

# Syllabus

AI for Sustainable Leadership

Barcelona, February 2026

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of a grid of orange triangles of varying sizes, pointing in different directions, creating a dynamic, abstract pattern.

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## 1. Course description / Introduction to the course

In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, sustainable leadership requires far more than technical familiarity with artificial intelligence. It calls for sound judgment, ethical clarity, and the ability to design and lead organizations where AI creates long-term business, social, and environmental value. This course equips students to lead AI-driven transformations responsibly, addressing not only what AI can do, but how it should be governed, scaled, and embedded in organizations.

The course focuses on the organizational and people challenges of AI adoption. Students will explore how data-driven companies are structured, examining models such as centralized and decentralized data teams, AI labs, hybrid organizational forms, and partnerships with external providers. The discussion addresses the sourcing of AI capabilities—decisions to build internally, buy externally, or collaborate through ecosystems—alongside the portfolio management of AI initiatives to ensure strategic alignment, value creation, and responsible scaling.

A strong people management lens runs throughout the course. Students will analyze talent scarcity and competition in AI-intensive environments, develop sustainable talent strategies that address burnout, retention, and diversity, and design compelling employer value propositions for AI professionals. The course also introduces People Analytics as a leadership tool, showing how data can support fairer, more informed, and more sustainable people decisions.

From a leadership perspective, the course addresses how leaders can use AI to enhance their own effectiveness and decision-making, while maintaining accountability and ethical oversight. Students will develop leadership judgment in data-driven decision-making, learning how to balance algorithmic insights with human values, contextual understanding, and strategic intuition. The course also tackles change and resistance to AI, highlighting why many AI projects fail—not due to technology, but because of execution, governance gaps, and organizational misalignment.

Students will gain exposure to tools and practices for managing AI projects, including agile and lean methodologies, portfolio and risk management approaches, and digital collaboration tools commonly used in AI contexts. Topics such as managing complexity and uncertainty, defining AI governance and decision rights, and scaling AI initiatives sustainably are central to the course.

Positioned at the intersection of leadership, people management, strategic decision-making, and technology governance, this course prepares students to lead digital transformation responsibly. The course concludes with a forward-looking discussion on the future of work, Industry 5.0 and 6.0, and the evolving role of leaders in shaping sustainable, human-centered AI organization.

### *Previous knowledge*

Students should have completed prior courses in leadership and management and possess a foundational understanding of organizational behavior. Familiarity with data science concepts—including data analysis, statistics, machine learning, and data visualization—is also expected.

## 2. Learning objectives and competencies

By the end of this course, the students will be able to:

- Explain the strategic, ethical, and societal implications of AI technologies in the context of sustainable leadership.
- Assess organizational and management approaches for effectively leading responsible AI initiatives.
- Propose organizational strategies for AI-driven organizations.

## 3. Course format and methodological approach

This is a highly interactive course with a mix of exposition of content, case analysis, simulations, student presentations and projects, and class discussions. Students are expected to prepare for the sessions with readings, case analysis, and occasional short assignments. In-class active participation is vital, where students are asked to critically reflect the content and frameworks presented, relate to their own experience, and draw connections to the business world. Moreover, students are encouraged to log their reflections regarding the course.

At the end of the course, students will be asked to demonstrate their learning in a final evaluation.

Class attendance is mandatory. Students must attend a minimum of 80% of sessions to be eligible to take the final exam.

## *Activities*

- Pre-class preparation and post-class reflection activities.
- Participation and contribution during the course.

Please, avoid using laptops during the session unless explicitly asked to do so (for specific tasks). All slides will be posted on Moodle after class.

The classroom is a safe space. Make sure you show respect and consideration for others and their possibly differing opinion. This includes not interrupting others, talking loudly during their input or behaving in a disruptive way; providing constructive and developmental feed-back; and helping others to make progress, i.e., helping them to learn.

