



# Executive Interview



## Leadership in the Age of AI: What to Hold, What to Let Go

2026



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## About BTS

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**BTS** is a global management consulting and professional services firm that helps organizations execute strategy through people. Founded in 1986 and publicly listed on the Nasdaq Stockholm exchange, BTS specializes in experiential learning, business simulations, leadership development and digital transformation. The firm works with Fortune 500 companies across industries including retail, consumer goods, electronics, financial services, healthcare and technology to build organizational capabilities, align leadership teams and drive measurable business results. BTS has offices worldwide and has spent four decades designing consequence-rich, hands-on learning experiences that accelerate strategy execution and organizational change.

## About Nicole Gams

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**Nicole Gams** is Vice President and Principal, Talent, Learning and Leadership at BTS, where she supports clients in the firm's Central region on talent strategy and creates value across key initiatives in the talent lifecycle. She specializes in shifting mindsets and building capabilities for leaders and teams at every level of an organization, with expertise spanning technology, retail, fast moving consumer goods and biopharmaceuticals. Before joining BTS, she held marketing and brand communications roles at consumer goods companies including Suntory Global Spirits and William Grant & Sons and later led talent, learning and leadership work at Warner Bros., bringing experience from both the consumer products and media and television industries into her current focus on leadership in the age of AI.

## Host: Rachel Cooke

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Today's conversation is moderated by **Rachel Cooke**, Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research and Performance Improvement industries.

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|                                         | Gold                                                                                         | Silver                                                                                        | Bronze                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
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| <b>Leadership Development</b>           |  <b>18</b>  |  <b>9</b>   |  <b>6</b>   |
| <b>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion</b> |  <b>1</b>  |                                                                                               |  <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Sales Performance</b>                |  <b>2</b> |                                                                                               |  <b>1</b> |
| <b>Talent Acquisition</b>               |  <b>1</b> |                                                                                               |  <b>1</b> |
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## Knowledge Is Commoditized

**Q Rachel**

Leader capability used to come from having expertise and having the answers. Your research points to that model breaking down. What do you see breaking down here and why?

**A Nicole**

The No. 1 thing breaking down is that knowledge and expertise used to be the core differentiator for organizations and for individuals and with AI, knowledge and expertise are becoming commoditized. That is a real shift in the value humans and leaders provide, because the answers are no longer solely within any one person's experience. They are shared, broad and accessible to everyone at every level and across organizations. That is a huge shift in where success comes from.

**Q Rachel**

Your research also talks about leaders needing to unlearn old habits, not just add new skills. What is something you have personally had to unlearn recently?

## Same Theory, New Execution

*Nicole's biggest recent unlearn wasn't the theory of communication — it was the medium, trading PowerPoint for interactive HTML built with AI.*

**A Nicole**

Over the last three years I put a lot of effort into developing how I structure my communications, with support from experts outside my own domain. The theory of what I learned still holds, but the way it gets executed because of AI has completely changed. I primarily learned that art form in PowerPoint and now I am not really building PowerPoint anymore. I am building interactive HTML. So I had to think about how to translate those skills, which was an interesting challenge, but also one that made me a little sad, because I had put so much effort into doing it one way and suddenly had to think about it completely differently. What I can retain versus what I need

## **Judgment Stays, Method Evolves**

to let go of is still a question I work on every day.

**Q Rachel**

A lot of leaders have built their reputation around being the person with the answer. When should they hold on to that and when should they let go?

**A Nicole**

What they should hold on to is anything involving judgment, discernment, or expertise around the how or the why. What they should let go of is the way in which it gets executed and even that might be the wrong word. It is more about challenging, evolving, or inviting a new way of reimagining how work gets done. That is the piece that is really at our fingertips right now. For my own example, I should not let go of the theory behind structured communication, but I should let go of how I am communicating in order to evolve that piece.

**Q Rachel**

How do you help a leader who feels like they are losing their identity when their core skill gets automated?

**A Nicole**

A few things matter here. First, we have to name and acknowledge what is real about people's loss. Something they love to do, or a colleague they love working with, may genuinely be lost and there can be real grief in that. We have to create space to name it, because that is necessary before people can move on. After that, we have to think about what questions can help people uncover their fears about the future and the possibilities too.

A sense of loss usually has people thinking about yesterday, so

## **Naming the Real Loss**

*When a core skill gets automated, the grief is real — leaders have to make space to acknowledge it before people can move toward what's next.*

## **Retain vs. Reinvent**

we have to ask what they see as risks going forward, what work they love, what they love about how they work and what impact they want to have, really getting grounded in their purpose. From there we can think about what to retain and where the space is to reinvent, because people need to feel like they belong in the future. It is about reframing the work and adding value in new ways, but getting there requires acknowledging the difficulty and the grief that can come with a transition like this.

### **Q Rachel**

Of the intelligences in your research, which one is an organization most at risk of underinvesting in right now?

### **A Nicole**

You named it yourself: the systemic piece, actually thinking about workflow redesign. This is an adoption challenge and a value challenge. Organizations are investing heavily, but knowing what metrics to drive, or what value can be created, is unclear for most and even those with more clarity may not be seeing the results they want. Running more AI initiatives is not, on its own, what drives results.

