

— FREE FRAMEWORK

You Can Manage AI Agents. Can You Manage People?

5 skills you're already building with AI — and what changes when you use them with people.

— INTRODUCTION

Nobody warns you before the promotion.

Most technical professionals who get promoted to management are handed a title, told congratulations, and sent back to their desk.

Nobody explains what actually changed. Nobody warns you that the skills and instincts that made you excellent at your previous job are about to work against you in this one. You find out later, usually mid-conversation, mid-project, or mid-performance review, when something breaks in a way that would never have broken with an AI agent or a piece of code.

THE REFRAME

If you've been working with AI agents, you've already been building management instincts. The foundation is closer to ready than you think. The translation is specific, learnable, and smaller than it feels on day one.

This framework maps five skills you've been developing through your work with agents. It shows you exactly where those skills transfer directly, where they evolve, and where there's a gap that AI work alone will never close.

WHAT YOU'LL HAVE BY THE END

A precise picture of which management skills you already own, where each one needs to evolve when the variable is a person instead of a model, and what to start paying attention to before your next difficult conversation.

How to use this: Read each skill in sequence. Use the "Ask yourself this" at the end of each section as a real diagnostic, not a reflection exercise. The translation table at the end is the reference you'll come back to.

— SKILL 01

Setting Direction

Giving clear goals, context, and constraints. Work moves without you.

WHAT YOU'VE BUILT WITH AGENTS

To get good output from an AI agent, you've learned to be specific. Vague prompts produce vague results. You define the goal clearly, set the constraints, and give enough context for the task to run without constant correction. You've gotten good at this, probably better than you realize.

WHERE IT TRANSFERS DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE

Everything. Clarity of direction is just as critical with people as it is with agents. Vague goals produce vague work. Teams that don't understand what success looks like spend enormous energy on the wrong things. The discipline you've built around defining scope and expected output is directly applicable.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Agents don't need to know *why*. People do.

Without the reasoning behind a goal, *why* this project matters, *why* now, *why* their contribution is the right one, people fill in the gaps themselves. Usually with anxiety, competing priorities, or assumptions that send them in the wrong direction.

Direction for people isn't just *what*. It's *why this, why now, and why you specifically*.

ASK YOURSELF THIS

Think about the last piece of work you assigned. Did you give the goal, or the goal plus the reasoning behind it? If you can't reconstruct the *why* in one sentence, the person you assigned it to is probably operating without it.

— SKILL 02

Delegating Ownership

Handing off work completely. Not taking it back.

WHAT YOU'VE BUILT WITH AGENTS

You've learned to let it run. Once you've set up the task, you don't rewrite the prompt mid-execution or take over when the output looks slightly different from what you pictured. You've developed a tolerance for process variance as long as the output quality is there.

WHERE IT TRANSFERS DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE

The instinct to define scope clearly and step back is exactly right. Managers who can't delegate create bottlenecks. The analytical mind's tendency toward precision in task definition, honed every time you write a prompt, is genuinely useful when handing work to people.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Taking work back from an agent has no consequences. Taking work back from a person sends a message.

Every time you step in to fix something, adjust the approach, or quietly redo a piece of work, even with good intentions, you're telling that person their judgment doesn't meet your standard. Over time they stop owning things. They do the work but wait for you to validate every decision. You become the bottleneck without ever meaning to.

The hardest part isn't the initial handoff. It's watching someone approach a problem differently than you would. Letting it run anyway.

ASK YOURSELF THIS

In the last two weeks, did you redo something someone on your team produced, or quietly take a task back? If yes: was it because the output was genuinely wrong, or because it was different from how you'd have done it? That's the question that separates a correction from a pattern.

— SKILL 03

Creating Feedback Loops

Identifying what's off and adjusting in a way that improves the next attempt.

WHAT YOU'VE BUILT WITH AGENTS

When output misses the mark, you've learned to diagnose specifically. Not "this isn't right" – but *what exactly* is off, and what correction produces a better result. You've developed precision in feedback. Vague corrections produce vague improvements.

WHERE IT TRANSFERS DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE

The diagnostic skill transfers completely. The ability to identify specifically what went wrong, rather than just that something went wrong, is exactly what separates useful feedback from feedback that frustrates people without helping them grow.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Agents process feedback as instructions. People process feedback through everything else.

The same feedback lands completely differently depending on the relationship you've built, how safe the person feels with you, whether they're having a difficult week, and what they think your correction means about how they're seen overall.

The technical skill of spotting what's wrong is the easy part. Delivering it in a way that actually lands, specific enough to be useful, timed well, framed without triggering defensiveness – that's where most new managers go completely silent. Not because they don't see the problem. Because they don't know how to say it without breaking something.

