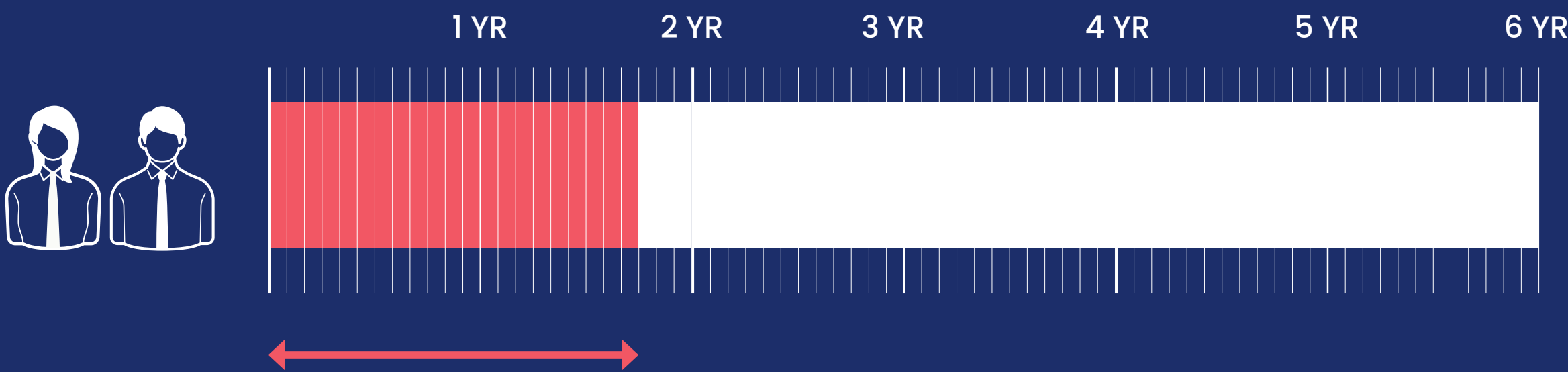
Orientation leaders typically operate in environments where:

- Interest in AI is high but understanding of what it takes to deliver is low.
- The business wants progress but hasn't aligned on goals or success criteria.
- Data foundations and trust structures are still fragile.
- The conversation is driven more by external pressure than internal readiness.

This is a fragile phase. The leadership work here is not about delivering transformation, but about creating the conditions for progress to take root



Benchmarking data from submissions by the DataIQ 100 2025 shows that the average tenure of European CDOs is just 1.9 years, a period often too short to land lasting change. The fragility of the role suggests that many leaders face difficulty in moving beyond Orientation mode.



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1.9 years



Navigating the Ecosystem

Inside the organisation, Orientation leaders tend to operate in ecosystems that are fragmented, informal, and only loosely aligned. Formal authority is limited, so progress depends on building relationships—with IT, compliance, business sponsors, and data owners—through influence rather than control. Much of the early work involves surfacing tensions that have remained unspoken, clarifying ownership, and locating decision rights that have not been explicitly mapped.

“The one thing you cannot do is underestimate the need to understand the ecosystem: how they operate, what they care about, what influence they have.” — **Ian Hockney, Group Commercial Director and Office of the CIO, Specsavers**

This environment creates constant trade-offs. Leaders must work across functions that have different incentives and levels of literacy, while keeping the work credible in the eyes of the executive.

Misunderstandings are common: IT may see AI as a technology rollout, the business as a quick productivity lever, and compliance as a risk to be controlled. Without alignment, efforts can duplicate, stall, or even undermine each other.

Externally, influence tends to be narrow. Orientation leaders may engage solution providers to support proofs of concept or training initiatives, but they are rarely positioned to shape long-term partnerships. Often, they inherit vendor-led activity initiated elsewhere, creating a patchwork of projects with uneven ownership. In this environment, proximity to the CIO or CTO becomes critical, determining whether leaders have visibility of, or access to, the wider enterprise technology agenda.

