

THE CONFIDENCE GAP UNDERMINING AI TRANSFORMATION

Why Trust in Senior Leadership May
Matter More Than the Technology Itself

Thought Leadership



INTRODUCTION

Organizations are investing billions in AI tools, data infrastructure, and training. Yet Korn Ferry's latest [Global Workforce Survey](#) suggests the greatest barrier to transformation may not be the technology itself, but whether employees trust the leaders driving the change. Employees with high confidence in leaders are nearly 3 times more likely to hold favorable attitudes toward AI and more than 5 times more likely to believe their organization can successfully adapt to change.

Since 2024, employee trust and confidence in senior leadership has fallen by 15 percentage points. As trust erodes, organizations risk losing one of the most critical conditions for successful AI transformation.

THE EMERGING LEADERSHIP CONFIDENCE ISSUE

At the very moment organizations need employees to navigate unprecedented change, confidence in senior leadership is falling. Since 2024, Korn Ferry's annual [Global Workforce Survey](#) has tracked employee sentiment on a consistent set of workplace measures, including whether respondents trust and have confidence in their organization's senior leadership team.

The shift is significant. Globally, the share of non-executive employees who agreed or strongly agreed that they have trust and confidence in their organization's senior leadership team fell from 68% in 2024 to 65% in 2025, then dropped sharply to 53% in 2026. The decline is observed at every organizational level, pointing to a broad erosion of confidence rather than a problem confined to a single workforce segment.

The pattern was also global. Except for Japan, trust and confidence in senior leadership declined in every country surveyed. In Brazil and India, the drop exceeded 20 percentage points from 2025 to 2026. A decline this consistent across levels and geographies is difficult to dismiss as a localized issue.

Other workforce research, including findings from [Gallup](#) and [Glassdoor](#), has reported similar deterioration in confidence in organizational leadership. The evidence points to a broader leadership challenge, rather than a temporary fluctuation.

WHY LEADERSHIP CONFIDENCE MATTERS NOW

Transformation asks employees to accept uncertainty, learn new ways of working, and in some cases, redefine their roles. They are more likely to do so when they believe leaders have a credible direction, make sound decisions, and consider the interests of both the organization and its people.

In our survey, trust in senior leadership was positively associated with both employee attitude toward AI ($r = .24, p < .001$) and confidence in the organization's ability to adapt to change ($r = .34, p < .001$). Translating these relationships into odds ratios highlights their practical significance: employees with high confidence in leaders are nearly 3 times more likely to view AI favorably and more than 5 times more likely to believe their organization can successfully navigate change.

But these relationships matter because trust is declining as employees run out of capacity and reach their limit for change. More than half of non-executive respondents (51%) say they feel exhausted by the pace of change in their organization, compared with 45% of executive leaders.

This creates a double barrier to AI transformation.

Change fatigue reduces employees' capacity to learn and adapt. Distrust reduces their willingness to commit. Together, they slow adoption, weaken follow-through, and put even well-designed initiatives at risk.

THE PERCEPTION DISCONNECT BEHIND THE CONFIDENCE GAP

One explanation is that leaders and employees are experiencing different versions of the same transformation.

Successful AI adoption requires a clear vision, new capabilities, and redesigned work. Yet senior executives consistently see more progress than employees do.

- **AI training:** 64% of senior executives say they are adequately trained to use AI tools, compared with 40% of employees.
- **Leadership understanding:** 62% of senior executives believe leaders understand AI and how the organization should use it; only 43% of employees agree.
- **Job redesign:** 51% of senior executives say their roles have been redesigned to optimize human-AI collaboration, versus 38% of employees.

The issue is not whether leaders or employees are right. Employees and leaders are experiencing the same transformation from different vantage points. These discrepancies matter because they shape how employees interpret leadership. When leaders say the organization is advancing, but employees do not experience the same progress, optimism can look like detachment. Employees may conclude that leaders underestimate the disruption, overlook frontline obstacles, or do not fully understand what the change requires.

The gap extends to employee voice. Although 62% of senior executives believe employees' ideas and opinions are welcomed by company leaders, only 46% of frontline employees agree. This disconnect matters because employee voice is one of the most effective ways to counter change cynicism and build support for transformation.

Opportunities for employee voice have also declined over the past three years. In 2024, 70% of non-executive respondents said their ideas were welcomed by leaders in their organizations. That share fell to 60% in 2025 and declined further to 54% in 2026.

The challenge is not simply to communicate the transformation. It is to make employees part of it.

WHAT LEADERS SHOULD DO NOW

Prioritize Change, Not Activity

Employees already fatigued by constant change have little capacity for another initiative. Sequence transformations deliberately, stop lower-value initiatives, and concentrate resources on the few changes that matter most. Success is not measured by how much change leaders launch, but by how much the organization can effectively absorb.

Close the Perception Gap

Do not assume the leadership view reflects the employee experience. Use regular listening, employee data, talent assessment, and frontline feedback to evaluate AI readiness from multiple angles, including cultural and leadership readiness. The first step in rebuilding trust is seeing the transformation through employees' eyes.

Build Trust Through Dialogue

Explain the direction, the trade-offs, and what remains uncertain. Then create credible ways for employees to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and influence decisions. Trust grows when people are heard, not simply informed.

Make the Transformation Meaningful to Employees

A clear vision is essential, but it is not enough. Employees need to understand what the transformation means for them: which tasks will change, what skills will matter, how performance will be assessed, and what opportunities may emerge. They are more likely to support change when they understand how it benefits both the organization and employees—and more energized when they can see themselves as part of the future being built. Ambiguity fuels distrust; specificity, relevance, and inclusion give people something they can believe in and act on.

Demonstrate Care Through Action

Employees look for evidence that leaders understand the disruption they are asking others to absorb. Invest in development, provide support during transitions, and acknowledge the real costs of change. Care becomes credible when employees can see it reflected in decisions, resources, and behavior.

A trust deficit is not an inevitable consequence of AI transformation. But it is a risk leaders cannot afford to ignore.

The survey findings point to a simple reality: organizations cannot assume employees will follow because the technology is promising. Transformation depends on the trust and confidence in the people leading it. At a time when trust is falling and change fatigue is rising, rebuilding that confidence may be one of the most important investments leaders can make.

AI may reshape how work gets done. Trust will determine whether employees are willing to help build that future.

HOW WE DID IT

Korn Ferry has been conducting the annual Global Workforce Survey since 2024. The survey examines a broad range of workplace topics, including employee attraction and retention factors, AI adoption, flexible work arrangements, compensation, learning and career opportunities, management, and well-being. Its geographic coverage and sample size expanded from approximately 10,000 respondents across seven countries in 2024 to approximately 16,000 respondents across 11 countries in 2026. This analysis includes respondents who were employed full-time. Non-executive employees are defined as respondents whose job titles were below the executive level. Year-over-year percentages are based on the same countries and eligible respondents included in each survey wave. Associations between leadership confidence, attitudes toward AI, and confidence in organizational adaptability were examined using correlations and odds ratios; these analyses indicate relationships rather than causation.

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