

THE ANCHOR

Managers are the real AI rollout

Only 28% of employees say their manager actively supports the team's AI use, according to a November 2025 Gallup survey of 19,043 U.S. employees. That one number predicts almost everything else about whether AI sticks.

By Don Long · Founder, SummitMark



The manager effect is bigger than any tool rollout

Gallup dropped an uncomfortable number on well-meaning AI rollouts everywhere: at companies that have actually implemented AI, only 28% of employees strongly agree their manager supports the team using it (1). Everything downstream traces back to that one data point.

The multiplier effect is real, even though nobody's proven it's causal. Employees who feel strongly backed by their manager are (1):

- 2.1x** more likely to use AI weekly or more
- 6.5x** more likely to say AI is actually useful at work
- 8.8x** more likely to say AI helps them do their best work

Gallup is careful to call this a correlation, not a cause. Employees already inclined toward AI might just gravitate toward managers who encourage it. Fair. But a gap that size is hard to wave off as noise. Manager support isn't a policy that gets published. It's closer to weather: if nobody signals otherwise, people just build their habits around whatever conditions are already sitting in the room.

This is the exact gap I've built my work around. For over a year I've argued that AI adoption at work doesn't succeed or fail based on some company-wide policy. It lives or dies on whether a manager is actually equipped to model it and reinforce it, not just nod along in an all-hands slide deck. The Gallup data is the clearest evidence yet of what fills that vacuum when manager-level support never shows up: shadow AI. Employees quietly experimenting on their own, unsupported, untracked, and mostly invisible to the people who'd want to know about it.

Here's the part nobody puts in the deck: employees don't tell their manager they're using AI, because nothing's signaled it's welcome. Managers don't tell their employees anything about AI, because nobody told *them* what they're allowed to say. Both sides read the other's silence as caution, so everyone quietly ends up doing the exact unsupervised thing the silence was supposed to prevent.

A USEFUL BREAKDOWN

01

Employee

Notice whether your manager has said anything specific about AI use, not a policy email, an actual conversation. If they haven't, you're one of the 72% figuring this out solo. Worth naming out loud in your next 1:1.

02

Manager

"Supportive" isn't a feeling you project, it's a specific behavior: naming an approved use case, reviewing an AI-assisted draft without penalty, or trying the tool yourself in front of your team. Gallup measured agreement with actions like these, not vibes.

03

Leader

Training budgets usually target employees. Gallup's data says the leverage point is one layer up: equip managers first, since their behavior is the strongest predictor of whether AI training sticks at all.

"Manager support has the strongest association with measurable differences in how employees use and value AI."

GALLUP, "MANAGER SUPPORT DRIVES EMPLOYEE AI ADOPTION," NOV. 2025

THE FOUR-STEP VERSION

01	02	03	04
Notice Notice whether your manager has ever explicitly addressed AI use with the team, or whether everyone's just guessing.	Name Managers: name one approved use case out loud this week. In a meeting, not a memo.	Try Run one AI-assisted task in front of your team, so support is visible instead of assumed.	Share Share what worked, and what didn't, back to the team. Silence reads as disapproval, even when it isn't.

MANAGER SUPPORT MULTIPLIES AI ADOPTION

Employees with strong manager support, relative to a 1.0x baseline without it: 2.1x more likely to use AI weekly, 6.5x more likely to find it useful at work, 8.8x more likely to say it helps them do their best work. (Association, not proven causation.)

Reply with the task.

I'm collecting real manager-support stories for a future issue. Has a manager ever actually said something that encouraged (or discouraged) you from using AI at work? What did they actually say?

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

1. [Manager Support Drives Employee AI Adoption](#) (Gallup · November 8, 2025). Worth a read if you want the actual methodology instead of just the number everyone is going to repeat out of context.