



2026 Global Leadership Study



Leadership Development in 2026

Trends and Challenges

As part of our mission to provide world-class global insights for the most effective ways to develop leaders for the future, Harvard Business Impact launched its fourth annual Global Leadership Study. This study examined the shifting business priorities, leadership development challenges, and organizational needs in the coming year. Its purpose was to clarify the critical jobs leadership development must help organizations accomplish and to offer guidance for building a workforce better prepared for the future.

2026 SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS



1,139 senior leaders



Nearly half from organizations with at least 20,000 employees



More than 15 countries and across industries



49% from organizations with annual revenue of at least \$10 billion

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2026 Global Leadership Study

In 2026, artificial intelligence (AI) has taken center stage for organizations and their workforces. Processes are being reshaped, leadership is changing, and operating models need to evolve to meet the new era of working. To better understand how leadership development strategies are evolving alongside it, Harvard Business Impact conducted a comprehensive global study of senior leaders to examine how their work fits into preparing for the new future of work.

This study surveyed more than 1,100 senior leaders across more than 15 countries and multiple industries. The respondents represent organizations of varying sizes, with nearly half from companies exceeding 20,000 employees and from organizations generating at least \$10 billion in annual revenue.

To complement the survey data, this report also draws on insights from conversations with senior leaders responsible for designing and executing leadership development initiatives or corporate strategy. The findings reveal key trends shaping leadership development and business objectives in 2026 are around AI strategy, transformation, faster learning, and prioritizing engaging learning methods.

The data reveal a significant shift in leadership development priorities and highlight how organizations are adapting leadership development programs to meet changing demands. This report offers insights on the attributes that organizations prioritize when selecting training programs, the leadership capabilities they consider critical, and the innovative methods they are implementing to drive engagement and sustain learning outcomes.

The findings reveal key trends shaping leadership development in 2026, with a focus on AI transformation, the importance of human-centricity, emerging learning methods, and persistent challenges that organizations must address to support learners effectively.

AI at Scale: Redefining the Culture and Operating Model



AI AT SCALE: REDEFINING THE CULTURE AND OPERATING MODEL

From AI Exploration to Enterprise Deployment

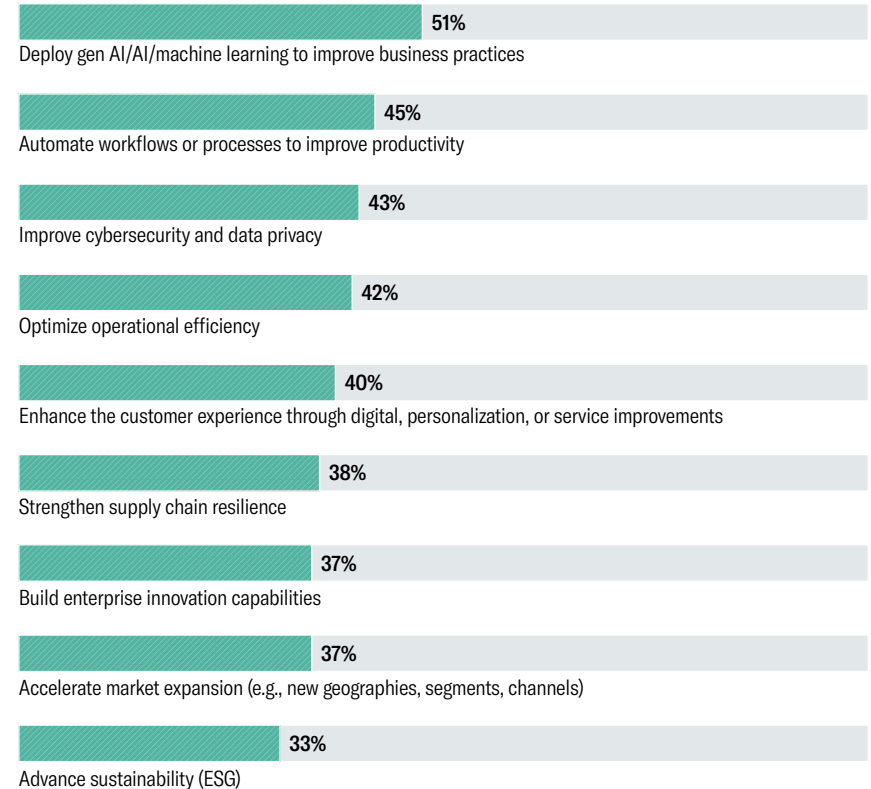
After several years of significant investment in artificial intelligence (AI), organizations are moving beyond early experimentation and focusing on scaling AI across the enterprise. This shift reflects a broader transition from exploring AI's potential to embedding it into core business operations.

In 2026, incorporating AI into business practices is the top initiative organizations are prioritizing, at 51%. AI applications now span a range of technologies—including generative AI and agentic AI—and are increasingly being used to improve productivity by automating workflows (45%) and optimizing operational efficiency (42%).

As organizations expand the use of AI, many also recognize the importance of strengthening cybersecurity and data privacy (43%). Scaling AI introduces new operational and data risks, making secure infrastructure and governance essential. For organizations seeking to remain competitive, the challenge is not only deploying AI at scale, but doing so in ways that are responsible, resilient, and secure.

Business Initiatives for Organizations in 2026

Which type(s) of enterprise or business initiatives has your organization prioritized for 2026?



AI AT SCALE: REDEFINING THE CULTURE AND OPERATING MODEL

Aligning Talent With New Ways of Working

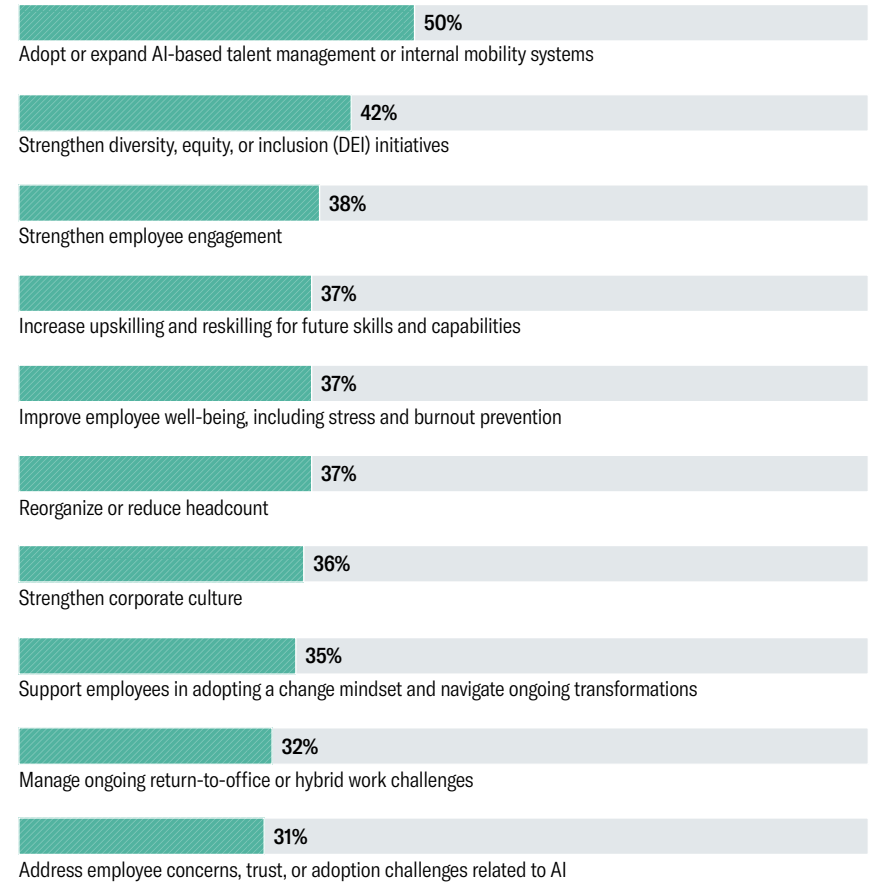
Technological advancement and human capital strategy are no longer competing priorities. In a digital-first world, they reinforce each other.

