

Turning Skeptics into Champions

Never pitch, only teach.

A field method for getting real people to actually use AI

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Most AI rollouts fail for a simple reason. The tool works. The people don't use it.

My whole career has been getting people to pick up technology they did not ask for and did not trust, and actually run with it. I started out on the railroad as the operator, the one who had to use whatever got handed down from above. That is why resistant rooms believe me. I have sat in their chair. I have run this on shop floors and inside enterprise accounts where a wrong answer reaches a bank or a hospital. For most of that time the new thing was not AI. It was operating and safety-critical systems. AI is just the newest thing I have aimed the same method at. The tool changes. The method does not. Here is how I do it.

1. Take AI off the pedestal first.

People are either scared of AI or they over-trust it. Both are the same problem: they think it is magic. It is not. It is a fast car that is dumb as a post, and it will drive into a wall if you let it. You are the driver. You pick where you are going, you steer, you keep a foot near the brake, and you watch the road. Once a room sees that, the scared ones relax and the reckless ones get careful.

2. Find the real fear, not the one they say out loud.

When someone pushes back on a new tool, the reason they give is almost never the real one. "It's too slow," "we've always done it this way," "I don't trust it." That is cover. Underneath is usually one of four fears: this makes me look stupid, this just piles more work on me, this takes away my control, or this is coming for my job. You cannot answer an objection the person has not actually told you, so I listen for the real one first. At an Amtrak maintenance center in Oakland, a room of maintenance leads saw a new monitoring system as more work that only helped Operations, the team that runs the trains, not them. Their real fear was not "this is hard." It was "this is not ours."

3. Make it their tool.

I do not argue the benefit. I move who it belongs to. The AI is not something you serve. It is something that works for you, an employee who never calls in sick, and you are the boss. That one move kills the biggest fear, the job fear, because now you did not get replaced. You got someone working for you. Oakland turned when I stopped calling it Operations' system and started showing them it was their tool that Operations also uses.

4. Teach, don't sell.

The fastest way to lose a skeptical room is to look like you are selling something. So I do not sell. I teach them to get better at their own job, and the suspicion melts. My rule is simple: never pitch, only teach. Another railroad hired me to train a room of newly promoted supervisors who saw me as a guy there to move more units. I never pitched. I taught them to use the same system to get real visibility into their operation and run better. I got applause. I have run the same move all the way up to the C-level. When a company brought me in to sell more, I still did not pitch. I taught the executives to actually use what they had, and they bought more because they finally saw it work. Teaching outsells selling.

5. Tell the truth, then point at the real work.

I never promise it makes their job easier. That is the line every salesman uses, and people can smell it. The truth is better: it clears the repetitive junk off your plate so you finally get to the work you never had time for, the fix that actually gets you noticed. And it will make mistakes. Treat every answer like a confident new hire's report. You would never send that to a customer without checking it yourself. Never trust, always verify. The tool can even help you check its own work, but you are the last signature. At Cisco I trained my delivery team to use generative AI on live customer messages and reports for banks, hospitals, and government accounts. I never taught them to let it write for them. I taught them to make it help them write, and to audit every answer before it went out. Nothing left the building unchecked.

6. Turn the loudest skeptic into the authority.

The person fighting you hardest is usually the one the room follows. Do not beat him, enlist him. The senior guy who says "I'm not putting my name on something a robot wrote" is right, and I tell him so. Then I hand him the one thing the tool cannot do, which is judgment. "It has no judgment. That's twenty years of you, and it can't be replaced. You're the person I want on this first, because you'll catch what it gets wrong when most people won't." Now the skeptic is the quality authority, and the room takes its cue from him.

The honest part.

This does not work on everyone, and I do not pretend it does. If someone's real plan is to keep their head down and wait for it to pass, I cannot help them, and I say so plainly. I would rather tell a room the truth about what the tool does and does not do than win them with a promise I cannot keep. That honesty is exactly why the rest of it works.