ASK YOURSELF THIS

Think of a piece of feedback you've been sitting on. Do you have a clear opening line for the conversation, not the content, the *opening line*? If you don't, that's not a knowledge gap. It's a skill gap. And it has a fix.

— SKILL 04

Reading the Signals

Noticing when something is off before it shows up in the output.

WHAT YOU'VE BUILT WITH AGENTS

When an agent starts producing inconsistent or degraded output, you notice. You've trained yourself to catch early signals: a prompt that's drifting, a context window getting noisy, a response pattern that's shifted. You've developed pattern recognition around output quality.

WHERE IT TRANSFERS DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE

The instinct to track signal quality over time, to notice when something has shifted, is genuinely valuable with people. Managers who wait until output degrades to ask questions are always behind. The habit of paying attention is the right one.

WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Agent signals are in the output. People signals are almost never in the output, at least not at first.

They're in tone. Energy. What doesn't get said in a 1:1. How someone shows up in a meeting compared to last week. A slight shift in response time. People don't send error messages. They go quiet. And by the time the signal shows up in their work, the conversation you needed to have was weeks or months ago.

Reading people requires a completely different kind of attention than reading output. You're not looking for what's wrong with the work. You're looking for what's changed in the person.

ASK YOURSELF THIS

For each person on your team: can you describe what they look like when they're engaged? Not what their work looks like — what *they* look like. If you don't have a baseline, you won't recognize the deviation when it comes. Start building it in your next 1:1.

— SKILL 05

Building Trust

This one has no AI equivalent.

WHAT YOU'VE BUILT WITH AGENTS

Nothing that applies here. Agents have no history with you, no career ambitions, no need to feel psychologically safe. They won't remember how you handled a mistake or whether you backed someone up. They execute the same way regardless of how you've treated them.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PEOPLE

Trust is the variable that determines whether everything else in this framework actually works. Clear direction only lands if people trust that you mean it. Delegation only works if people trust you'll back them up when a decision goes sideways. Feedback only improves people if they trust you're saying it because you want them to grow, not because you're managing them out.

THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

Trust isn't a soft skill that sits alongside the other four. It's the environment that makes the other four function. It's built in moments you won't recognize as trust-building while they're happening: how you handle a mistake in a team meeting, whether you remember what someone told you three weeks ago, what you say about your team when they're not in the room. It accumulates slowly. It can disappear fast. No amount of process clarity compensates for its absence.

ASK YOURSELF THIS

Do the people around you feel safe being wrong in front of you? Not comfortable. Not happy. *Safe*. As in: if they make a mistake, raise a concern, or push back on your direction, they trust the relationship absorbs it rather than suffers for it. If you're not sure of the answer, that's the most important thing you can find out.

— FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

The Translation Table

What carries over from AI work, where each skill evolves when the variable is a person, and the gap that remains.

Skill	Transfers Directly	Where It Evolves	The Gap
Setting Direction	Clarity of goal, scope, and constraints	Add the <i>why</i> behind the <i>what</i>	People need reasoning, not just instruction
Delegating Ownership	Define clearly, then step back	Learn the cost of taking it back	Reclaiming work signals distrust, even with good intentions
Creating Feedback Loops	Diagnose specifically, not vaguely	Timing and delivery matter as much as content	You need a framework for the conversation, not just the correction
Reading the Signals	Pattern recognition over time	Shift from output signals to people signals	Build individual baselines, not just work quality
Building Trust	<i>No AI equivalent</i>		Built from scratch. It determines whether the other four work.

THE PRINCIPLE

The gap isn't the skills. It's the layer underneath them, the part where people have context, emotions, history, and careers. The same approach that works on a model produces a completely different result on a human being. That gap is exactly what the IC-to-manager transition requires you to close. Most people don't find out about it until they're already in the job.

— THE NEWSLETTER

The newsletter is where the framework goes deeper.

Every week, Code to People covers one framework, situation, or decision that technical professionals don't get warned about before they start managing people. Not generic advice. The specific skills and gaps that show up in the first few years of leading a team.

PILLAR 01**IC-to-Manager Frameworks**

Proven mental models for the specific shift technical professionals have to make — not generic management thinking recycled from a business school textbook.

PILLAR 02**Managing Up & Down**

How to translate technical depth into stakeholder alignment, clear decisions, and team direction — without losing what makes you credible.

PILLAR 03**Real-World Scenarios**

Case studies pulled from actual leadership challenges across Finance, Media, and Tech — the hard parts of managing people are universal.

PILLAR 04**Actionable Takeaways**

Every issue ends with one clear thing you can apply this week — no fluff, no theory without practice.

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