In Orientation, the ecosystem is therefore less a formal structure and more a web of dependencies to be understood and navigated. Mastering this stage through careful mapping, trust building, and gaining early credibility can knit together what is otherwise fragmented and lay the groundwork for the more coordinated, scaled-up ecosystem that follows.

Leadership Focus

In Orientation mode, the leadership focus is on building trust, defining purpose and value, and establishing permission to lead. With responsibility high and authority low, progress depends on relational work: earning credibility step by step, clarifying expectations, and demonstrating relevance in ways the business can recognise.

Guild contributors describe the leadership work that matters most in this mode:

- **Building trust from the centre outwards**

Progress depends on senior sponsorship, but that sponsorship must be earned and continually reinforced. Leaders invest early in relationships with executive stakeholders, listening carefully, demonstrating relevance through action, and avoiding overly technical framing.

“Start building trust at the c-suite level—make sure they understand where you’re coming from and how you can help them. Once you have that trust, they will start to cascade it down through the business.” — **Bharathi Rajan, VP – Data & Insights, Swire Coca-Cola, USA**

- **Framing the work in clear, relatable language**

Language is a critical enabler of trust and credibility. With uneven literacy across the business, Orientation leaders rely on metaphors, mantras, and repetition to make the work accessible and easier to support. Clear language also helps avoid misperceptions that data and AI are purely technical or peripheral.

“In the first year, the theme was ‘building the team.’ But in the second year, I kept repeating: ‘this is showtime.’” — **Laia Collazos, Chief Data and Analytics Officer, Coca-Cola EuroPacific Partners**

- **Clarifying goals and expectations**

Orientation leaders work with executives to establish what the organisation really wants from data and AI: services, process change, or deeper transformation. This means surfacing assumptions and bridging literacy gaps at the top table. Without clear expectations, pressure mounts but progress stalls.

"There's no "data" and "business". We're all in this together. So instead of having data teams going through their own transformational programmes and creating their own metrics, we need to get on the bus of key strategic organisational changes like sustainability, and GDPR, and drive the data transformation through those strategic goals." — **Enrique Mendez, Group Chief Data and Analytics Officer, Edrington**

- **Creating mandate through contribution**

With limited authority, Orientation leaders build credibility by solving meaningful problems, even if small or tactical. Quick wins may not match strategic ambition, but create momentum and legitimacy.

"Every C-suite leader owns a problem they're losing sleep over. If you can solve 10% of their problem, the rest of the C-suite will come to you." — **Toby Balfre, VP Field Engineering, Databricks**