- Teamwork along the course.
- Final evaluation (individual and team).

## *Workload distribution*

The 6 ECTS allocated to this course represent a total of 150 hours of student workload, given that 1 ECTS= 25hs of students' work.

The 150 hours of workload corresponding to this course are distributed as follows:

50 hours - Active participation during the sessions (we will have 20 class sessions of 2.5hs duration = 50h of in-class time).

100 hours of autonomous work This includes:

- Reading the course compulsory materials
- Working on individual tasks
- Working with team members on the team-based tasks, assignments and the final project
- Submitting tasks and assignments in due time
- Reflect on your own learning along the course

## 4. Course Contents

### *MODULE 1: Framing AI as a Leadership and Sustainability Challenge*

#### **Session 1. Course introduction**

In the first session, we will introduce the course and its objectives, exploring the strategic and organizational challenges of AI in business. We will discuss the course structure, expectations, and key themes, providing a foundation for understanding how leadership and organizational choices shape AI's impact.

#### **Session 2. Sustainability, Ethics, and Responsible AI**

This session explores the societal and environmental impact of AI across its value chain. We will examine ethical challenges such as precarious work, ghost work, and environmental footprint, discussing how leadership decisions can shape AI practices to be responsible and sustainable.

#### **Session 3. Ethical AI in Organizations**

Focusing on organizational implementation, this session examines the ethical concerns companies face when deploying AI. We will explore frameworks, rules, and practical measures to ensure AI initiatives comply with ethical principles and regulations, highlighting leadership's role in guiding responsible AI adoption.

### *MODULE 2: Designing AI Organizations*

#### **Session 4. Organizational Structures for Data-Driven Companies**

We will examine how organizational design shapes AI capabilities, comparing vertical vs. horizontal analytics teams and embedded vs. centralized structures. The session emphasizes how structural choices affect coordination, accountability, and sustainability, highlighting their strategic implications for leadership.

#### **Session 5. AI Labs, Hybrid Models, and Social Alignment**

This session explores different AI lab models and hybrid structures that link business and social missions. We will discuss the risks of "innovation theatre" and consider examples of labs pursuing sustainability objectives, focusing on organizational choices that align AI innovation with broader social impact.

**Session 6. Sourcing AI Capabilities: Make, Buy, or Partner**

We will analyze sourcing strategies for AI capabilities, considering in-house development, outsourcing, or partnerships. The session highlights risks of dependency, capability erosion, and sustainability implications, and explores how to design sourcing strategies aligned with organizational values.

**Session 7. Portfolio Management of AI Initiatives**

This session examines how organizations manage multiple AI initiatives under uncertainty, balancing exploration and exploitation. We will learn about key trade-offs in AI portfolio management and discuss how strategic choices shape long-term value creation, risk exposure, and organizational learning.

***MODULE 3: People and Leadership in AI Organizations*****Session 8. Roles, Profiles, and Collaboration in AI Organizations**

We will explore key roles and profiles in AI teams, from product owners and technical leads to data scientists and engineers. The session addresses tensions between technical and people-oriented roles and includes an exercise to design cross-functional AI teams or job descriptions.

**Session 9. People Management in AI Organizations**

This session addresses challenges of attracting, retaining, and sustaining AI talent. Topics include burnout, diversity, and employer value propositions, with a case discussion on scaling AI talent without compromising culture.

**Session 10. Introduction to People Analytics**

Students will engage in a hands-on simulation applying foundational concepts of people analytics, exploring how data can inform HR and leadership decisions in a practical, organizational context.

**Session 11. People Analytics in Organizations**

Building on the previous session, we will deepen our exploration of people analytics by examining more sophisticated methods and discussing the potential benefits and challenges of applying analytics in organizational contexts. Students will reflect critically on ethical, practical, and strategic considerations when using data to inform people decisions.

