

POWERED BY LEAD WITH PURPOSE

2026 Leadership Development

TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS REPORT



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	02
Section One	04
What 2025 Revealed About Emerging Leadership	
Section Two	08
Why Traditional Leadership Development Failed Emerging Leaders	
Section Three	12
Trends & Projections of What Emerging Leaders Need in 2026—and How to Equip Them	
Section Four	26
How Leading Organizations Are Developing Emerging Leaders Now	
Section Five	31
Embedding Readiness in 2026: The New Culture of Leadership Development for Emerging Leaders	
Section Six	36
Projections—The Emerging Leadership Landscape Through 2030	
Section Seven	41
2026 Challenge for All Leaders	

Executive Summary

2025 was a leadership stress test—and most organizations failed it. Emerging leaders were thrust into complexity with little preparation. AI forced restructuring. Economic whiplash shattered forecasts. Employee expectations shifted faster than most leadership teams could track. In the middle of it all, high-potential employees were promoted without the tools, coaching, or confidence to succeed. The result? A crisis of readiness. A breakdown in alignment. A wake-up call.

It wasn't a lack of talent. It was a failure of preparation for this new, disruptive world. The pressure revealed a truth that too many organizations had ignored: the way we've been developing new leaders is outdated, incomplete, and too slow to respond to today's realities. Leadership development—if it happened at all—was built around models that assume:

- Leadership is earned with time and age, not responsibility.
- Leaders should be polished before they're empowered.
- Training happens in retreat centers, not in real-time.
- Alignment is top-down, not shared across teams.

That model doesn't work in 2026. It barely worked in 2016. In 2025, new leaders weren't just being developed too late. They were being developed in the wrong ways. Many had never been taught to make

decisions without all the answers. They had never been shown how to lead a team across generations. They had never been invited into strategic conversations or given the tools to translate purpose into action. And yet, they were expected to drive results, motivate teams, and stay calm under pressure.

Meanwhile, Gen Z—the fastest-growing workforce segment—challenged nearly every traditional leadership assumption. They demanded purpose over process. Flexibility over formality. Coaching over control. And most leadership systems weren't built to handle that. The cost?

- Misalignment between senior leaders and frontlines.
- Delayed execution as new managers waited for permission.
- Frustration from younger leaders who didn't feel trusted, prepared, or heard.
- A growing sense that leadership wasn't worth aspiring to.

But not everywhere. Some organizations did more than survive the 2025 chaos—they adapted and accelerated. They equipped emerging leaders early. They created decision-making frameworks that worked under pressure. They built cultures where purpose was lived, not laminated. And they developed aligned leadership teams that could execute through uncertainty. This report unpacks what those organizations did differently—and how you can do the same.



THIS REPORT EXPLORES:

- **What the real-world challenges of the turbulent past year exposed in our leadership pipelines**
- **What skills, mindsets, and systems emerging leaders now require to lead through disruption**
- **Why traditional development programs are outdated—and what needs to replace them**
- **And how to build leadership systems that create alignment, speed, and clarity at every level**

Core Trends & Projections:

Decision Confidence Under Ambiguity

Emerging leaders must be able to make high-stakes decisions with incomplete information. Waiting for certainty is no longer an option.

Mission-Driven Leadership at Every Level

If purpose lives only in the C-suite, it dies before it reaches the front lines. Emerging leaders need to know how to connect their team's work to the larger mission—and how to communicate that clearly.

Influence, Not Just Authority

In multi-generational teams, positional power isn't enough. Younger leaders must learn how to lead across—not just down.

Real-Time Learning and Leadership Habits

Leadership development must shift from abstract to applied. From episodic workshops to daily habits and field-level coaching.

Organizational Alignment as a Leadership Muscle

The best leaders keep strategy, communication, and culture aligned—especially when things change. That's not just a skill-set—it's a system.

This isn't just about preparing future executives. It's about preparing the next generation to lead now—because in many organizations, they already are. Let's stop assuming leadership will click into place once they "rise up." Let's build the next generation of elite leaders now—grounded in purpose, aligned to win, and equipped for disruption.

SECTION ONE:

What 2025 Revealed About Emerging Leadership

If 2020 cracked the surface of traditional leadership, 2025 shattered it.

Emerging leaders stepped into roles defined by disruption—only to discover that the systems meant to support them weren't built for the world they were actually leading in. What was exposed wasn't a lack of leadership potential, but a failure in how we prepare people to lead in real time, under pressure, and in alignment with the mission.

The High-Pressure Reveal: A Crisis of Readiness

When markets destabilized, AI rewrote workflows, and generational differences created cultural friction, organizations turned to their next generation of leaders—often middle managers, team leads, and high-potential individual contributors—for stability, execution, and adaptability.