- **Working with, not against, ambiguity**

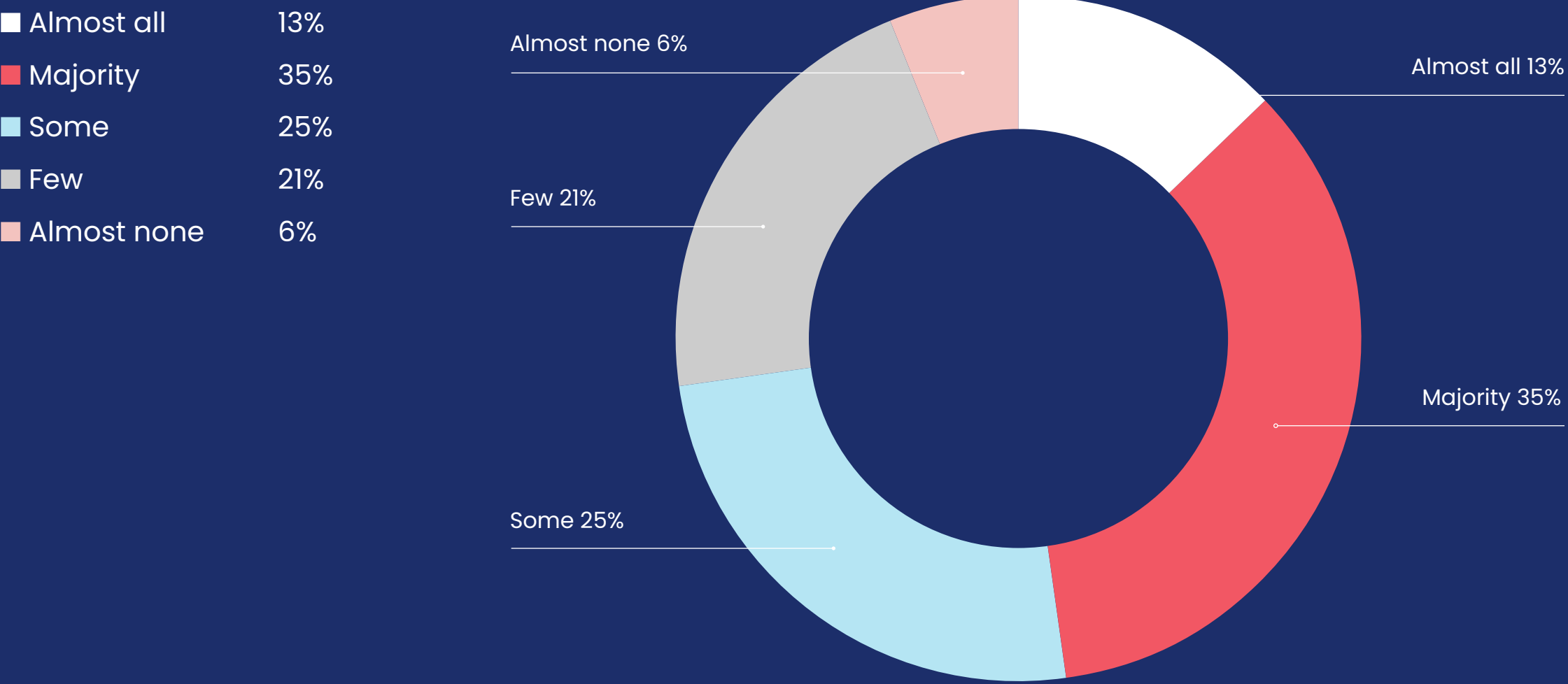
Orientation leaders avoid contesting ownership; instead they partner with active teams and use those relationships to drive alignment over time.

"Don't worry about how AI is defined in your organisation. Work with those teams and build the relationships that matter." — **Samir Patel, Head of Data, BAE Systems**



One of the key challenges facing Orientation leaders is the relatively low level of data literacy among Executive Committee members

What is the level of Data Literacy among your Executive Committee (or equivalent)?



Source: Data Capability Matrix, a benchmarking assessment available to DataIQ clients.

Addressing Pressure Points

With pressure stemming from managing high expectations while having relatively low authority, Orientation leaders work relationally to build momentum through credibility, developing the fluency to navigate across teams without being boxed in by organisational structures.

Guild contributors describe the key traits that make this possible:

- **They influence without alienating**

They nudge upwards without creating resistance, choosing their timing carefully, and recognising when influence matters more than ownership.

- **They read the organisation before redesigning it**

They take the time to understand where decisions are made, how power flows, and where frictions exist, rather than pushing for formal alignment too early.

- **They start with empathy before architecture**

They begin with people, not roadmaps. They listen with curiosity, surface tensions, and hire for soft skills alongside technical expertise.

- **They frame problems through business pain points**

They lead with relevance, not capability. By addressing specific challenges, they generate momentum for broader adoption.

- **They use language to demystify**

They repeat key messages, building shared metaphors, and cutting through technical jargon to make progress intelligible.

- **They make progress visible without claiming credit**

They use internal comms and business champions to carry the story, prioritising credibility across the system over personal profile.

- **They are transparent in uncertainty**

They share openly when the path is unclear. Through updates, forums, or just showing up, they normalise ambiguity and invite others into the work.

Leadership Mode 2



Scaling



Defining Context

Scaling leaders sit at the point where scaling of business impact with data and AI becomes viable for enterprise-wide deployment. The business is calling for impact over ideas, proof over potential. The focus is no longer primarily on building foundations but on orchestrating delivery while reinforcing guardrails.