With digital transformation accelerating, organizations are prioritizing workforce systems that help them deploy the right skills at scale. In 2026, 50% of organizations are prioritizing the adoption or expansion of AI-based talent management and internal mobility, investing in smarter ways to match the right people to the new ways of working. This shift also requires evolving the workforce itself: more than a third are prioritizing upskilling and reskilling for future skills, and roughly one-third are focusing on cultivating a change mindset to better navigate ongoing transformation.

Notably, only about three in 10 organizations are prioritizing efforts to address employee concerns, trust, or adoption challenges related to AI. This oversight from organizations can be costly, as clear communication and deliberate change management are essential to reduce friction and ensure employees understand how AI will be used—and what it means for their work. Without that foundation, even well-funded AI efforts can stall at the point of adoption, as uncertainty, skepticism, and inconsistent use undermine the value the technology is meant to create.

Human Capital Initiatives for 2026

Which type(s) of human capital or workforce initiatives has your organization prioritized for 2026?



AI AT SCALE: REDEFINING THE CULTURE AND OPERATING MODEL

Redesigning the Operating Model for the Age of Collective Intelligence

As organizations move beyond experimentation and work to scale AI across the enterprise, this is a critical inflection point to assess how much progress has been made. Virtually all organizations have now integrated AI into their daily workflows, with 98% reporting at least a moderate level of integration. Yet despite the disruption AI is driving, many organizations' operating models have not fully evolved into a truly "human + AI" way of working. Just over a third of respondents report that AI is now embedded at scale in core processes across the organization, which is only slightly up from 2025, at 30%.

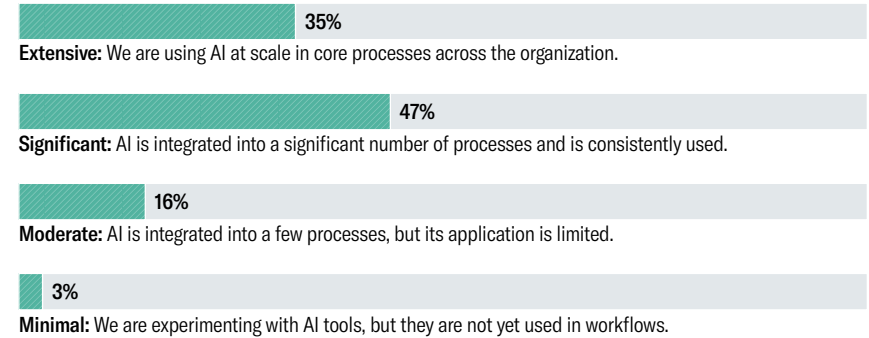
Even as AI use cases vary by role and region, the mandate is consistent: Move from pockets of adoption to enterprise-scale integration. Doing so will require a redesign of the operating model, and a culture that supports new ways of working.

“As you think about this holistically, all those elements have to be factored into the current operating model, because you need an assessment of the current-to-future-state model. This is where our leadership focus is: What kind of leaders do we need?”

Human Resources Leader, Tech Industry

AI Integration Into Daily Workflows

To what extent has your department integrated AI into its daily workflows?



AI AT SCALE: REDEFINING THE CULTURE AND OPERATING MODEL

AI's Impact Across Organizations

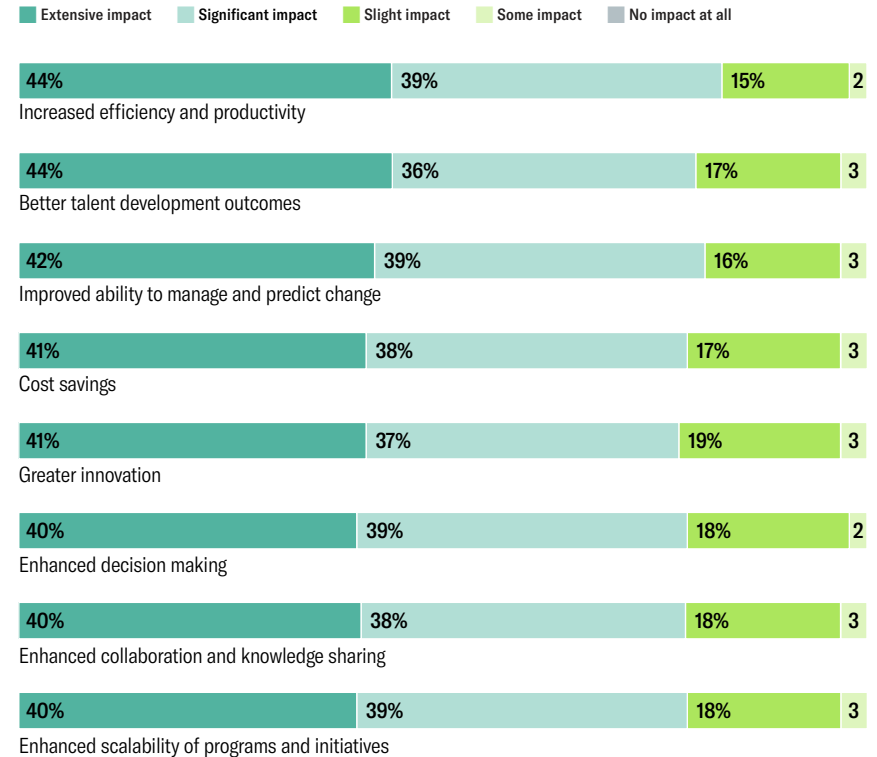
Over the past 12 months, AI has begun to reshape how organizations create value through work, decisions, learning, and innovation. Despite many organizations not yet realizing gains from their investments, its greatest impact has been on efficiency and productivity, cited by 83% of respondents. Its effects extend beyond operational gains as well. Roughly three in four respondents report that AI has had an observable impact across nearly every dimension measured, from talent development and decision making to collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Importantly, respondents from organizations with extensive AI integration are more likely than their peers to report extensive impact. The strongest differences emerge in decision making, knowledge sharing, and innovation, reinforcing a central theme of this year's findings: organizations further along in embedding AI into core processes also appear more likely to realize broader value from it.

AI is no longer confined to isolated use cases or productivity improvements alone. It is increasingly influencing how work gets done and how value is created across functions. As AI becomes more deeply embedded, the challenge shifts from adoption to building the operating model, culture, and leadership readiness needed to make those new ways of working succeed.

AI Impact

Over the past 12 months, what impact have you observed from the implementation of AI in your area/department?



The Leadership Readiness Gap



THE LEADERSHIP READINESS GAP

Redefining Leadership in Real Time

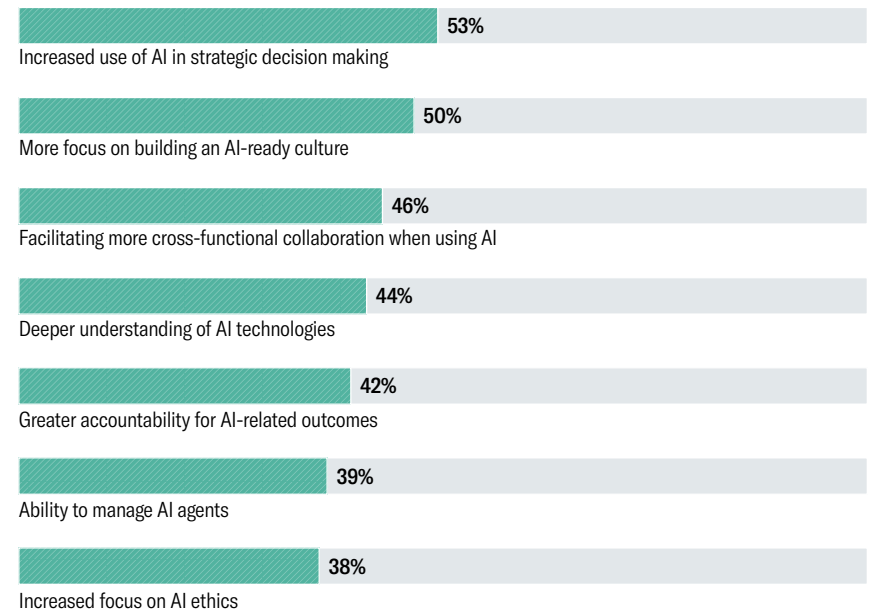
As organizations increase investment in AI and push to scale adoption, the role of leaders is being redefined in real time. The expectation is no longer just that leaders support AI initiatives through small pilots, but that they actively use AI to shape decisions, guide teams, and create the conditions for AI transformation.