...most leadership development models in place today are still designed for a business world that no longer exists.

But in many cases, those emerging leaders were stepping into the storm without a compass. They weren't equipped to make fast decisions. They weren't

confident communicating purpose to their teams. They didn't have the trust, clarity, or cross-functional influence needed to unite teams across silos or generations. And they weren't aligned with senior leadership on strategy, values, or expectations.

The result?

- Missed deadlines due to decision paralysis
- Confusion on hybrid teams with conflicting norms and expectations
- Disengagement from new managers who felt unsupported and overwhelmed
- Breakdowns in communication and culture, especially across generations

2025 didn't just test leadership—it exposed where leadership development has failed.

Outdated Development for a New Era of Leadership

Here's the hard truth: most leadership development models in place today are still designed for a business world that no longer exists.

They focus too much on theory and not enough on application. They reward tenure over capability. They rely on patterns and pattern recognition, when repeatable patterns are no longer appearing at the rate they were. They treat leadership as a top-

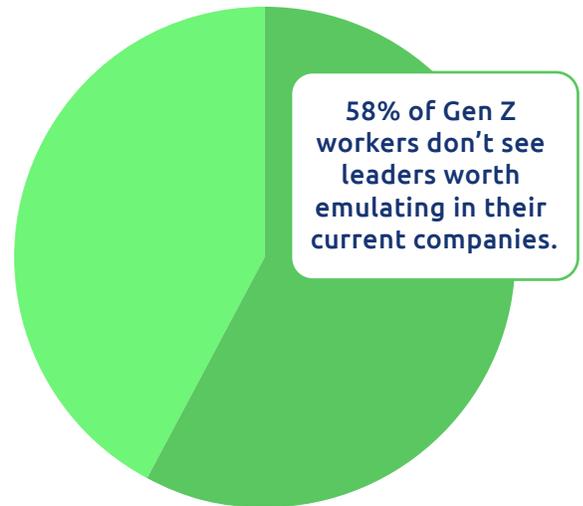
down status, rather than a bottom-up responsibility. They emphasize technical skills over alignment, communication, and decision-making under pressure.

These approaches may have worked when change was incremental. But in today's environment—defined by disruption, decentralization, and speed—they're no longer just ineffective. They're dangerous.

- **77% of organizations reported they lack the leadership depth they need.**
- **40% of leaders considered stepping away from leadership due to feeling underprepared.**
- **58% of Gen Z workers don't see leaders worth emulating in their current companies.**

These aren't numbers. They're alarms.

(Sources: DDI Global Leadership Forecast, Exec.com, LinkedIn Learning Report 2025)



The Disconnect: What We Expect vs. What We Equip

What 2025 made painfully clear is this: we are expecting more from emerging leaders than we're preparing them to handle.

We ask them to lead cross-functional teams—without teaching them how to influence without authority. We ask them to communicate company mission—without ensuring they understand it themselves. We expect

them to build culture—without modeling it from the top. We call for collaboration—without providing clarity, alignment, or purpose.

And then we wonder why they hesitate. Or disconnect. Or leave. The disconnect between what we ask of emerging leaders and what we give them in return is no longer sustainable.

The Crossroads: Reinvention or Irrelevance

2025 wasn't just turbulent—it was clarifying. It showed us that our systems for identifying, developing, and empowering new leaders are out of sync with the pace and pressure of today's business landscape. It also showed us what is possible when those systems are realigned. Organizations that succeeded in 2025 did so because they had:

- Built-in decision-making frameworks that gave emerging leaders confidence

- Clear internal alignment between mission, strategy, and day-to-day execution
- Development tools embedded into real work—not one-off workshops
- A culture that viewed leadership not as a title, but as a behavior

These companies weren't waiting for leaders to emerge. They were creating them.

Leadership Readiness: What Organizations Need Now

If 2025 taught us anything, it's that leadership readiness is the single greatest competitive advantage an organization can invest in. It's not just about preparing for a future promotion. It's about enabling performance right now—in the chaos, in the fog, in the complexity of daily leadership challenges.

2026 belongs to organizations who stop waiting for leaders to emerge...

Most companies have leadership development. Far fewer have leadership readiness—the ability to put leaders at every level into motion with:

- Clear decision-making frameworks
- Alignment around company mission and strategy
- Tools to build trust and lead multi-generational teams
- The mindset to act, adapt, and adjust in real time

Leadership readiness closes the gap between planning and execution. It gives teams the confidence to move. It unlocks the potential of your people. It removes the

bottleneck of top-heavy decision-making. And it keeps culture, performance, and engagement aligned—even when everything around them is shifting.

