

# 04

IN CONVERSATION



## Are systems evolving, *or* *merely being fine-tuned?*

*Prof. Lilac A. Alsafadi on the leadership paradox of incrementalism,  
and why Saudi Arabia is prototyping the future of education.*



**Prof. Lilac A. Alsafadi**

In conversation with Prof. Mansoor S. Almalki



## IN CONVERSATION

## Are systems evolving, *or merely being fine-tuned?*

*"We spend too much time improving what exists, rather than imagining what could exist."*

PROF. MANSOOR S. ALMALKI IN CONVERSATION WITH PROF. LILAC A. ALSAFADI · JANUARY 28, 2026

## IN BRIEF

**The Core Conflict:** most leaders confuse "incremental efficiency" with "systemic transformation."

**The Insight:** Prof. Lilac Alsafadi argues that true transformation requires reimagining the "why," not just upgrading the "how."

**The Context:** how Saudi Arabia is transitioning from a policy beneficiary to a global prototype for education and talent development.

In the landscape of modern governance, "transformation" has become a ubiquitous buzzword. Yet, in Saudi Arabia, where the pace of reform is compressing decades of change into years, the term carries a heavier weight. It is not merely about improvement; it is about relevance and survival.

We recently sat down with Prof. Lilac A. Alsafadi, the CEO of IKONIC Educational Holding and one of the Kingdom's foremost voices on digital leadership, for the Saudi Thought Leadership (STL) newsletter to dissect the mechanics of change. What emerged from our conversation was not a checklist of reforms, but a fundamental challenge to how leaders approach institutional change.

Her central thesis is stark.

## The Trap of Incrementalism

When steering large, complex institutions, it is tempting to focus on efficiency, doing things better. Alsafadi warns that this is the hallmark of incrementalism, not transformation.

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*"Incremental change is about efficiency; transformation is about relevance and value. They demand different capabilities because they operate on a different logic."*

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According to Alsafadi, leaders often fall into the trap of fixing symptoms while ignoring root causes. To escape this trap, she outlines four critical shifts in leadership thinking:

- 01 Systemic Mapping:** leaders must read "causal loops" and power dynamics. Without this, well-intentioned reforms often reinforce the very problems they aim to solve.
- 02 Shared Purpose:** strategy documents are not enough. Transformation requires a compelling "why" that turns compliance into commitment.
- 03 Momentum over Plans:** technical coalitions build structures, but passion builds movement. "Passion converts compliance into commitment and effort into momentum," she notes.
- 04 Psychological Safety:** perhaps most importantly, transformation is psychological. People are being asked to let go of familiar identities. Leaders must cultivate resilience and safety so that experimentation can flourish.

## Navigating the "Leadership Paradox"

A common friction point in the Saudi context, and indeed in any high-growth market, is the gap between national ambition and institutional readiness. Alsafadi calls this the "Leadership Paradox": the urgency to deliver often exceeds the system's capacity to absorb change.

How do leaders survive this tension? "Not by diluting ambition," Alsafadi asserts, "but by sequencing it."

She advocates for a strategy of "Radical Clarity." While the how may evolve, the purpose must remain immovable. To bridge the gap, leaders should pursue "early quick wins": high-visibility, low-friction initiatives that serve as proof of concept and build the confidence and social capital needed for harder reforms.

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*"Transformation may be a marathon, but systems require periodic sprints."*

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## **The Digital Litmus Test**

Nowhere is the confusion between "change" and "transformation" more visible than in technology. Alsafadi draws a sharp line between Digital Adoption and Digital Transformation.

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*"Digital adoption upgrades tools; digital transformation rewires how institutions create value."*

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If you are simply digitizing workflows, you are modernizing, not transforming. The litmus test, she suggests, is whether the technology enables entirely new capabilities, such as mass personalization or evidence-based decision-making.

In the era of AI, this distinction is critical. Alsafadi views AI's strategic value not as automation, but as precision: matching talent to opportunity, diagnosing skill gaps, and enabling evidence-based governance at scale. However, she warns that responsible AI requires robust governance and a clear understanding of where it augments human judgment versus where it replaces routine work.

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*"In a post-AI economy, education cannot remain a provider of credentials; it must become a platform for talent, innovation, and lifelong learning."*

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## Saudi Arabia as a Global Prototype

Shifting the lens to the global stage, Alsafadi believes the narrative around Saudi Arabia is outdated. The Kingdom is no longer just "catching up"; it is actively prototyping new models that the rest of the world can learn from.

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*"Saudi institutions should not seek to integrate into the global education landscape as it exists today; they should help shape what it becomes next."*

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She highlights three dimensions that make the Saudi experiment relevant to international investors:

- 01 The Compression of Time:** the pace of reform creates a unique lab for innovation.
- 02 System-Level Alignment:** the coordination between labour, education, and R&D reduces historical friction.
- 03 New Models:** from digital universities to micro-credentials, Saudi Arabia is moving from "capacity expansion" to "value creation and competitiveness."

For international partners, the message is clear: the world rewards execution, not just reform. "Western models are reforming; Asian models are scaling; GCC models are experimenting and shaping," Alsafadi observes. "The frontier will be shaped by whoever can combine innovation with execution."

## Beyond Initiatives: Building Lasting Capabilities

As the conversation concluded, we asked Prof. Alsafadi for her strategic advice to the leaders shaping the next phase. Her counsel was to shift focus from launching initiatives to building institutions.

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*"Systems transform when rules transform."*

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The next phase requires a focus on talent development for a post-AI era, deep industry integration, and regulations that reward innovation rather than compliance.

Ultimately, the Saudi narrative deserves greater visibility, not just as a success story, but as a blueprint. "This emerging narrative is not about catching up," Alsafadi concludes. "It is about identifying our true assets ... and demonstrating that dreaming big and delivering big are no longer opposing ideas."

### **Executive Sidebar: The Transformation Playbook**

*Key tenets from Prof. Lilac Alsafadi on leading systemic change.*

**On Strategy:** don't just improve the old; imagine the new.

**On Speed:** use "quick wins" to buy the social capital needed for deep reform.

**On Tech:** if you aren't changing the business model, you aren't doing digital transformation.

**On The Future:** education must shift from "transmitting knowledge" to "producing talent."



## ABOUT THE GUEST

**Prof. Lilac A. Alsafadi**

Prof. Lilac Alsafadi is a recognized authority in systemic transformation, AI strategy, and human capital development. She currently serves as CEO of IKONIC Educational Holding, where she leads strategic investments reshaping the region's education landscape. She made history as the first woman to lead a co-educational university in Saudi Arabia as President of the Saudi Electronic University (SEU). Her career bridges academia and global tech; she previously served as Vice President and National Technology Officer at Microsoft Arabia. A computer scientist by training, she holds a PhD and leads critical initiatives within the Kingdom's Vision 2030 framework, sitting on multiple advisory boards shaping the future of digital governance. She also currently sits on several boards of directors and boards of trustees, and serves as a senior advisor to public institutions and private enterprises shaping Saudi Arabia's next phase of modernization.





#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Mansoor S. Almalki

*Founder and editor*

Prof. Mansoor S. Almalki is a strategy consultant and board member who has spent more than fifteen years leading change inside institutions: first in higher education, then across corporate governance, AI readiness and national transformation. STL is where that experience becomes published thinking, a research and development practice and a think tank by design, built to put Saudi ideas in front of decision makers at home and abroad.



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