In 2026, the top expectation is that leaders will make greater use of AI in strategic decision making, at 53%. At the same time, leaders need to build an AI-ready culture (50%), deepen their understanding of AI technologies (44%), and take greater accountability for AI-related outcomes (42%).

Leaders need to exercise stronger judgment in environments where AI is increasingly shaping insight, speed, and action. AI may help synthesize information and surface patterns faster than ever, but leaders still must decide what to trust, when to challenge it, and how to apply it responsibly in high-stakes situations. In other words, as AI becomes more embedded in the work, leadership itself becomes more demanding.

Expectations of Leaders Regarding Role in AI Initiatives

Regarding their role in AI initiatives, which of the following expectations for leaders in your organization will change in the coming year?



THE LEADERSHIP READINESS GAP

Strategic Mindset in an AI-First World

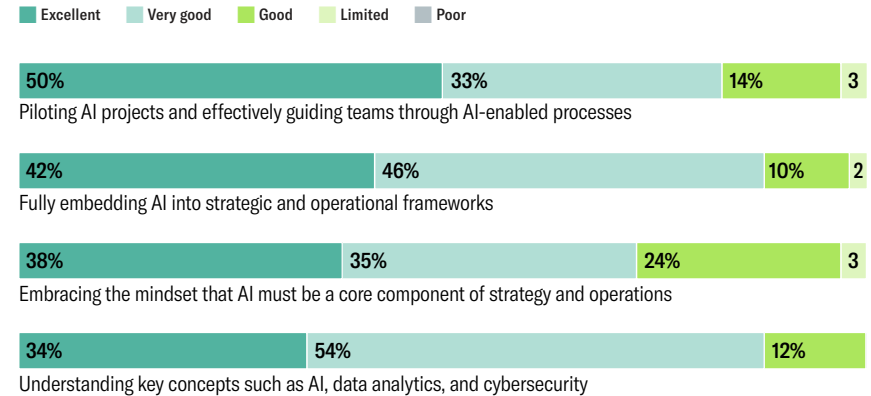
Expectations are rising, but leadership readiness is not necessarily keeping pace. That raises a critical question for organizations: Are leaders prepared to lead in the realities of human + AI work?

This past year, leaders have made modest gains in the more execution-oriented dimensions of AI readiness. The share reporting excellent capability in piloting AI and guiding teams through AI-enabled processes rose to 50%, and 42% of respondents say their leaders excel at fully embedding AI into strategic and operational frameworks. Together, progress has been made on the execution side of AI over the past 12 months.

However, with strategic capabilities still lagging behind execution, organizations must consider the implications. If leaders are not equipped with AI's foundational capabilities, how will they develop the contextual fluency required to lead through a transformation that is rapid, wide-ranging, and still uncertain?

AI-Related Leadership Capabilities

How would you rate leaders in your organization (as a group) on the following AI-related leadership capabilities?



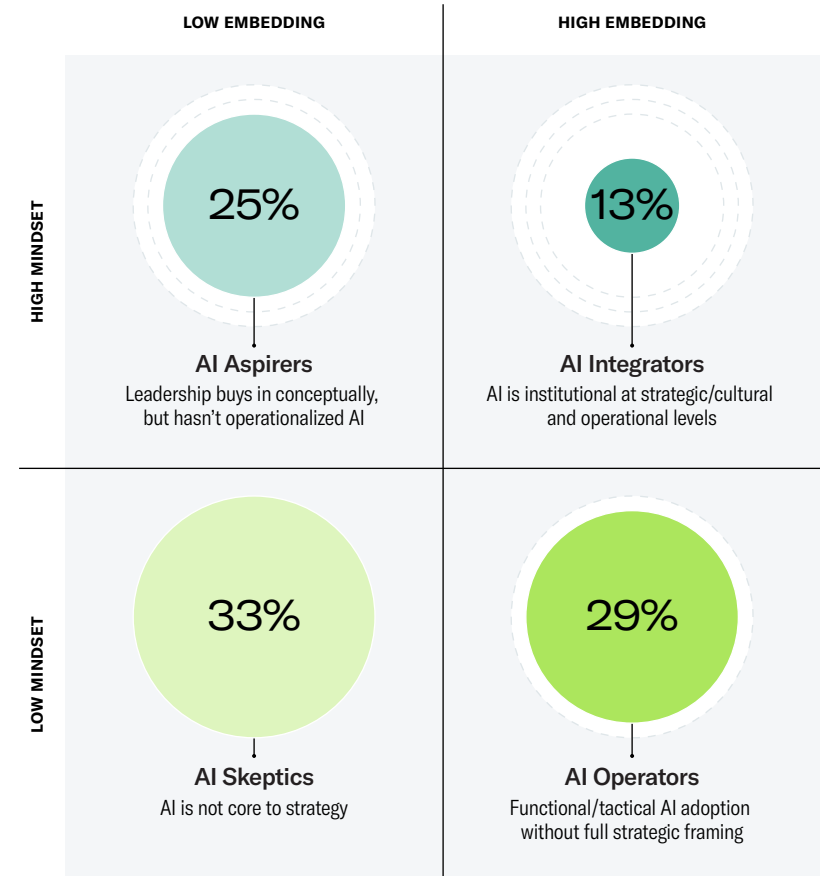
Embedding AI is only one piece of the puzzle, as it is the strategic mindset behind it that turns activity into business value. When strategic and execution capabilities are viewed together, four distinct organizational leader profiles emerge: Integrators, Aspirers, Operators, and Skeptics.

Operators may appear to be making progress, but execution without the right strategic mindset comes at a cost. While Operators are building the ability to embed AI directly into the flow of work, they are less likely than Integrators to translate that activity into higher-value outcomes.

That gap becomes clearer in the impact data. Over the past 12 months, Integrators were more likely than Operators to report extensive impact on innovation (52% vs. 39%) and the ability to manage and predict change (56% vs. 40%). They are also scaling AI more effectively and, in turn, seeing stronger gains in efficiency, productivity, and cost savings.

As expectations continue to rise, that mindset gap becomes more consequential. Operators are likely to face increasing pressure to build an AI-ready culture and deepen their understanding of the technology, even as they continue working to operationalize it. While they work to catch up, organizations led by Integrators are better positioned to pull ahead—shifting their focus toward higher-value activities like innovation, scale, and longer-term transformation.

AI Leadership Capability Matrix



It should then come as no surprise that AI Integrators are leading their peers when it comes to effectively working in human-AI fusion roles.

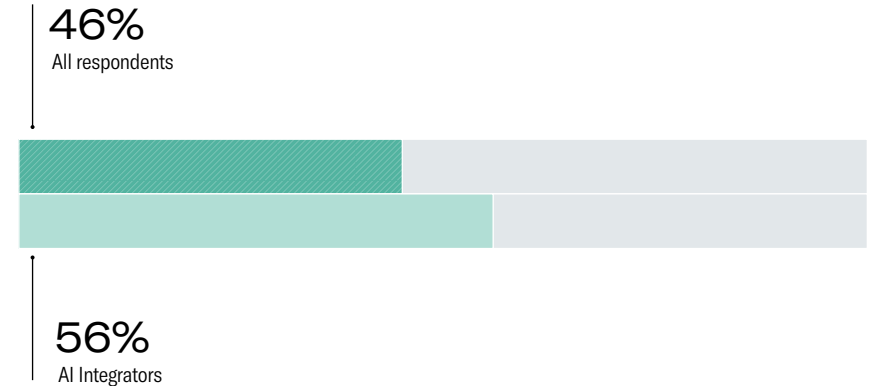
With 56% of AI Integrators giving their leaders the top rating on this capability, they display the various capabilities and strengths that these roles demand. An organization whose leaders pair strategic mindset with execution are better equipped not only to use AI, but also to work alongside it in ways that elevate judgment, adaptability, and performance. As human + AI work becomes a more central feature of leadership, AI Integrators are already operating closer to what the future role demands.