- Ready leaders make decisions faster
- Ready leaders create stronger team alignment
- Ready leaders reduce reliance on executive intervention
- Ready leaders stay longer—because they're equipped to succeed

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

Organizations that intentionally build leadership pipelines are 4.2x more likely to outperform competitors in revenue growth and 6.2x more likely to have highly engaged teams

(DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025)

This isn't theory. It's a tactical shift. And the results are measurable—in retention, innovation, execution speed, and strategic clarity. 2026 belongs to organizations who stop waiting for leaders to emerge—and start building them. Because when leadership is aligned, mission-driven, and ready at every level—there is no disruption that can't be navigated.

SECTION TWO:

Why Traditional Leadership Development Failed Emerging Leaders

For decades, organizations built leadership pipelines for a world that was slower, more predictable, more hierarchical, and more insulated from the pressure we now feel every single day. In that world, leadership was something you waited for—a title you earned after years of experience, mentorship, and incremental responsibility.

But that world is gone. And emerging leaders—especially Gen Z—are the ones paying the price. According to Gallup's 2025 workplace research, **Gen Z remains the least engaged generation, and only 31% strongly agree they understand what is expected of them at work.**

The problem wasn't that these new leaders lacked ability. It's that outdated leadership frameworks prepared them for a playing field that no longer exists.

The Legacy Model Assumed Stability. Emerging Leaders Inherited Chaos.

Most leadership development models were engineered for a linear world. A world where leaders slowly climbed the ladder, absorbed institutional knowledge, studied best practices, and finally stepped into leadership roles once they were “ready.”

But 2025 shattered the illusion of readiness. Markets destabilized. Technology shifted monthly. Workforce expectations—especially from Gen Z—evolved faster than most organizations could interpret. And into this

storm, emerging leaders were promoted because the business needed someone—anyone—to fill the gap.

The old leadership model assumed clarity. Emerging leaders inherited complexity. The old model rewarded caution. Emerging leaders needed speed. The old model emphasized authority. Emerging leaders needed influence. And the old model was built for a world where leaders had time. Emerging leaders do not.

The Result: A Generation Asked to Lead Without the Tools to Do It

The expectation placed on emerging leaders in 2025 was extraordinary:

- Make decisions without all the answers
- Lead peers and older employees
- Navigate hybrid teams with conflicting norms
- Communicate mission they were never included in crafting
- Bridge values across multiple generations
- Drive results with fewer resources and higher pressure

And they were told to do it with training that was designed for their grandparents.

Is it any wonder so many felt under-prepared? Or that many questioned whether leadership was worth aspiring to at all?

For Gen Z—the most purpose-driven, feedback-hungry, and transparency-focused generation in modern history—this disconnect was especially devastating. They entered the workforce expecting to contribute, to collaborate, to understand why their work mattered. Instead, they encountered leadership systems that were rigid, top-down, and decades out of alignment with the world they were being asked to lead in.

The Gap Between What Emerging Leaders Needed and What They Got

2025 revealed three crippling gaps in how we prepare new leaders:

1. The Readiness Gap

Emerging leaders were promoted into roles that required judgment under pressure—but were trained in theory, not practice.

2. The Alignment Gap

They were expected to communicate mission, values, and strategy—yet often had never seen them lived out by senior leadership.

3. The Influence Gap

They were asked to lead across generations, but were trained in leadership models built on authority rather than trust.

These gaps weren't signs of weak leaders. They were signs of weak systems.

Gen Z Exposed What the Old System Ignored

Because Gen Z expects meaning, not mechanics—clarity, not hierarchy—they often saw the misalignment first. They saw where purpose didn't match practice. They felt the friction between stated values and lived behaviors. And they quickly recognized that leadership was being treated like a title rather than a responsibility.

This is why Gen Z's push-back is not rebellion. It's a diagnosis. They are exposing what older generations

tolerated for too long: Leadership development has been designed for a world that no longer exists.

And because Gen Z now makes up the fastest-growing segment of the workforce—and the *primary source* of emerging leaders—their expectations are not a nuisance. They are a roadmap. A roadmap toward what leadership must become.

The Consequence of Waiting Too Long to Teach Leadership

We cannot continue waiting to develop leaders until after they have already failed, burned out, or disengaged.

Here is the hard truth many organizations discovered in 2025: We are developing leaders after we need them—not before. By the time an emerging leader receives formal training, they’ve already:

- Lost confidence
- Formed poor decision-making habits
- Hesitated at critical moments
- Felt disconnected from the mission
- Internalized the belief that leadership is overwhelming

This isn’t a talent problem. It’s a timing problem. Leadership must begin earlier. Much earlier.

