VALUES, LEADERSHIP AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ROMANIAN COMPANIES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This study looks at the relationship between personal values, quality of leadership and artificial intelligence in Romanian companies. We began with our practical observations resulted from facilitating leadership programs and a survey we sent out to 250 Romanian professionals out of which 217 participated. They were all members in different personal development communities. We made 7 key observations that have practical and theoretical relevance. The most interesting one is that many professionals with high value clarity are thinking of leaving their companies. We introduced the concept of values-driven exit as a separate exit reasoning which is influenced by the difficulty in keeping one's identity and personal values in the organizational context. The data shows that AI by itself does not create tension in the culture. It is in fact the way that leaders mediate the relationship between algorithms and people what creates most tension. The Romanian context offers a specific perspective that is almost absent in today's literature.

Keywords: *organizational culture, values-based leadership, artificial intelligence, values-algorithms, values-driven exit*

JEL classification: M12, M14, O33, D23

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1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence is already present in our companies. This is not a futuristic thing anymore. It is here. We see it in the way we evaluate performance; we make decisions and basically in the way we shape our work (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). What we have yet to explore is how all of this is affecting cultures inside our companies. Not just what AI is doing but what is actually happening with values, behaviors and identities of the people who work in companies where algorithms are more present every day.

This study was born from a practical observation. During the leadership programs we facilitated in the last few years, people have described a specific phenomenon: they spoke about leaders who start using digital tools to make decisions and evaluate performance, and how those leaders are becoming more distant, as if those tools are giving them a way out of dealing with difficult

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conversations and taking responsibility. This comes from the way leaders use technology and not from technology in itself.

Romanian research in management has many times shown that companies in our area are very sensitive to the mismatch between declared and practiced values (Năstase, 2004; Nicolescu & Verboncu, 2008). With AI here, this mismatch goes to a new level. Algorithms do not declare values but they do reflect values in their logic. And people can feel it.

This study brings an exploratory and descriptive approach that is anchored in the data we got from a survey we sent to 250 people but also from our practical observations we got from years of facilitating leadership programs inside companies. Our main contribution is to identify patterns that deserve later research and also to bring a Romanian perspective in a space that is still dominated by Western studies.

2. Fundaments – Organizational Culture, AI and Values-Based Leadership

Organizational culture is a collection of ideas, values and beliefs that influence the way people think, feel and act inside a company (Schein & Schein, 2017). Organizational culture is not built just with procedures. It evolves in time through observed behaviors and especially through common emotions. This is the deepest level of culture (Schein & Schein, 2017): our basic assumptions that are invisible but resistant to change. AI brings an unbeatable logic that is not built on the way that people make decisions and build relationships. Research in the last decade has shown that human decisions are emotionally driven and reasoning often comes later to justify the emotional decision. When you have an algorithm that makes decisions, it can disturb an entire emotional ecosystem that was built over years. People do not know when to listen to their own intuition when they are faced with clear logic. This incapacity to combine the emotional and algorithmic language creates the first fractures in organizational culture. Values play a key role in all of this. They act as collective points of reference and when they are aligned with company values, we get a higher commitment rate and a lower leaving intent (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

When the company goes through changes or when the leader is inconsistent, people feel a certain mismatch between the company direction and its declared values (Cable & DeRue, 2002). This is not just uncomfortable. In the AI era it can become a real cultural threat.

The presence of algorithms in organizations does not stop with the automation of repetitive tasks. It changes the relationship between company and employee. When performance is measured by a system, when feedback comes from a database and not through a conversation, a person can feel they no longer interact with culture but with logic. And this logic, even if it is correct, does not see him or care about him. Kellogg et al. (2020) show that algorithms form new ways of control that are less visible but harder to fight against than human authority. Jarrahi et al. (2021) add that algorithmic management can reduce employee autonomy and can alter their perception of work fairness. The psychological consequence is that a person who is being measured through a system will no longer fight to get better. They feel the standard will only go up and that it was created by something that does not understand them, and that there is no chance for dialogue. Over time, frustration will not go towards the system but in fact employees will turn against other people: their leaders, colleagues and company. Emotional disconnect begins quietly through complacency and retreat and ends up with what we name in this study as the values-based exit. This happens when a person stops believing the place they work in belongs to them.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) were already describing the beginning of the intelligent machine era, a transformation that has since reached even functions previously reserved for human judgment, such as performance evaluation and promotion decisions (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2022).