In this mode, scaling is about reducing friction, managing exposure, and acting as a guiding mind for how data and AI enable the business.

Co-creation becomes the modus operandi. These leaders have earned a seat at the table and are building operating models that make collaboration repeatable. They engage early, draw on trust to ask the difficult questions, and focus on enabling the business to take the lead in delivering value through data and AI.

Several recurring conditions characterise this mode:

- Demand for AI is high, but capability across the organisation remains uneven.
- Foundational structures (governance, platform, security) exist but are still patchy.
- Success depends on early engagement across functions—not just technical delivery.
- Adoption requires cultural shift, not just new tooling.

Navigating the Ecosystem

As Scaling leaders move from experimentation to delivery, they describe rising complexity not just in technology but also in relationships. The challenge is not simply ownership, but coherence: aligning internal teams, external partners, and strategic goals when priorities are fragmented and the pace of demand is high.

External partnerships: pressure and loss of rhythm

Contributors reflected on the increasing strain created by vendor activity. External providers are often engaged directly by business units, bypassing central data or IT teams. While this reflects genuine enthusiasm, it can also lead to duplicated effort, platform misalignment, and overpromised outcomes.

As one leader warned:

"We've got a lot of vendors all over the place making promises about AI... we're having to sit down with the business and explain why what the vendors are saying isn't quite the truth."

Diane Berry, Former Chief Data and Analytics Officer, The Phoenix Group, advised: *"You have to set the rhythm. Otherwise, the consultants will sell the strategy before you've defined what's possible."*

These leaders emphasise the need for deliberate sequencing: involving procurement and risk teams early, clarifying delivery capacity, and ensuring internal alignment before external engagements are scoped.

Internal complexity: misaligned timelines and overlapping roles

Inside the organisation, the challenge is often one of overlap and misalignment. Contributors describe competing initiatives across functions, each with its own agenda and level of maturity.

Even with executive sponsorship, delivery can stall if middle management lacks clarity or support. As one contributor put it:

“Often, it’s an executive sponsor. But are they engaged? Or are they just a name on a sheet?”

Delivery cycles are frequently misaligned: models are ready before change management is in place; pilots succeed technically but fail to scale.

“The reality check is that you can develop very quickly a proof of concept... Now, from that proof of concept to production, to be live at scale globally for 2,000 field technicians in the world — that’s another story.” — **Jean-Pierre Pelicier, Former Group Chief Data Officer, Engie SA**

In this environment, the leader’s role shifts again from translating between data and the business to arbitrating between ambition and reality. Their influence lies not in owning every piece of the solution, but in setting shared expectations, aligning delivery cadence, and reinforcing where accountability must live.

Leadership Focus

In Scaling mode, the leadership focus is on co-creating value, embedding guardrails, and coordinating delivery across a widening ecosystem. The challenge is no longer just to move faster, but to move coherently: aligning goals, sustaining trust, and designing systems that help others lead well.

Guild contributors described the leadership focus as:

- **Establishing shared business fluency and success measures**

Scaling leaders need their teams to speak the language of revenue, risk, operations, and impact, and they must align with peers on what “success” really means. Technical wins only matter if they translate into outcomes that business partners recognise, such as productivity, sustainability, risk reduction, or customer experience.

“It’s very important to establish what we mean by business impact. All of our initiatives are focused on generating shareholder value, employee and customer experience, and reputation. Our efforts are solely aligned with those.” — **Laia Collazos, Chief Data and Analytics Officer, Coca-Cola EuroPacific Partners**

- **Breaking change into visible, repeatable wins**

Scaling is not about dramatic breakthroughs. It is about small, tangible shifts that build confidence and spread organically. Quick, replicable wins reduce resistance and establish proof points that can be reused across functions.