The System Failed—But 2025 Gave Us the Blueprint

2025 was painful, but it was clarifying. It proved beyond a doubt:

- Emerging leaders are stepping into leadership faster than ever
- Gen Z is reshaping what leadership must look like
- Old development models are not simply outdated—they are obstructive
- Leadership readiness is now a survival metric, not a development goal

We cannot continue waiting to develop leaders until after they have already failed, burned out, or disengaged. The next section will explore the fundamental trends reshaping leadership development in 2026—trends that must be understood if we want emerging leaders to succeed in a world where clarity is scarce, ambiguity is constant, and purpose is the only real anchor.

Because emerging leaders aren’t the leaders of tomorrow. They are the leaders of right now. And they deserve systems designed for the world they are actually living in.

SECTION THREE:

Trends and Projections of What Emerging Leaders Need in 2026—& How to Equip Them

Emerging leaders don't need more pressure. They need better preparation.

2025 made it clear: organizations are expecting more from their high-potential talent—but without rethinking how they equip them to meet those expectations. Younger leaders today aren't entering stable teams with predictable roles and linear growth paths. They're navigating hybrid dynamics, cross-functional complexity, AI-accelerated change, and multigenerational tensions. They're being asked to lead without the support or systems that made previous leadership eras more manageable.

To thrive in 2026, emerging leaders need more than a title. They need a new toolset. They need a new mindset. And they need a development system that treats leadership as a daily discipline—not an annual workshop.

Leadership Has Changed. Our Development Approach Hasn't.

The traditional leadership model assumes that leadership happens later in a career and that people will develop skills simply through experience. But that hasn't matched the reality of today's environment.

In 2025, **only 43% of organizations reported using a combination of internal and external leadership development programs**, even though employers are prioritizing generative AI and leadership learning as business imperatives. [Harvard Business Impact](#)

At the same time, **half of managers lack the proper support to help their teams grow**, while nearly the same percentage report employees lack adequate support for development—indicating systemic barriers to real growth. [LinkedIn Learning](#)

These gaps are especially problematic for emerging leaders—people who are being asked to act now with little contextual preparation.

So What Do Emerging Leaders Actually Need?

In 2026, developing effective emerging leaders isn't about charisma or title. It's about building critical capacities—each rooted in real data from 2025 and each aligned to the demands of today's workplace.

TREND 1: CONFIDENCE TO DECIDE WITHOUT FULL CERTAINTY

The Emerging Leader Pain Point

In 2025, one of the most common challenges emerging leaders faced wasn't a lack of knowledge—it was a lack of certainty. They were promoted into leadership roles, handed complex projects or teams,

and expected to make quick decisions in fast-moving environments—but without the full picture, senior-level access, or past experience to guide them.

Many froze. They hesitated to take action without 100% of the data. They waited on approvals or escalated decisions unnecessarily. They worried about looking inexperienced or making the wrong call in front of their teams. As a result, team momentum slowed, opportunities were missed, and emerging leaders began to question their fitness for leadership—not because they lacked potential, but because they lacked a decision-making framework suited for ambiguity.

This kind of pressure is especially paralyzing for younger generations who have come up in structured educational and digital environments where feedback loops are fast, answers are searchable, and uncertainty is avoidable. Now, suddenly, they're being asked to lead without a roadmap—and very few feel equipped to do so.

"I'm leading a team, but I don't know if I'm even making the right calls. Everyone's waiting on me, but I'm waiting on clarity that never comes."

— First-time manager, software company (LinkedIn Workplace Learning 2025)

The Organizational Blind Spot

Many organizations don't realize just how underdeveloped their decision-making systems are at the emerging leader level. They assume that leadership instinct "kicks in" as people gain experience, or that junior leaders will naturally learn through observation. But 2025 showed us this model no longer works—not when the environment is constantly changing, so much of the workforce

is hybrid, and leaders at all levels are being asked to act fast, align cross-functionally, and maintain performance under pressure.

Most organizations still base their leadership development around *what* to do—not *how* to think under uncertainty. Decision-making is often treated as a technical or analytical skill, rather than a leadership behavior that can be modeled, coached, and repeated. Even worse, some companies unconsciously punish the wrong kinds of decisions (those made quickly with the right intent but imperfect results) while rewarding over-analysis or indecision masked as caution.

The net effect? Teams wait. Leaders default to escalation. Senior executives get bogged down in small decisions, while the people closest to the problem feel stuck.

The Leadership Skill Needed: Timely, Mission-Aligned Decision-Making

Leadership today isn't about making perfect decisions. It's about making *good-enough decisions in time to matter*. And that requires emerging leaders to operate from a different internal compass—one rooted in confidence, purpose, and alignment rather than certainty or permission.