In this context, leadership becomes more important than ever. There is no need in fact for the leader to understand technology, but to remain human while technology evolves. Bass & Avolio (1994) show that in moments of adversity and change, people do not look for solutions. They first look for meaning and people they can trust. Just like an overwhelmed child will look for his parents, when an employee feels something is breaking, he will look for his leader. And this is the window in which things can still be changed for the better: when the employee is searching and has not disconnected. But the window closes even faster if the leader has given up himself and has surrendered to the authority of the algorithm. He then becomes nothing more than an extension of the system. Avolio & Gardner (2005) show that authentic leaders who stay aligned with declared values and practiced behaviors will reduce the distance between employee and organisation. Năstase (2007) adds that in the Romanian context this function is even more critical, as formal processes tend to replace real values dialogue. The most effective leader is not the one who can explain the algorithm but the one that speaks to the person in front of him and has the courage to put himself between the system and the person when the system cannot see what he knows is right.

3. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive exploratory design. It also has a qualitative component. Data was collected with an online questionnaire between May 1st and 15th, 2026. We used TypeForm to collect the data. Our final sample has 217 valid answers. Most participants are affiliated with the Maxwell Leadership Romania community but some are also part of a professional business networking organization with similar interests. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

We used 44 items with a Likert scale (1 – do not agree, 5 – completely agree). The items followed the clarity on personal values, organizational values, AI influence, leadership quality, tension between values and algorithms, professional satisfaction and intent to leave the company. There was also an optional open question that gave participants the chance to describe in their own words what they mean by keeping their values in their company as the company becomes more and more technology-driven. 164 out of 217 participants answered this question.

The data was analyzed descriptively. We looked at how most people answered certain items. Open questions were analyzed by noticing recurrent ideas.

Sample Distribution (N=217)

Table 1

Company level	N	%
Execution / specialist	84	39%
Antreprenor / Founder	52	24%
Middle management	33	15%
Team Lead	31	14%
Top management	17	8%
TOTAL	**217**	**100%**

Note: 79% of the sample is more than 40 years old; 69% has more than 5 years in their current workplace.

*Sourc*e: Authors' own research (2026)

Our sample is limited as 217 participants but it reflects a part of the population that is evenly exposed to values and leadership topics. Most of them belong to the Maxwell Leadership Romania community and other affiliated organisations. This limitation is presented in the Conclusions section. In the same time, this offers a specific advantage for an exploratory study: we have access to a specific lead-user group that is already sensitive to the tension between personal values and algorithmic systems. This makes it appropriate to bring out patterns that might not be visible (but still present) in a general sample that is less aware of personal values.

4. Observations and Discussion

Here are 7 observations that were made by analyzing the data and through our practical experience. These are patterns that hold practical and exploratory value.

4.1 The Paradox of the Integrous Person Who Wants to Leave the Company

The most surprising observation comes from the contrast between two sets of answers. When they were asked about their personal values, 91% (almost unanimous) answered that they knew the principles they did not want to break, 90% said they would stay loyal to their values even in difficult times, and 93% believed others see them as being consistent. And yet, one third of them have thought about leaving the company in the last few months. And when asked about a better job offer, they were almost split in half — 38% would take it and 37% would not.