“Don’t do it secretly, do it iteratively. Taking that thin slice approach means getting to value, showcasing it, and getting buy-in continually.” — **Lexy Kassan, Lead Data & AI Strategist, Databricks**

- **Designing governance that supports autonomy**

In Scaling, control is no longer centralised, but accountability still matters. Leaders embed guardrails into delivery so that governance becomes an enabler of progress, not a barrier. Done well, this shifts governance from being perceived as restrictive to being experienced as shared practice.

“Our role is not to be policing AI. Our role is to be the enabler.” — **Chris Gullick, Chief Data & AI Officer, Ofgem**

- **Orchestrating federated delivery**

As adoption decentralises, product teams and business units take on more responsibility for delivery. Leaders must balance local empowerment with central coordination, ensuring the centre's enabling role remains visible enough to retain credibility and funding. This is about setting rhythm and coherence across distributed initiatives that facilitates a state of synchronised autonomy across the organisation.

"Ultimately, you want to federate as much as possible. This means you have to start acting like every other business leader in the organisation who has to do matrix management." — **Steve Green, CDAO, Financial Services**

- **Preparing for the people side of scaling**

Scaling AI is as much about rethinking people, roles, and operating models as it is about technology. Leaders work with HR, L&D, legal, and in some cases trade unions to anticipate new responsibilities, redesign roles, and prepare people to grow with the technology.

"Nearly all AI projects are really operating model projects with value unlocked through rethinking process, data, technology and people." — **Ian Hockney, Group Commercial Director and Office of the CIO, Specsavers**

Addressing Pressure Points

As demand outpaces means, Scaling leaders face pressure to overcommit, centralise control, or compete with business units for credit. What defines them is not technical mastery alone but the way they lead under these conditions.

- **They enable rather than own**

Scaling leaders don't try to control everything. Instead, they focus on creating the conditions for others to deliver through operating models, shared frameworks, and trusted guardrails. They also know when to step in and when to hand responsibility back.

- **They lead through partnership, not position**

Accepting that matrix management is the norm, they build influence laterally and vertically, using credibility to create space for others.

- **They orchestrate coherence under pressure**

Rather than overcommitting, they set rhythm and sequence delivery, aligning expectations with agreed definitions of value. This pacing is how they stop demand from overwhelming capacity.

- **They share credit while holding accountability**

In federated models, impact often materialises elsewhere. Scaling leaders do the quiet work—standards, infrastructure, rhythms—while holding their business partners up as the heroes.

- **They maintain business fluency under strain**

Even when pressure rises, they keep the conversation anchored in value, risk, and productivity, ensuring their teams do the same. This fluency earns them a seat in outcome-setting conversations rather than just delivery reviews.

- **They balance invisibility with visibility**

Much of their impact is below the waterline, yet they ensure the enabling role of data and AI remains visible enough to protect funding and mandate. They often do this by measuring all their activity but only sharing what is relevant with their audiences.

- **They adapt their identity as leaders**

Scaling redefines roles and expectations. Leaders move beyond being seen as governance or delivery stewards to being strategy shapers, bridging operations, culture, and business outcomes, even as their formal mandate lags behind.

Leadership Mode 3



North Star



Defining Context

North Star leaders operate in environments where data and AI are built into how the organisation plans, delivers, and evolves its strategy.

Here, transformation is accepted as ongoing work, aligning emerging AI capabilities with enterprise priorities. Leaders in this mode are embedding teams and capabilities into planning cycles, business design, workforce planning, and product development.

This integration is enabled by legitimacy. Their authority comes not only from delivery but from being recognised as co-owners of the strategic agenda, alongside peers across the C-suite. That shared posture unlocks a different kind of leadership: more distributed, more embedded, and more able to shape direction at scale.

The principal challenge with this level of integration is sustaining momentum as AI capabilities continue to shift, and pacing change to what the organisation can absorb. Guild contributors described the difficulty of evolving architecture, culture, and control models while maintaining pace, delivering value, and planning for what comes next.