The most effective emerging leaders in 2025 weren't the ones who knew the most. They were the ones who understood the mission, made timely calls, communicated intent, and adjusted quickly when needed. This type of decision-making is especially critical in matrixed or hybrid organizations where delays compound and ambiguity is the norm.

To build this skill, leaders must be taught how to assess risk, evaluate information rapidly, and make aligned decisions using strategic guardrails—not micromanagement. They must learn that clarity of *intent* can outperform clarity of *data*, and that decision velocity is often more important than decision perfection.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT: The 40–70 Rule

Onboard a \$1B nuclear submarine, decisions are made with lives on the line—often in total silence, at depth, with no perfect information. That's where Marc Koehler learned and now teaches the 40–70 Rule:

Act when you have between 40% and 70% probability that you are going to make the right decision. Less than 40%, you're guessing. More than 70%, you've waited too long.

This principle, borrowed from battlefield command and adapted for boardroom execution, gives emerging leaders a structured model for knowing when to move. It replaces fear with intent, confusion with clarity, and second-guessing with calculated confidence.

In organizations where the 40–70 Rule has been implemented as a decision-making benchmark, emerging leaders report:

- Greater ownership over their decisions
- More alignment with strategic objectives
- A sense of permission to act, adjust, and learn in motion
- Higher levels of autonomy in decision making leading to higher levels of engagement
- The mindset that can fail their way or course correct their way to success.

It also builds organizational muscle memory—everyone starts to understand how decisions get made and why, creating transparency and reinforcing trust across teams.

Supporting Data from 2025

60% of first-time managers in 2025 reported delaying decisions due to fear of making the wrong choice.

(LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report, 2025)

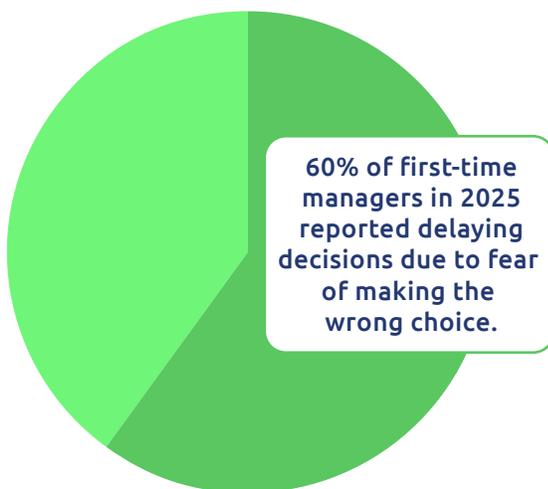
Only 38% of organizations provided real-time training for decision-making in uncertain or ambiguous conditions.

(Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning Report, 2025)

Companies that emphasize adaptive decision-making outperform competitors in speed-to-market by 22% and report higher team confidence scores.

(DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025)

These numbers reinforce what we've seen across industries: most organizations want decision-makers, but they haven't built decision-readiness into their leadership systems.



How to Equip Emerging Leaders for 2026

Closing the readiness gap around decision-making requires more than a memo. It requires:

- Structured decision-making frameworks (like the 40–70 Rule) that are taught and modeled
- Simulation-based learning environments where

leaders practice acting under time constraints and partial visibility

- Real-time coaching where decisions are debriefed not for outcome alone, but for process and intent
- Organizational permission systems that clarify the guardrails of autonomy—so leaders know where they're free to move, and where they need to escalate
- Consistent role modeling from senior leaders who openly discuss how they made decisions, not just what they decided

This creates a culture where speed and alignment are not in conflict, and where new leaders are trusted to move the mission forward without waiting for every box to be checked. In this new, disruptive world, it's about making the most, smart decisions the fastest.

Alignment to Mission

But decision-making doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's not just about how quickly someone acts—it's about how aligned they are with the bigger picture. The best decision-makers aren't just fast. They're anchored. They know the purpose. They know the plan. And that's what gives their actions weight and direction.

Which brings us to the next essential trend for 2026:

TREND 2: CLARITY ON HOW THEIR WORK ALIGNS TO THE MISSION

Emerging leaders in 2025 were more purpose-driven than any generation before them—yet many reported feeling disconnected from their organization's mission. They understood the what. They were told the how. But the why? Often missing.

For younger leaders stepping into new roles, especially in fast-moving or matrixed companies, the lack of context made it difficult to make confident

decisions or communicate priorities to their teams. When these leaders didn't understand how their work contributed to the broader mission, it led to confusion, disengagement, and misalignment down the chain.

