Influence Without Authority: Leading AI Modernization Across Boundaries [1]

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Many of the leaders most responsible for AI modernization in government hold no formal authority over the agencies, vendors, or systems they depend on. Programme delivery leads, technical advisors, and cross-agency coordinators are accountable for outcomes they cannot mandate. This brief answers a practical question: *How do you lead an AI modernization programme when you cannot tell people what to do?*

The Accountability Gap

The accountability gap—the distance between what a leader is responsible for delivering and the formal authority they hold to direct it—is a defining feature of large technology programmes. Consider a cross-agency AI data integration programme. The technical lead is accountable for delivery but has no authority over the three agencies supplying the data. Each agency operates under its own governance rules, risk appetite, and legal obligations. When a decision is needed—say, whether to delay a milestone to resolve a data quality problem—the technical lead cannot simply decide. They must create the conditions under which all parties reach a defensible conclusion together. That is the accountability gap in practice.

This gap widens during AI adoption, where unfamiliar technology amplifies stakeholder anxiety and resistance. Without a clear mechanism for reaching shared decisions, transformation stalls—not because solutions are unavailable, but because the right people cannot agree on the risks they are collectively accepting.

Decision Transparency as the Primary Lever

In the absence of formal authority, decision transparency—making the rationale behind every key choice explicit, visible, and consistent across stakeholders—becomes the most powerful tool available. When a leader states the trade-off clearly—delay two weeks to fix a data quality issue,

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or meet the statutory deadline and accept that risk—the decision is no longer personal. It belongs to everyone in the room. Disagreement shifts from *who is right* to *what risk are we collectively accepting.* That shift is what makes progress possible without formal control.

Figure 1 illustrates the three behaviours through which decision transparency operates in practice. Together they enable aligned stakeholders, unblocked decisions, and accountable AI delivery—even where authority is fragmented.

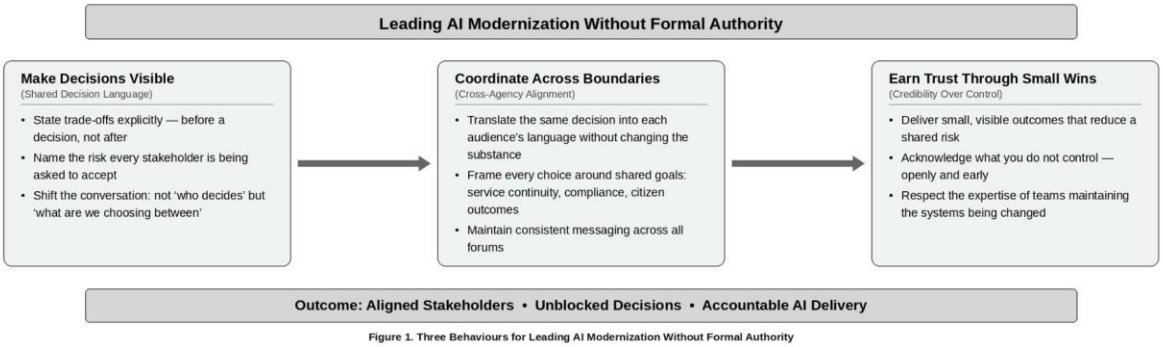

Figure 1. Three Behaviours for Leading AI Modernization Without Formal Authority

Three Behaviours in Practice

Make decisions visible before they are made. Before any cross-agency decision, state the trade-off in plain terms and name the risk each party is being asked to accept. A legacy data migration, for example, carries a different risk for a benefits agency than for a revenue authority. Naming those differences explicitly—rather than leaving them implicit—prevents disagreements from surfacing only after a decision has been logged.

Translate, do not tailor. When briefing a policy director, a technical architect, and a procurement officer on the same AI adoption decision, present the same underlying analysis in each audience's language without changing the substance. Inconsistent narratives—even small ones—erode credibility quickly in multi-agency environments where stakeholders compare notes. Over time, consistency builds the standing needed to influence decisions without authority.

Earn trust through small, visible wins. Deliver on a narrow commitment first—resolving a data access blocker, clarifying a compliance question that has stalled progress—before seeking alignment on larger choices. Equally, respect the expertise of the teams maintaining the systems

being modernized. Legacy system professionals carry institutional knowledge—edge cases, undocumented workarounds, operational history—that AI tools cannot easily replicate. Leaders who present innovation as an extension of that expertise, rather than a replacement for it, move faster.

Applicability Beyond Public Services

These leadership dynamics are not unique to government. Healthcare systems, financial services firms, utilities, and critical infrastructure programmes all exhibit the same pattern: significant AI adoption responsibilities held by leaders who lack the positional authority to mandate change across the organizations they depend on. In each setting, the same three behaviours apply—making decisions visible, translating consistently, and earning trust through delivery.

References

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