## **Session 12. AI for Leadership**

Building on previous sessions on people analytics, this session explores how leaders can leverage AI to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency. We will examine the interplay between human judgment and AI recommendations, discuss trade-offs and risks of over- or under-reliance on algorithms, and reflect on leadership responsibilities when AI-driven decisions go wrong.

## *MODULE 4: Executing, Scaling, and Governing AI*

### **Session 13. Leading a Digital Transformation**

Through a case discussion, students will explore how digital transformation reshapes processes, structures, and systems. The session emphasizes the leader's role in driving organizational change alongside technology adoption, and contrasts digital transformation leadership with other forms of change management.

### **Session 14. Cultural Change and Resistance to AI**

This session focuses on the cultural and human dimensions of AI adoption, including opportunities for innovation and efficiency, as well as challenges such as employee resistance. Students will reflect on strategies for managing technological change while balancing organizational and human needs.

### **Session 15. Managing AI Projects: Execution and Practices**

This session explores why AI projects often fail and how leaders can manage them effectively. We will examine the limitations of classic project management for AI, introduce agile and lean principles, and discuss trade-offs between speed and sustainability. Students will explore tools, coordination practices, and approaches to transparency and accountability, including a hands-on exercise managing dependencies in AI projects.

### **Session 16. Complexity, Uncertainty, and Scaling AI**

Building on project management foundations, this session focuses on leading AI initiatives in complex environments. We will explore interdependencies, feedback loops, and unintended consequences. The session also covers scaling AI from pilot to organization-wide deployment, including organizational, technical, and ethical challenges.

### **Session 17. AI Governance and Decision Rights**

This session focuses on governance structures and decision rights in AI-enabled organizations. We will examine who owns AI decisions, explore different models of human oversight, and discuss governance mechanisms that support

accountability and sustainable AI, including a class debate on leadership authority over AI systems.

## *MODULE 5: Reflection, Responsibility, and the Future of Leadership*

### **Session 18. Team Project Presentations**

In this session, student teams will present their course projects, showcasing how they have applied course concepts and learnings to real problems. The presentations provide an opportunity to reflect on learning outcomes, share insights, and engage in collective discussion and feedback.

### **Session 19. Leadership for Sustainable AI**

Returning to the core questions introduced at the beginning of the course, this session reflects on the role of leaders in shaping sustainable AI practices. Drawing on course learnings and team projects, we will discuss how leadership choices influence the ethical, organizational, and societal impact of AI.

### **Session 20. Future Perspectives and Course Wrap-Up**

To conclude the course, this session explores emerging trends and future perspectives related to AI, leadership, and sustainability. Topics include the future of work and developments such as Industry 5.0 and 6.0, followed by a synthesis of key insights and course takeaways.

## **5. Assessment**

The assessment includes three components:

- participation, class preparation, and individual reflection: **30%**
- team assignment: **30%**
- final individual exam: **40%**.

More details about each component will be provided in class.

If a retake exam is necessary, the final course grade will be determined by the following components:

- participation, class preparation, and individual reflection: **15%**
- team assignment: **15%**
- final individual retake exam: **70%**.

Students must achieve a minimum grade of 5.0 on the final exam of a course to be eligible to pass the course; a grade lower than 5.0 in the exam will become the student's final grade without averaging in other assessments. This rule applies to retake exams as well.

This course is strictly ruled by ESADE's Honour Code

*"I will not lie, cheat or steal to gain an academic advantage. I will respect all ESADE students, faculty and staff with my words and deeds."*

The violations of the ESADE Honor Code include the following:

**Lying:** Lying includes knowingly communicating an untruth in order to gain an unfair academic or employment advantage.

**Cheating:** Cheating includes, but is not limited to, using unauthorized materials to complete an assignment; copying the work of another person; unauthorized providing of materials or information (e.g. proprietary course information) to another person; plagiarism; unauthorized providing of materials or information to another person during an exam. All communications, written, oral or otherwise, among students during examinations, are forbidden, as is the use of notes, books, computers, calculators or other written material except when approved by the instructor.