...mission clarity isn't about words —it's about shared understanding

This disconnect was especially painful for Gen Z and Millennials, who overwhelmingly rank “meaningful work” and “mission alignment” as top career priorities. They don't just want a role—they want to feel like their efforts matter. When that connection isn't made, they don't just struggle to lead—they begin to mentally check out.

“I have a team to manage, but I don't really know what we're trying to accomplish at the highest level. Every department seems to be marching to a different beat.”

— Emerging team lead, financial services

The Organizational Blind Spot

Many companies assume that their mission is self-evident because it's printed on the wall, the website, or the onboarding packet. But mission clarity isn't about words—it's about shared understanding and practical application, especially at the emerging leader level.

Leaders at the top may feel deeply connected to the company's vision. But if that vision isn't clearly and consistently communicated through systems, language, and behavior, it rarely survives the layers between strategy and execution. Middle managers and first-time leaders are often the weakest link in the alignment chain—not because they lack intent, but because no one ever taught them how to translate strategy into action.

In 2025, Gallup reported that **only 32% of U.S. employees strongly agreed that the mission or purpose of their organization makes them feel their job is important.**

(Gallup State of the Global Workplace, 2025)

That's not a culture problem—it's a leadership readiness problem.

The Leadership Skill Needed: Translating Mission into Meaningful Work

In 2026, emerging leaders must learn how to connect the dots between the organization's purpose and their team's day-to-day work. This is more than reciting the mission statement. It's about embedding alignment into how they communicate, plan, and lead.

Great leaders make purpose feel *personal*. They help their teams see how the work they do contributes to something larger. They reinforce why what they're doing matters, especially when the path ahead is unclear or the work becomes difficult.

This isn't just an emotional exercise. It's a strategic imperative. Teams with strong alignment move faster, make fewer mistakes, and stay motivated longer. They don't just know what they're doing—they know why it matters.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT: Alignment as the Anchor

On a submarine, alignment is not optional. Every crew member must understand the mission, their role, and how their actions impact others. One misstep—or one misaligned decision—can compromise the safety of the entire crew.

Marc Koehler teaches that alignment is the new authority. In flat or distributed organizations, leaders can no longer rely on command-and-control to get results. Instead, they must rely on shared purpose and clarity of intent to guide teams toward the goal.

Emerging leaders must become alignment multipliers—people who take abstract strategy and give it practical meaning. They must build “alignment moments” into how they lead: in how they set goals, communicate updates, delegate tasks, and celebrate wins.

Supporting Data from 2025

Employees who strongly agree their manager helps them see how their work connects to the organization’s goals are 3.5x more likely to be engaged.

(Gallup, 2025)

Organizations with high strategic alignment grow revenue 58% faster and are 72% more profitable than misaligned peers.

(LSA Global Organizational Alignment Research, 2025)

Less than 40% of first-time managers say they were trained to connect team goals to company strategy.

(LinkedIn Workplace Learning, 2025)

These numbers reveal a dangerous truth: emerging leaders are being asked to drive performance without being shown where the road leads—or why it matters.

How to Equip Emerging Leaders for 2026

To build alignment-focused leadership at the emerging level, organizations must:

- Teach purpose translation as a core leadership competency
- Build communication cadences where managers routinely connect work to mission
- Provide leaders with one-page alignment tools (like the One-Page Purpose Plan) that connect vision, values, goals, and roles
- Coach leaders to ask alignment questions, not just give directives
- Create feedback loops where teams can reflect on progress toward purpose—not just output metrics

When mission becomes a daily conversation instead of a quarterly poster, teams unite. Priorities become clearer. Decision-making accelerates. Accountability deepens. And most importantly, emerging leaders start to lead not just from authority—but from conviction.

Leading Through Influence, Not Authority

Clarity of purpose gives leaders direction. But executing that direction—especially across generational lines and in flat hierarchies—requires more than clarity. It requires influence.

In the next trend, we’ll explore why emerging leaders in 2026 must master the art of leading without relying on positional power—and how organizations can help them do it well.

TREND 3: THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE WITHOUT AUTHORITY

Many emerging leaders in 2025 found themselves responsible for outcomes—but not necessarily in charge of the people involved. They were asked to manage projects, align peers, or coordinate cross-functional teams—but lacked the formal authority to direct others. This left them feeling stuck between responsibility and power.

Leading without a title—or across to more experienced or senior peers—requires a completely different set of muscles than traditional top-down leadership. Emerging leaders often expressed frustration: they knew what needed to happen, but didn’t feel empowered or confident enough to guide others without seeming overbearing, uncertain, or inexperienced.

They may need to earn trust from Baby Boomers who’ve been in the organization for decades.