“Traditional leadership doesn’t work in such an environment ... knowledge is now automated, and AI is equipped to understand, and even take [on] decision making, [so] that it almost wipes out the requirement of that skill set. Do we still require it? Yes. Because there is human intuition ... I call it wisdom, which AI does not have yet.”

Chief Operating Officer, Food and Beverage Industry

Expectations of Leaders to Work Effectively in an AI-Fusion Role

Share of respondents who say leaders will be able to work effectively in human-AI fusion roles to a very great extent in the coming year.



THE LEADERSHIP READINESS GAP

The Next Horizon of Leadership Readiness

As organizations look ahead, leaders must deliver results under current conditions while also preparing their organizations for demands, expectations, and ways of working that are still emerging.

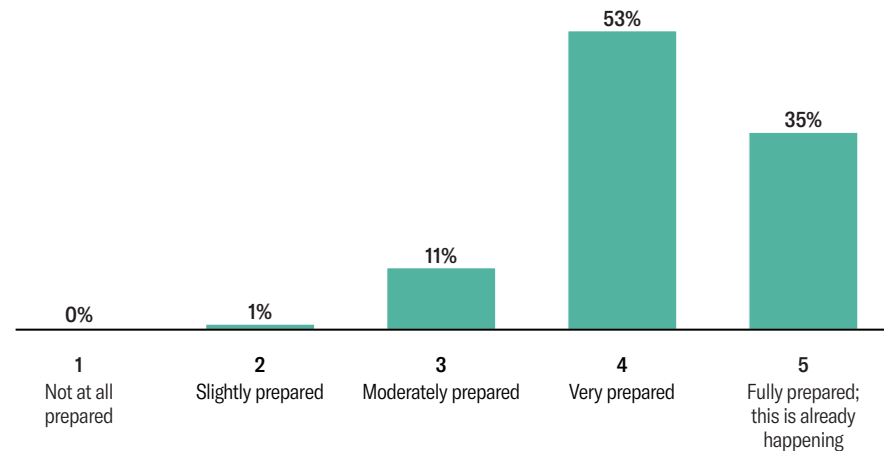
The silver lining for organizations is that leaders feel prepared to tackle these future challenges. For some leaders, those future challenges are not distant possibilities but are today's reality. Regarding the previously mentioned mindset-integration matrix, Integrators are two times more likely to report that this future hypothetical is real for them, with 61% of them reporting that AI systems already generate 80% of first-pass strategic analyses, forecasts, and recommendations.

Additionally, preparedness should be interpreted carefully. Many organizations say their leaders are very prepared for a future in which AI generates most first-pass analyses and recommendations, but stated preparedness reflects perception, not proof. Actual readiness is better measured by whether leaders already demonstrate the strategic mindset capabilities required to work effectively with AI. In a future where human judgment and AI capability are increasingly intertwined, readiness will depend on leaders who can navigate ambiguity, apply judgment, and translate AI into better decisions and stronger team performance.

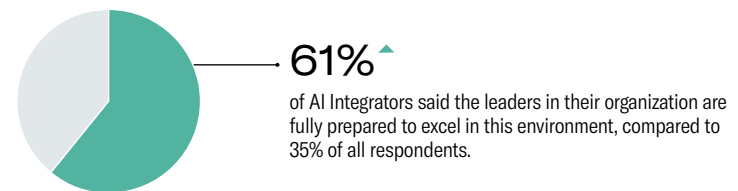
Leaders' Level of AI-Preparedness

Imagine a future where AI systems generate 80% of first-pass strategic analyses, forecasts, and recommendations. Leaders must integrate these insights, apply judgment, and navigate the associated risks.

How prepared are leaders in your organization to excel in this environment?



AI Integrators Lead the Way



The Human Advantage in an AI World

THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE IN AN AI WORLD

The Real Differentiator in AI Transformation

As organizations navigate transformation in an increasingly AI-enabled environment, leadership is defined by how leaders adapt their behavior, guide people through uncertainty, and apply judgment in moments when technology cannot.

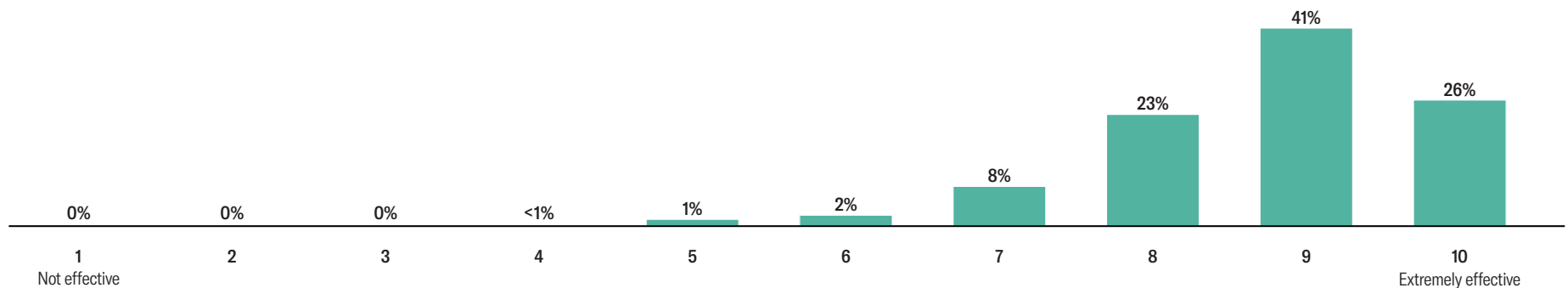
Two-thirds of respondents say their leaders are effective at adapting, aligning, and advancing the strategic vision of the organization. While leaders are broadly seen as effective, this year's findings suggest that the capabilities rising in importance are distinctly

human: resilience, flexibility, emotional intelligence, sensemaking, and the ability to challenge and contextualize AI-driven outputs. In an AI world, the leadership advantage is becoming more human, not less.

That is why, in 2026, the ability to function effectively in an environment of ongoing change, uncertainty, and stress rose to become the most important leadership capability for meeting business needs.

Leadership Effectiveness at Adapting, Aligning, and Advancing Strategic Vision

How effective are your organization's/department/division leaders at enabling the organization to adapt, align, and advance its strategic vision?



Climbing from 30% last year to 40% this year, this shift reflects the difficult reality leaders and the workforce now face. Rapid technological change is reshaping jobs and how work gets done. Geopolitical instability is weighing on employee well-being. Economic pressure is forcing organizations to do more with tighter budgets. Taken together, these conditions create an unprecedented test for leaders.

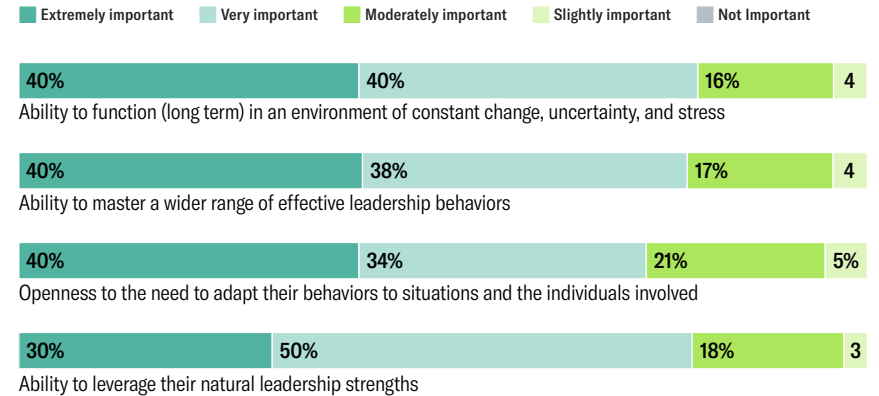
Notably, the importance of leveraging natural leadership strengths increased slightly this year. As AI continues to automate workflows and streamline processes, distinctly human qualities are becoming more valuable. Technology can accelerate efficiency, but it cannot replace human connection. In fact, uncertainty often heightens the need for that connection. In moments of stress and disruption, people look to leaders who are authentic, empathetic, and grounded in human qualities.