**Stealing:** Stealing includes, but is not limited to, taking the property of another member of the ESADE community without permission, defacing or vandalizing the property of the ESADE Business School, or the misuse of ESADE resources.

**Respect for others and professional conduct:** Respect for others includes treating all ESADE students, staff, faculty and external contacts connected to the

school with politeness and cordiality, refraining from using abusive language or physical violence.

Upon witnessing a violation of the Honor Code, a student has a **moral obligation** to inform the student whose conduct is believed to be in violation of the Code that the Code has been violated. Each member of the ESADE community, as a person of integrity, has a personal obligation to adhere to this requirement, both on campus and when representing ESADE off campus.

Failure to comply with the more explicit guidelines set forth by the Program's Rules and Regulations can also be considered as breach of the Honor Code.

**Violations of this agreement and will be governed by Program Management which has the right to exercise any disciplinary action necessary in order to uphold the standards set forth herewith and in the Program's Rules and Regulations.**

#### Responsible Use of Generative AI

When using Generative AI in your academic work, you must do so responsibly and transparently. This includes **stating whether you used GenAI, how you used it, and how you adapted its output**. In some cases, you may also need to provide a formal citation for a specific GenAI chat or for the tool in general.

- Learn the essential steps for acknowledging and citing GenAI—along with templates and examples—in the Library's **Acknowledging and Referencing GenAI** capsule: <https://esade.libguides.com/how-to-cite/genai>
- For broader guidance on using GenAI responsibly and effectively at Esade, including responsible use principles, tools, skill-building resources, and workflow tips, visit the Library **AI Toolkit**: <https://esade.libguides.com/ai>

## 6. Materials

All the materials are provided through the course eCampus and Leganto.

## 7. Faculty leading the course

**Emilia Wietrak** (she/her/hers) has been collaborating with ESADE since 2018 and is currently serving as an Assistant Professor in the Department of People Management and Organization. Emilia holds a Ph.D. in Social and Organizational

Psychology from the University of Barcelona, and a Double Diploma M.Sc. in Work, Organizational, and Personnel Psychology from the University of Barcelona and the University of Bologna. At ESADE, she instructs undergraduate and graduate students on topics such as people management and organizational behavior.

Emilia is a dedicated expert in people analytics and evidence-based management. She is a fellow of the Center for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA). As a consultant, Emilia leverages her expertise in I/O psychology and research to help organizations analyze their HR data, gain insights, and take actionable steps to improve employee outcomes and overall business effectiveness. In addition to her consulting work, Emilia is passionate about translating and communicating scientific research findings to HR leaders and I/O professionals. She has authored evidence-based reports, summaries, and blog posts on various people management topics, and her clients include renowned organizations such as CEBMA, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Orgnostic, and ScienceForWork.

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Department of People Management and Organization secretary

- Ms. Carme Roig ([carme.roig@esade.edu](mailto:carme.roig@esade.edu)), Barcelona-Sant Cugat Campus.

## 8. Timetable and sections

- **Session 1:** Wednesday, 11/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 2:** Friday, 13/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 3:** Wednesday, 18/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 4:** Friday, 20/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 5:** Wednesday, 25/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 6:** Friday, 27/2/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 7:** Wednesday, 4/3/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 8:** Friday, 6/3/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 9:** Friday, 13/3/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 10:** Wednesday, 18/3/2026, 14:45 – 17:15

- **Session 11:** Friday, 20/3/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 12:** Wednesday, 8/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 13:** Friday, 10/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 14:** Wednesday, 15/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 15:** Friday, 17/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 16:** Wednesday, 22/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 17:** Friday, 24/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 18:** Wednesday, 29/4/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 19:** Wednesday, 6/5/2026, 14:45 – 17:15
- **Session 20:** Wednesday, 8/5/2026, 14:45 – 17:15