“I’m expected to lead a project that touches marketing, ops, and engineering—but no one reports to me. I don’t know how to get buy-in without sounding bossy, or like I’m trying too hard.”

— Emerging leader, tech startup

This isn’t a marginal scenario—it’s now the norm. In hybrid organizations, matrixed teams, and increasingly flat hierarchies, emerging leaders must know how to influence across, up, and down without relying on title or tenure.

The Organizational Blind Spot

Most leadership development models still emphasize managing direct reports. But in 2025, the most frequent leadership challenges emerging leaders faced weren’t about giving performance reviews or delegating tasks—they were about getting alignment from peers, negotiating stakeholder needs, and moving others toward action without formal authority.

Unfortunately, most organizations do little to develop these capabilities. Influence is treated as an “advanced” skill—something leaders learn after they’ve managed for years. But today, influence is required from day one.

And in multi-generational teams, the stakes are even higher. Gen Z leaders may need to lead Millennials or Gen X employees. They may need to earn trust from Baby Boomers who’ve been in the organization for decades. Without the right tools and support, this dynamic becomes a credibility crisis—and many emerging leaders quietly opt out of driving change altogether.

The Leadership Skill Needed: Trust-Building Influence Across Levels

In 2026, emerging leaders must be able to build relational trust and forward momentum, regardless of role or reporting structure. Influence is not about charisma. It’s about credibility, consistency, and

clarity of purpose. Leaders who master influence know how to:

- Build trust through active listening and transparency
- Align stakeholders around shared outcomes
- Navigate tension or disagreement without damaging relationships
- Use questions and frameworks to guide, not control

They know when to push, when to pull, and when to step back. They move people—not just through personality, but through a clear connection to the mission, a strong understanding of context, and a commitment to shared success.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT: Leadership Is Not Rank. It’s Responsibility.

Marc Koehler teaches that elite leadership is about responsibility, not rank. On a submarine, any crew member can (and must) step up and lead when the situation demands it—regardless of their title.

In a world of decentralized teams and overlapping roles, this mindset is critical. Emerging leaders must learn to lead from wherever they stand, using influence built on clarity and character.

This is especially true for mission-critical decisions where speed matters. Waiting for permission wastes time. But pushing without trust causes resistance. Fast Attack Leaders are trained to build influence systems—trust, alignment, shared goals—that allow them to lead even when they don’t have control.

Supporting Data from 2025

72% of Gen Z employees say they follow leaders who earn trust, not command it.

(Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025)

Only 29% of organizations say they effectively develop the skills needed to influence cross-functional teams.

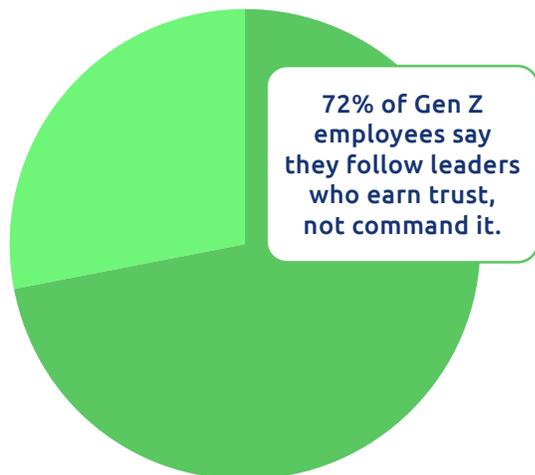
(DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025)

Influence, collaboration, and empathy were ranked in the top 5 most in-demand leadership skills by LinkedIn's 2025 Workplace Learning Report.

Organizations with high trust levels report 74% less stress, 106% more energy, and 50% higher productivity.

(Harvard Business Review, 2025)

The numbers make it clear: influence isn't a soft skill. It's a core leadership competency—especially for emerging leaders working in complex, fast-moving environments



How to Equip Emerging Leaders for 2026

To help leaders develop influence without authority, organizations must:

- Redefine leadership as a behavior, not a title
- Provide training in interpersonal agility, stakeholder alignment, and peer influence

- Create safe environments for practice, including simulations, role-playing, and leadership labs
- Coach emerging leaders to use shared purpose as a lever for collaboration
- Encourage upward communication and “managing up” as part of leadership training
- Build mentorship networks that model influence through relationship, not role

When emerging leaders learn to lead with clarity and connection, they unlock momentum across teams—not through control, but through trust. And that trust becomes the engine of organizational speed.

Applied, Real-Time Learning

The ability to influence others is essential—but it isn't learned from a slide deck. It's learned by doing, in live situations, with real feedback and reflection.

