How Leadership Development Is Being Redefined for 2026

A VentureBean Industry Analysis

Publisher: Harvard Business Impact
Publication: survey conducted January to March 2026
Publication Year: 2025
Source: 2026 Global Leadership Study
Analysis by: VentureBean

This analysis distils the key findings of Harvard Business Impact's 2026 Global Leadership Study and frames them through a VentureBean lens, with particular attention to what the findings mean for organisations building leadership capability while AI changes work, operating models and expectations of leaders.

The study surveyed 1,139 senior leaders across more than 15 countries and industries. Nearly half represented organisations with at least 20,000 employees, while 49% came from organisations with annual revenue of at least $10 billion.

Source basis: Harvard Business Impact, 2026 Global Leadership Study. The study combines survey responses with interviews with senior leaders responsible for leadership development and corporate strategy.

VentureBean's Perspective

The central message is clear: AI transformation is moving from experimentation into the operating model, and leadership development has to move with it.

In 2026, 51% of organisations identify incorporating AI into business practices as a priority. Yet the leadership challenge is broader than technology adoption. Leaders are increasingly expected to use AI in strategic decision making, build an AI-ready culture, enable cross-functional collaboration and take accountability for AI-related outcomes.

This creates a leadership requirement that combines technology understanding with judgment, context, adaptability and the ability to lead people through uncertainty. The study identifies emotional and social intelligence at 45% and agility and resilience at 43% among the leading capabilities required to meet business needs.

The operating model is changing too. Ninety-eight percent of respondents report at least moderate AI integration in daily workflows, but only just over a third report AI embedded at scale across core processes. The gap between using AI and redesigning work around AI is therefore significant.

For organisations investing in leadership development, the implication is practical. Development cannot sit separately from business transformation. It needs to help leaders make better decisions, translate strategy into action, work effectively with AI, manage changing team dynamics and sustain performance during continuous change.

Significance of the Report

Harvard Business Impact's fourth annual Global Leadership Study examines changing business priorities, leadership development challenges and organisational needs for 2026. Its findings connect AI adoption with leadership readiness, human capability, learning methods and the design of leadership development programmes.

The report is particularly relevant because organisations are simultaneously asking leaders to deliver current performance and prepare teams for ways of working that are still evolving. It also shows that organisations are increasingly evaluating leadership development through a business lens, including scalability, measurable effectiveness, practical application, sustainment and business impact.

For leadership teams, the report provides a useful reference point for examining whether leadership capability is keeping pace with changes in technology, operating models and workforce expectations.

Findings

1. AI has become a leading business priority

51% of organisations prioritised deploying generative AI, AI or machine learning to improve business practices. Workflow automation followed at 45%, while cybersecurity and data privacy stood at 43%.

2. AI adoption is widespread, but enterprise-scale integration remains incomplete

98% report at least moderate AI integration into daily workflows. Only 35% report extensive use of AI at scale in core processes.

3. AI is already affecting multiple dimensions of organisational performance

83% report an impact on efficiency and productivity. Roughly three in four respondents report observable impact across areas including talent development, change management, cost savings, innovation, decision making, collaboration and scalability.

4. Leadership expectations are changing quickly

The leading expectation for leaders in 2026 is greater use of AI in strategic decision making at 53%, followed by building an AI-ready culture at 50%, cross-functional collaboration at 46%, deeper AI understanding at 44%, and accountability for AI-related outcomes at 42%.

5. Execution capability is ahead of strategic readiness

50% rate their leaders as excellent at piloting AI projects and guiding teams through AI-enabled processes, while 42% rate them excellent at fully embedding AI into strategic and operational frameworks. The study highlights the need for contextual fluency, not only technical familiarity.

6. Human capabilities are becoming more important as AI expands

Emotional and social intelligence is identified by 45% as an important leadership capability, followed by agility and resilience at 43%. The study also highlights questioning AI decisions, managing human dynamics amplified by AI, resilience, ethical discernment and psychological safety.

7. Leadership development is increasingly tied to business performance

Improving productivity and increasing AI-related skills and knowledge each receive 44% emphasis among leadership development training goals. Continuous learning receives 43%, while innovation and experimentation and building a change-seeking organisation each receive 42%.

8. Organisations want measurable, practical development

Scalability is the most important programme attribute at 47%, followed by measures of training effectiveness at 43%, practical application at 42%, post-programme sustainment at 39%, and proof of business impact at 37%.

9. Capability-gap assessment remains a major challenge

45% identify inability to assess leadership capability gaps as a significant challenge. Other challenges include lack of technology integration at 42%, poor alignment with business strategy at 39%, resistance to change at 38%, and lack of C-suite support at 36%.

10. Midlevel leadership deserves greater attention

The study notes that midlevel leaders can be underinvested in despite their role in translating senior direction into execution and shaping how change is experienced across teams.

Thought Triggers

Provocative questions for CEOs, founders, business heads and senior leaders:

1. AI is already integrated into daily workflows in 98% of organisations surveyed. Where is AI changing work in your organisation, and where is it still treated as a separate technology initiative?

2. Leaders are increasingly expected to use AI in strategic decision making. Are your leaders equipped to challenge AI-generated recommendations, apply context and take accountability for the final decision?

3. Only 35% of respondents report AI embedded at scale in core processes. What would need to change in your operating model for AI to move from individual use cases to enterprise-wide ways of working?

4. Emotional and social intelligence ranks above several technology-related capabilities in the leadership skills required for 2026. How deliberately are you developing the human capabilities needed to lead teams through AI-driven change?

5. Scalability, measurable effectiveness and practical application are among the most important attributes of leadership development programmes. Can your current leadership development investment demonstrate what changes in behaviour and business performance?

6. Forty-five percent identify inability to assess leadership capability gaps as a significant challenge. Do you have a clear view of where your leadership capability is today and where it needs to be as the business changes?

7. Midlevel leaders translate strategy into execution and shape how change is experienced across teams. Are they receiving the development, coaching and organisational support required to carry that responsibility?

8. Organisations are expanding experiential simulations, blended learning, AI-enabled coaching and adaptive learning. Is your leadership development approach evolving at the same pace as the way leaders are expected to work?

What This Means for Leadership Development

The study points towards a leadership development model that is closely connected to business priorities. Capability building needs to be practical, measurable and sustainable, while giving leaders opportunities to apply learning in real work. It also needs to recognise that AI is changing the context in which judgment, collaboration, decision making and people leadership take place.

For organisations navigating this transition, the relevant question is not simply how much leadership training is being delivered. It is whether leaders are becoming more capable of translating strategy, working with AI, leading people through uncertainty and sustaining performance as the operating environment changes.

Ready to Apply These Insights?

If these findings resonate with your organisation, the next step is to examine the leadership capabilities required for your current and future business priorities.

VentureBean works with organisations on leadership development, executive coaching and capability building, helping leaders strengthen decision making, leadership effectiveness and execution capability as businesses grow and operating conditions change.

A practical starting point is to assess the gap between the leadership capabilities your organisation needs and the capabilities leaders currently demonstrate. From there, development interventions can be aligned to business priorities, leadership levels and measurable outcomes. **Schedule a call with VentureBean: https://venturebean.com/contact-us/** for an expert discussion and explore how the right business consulting approach can help your organisation

Source: Harvard Business Impact, *2026 Global Leadership Study*. Survey of 1,139 respondents, with interviews conducted January to March 2026. All statistics and study findings in this analysis are drawn from the supplied source report.