“To me, North Star leaders build the next generation of strategic goals every 18 months.” — **Volker Buscher, Chief Data Officer, DataIQ**

Guild insights surfaced these common features:

- Data and AI are embedded in strategic planning rather than layered on afterwards.
- Executive collaboration is continuous and forward-looking.
- Impact is judged by adaptability and contribution.
- Leadership operates through distributed orchestration.
- Workforce planning includes deliberate strategies for augmentation, role evolution, and human–AI teaming.

Navigating the Ecosystem

In North Star mode, the ecosystem becomes part of the strategic fabric. Internally, these leaders operate across the executive committee, shaping business strategy, workforce planning, and operating model design. Their relationships extend beyond traditional technology and data teams, encompassing HR, finance, risk, innovation and external affairs.

Externally, North Star leaders often participate in shaping their ecosystems rather than merely navigating them. This includes strategic vendor partnerships, regulatory engagement, and collaboration with peers in industry or sector alliances. The ecosystem becomes a space of co-design, not just procurement or adoption.

At this level, leadership is defined less by control over individual parts of the system, but by leveraging legitimacy to align its dynamics, ensuring that the organisation remains adaptive, accountable, and able to realise value across cycles of capability change.

“What I’m trying to do right now and what I have influence over right now has the potential to have the biggest impact of anything I’ve done before. To realise that opportunity you have to get out of your silo, think broadly, and ensure that you’re bringing the capabilities and leadership to your function that will unlock that.” — **Ian Hockney, Group Commercial Director and Office of the CIO, Specsavers**

Leadership Focus

For North Star leaders, the task is to build enduring organisational capability enabling the enterprise to evolve as AI technologies and societal expectations continue to shift. It requires holding a long view while staying responsive to near-term demands.

Guild contributors describe the leadership focus as:

- **Embedding adaptability into business design**

These leaders work with the business to re-architect how functions deliver outcomes, embedding data and AI into business design in ways that allow the enterprise to continually reconfigure around strategy.

"Your job is to be at the table talking strategy, talking about remediation of problems and achievement of outcomes. Your job is then to deliver strategic activity, not just deliver a set of tasks that someone's given you." — **Steve Green, CDAO, Financial Services**

- **Sustaining executive-level relationships**

Trust is built not on technical depth, but on a shared understanding of what responsible AI leadership entails. This includes redefining success as continuous alignment rather than project delivery.

"My success is measured by the holistic value created through collaboration, working with the C-suite to break down silos and bring everyone together as aligned with the organisations purpose. It's about understanding how data feeds the wider operating model, that delivers the strategic plan and sometimes that means having hard conversations." — **Abbi Agana, Fractional Chief Transformation Officer, Leathermarket JMB.**

- **Balancing ambition with absorption capacity**

Leaders in this mode pace transformation cycles (architecture, culture, workforce) so change can be absorbed without fracturing. They use co-creation to align investments with strategy, avoid "sticking-plaster" change, and filter low-value work early.

"AI is acting as a catalyst for change. Opening up discussions and making it easier to change that relationship from an order taker to someone they want to work with to drive value is key." — **Group Discussion, Guild 2025**

- **Preparing for the impact on people and roles**

North Star leaders are working with HR, business unit heads, and transformation partners to anticipate how AI will reshape work and culture. This includes role redesign and training, augmentation planning, and the creation of enabling structures for human–AI collaboration.

“Even if your team doesn’t have the skills today, if they’ve got the right mindset and the right capacity, they should be ready.” — **Diane Berry, Former Chief Data and Analytics Officer, The Phoenix Group**

- **Designing for long-term sustainability**

North Star leaders understand that sustainability and AI are intertwined dimensions of long-term value creation. They explore concepts such as frugal AI, reframing sustainability not as a constraint but as efficiency-by-design principle.