“ There needs to be human touch, the human side of leadership ... [AI] tools help us save time, to come up with something massive with data. It helps us, but does not eliminate human touch, human-centricity, or the human aspect. ”

Human Resources Leader, Energy Industry

Importance of Leadership Fitness

How important is improving the following capabilities among leaders in meeting your expected business needs in 2026 and beyond?



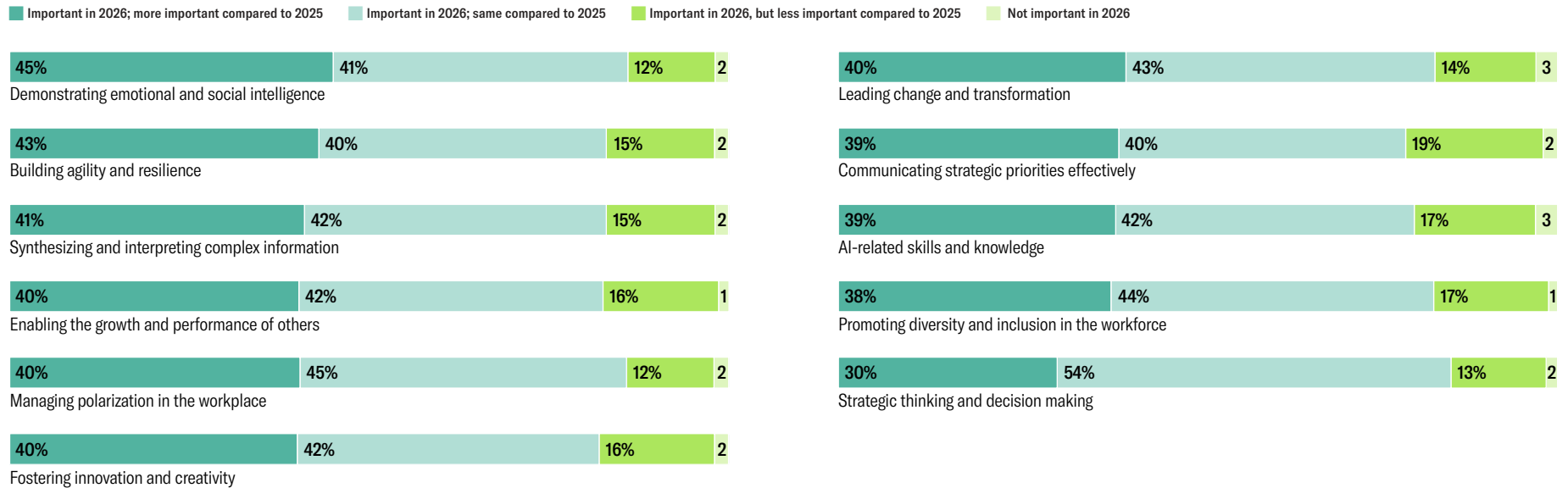
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To further reinforce this point, the top two leadership capabilities identified this year were demonstrating emotional and social intelligence (45%) and building agility and resilience (43%). These distinctly human leadership qualities rank well above more business-centered capabilities such as decision making (30%) when it comes to meeting today's business needs. This is not to suggest that decision making and increasing AI knowledge no longer matter. They do. But as access to AI becomes more universal, the bigger question is what leaders are uniquely expected to contribute.

AI can increasingly support business-focused capabilities by helping leaders analyze information, surface insights, and strengthen decision making. The real differentiator is not the technology itself, but the human judgment, contextual understanding, and lived experience leaders bring to applying it in ways that reflect the business, its values, and its culture. As technology takes on more analytical and process-driven work, the ability to connect, reassure, and build resilience across teams is becoming a defining source of leadership advantage.

Leadership Skills to Meet Business Needs

How important are the following leadership capabilities/skills in meeting your expected business needs in 2026 vs. 2025?



THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE IN AN AI WORLD

Leading a Human + AI Workforce

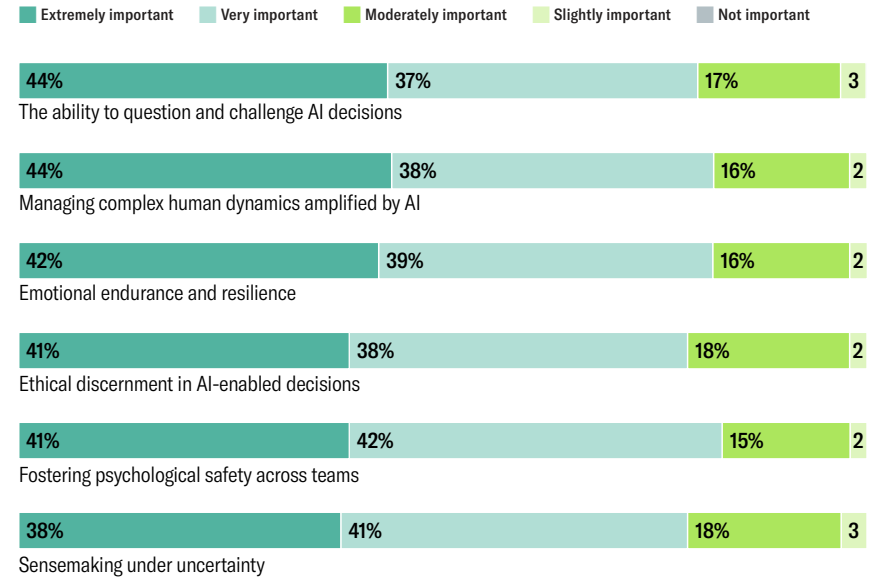
In a human + AI workforce, leaders must do more than manage people. They must also adapt their leadership to oversee how machines influence decisions, workflows, and team dynamics, and ultimately guide a successful AI transformation. The top two capacities for leaders are the ability to question and challenge AI decisions (44%) and managing complex human dynamics amplified by AI (44%). The success of AI transformation will depend on leaders who can apply critical thinking, build trust, and help people navigate new ways of working.

It is also notable that AI Integrators,¹ who are further ahead in transformation, are far more likely to say that sensemaking under uncertainty is extremely important (54% vs. 36%). With closer proximity to AI's real-world complexity, these leaders better understand that as machines take on a greater role in work, it is human judgment, oversight, and contextual understanding that make transformation successful.

¹ AI Integrators: Organizational leaders with high strategic mindset and execution capabilities (see page 12).

Leadership Capabilities Needed for AI Transformation

How important will the following human leadership capacities be for successful AI transformation in the next three to five years?



Developing Leaders to Meet the Moment

DEVELOPING LEADERS TO MEET THE MOMENT

Leadership Development as a Strategic Engine for Performance

After a couple of years with stable satisfaction ratings of organizations' employee engagement, 2026 brings a modest but meaningful improvement. Last year, 62% of respondents reported high satisfaction with their organization's employee engagement efforts, unchanged from the prior year. In 2026, that figure rises to nearly seven in 10 respondents rating satisfaction a nine or 10.

