

AI TRANSFORMATION

Seven stages, in this order

How an AI transformation moves from declaration of intent to impact

MLI Leadership Institut · 2026

Most AI initiatives do not fail because of the technology but because of the sequence. They start with tools before anyone has decided how success is to be recognized — and end up as a collection of pilots that no one can compare.

Seven stages, in this order.

1 · Define the ambition

Top management sets the acceptance criteria: How do we recognize success? What is our ambition in working with AI? Without this yardstick, every later assessment remains a matter of taste — and whoever presents loudest wins.

2 · Open the learning journey

All employees learn that the company is setting out on a learning journey together. The point is to spark curiosity: everyone can grow along the way. This step is often skipped because it produces nothing. It decides whether the workforce reads the effort as an opportunity or as rationalization — and that reading can hardly be corrected later.

3 · Big Think Day

Together with the key people — and, where helpful, neutral outside experts — define the strategically most important use cases. Where does AI create customer value? Where does it extend employees' capabilities, for instance in predictive maintenance? And where does it measurably increase the efficiency of internal processes? Then prioritize by overall benefit.

4 · Form mission-driven teams

Small, capable teams pilot the prioritized use cases autonomously — ideally in a separate space and fully released from other duties. The release is the point at which it becomes clear how seriously the effort was meant. A team that does the transformation on the side delivers on the side.

5 · Sprints in a quarterly rhythm

Every three months, the key people come together, assess progress jointly and prioritize the next use cases on the basis of what they now know.

6 · Share knowledge through AI identities

Experience and proven tools are bundled into specific agents: one for marketing, one for sales, for production, for maintenance. Employees are trained in working with these assistants.

7 · Rethink the organization

New task profiles, new future skills. Roles are also assessed by the assistants they direct. Agents are given an identity of their own — led by a human who carries the responsibility.

Without a yardstick there is no progress; without a rhythm, no consistency.

Tool

The AI Utilization Matrix

Four fields, one decision. The matrix sorts activities along two questions that almost always get mixed up in discussions about AI.

Horizontal: machine or human. On the left are activities in which the machine plays to its strengths — large volumes of data, clear rules, high repetition, measurable results. On the right are activities whose value arises from the relationship: care, advice, leadership, craftsmanship. Not because AI would fail there, but because customers experience the presence of a human being as part of the service. The middle is the most interesting area: there, the division of labor determines quality.

Vertical: differentiate or scale. At the top are activities that set you apart — strategic decisions, conceptual work, product configuration. At the bottom is what every competitor has to do as well. This axis separates two investment logics: at the top, an edge justifies almost any price; at the bottom, the only question is whether it gets cheaper.

The four fields. *Top left, automated differentiation:* the biggest lever and the biggest effort — it belongs on the board agenda, not in IT. *Top right, human differentiation:* leadership, advice, coaching. Here AI is reinforcement, never replacement. *Bottom left, automated scale:* quick to calculate, quick to implement — and quickly copied. Good for the business case, poor as a strategy. *Bottom right, human scale:* the most expensive quadrant. Here it is worth asking whether the service really needs a human being.

How to work with it. Take your own activities, not the examples: twenty to thirty from your value chain, placed individually by each member of the leadership team. The argument about where each belongs is the real yield. Only then comes the question of AI. And it is not “Where can we use AI?” but: “Which three

fields change our position in the market?”

What it cannot do. It is a map, not a timetable — it says nothing about feasibility, data or cost. And it is a snapshot. Redo it once a year.

Where this sequence reaches its limits

The seven stages assume that it makes sense to transform the existing house at all. Sometimes it does not. Anyone who can start afresh without legacy burdens reaches the goal faster — and some of our clients run both in parallel: the existing business for customers who value personal contact, and an AI-native version alongside it.

Second, stage 4 is the most expensive step and the first to be cut when the quarter gets tight. If you cannot sustain the release from other duties, choose fewer use cases rather than less release.

And third, the sequence does not describe a timeline. Stages 1 to 3 can be covered in six to eight weeks. Stage 7 is not a stage but an ongoing task.

In the magazine

The tools in the magazine

This article summarizes two tool pages from **Tiefgang 1/2026** (in German): “The AI expedition in seven stages” and “The AI Utilization Matrix.” In the magazine, the matrix appears as a graphic with sample activities in all four fields.

The starting situation and the two scenarios are described in the Leadership Insights article “Waiting is the most expensive scenario.”

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