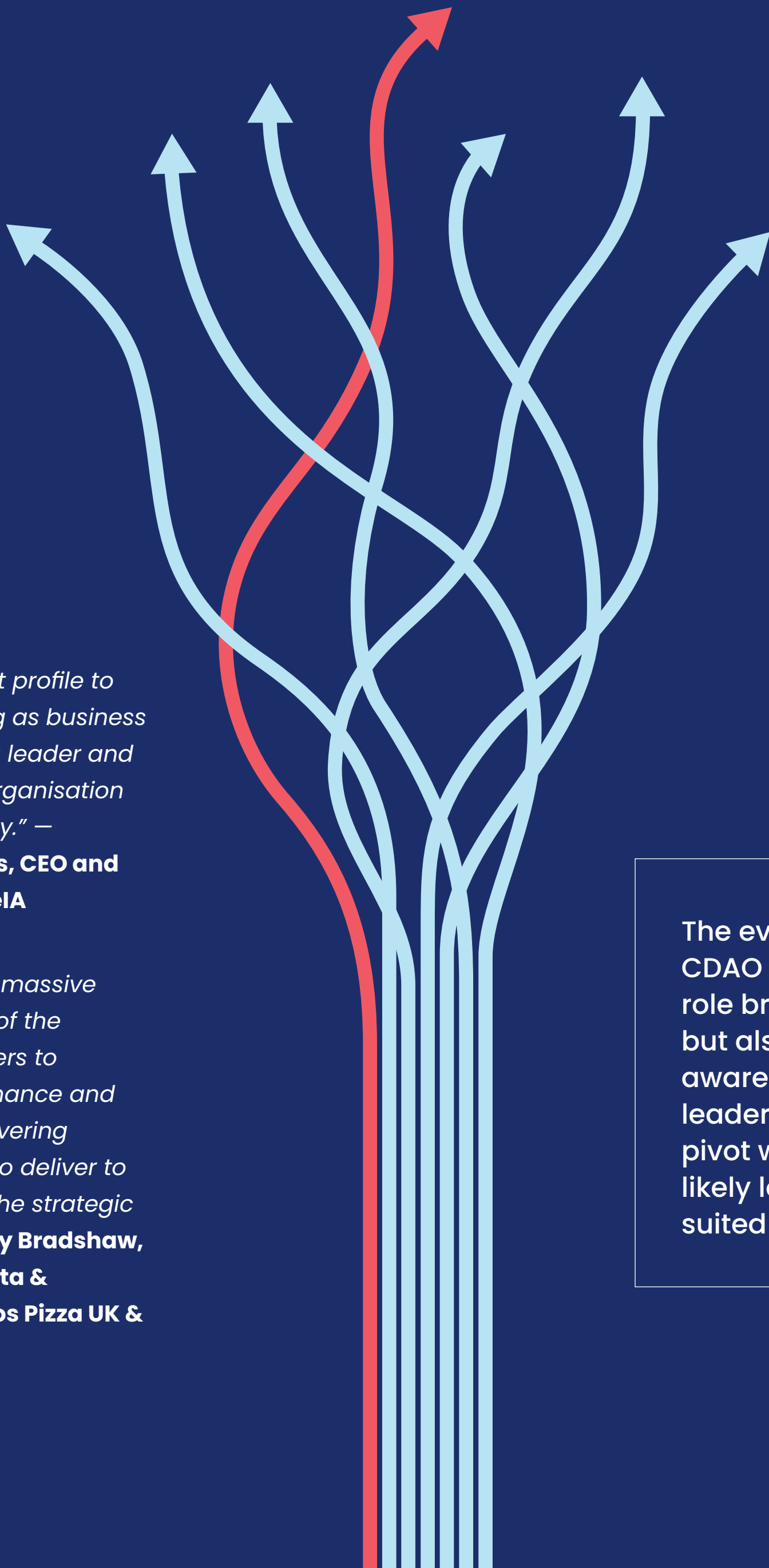
“When we measure AI, the total cost of ownership and value created matter, but we also need the full picture of impact—on environment, on poverty, on equality. Particularly as AI use grows, sustainability becomes critical. If we continue on this trajectory, data centre energy becomes highly relevant.” — **Elizabeth Osta, Senior Advisor, DataIQ and founder**



Guild contributors reflected that the direction of travel is towards transformation, but not everyone will want to follow it.