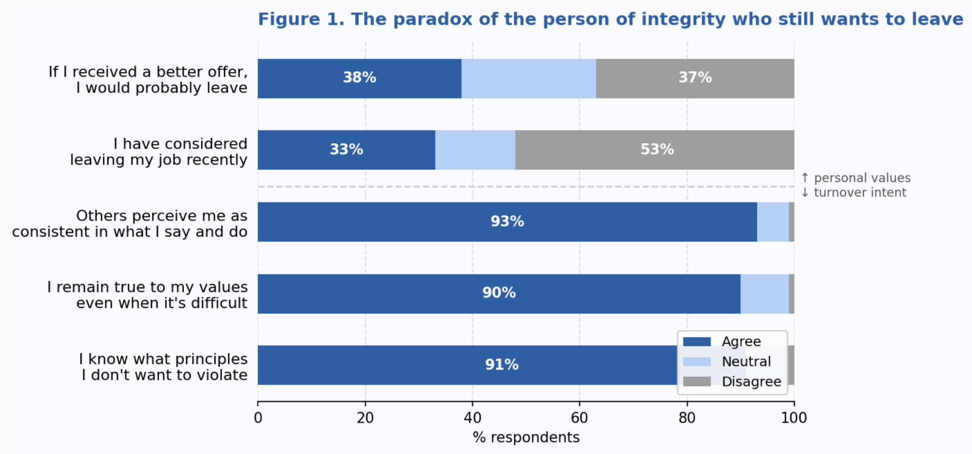

Figure 1. The paradox of personal values versus intent to leave (N=217)

Source: Authors' own research (2026)

This shows that companies are not losing weak and disoriented people. They are losing people who know exactly who they are. We could call this the 'values-based exit category'. These people are in fact looking for a new place where they can be themselves.

The open answers confirm and build on this. One participant said (using present tense, not past): "to me, respect and trust are very important. These are values I have not seen in my leader in the past few weeks. It is because of this that I won't be going to work anymore starting tomorrow, even though I was doing well financially. I will look for a place to work where respect and trust are dominant." This person does not speak about money and does not mention AI or burnout. They speak about values and a leader who does not live them.

In Romanian management literature, retention is almost always analyzed through external factors like salary, benefits and advancement opportunities. Our observation suggests there is a risk category that is not shown in any HR alert system — the performant, financially satisfied and integrous employee who chooses to leave because he can no longer be himself in his workplace.

4.2 The Leader Doesn't Lie. He Just Gives In

Two questions about the leader showed a strong contrast. When asked whether their leader speaks about values and then decides differently, 40% said no and 30% said yes. This shows we are not dealing with intentional hypocrisy here. But when asked whether their leader stays consistent with his values under pressure, only 57% said yes and 16% said no.

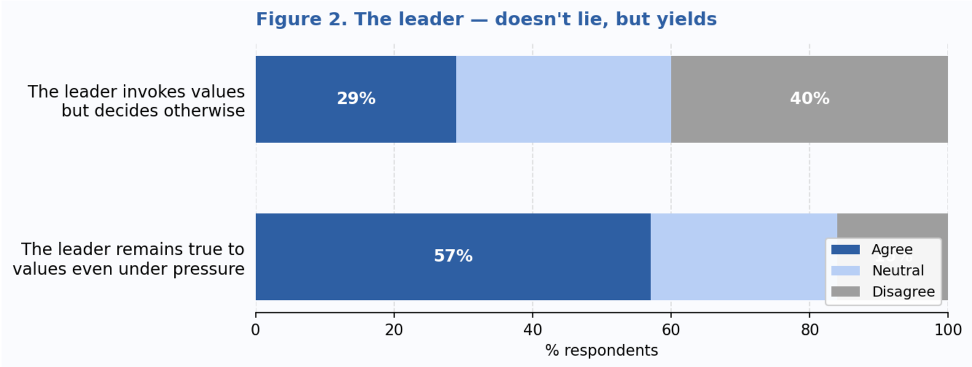

Figure 2. Perception of leader behavior in relation to declared values (N=217)
Source: Authors' own research (2026)

This shows a specific type. The leader who believes in his values but is unable to keep them when he is being pushed in a different direction. He is not a bad person. He just gives in. There is a difference between hypocrisy and fragility. One knows he is lying. The other one thinks he is doing the right thing, but only when it is convenient.