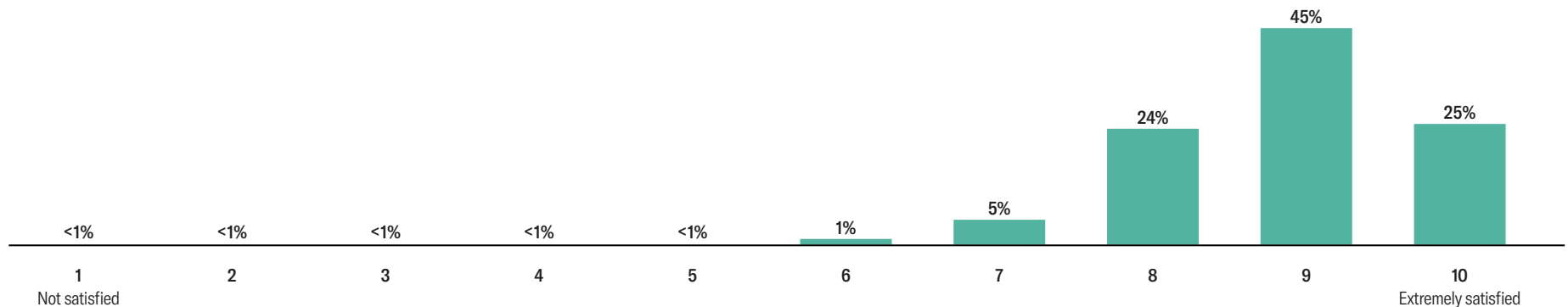
This is an encouraging signal for organizations, as they are making progress in strengthening the employee experience. As transformation accelerates, employee engagement becomes an

important cultural metric, one that enables faster learning, stronger alignment, and greater openness to change.

That is why leadership development has evolved into something greater. It is now a strategic engine for business performance, operating alongside business strategy rather than apart from it. As a result, training goals are increasingly centered on the capabilities organizations believe will drive performance and transformation.

Employee Engagement Satisfaction

How satisfied are you with the current results of your organization's employee engagement efforts?



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In 2026, improving productivity and increasing AI-related skills and knowledge received the greatest emphasis as key training goals, each at 44%.

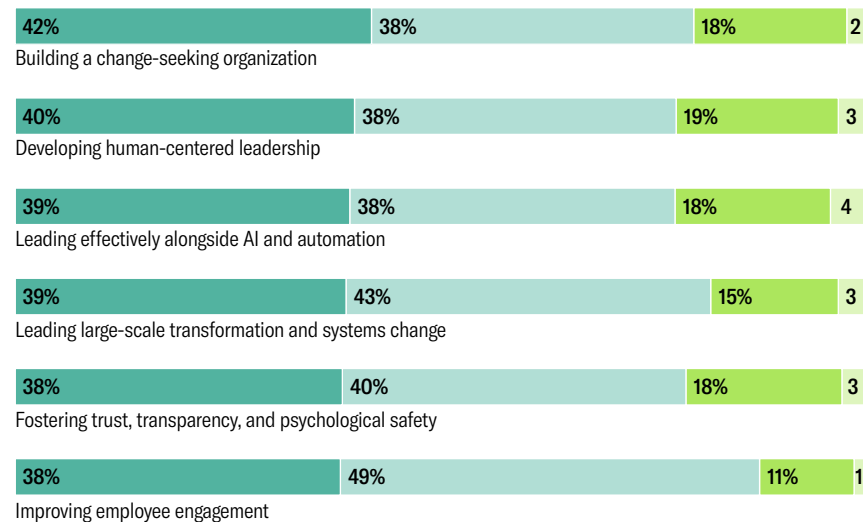
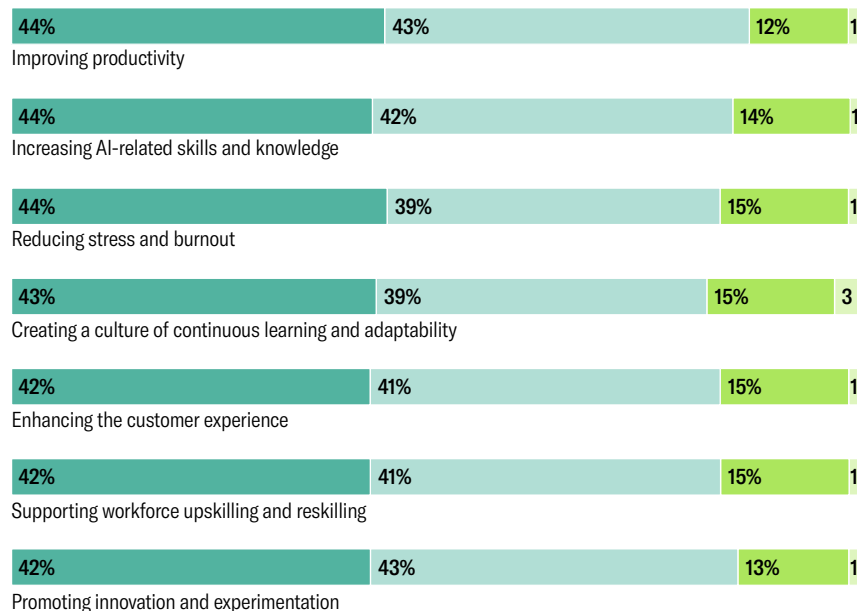
These priorities are closely linked: As organizations build employees' foundational AI knowledge and skills, they strengthen digital fluency and create greater potential for productivity gains. Other core strategic priorities include creating a culture of continuous

learning (43%), promoting innovation and experimentation (42%), and building a change-seeking organization (42%). Reducing stress and burnout also received top emphasis (44%), and improving employee engagement remains an important priority (38%). Leadership development serves as both a driver of business results and a way to strengthen the human element needed for change to succeed.

Leadership Development Training Goals

In comparison with 2025, how much emphasis will your organization's leadership development training put on the following goals in 2026?

More emphasis in 2026 Same Less emphasis in 2026 Not part of our leadership development



DEVELOPING LEADERS TO MEET THE MOMENT

Key Attributes and Challenges for Training Programs

When selecting a leadership development program, scalability remains the most important attribute, cited by 47% of respondents.

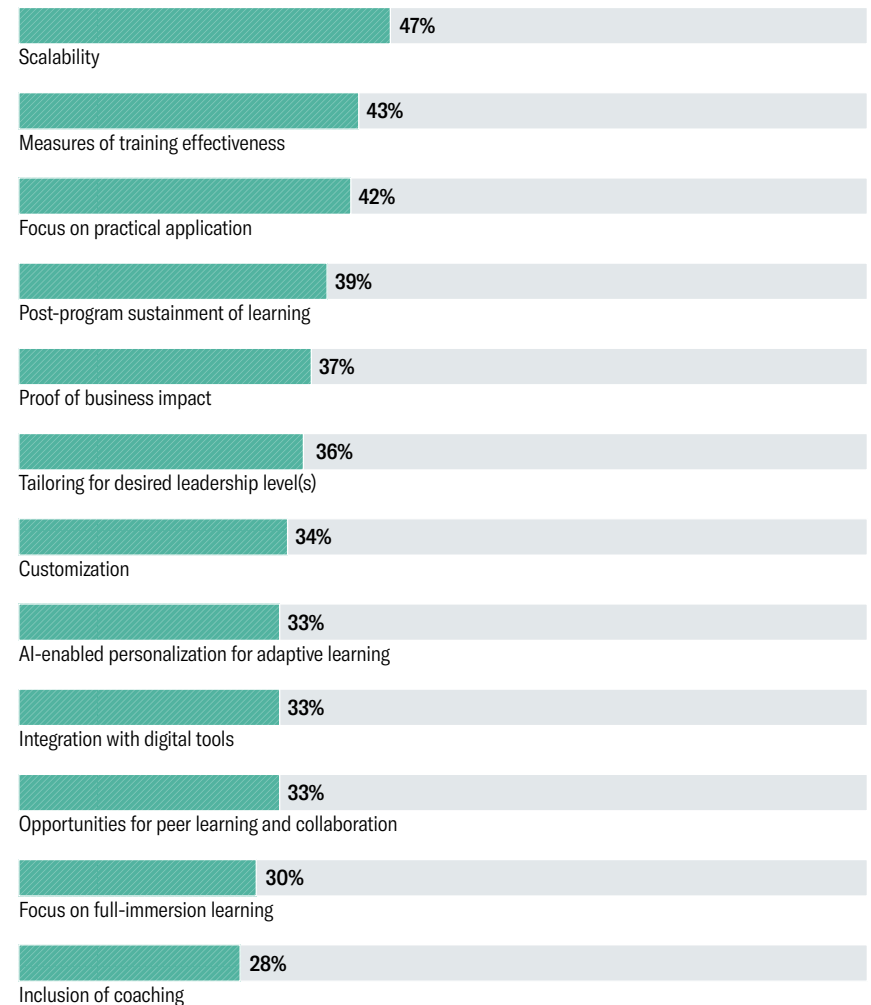
As organizations make investments in leadership development, they are evaluating programs through the same lens they use for any strategic business decision: impact, effectiveness, and return. After scalability, the most important attributes are the ability to measure training effectiveness (43%), practical application (42%), post-program sustainment (39%), and business impact (37%). Organizations want programs that can scale efficiently, translate into real-world behavior change, and build the capabilities needed to move the business forward.