Transformation



"It's a very different profile to operate something as business as usual or to be a leader and to bring a whole organisation on the data journey." — **Richard Benjamins, CEO and Co-founder, OdiselA**

"It strikes me as a massive change for some of the current data leaders to move from governance and reporting and delivering what they're told to deliver to suddenly driving the strategic change." — **Antony Bradshaw, Head of Digital Data & Analytics, Dominos Pizza UK & Ireland**

The evolution of the CDAO into a strategic role brings opportunity but also requires self-awareness. Some leaders will welcome the pivot while others will likely look for roles better suited to their ambitions.

Addressing Pressure Points

North Star leaders are no longer perceived as data leaders. Instead, they face continuous expectations to align shifting capabilities with strategy while keeping pace with external demands. What sets them apart is how they work under this pressure: holding alignment without centralising control, and building legitimacy to guide organisations, helping them to reimagine what's possible and building the structures and capabilities to make it real.

- **They act like C-suite executives**

North Star leaders operate alongside their peers in the C-suite, contributing to the definition and delivery of strategic outcomes rather than representing data as a separate agenda.

- **They move with clarity in complex environments**

They recognise that large organisations do not behave like linear systems. They navigate ambiguity, adapt to different contexts, and communicate in ways that are relevant to the audience. They distinguish between technical and organisational challenges, and address each on its own terms.

- **They work from the business context while drawing on technical knowledge**

These leaders understand the business intimately, supported by experts embedded in functions who know how it operates, where it's constrained, and what customers and employees need.

- **They think in systems**

Where others see disconnected projects or silos, these leaders see how to link them up. They identify the "business superpowers" the workforce needs to succeed, building frameworks that enable others to deliver well, with the right level of autonomy and support.

- **They model ongoing learning**

In an environment of constant change, North leaders remain visibly open to new perspectives, especially on people, process, and purpose.

- **They challenge constraints with humility**

They help the business raise its sights, not by pushing a bold vision from outside, but by carefully and credibly showing what's newly possible, and creating safe conditions for ambition to grow.

- **They plan for people, not just processes**

They take responsibility for the human side of change, working with HR and transformation leads to design career paths, support upskilling, and manage role evolution, recognising that no AI strategy succeeds without its people.

- **They assume their role in shaping the future of society**

They recognise that AI is reshaping not only how organisations function but how people work and what society expects. They carry that awareness into decisions about skills, roles, accountability, and sustainability.

| Conclusion



| Leadership in Motion

There is no fixed model for what data and AI leadership should look like, but there is growing clarity on what it currently demands: navigating pressure before mandate, building structures before certainty, and earning influence in contexts that are still catching up to the pace of change.

The leaders who have provided these insights are not all operating from the same position. Some are still working to define the terms of their role. Others are guiding complex systems through wide-scale redesign. What they share is not a set of tasks, but a way of thinking about the business, about their people, and about what's possible when the conditions are right.

Guild 2025 showed that the work of building the AI-first organisation is far more than just technical. It's relational, architectural, and cultural. It touches governance and hiring, funding and partnership, credibility and trust. And it's far from over.

If GenAI opened the floodgates, then Agentic AI is already reshaping the landscape beyond them. There is no stable ground, only the decision to lead forward through conditions that remain in motion.

Leadership, in this context, isn't about knowing all the answers. It's about holding the centre, making the work coherent, and helping the organisation move deliberately and responsibly towards a future it is still learning how to understand. It calls for judgement, resilience, and a deep understanding of how change really happens. Few are better placed to offer this than those who have led this journey so far.

| Contributors



This report reflects the shared experience of participants of DataIQ Guild 2025. Many voices shaped the discussions, but the individuals listed here are those whose words are directly quoted within the report. We thank all Guild contributors for their candour, and acknowledge that the insights presented go well beyond those featured on these pages.

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