As companies become more and more digitalized, leadership fragility becomes more and more expensive. When you have an algorithm that provides you with a number, it is far easier to act on that number than it is to argue against it. A digital system can provide a leader with a cover he did not have in the past. A participant in our sample says this very clearly: “Do not make decisions solely on data when intuition, experience or ethics tell you something is wrong. Use technology as an instrument to amplify thinking and not replace it. Algorithms don't have honor, loyalty, meaning, moral courage and existential responsibility.”

This observation is supported by our practical experience as well. During the COVID-19 pandemic we noticed that leaders who held their values in front of financial difficulties generated a level of commitment from their employees that could not be replicated by any regular management tool. When the CEO of one company we were working with declared publicly that he would not let people go as long as it was financially possible, even by sacrificing his own pay, and this declaration was aligned with what people already knew about him as a human being, even some of his senior staff volunteered to sacrifice their own pay to support the company. This does not happen in companies with fragile leaders.

4.3 Reduced to Numbers

31% of our participants feel they are being evaluated solely by numbers and indicators. The distribution is almost identical to the one from the question about digital evaluation of performance (32% agree). This means that those who experience digital evaluation feel it as a transformation of their personal identity into a simple number — not as a support tool but as a replacement for human thinking.

There is a difference between being measured and being reduced to a number. All companies measure performance. But when those measurements replace all conversations, when KPIs replace direct observation, then we have a problem. One participant articulated this very well: “I don't want to see people through the KPI lens. I want to look for performance improvement by showing people they are being seen and appreciated as valuable human beings and not as a 'smaller than expected' number.” This opinion was expressed in Romanian, but the words 'smaller than expected' were left in English by the participant. This was probably done just to refer to the regular evaluation systems most companies use. The participant internalized the system's language and quoted it to show the absurdity it can bring to a human being.

When people feel they have been seen as numbers only, the consequence is a rupture in their identity. And this becomes one of the reasons for the values-based exit described earlier.

4.4 Companies Adopt Systems Without Explaining Why

53% of the participants say they understand how digital systems work in their companies, but only 45% say the company actually explained how and why they use them. The gap between what a system does and why it is there is the most relevant finding in this section of the survey.

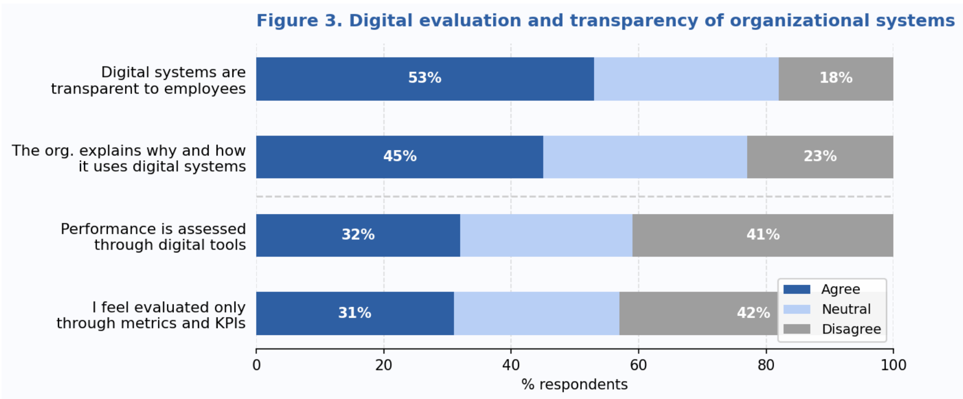

Figure 3. Digital evaluation and systems transparency (N=217)
Source: Authors' own research (2026)

Technical transparency is not the same as transparency of intention. You can understand how a system works and yet not understand why it was chosen, what values it reflects and how the results will be used. Companies that adopt AI without explaining their intention do not just make a communication mistake, they make a cultural one. They send a clear message: the system decides, you execute, questions are not welcome.