## **The System, Not the Individual**

*Organizations investing heavily in AI often can't say what value it's creating — because the real work is redesigning the workflow itself, not just adopting the tool.*

The organizations that will be extraordinarily successful are the ones that actually redesign their workflows: how a workflow is designed, who owns it, who has decision rights, what gets rewarded and incentivized. It is really about the system, not the individual talent or the technology itself. We need to change the way of working, the decision rights and the incentives if we want to scale the impact of the good AI work already being done.

## Ask Why, Not Just What

**Q Rachel**

How do you tell the difference between a leader with real judgment and one who is just confident and articulate?

**A Nicole**

Some of this is still very much the same as it always was. Asking the why behind the what will always reveal what a leader does or does not know, what they have thought through and what they have validated. What is different with AI is that some of the natural visibility into how we do our work is not quite the same, because a decision might be made with a human and AI rather than a human and a team sitting around a table.

So we also have to think about what prompts people used and what their approach with AI was, since most of us are not going to pick apart that work directly. But at the end of the day, asking the why and the what behind a decision should still reveal how someone came to it and what judgment they used.

**Q Rachel**

And what about the information behind that judgment? Are leaders using their own material, or content and expertise validated by their organization and by reliable sources? That distinction feels important.

**A Nicole**

In just the last couple of months I have seen a lot of questions among clients and inside our own organization, about whether using AI to produce something is a negative or a positive. I am starting to see that become more neutral, in the sense that using AI may become an expectation. What matters is what AI accessed, or what you

## What Went Into It Matters

*As AI use becomes the norm, the real differentiator isn't whether someone used it; it's the quality of what they fed it.*

## No One Is Actually an Expert

put into it, because that is what really validates the quality of the judgment behind the output.

**Q Rachel**

What role does vulnerability play in leading through this kind of change?

**A Nicole**

It shows up in a few ways. The first is vulnerability about not knowing AI itself. People who claim to be AI experts are probably actually revealing that they lack vulnerability, because no one is truly an expert in something moving this fast. It is meaningful to communicate what you do not know, because that is simply true and it converts the conversation from one person being the expert into something necessary to explore and experiment together.

The second part and where I am having more personal conversations with leaders, is communicating that we do not know the full impact AI will have on the business, on careers, on roles, on work. It is hard to say we do not know, but it is true. We cannot promise job security and we cannot promise which tasks will or will not be automated. So it is important to be clear about what we do and do not know, so we are not giving false comfort and instead treating uncertainty as the norm we are operating and leading in and as a responsibility we discover together.

## Celebrate the Path, Not Just the Prize

*Celebrating everything all the time dilutes the message — recognition has to be strategic, tied to the capability the organization actually wants to build.*

**Q Rachel**

What should organizations be doing now to build the muscle of celebrating and scaling what they learn, rather than just moving fast?

## Strategic, Not Constant

**A Nicole**

We hear the pressure to move fast every day. But some of that speed now is about learning fast, so that we can keep learning. The most successful senior leaders and organizations are being vulnerable about what they do not know about org structures and careers, so they can focus on new value creation: if AI automates one thing, what can humans do to create something new? For people to take that risk and let go of what they have been doing, they need to be celebrated and acknowledged for it. Celebration is key because it motivates people to keep going, but celebrating everything all the time can actually diminish it.

It has to be strategic, tied to the capability or new way of thinking the organization actually wants and it should be more of a leading indicator than a lagging one: celebrating the learning that clarifies the path forward, not just the results. Companies need to sit down and decide what learnings they want to celebrate and what they have the possibility to learn in connection with their strategic goals. Early in AI adoption, some organizations may still need to reward adoption itself, knowing new discoveries and learnings will follow. It is about understanding where an organization is and what it wants to achieve within its overall AI transformation and putting attention toward what is most meaningful to that strategy.

## The Workflow Is the Differentiator

*Strategic and creative thinking will keep mattering, but the leaders who redesign how work actually gets done, not just imagine it, will pull ahead.*

**Q Rachel**

If you think even two years ahead, what is the leadership capability that will matter even more than it does today?

**A Nicole**

It is a hard question, because so much can change even faster than two years. I will give the expected answer first, then one that might

## Transform the Humans, Not Just the Tech

be less expected. Strategic thinking, creative thinking, emotional connection, trust, agility and understanding how to navigate systemic dynamics should all continue to matter in some form, even if they show up differently.

But the leaders and organizations who will be most successful are the ones who can actually redesign a workflow, not just envision it, but put a new way of working into practice: how to structure teams, how to structure meetings, how to structure a team that is a hybrid of agents and humans and how to think about where and how work gets done. It is one thing to envision that and another to execute on it. Executing on it will keep mattering, even once we are in an era of quantum computing, because that skill is so closely connected to value creation for organizations. I think that will be the differentiator for a lot of leaders.

## Where Humanity Gets Compromised

*Focusing only on transforming technology leaves humanity behind — organizations also have to transform the value humans provide, and do it at the same speed as the AI itself.*

**Q Rachel**

As we wrap up, any lasting thoughts you would like to share?

**A Nicole**

One of the things that feels most important for the year ahead is that we cannot just focus on transforming technology in organizations. We have to transform the value that humans can provide, because if we do not, that is where humanity starts to get compromised. How do we transform ourselves, as humans and what we can achieve together, at the speed of, if not faster than, technology or AI? I think that is going to be a key question.



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