“ One of the things that come with an integrated leadership development strategy is that we have to have scale in order to have impact ... it’s got to be immersive, it’s got to reflect our DNA, and it’s got to be intensely focused, both on the individual and on the organization. ”

Chief Operating Officer, Aerospace Industry

Important Leadership Development Program Attributes

What are the most important attributes prioritized when selecting a leadership development training program for your organization/department or function?

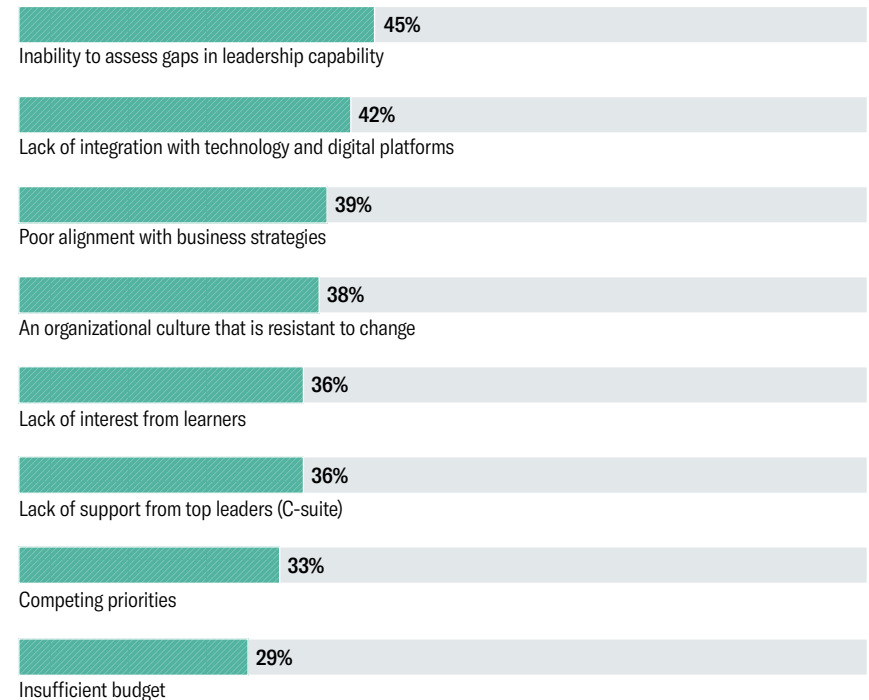


However, one of the persistent challenges in leadership development is organizations' ability to assess capability gaps, measure program effectiveness, and integrate learning into existing systems. In an environment of constrained budgets, leadership development programs must demonstrate impact to justify continued investment. That is why leadership development providers face pressures to deliver tools that diagnose gaps, measure progress, and integrate with existing systems in ways that make use of local data.

Additionally, leadership resistance remains a significant barrier. Nearly four in 10 respondents cite poor alignment, a culture resistant to change, and lack of support from the C-suite as major challenges. For organizations seeking to strengthen learning velocity and advance transformation, leadership development cannot operate in isolation. It must be aligned with enterprise strategy and backed by visible commitment from senior leadership.

Leadership Development Challenges

Which of the following are significant challenges your organization faces in developing leaders?



DEVELOPING LEADERS TO MEET THE MOMENT

Building Programs for Scale and Impact

In 2026, organizations are taking a relatively balanced approach to leadership development, allocating time across both formal and informal learning modalities. The largest planned increase is focused on frontline leaders, with 49% reporting greater investment in formal learning such as online or classroom training, simulations, and conferences, and 47% reporting greater emphasis on informal learning such as on-the-job development, peer coaching, and self-directed learning.

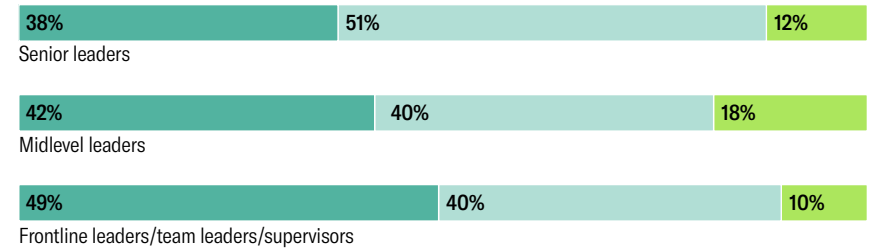
By contrast, midlevel leaders are projected to see the smallest net increase across both formal and informal learning. Midlevel leaders are often underinvested in, despite occupying one of the most critical positions in the organization, translating strategy into execution, connecting the direction of senior leaders to day-to-day operations, and shaping how change is experienced across teams. If organizations want transformation to endure, they cannot afford to overlook this leadership layer. Greater investment in midlevel leader development is essential to turning change initiatives into sustained organizational progress.

Type of Learning by Leadership Level

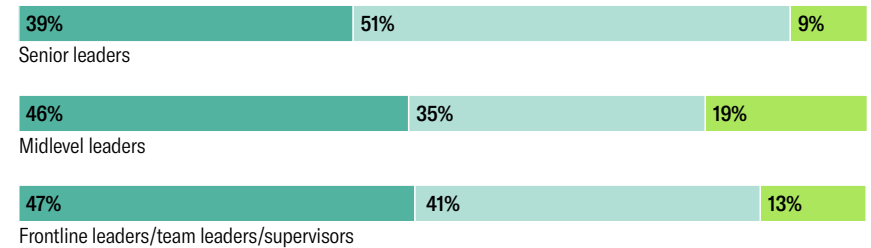
How do you think the time spent on formal/informal learning and development will change for each leadership level in your organization in 2026 compared to 2025?

■ Significant increase ■ Slight increase ■ Decrease or no change

FORMAL (e.g., online/classroom training, simulations, conferences)



INFORMAL (e.g., on-the-job learning, peer coaching, self-directed learning)



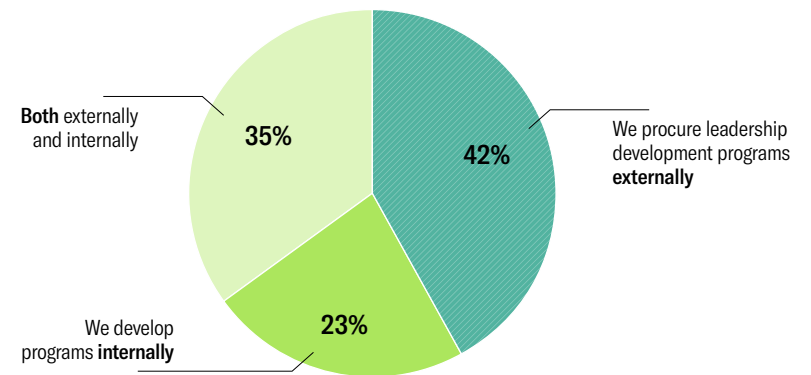
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Organizations continue to rely heavily on external providers for leadership development, with 42% reporting that they procure programs externally. Even as AI is increasingly used to support internal program design and development, more than a third of organizations still supplement in-house efforts with external offerings. Procuring an external partner allows for highly credible and specialized learning to happen at speed and scale for organizations.

The question that remains for organizations is how leadership development should be built to combine the right capabilities, expertise, and delivery models to create high-quality learning at scale. Ultimately, organizations are looking for the most effective way to deliver leadership development that is scalable, credible, and able to meet evolving business needs.