One participant said this: “analyzed data needs to be discussed and improved on together with employees, in a context where they can be heard and listened to.” This is not data rejection. It is more of a request for dialogue around it.

4.5 The Conflict Between Values and Data Is Real for Almost Half of Respondents

46% of participants said that data-based decisions are in conflict with what they believe is right or human. Only 20% deny this tension. Almost half of the people we questioned are experiencing this right now in their workplace.

This type of conflict is not new. Managers have always made decisions on data while their intuition or ethics told them otherwise. What is new here is the increasing authority that data has and the rising difficulty people have arguing with it. When a human manager tells you that you are underperforming, you can argue with that or ask for another perspective. But when an algorithm provides you with a score, the conversation becomes more difficult. Who would you talk to? Who is responsible if the system is wrong?

One participant spoke clearly about the mechanism through which a person with clear values navigates this tension: “To do right, I will do what I feel is right even if sometimes data says otherwise. I want to use data to help me make a good decision. But I need to be the one making it. I will not rely 100% on data and technology and not think it through.”

4.6 Organizational Values: More Formal Than Real, but Not for Everyone

When asked if company values are discussed more formally than practically, participants split into three almost identical groups. This was the only time in the survey where there was no clear direction. But that makes it a relevant item.

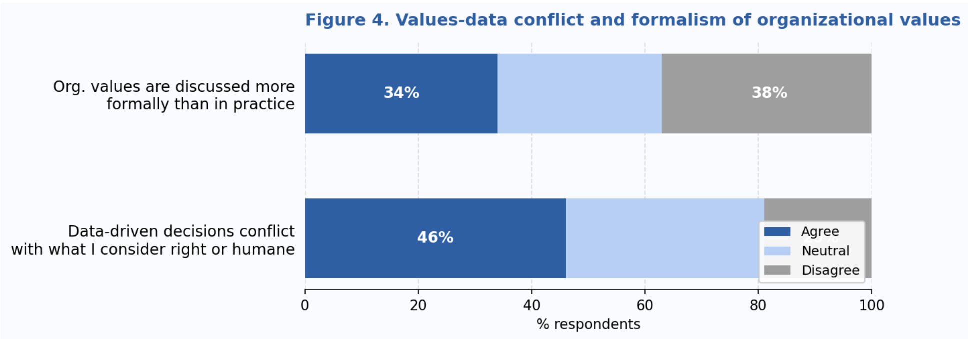

Figure 4. Value–data conflict and how organizational values are discussed (N=217)
Source: Authors' own research (2026)

Working with organizational values is not the same everywhere. It is mediated by the leader, the team and the immediate context. Two people in the same company can experience completely different realities when it comes to values. This means that the issue is not at company level but in how culture is being implemented locally.

This observation resonates with research (Năstase, 2004) in Romania, where a specific sensitivity towards declared and practiced values was detected in Romanian companies. Our study shows this sensitivity persists even in a digitalized context and that its amplification depends on the leader's behavior.

One participant describes a positive experience which he calls 'rare': "it brings me great joy and motivation to see that my personal values are aligned with my company's values. This is a rare thing." This person is grateful for something that should be normal. This gratitude speaks more than statistics.

4.7 Values-Based Exit — An Emerging Category

The final observation does not come from Likert items but from the open question in the survey. A few of the answers describe a reality that is not covered in the general retention literature: people who left, or are about to leave, because they could not stay true to their values.

Two participants say it directly: "For me it means being connected to myself. Even if this meant leaving my former job" or "If I were forced to go against these values, my wellbeing would be affected a lot and I am certain I would look for another job."

Kahn (1990) wrote about how employees disconnect long before they leave their jobs and called this 'psychological retreat'. Our survey shows that this is in fact an identity rupture. This is not 'I don't want to be involved anymore'. This is 'I cannot be myself here anymore'. This is something else.

Values-based exit is different from regular exits (motivated by salary or other external factors) or burnout (motivated by exhaustion). This one happens when a person realizes that they stayed at their job but lost themselves in the process. It becomes an identity-hygiene decision.

Romanian HR does not measure, name or understand this category enough. And so, it cannot prevent it. We noticed this frequently in the companies where we facilitated leadership programs. The employees with the highest clarity of values are the hardest to keep through salaries and promotions, and the easiest to lose when the company no longer leaves room for authenticity.

4.8 Synthesis of Survey Responses

Table 2 shows the distribution of answers for the twelve main questions in the survey. They cover five topics: clarity of personal values, consistency of the leader, digital evaluation, company transparency and intention to leave the company.

The percentages show how many participants agreed, were neutral, or disagreed with each statement.

Responses to key survey items (N=217)

Table 2

Statement (N=217)	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**
I know what principles I don't want to violate	91%	7%	2%
I remain true to my values even when it's difficult	90%	9%	1%
Others perceive me as consistent between what I say and what I do	93%	6%	1%
I sometimes act against the values I declare (R)	17%	24%	59%
I have considered looking for another job in recent months	33%	15%	53%
If I received a better offer, I would probably leave	38%	25%	37%
The leader remains true to values even under pressure	57%	27%	16%
The leader invokes values in speeches but decides otherwise (R)	29%	31%	40%
I feel evaluated solely through indicators and metrics	31%	26%	42%
The organization explains why and how it uses digital systems	45%	32%	23%
Data-driven decisions conflict with what I consider right or humane	46%	35%	20%
Organizational values are discussed more formally than in practice	34%	29%	38%

(R) = reverse-scored item; disagreement indicates the positive behavior. Likert scale 1–5.

Source: Authors' own research (2026)

What we can see here is that there is a difference between the level of clarity in personal values (91–93% of participants said they know who they are and what they will not compromise on) and the tension with digital systems, where 46% of participants are in conflict between what data shows and what they think is right. In other words, the participants in our sample know what they value. Their problem is with the space the company and their leaders give them to live out their identity in the workplace.

5. Conclusions

Our study began by asking what happens to people's values when algorithms take over company decisions. The answer that the data is showing is simple but not comfortable: AI is not the problem. The problem is the way leaders and cultures mediate the presence of those algorithms.

Employees who know their values leave when they can no longer be authentic. The classic leader in our sample is not a hypocrite, but he is fragile and can give in under different pressures, including the algorithmic one, especially when he is given an excuse to avoid difficult conversations. Digital evaluation creates ruptures in identity when it becomes the only language the company speaks when it comes to people. Companies adopt systems without explaining the intent behind those adoptions. Almost half of the professionals live in conflict between the data that systems provide and what they consider to be right and humane.

For management and HR this is important. Early alert systems that signal intent to leave do not capture values-based exit intent — a person can be financially satisfied, loyal for a long time, and also be on the verge of leaving because they no longer see themselves there. AI implementation in companies should come while also communicating the intent behind it. Leaders who implement digital systems need more courage, not technical training — the courage to stand between the algorithm and the people and say: while the data says this, the person in front of me is more than what the data shows.

The limitations of this study are recognized: the sample is drawn from a community that has higher values-awareness than the general population, the cross-sectional design excludes causality, and the tension between values and algorithms was captured through two separate items rather than a validated scale. Future studies should use samples that represent the general population, follow the evolution of these patterns as AI adoption grows in Romanian companies, and build validated tools to measure values-based exit.

The question this study keeps open is not whether AI will transform organizational culture. Data and our practical observations show that this is already happening. The question is whether this transformation will be led intentionally, with values at the center, or whether it will be left unchecked, without a culture to guide it. The data suggests the leader makes the difference. The choice to lead is still human.

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