Leadership Development Program Sourcing

Which of the following statements best describes the leadership development training programs conducted by your organization/unit/department?

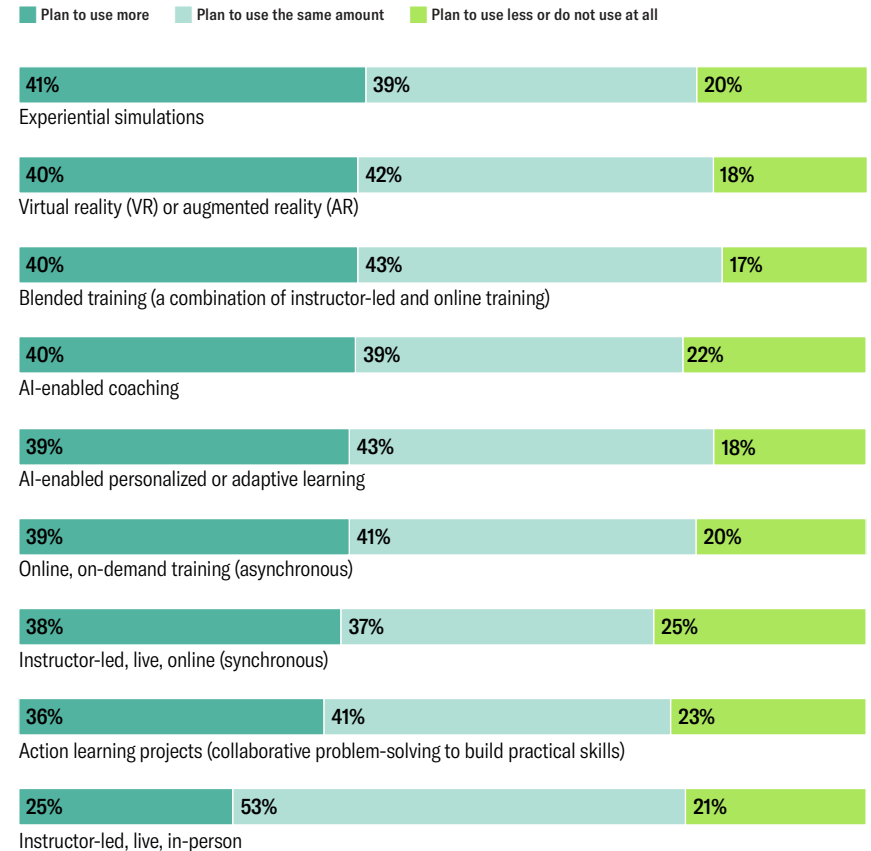


Further supporting the shift for greater scale is how organizations plan to deliver leadership development in 2026. Rather than relying on a single dominant modality, organizations are expanding across a broader mix of scalable, tech-enabled, and applied methods. The greatest planned increases are in experiential simulations (41%), virtual or augmented reality (40%), and blended training that combines instructor-led and online learning (40%). AI-enabled methods are also gaining traction, with 40% planning to increase AI-enabled coaching and 39% planning to increase AI-enabled personalized or adaptive learning.

Asynchronous learning continues to grow (39%), but is no longer the sole method of delivery. Organizations are now experimenting with a breadth of learning methods to see what fits best for their needs. Through a diversified delivery strategy, organizations combine flexibility, immersion, and practical application to build leadership capability more effectively.

Leadership Development Training Methods

Compared to 2025, how do you expect your organization's use of the following methods for delivering leadership training to change in 2026?



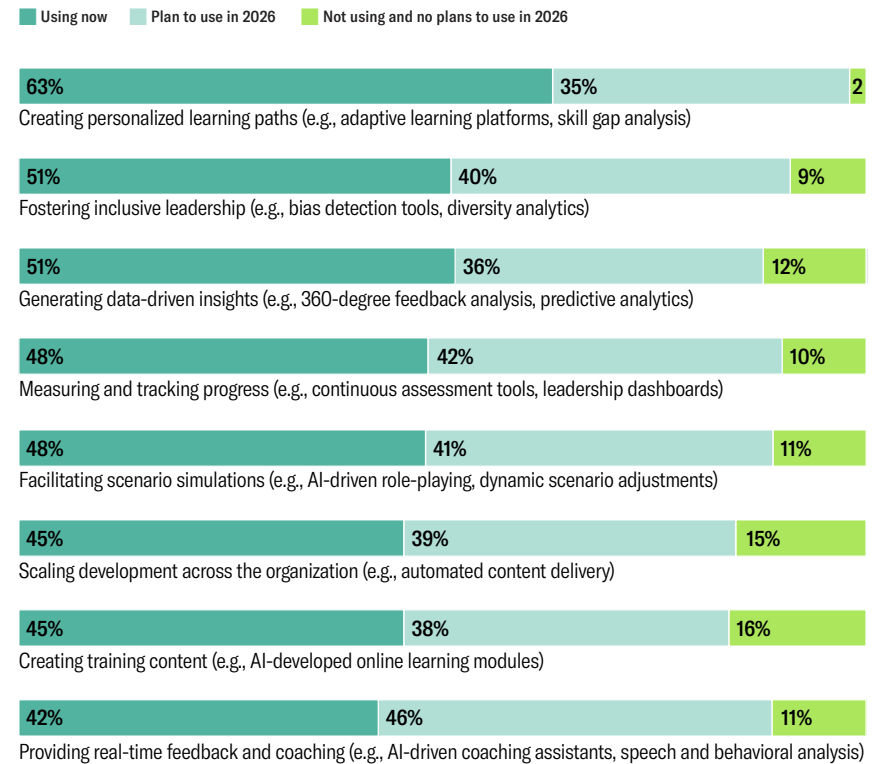
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AI plays a huge role in allowing for innovative ways to improve leadership development. Being embedded in design, delivery, and sustainment, it serves as a vital tool for scalability and success. In 2026, the most common current uses of AI in leadership development are creating personalized learning paths (63%), fostering inclusive leadership (51%) and generating data-driven insights (51%). AI is being prioritized where it can make learning more targeted, measurable, and responsive to individual and organizational needs.

At the same time, the strongest forward momentum is in more interactive applications. Nearly half of respondents say they plan to use AI for real-time feedback and coaching (46%), followed by measuring and tracking progress (42%) and facilitating scenario simulations (41%). Taking on many different roles, AI has evolved to be a more active tool for practice, feedback, and capability building.

AI in Leadership Development

How is your organization leveraging AI in leadership development?



A Call to Action for Leadership Development in 2026

Leadership development is no longer a supporting function to transformation. It is one of the conditions that will determine whether transformation succeeds.

The deeper implication of these findings is that leadership development can no longer be designed primarily to prepare individuals for known responsibilities. Its real purpose now is to build an organizational capacity: the capacity to absorb disruption, convert uncertainty into action, and continuously rebalance the relationship between human judgment and machine intelligence.

As AI expands what organizations can automate, analyze, and scale, the leadership premium shifts elsewhere, toward interpretation, judgment, courage, and the ability to align people around what matters most. In that sense, the future of leadership development is not about keeping pace with change. It is about building the institutional strength to shape change more deliberately, more responsibly, and more competitively than others can.

4 KEY TRENDS SHAPING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN 2026



Organizations must evolve their culture and operating model for AI at scale



Leaders must be prepared for human + AI leadership



Leadership development must build capability at the speed of transformation



Human connection and a strong culture remain the conditions for lasting change

STUDY METHODOLOGY

2026 Global Leadership Study

Based on 1,139 survey responses gathered, plus interviews conducted with senior leaders, conducted January through March 2026.





About Harvard Business Impact

Harvard Business Impact helps organizations unlock the full potential of their people to drive business outcomes and transformation in a rapidly changing world. We create research-based and contextualized active learning experiences informed by the latest thinking in leadership and management. From on-demand digital learning to immersive cohort-based journeys, we support capability building at scale across all levels of the enterprise.

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