That's why the next essential trend for 2026 is not just what emerging leaders learn—but how they learn it:

TREND 4: REAL-TIME APPLICATION OVER ABSTRACT THEORY

In 2025, many emerging leaders found themselves stuck in a frustrating loop: they had been through training, but couldn't recall how to apply it in the moments that mattered most.

They had taken notes, completed certifications, and checked every box in the company LMS. But when conflict erupted in a meeting, when a project derailed, or when they needed to address under-performance with a peer—they froze. The training hadn't prepared them for the *feeling* of real leadership. The messy, high-stakes, uncertain nature of leading under pressure left them unsure and reactive.

“I did the training, I read the article, but none of that helps when I’m in the moment and everything is moving fast.”

— First-time manager, B2B sales team

This pain point became a recurring theme in post-program evaluations and internal feedback across industries. It wasn’t a motivation problem. It was a misalignment between how leaders were being developed and how leadership actually shows up in their day-to-day roles.

The Organizational Blind Spot

Many organizations still view leadership development as a separate initiative—something that happens “over there,” in a course, a cohort, or an annual retreat. But in 2025, the gap between learning and doing was exposed as a major failure point.

It’s about deliberate practice—in motion, under pressure, with feedback.

Companies invested in robust learning platforms, offsite experiences, and content-rich training materials—but failed to bring those lessons to life in real-time, in the flow of work. Emerging leaders were left trying to bridge the gap alone, often defaulting back to instinct, habit, or passivity.

The biggest blind spot? Assuming that knowledge leads to action. In truth, only applied knowledge becomes leadership. Unless lessons are practiced under real conditions—with feedback, coaching, and repetition—they don’t become behaviors. They stay on paper. And the cost is high: inconsistent execution, missed coaching opportunities, and emerging leaders who feel like imposters the moment something goes off-script.

This is where so many leadership pipelines stall—not because of who was chosen to lead, but because of how they were prepared.

The Leadership Skill Needed for 2026: Learning in Motion

In 2026, the most critical skill for emerging leaders is learning while leading—developing the ability to apply new tools and approaches in the middle of real work, without waiting for ideal conditions or classroom settings. Leadership today moves too fast to be episodic. Leaders must be able to:

- Step into a coaching conversation minutes after conflict
- Adjust delegation styles on the fly
- Use purpose-driven frameworks in weekly planning meetings
- Apply recognition principles mid-project—not at year-end
- Course-correct without shame when a strategy isn’t landing

This requires development systems that normalize small, frequent, contextual leadership reps, rather than large, infrequent theoretical ones.

It’s not about perfect performance. It’s about deliberate practice—in motion, under pressure, with feedback.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT: Train Where You Fight

Marc Koehler draws from his submarine experience where high-stakes training didn’t happen in sterile classrooms—it happened onboard, in real time, during real missions.

“*Train where you fight*” isn’t just a saying. It’s a survival principle.

In the Fast Attack Leadership approach, leaders are trained where their performance matters most—inside the work. Every moment becomes an opportunity to grow leadership capabilities: alignment conversations, mission briefings, feedback loops, debriefs. Leaders don't need more theory—they need tools that live where they lead.

Emerging leaders thrive when their development mirrors the environment they're navigating: fast, imperfect, real. When learning happens in context, leaders gain muscle memory. They don't just know what to do—they trust themselves to do it under pressure.

Supporting Data from 2025

91% of L&D professionals ranked “learning in the flow of work” as their top priority for 2025.

(LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report, 2025)

Companies that embed leadership development into daily workflows are 4.2x more likely to report leadership effectiveness across levels.

(Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning Report, 2025)

59% of employees say their company's training content isn't relevant to the challenges they actually face.

(Exec.com Learning Experience Study, 2025)

Despite widespread investment, only 38% of organizations deliver real-time, contextual development for emerging leaders.

(Harvard Business Publishing, 2025)

The research reveals a hard truth: knowledge alone doesn't create leaders. Context, application, and coaching do.

How to Equip Emerging Leaders for 2026

To close this gap, leading organizations in 2026 are redesigning leadership development with application first. That means:

- Shifting from courses to micro-practices embedded in weekly workflows
- Using coaching debriefs after key leadership moments, like team meetings or project pivots
- Encouraging “on-the-job reflection” as a discipline, not a luxury
- Implementing simple tools like mission briefs, weekly wins check-ins, and alignment huddles
- Assigning stretch roles with built-in support and feedback, not just tasks

They're also reframing leadership development as a team sport: something built into 1:1s, huddles, project launches, and recognition systems—not something to be downloaded from a training portal.

And when they do this well, the impact is immediate. Emerging leaders stop seeing development as something “extra” or disconnected—and start seeing themselves as capable, growing leaders right now, inside the business.

Culture and Purpose Communication

Real-time leadership development helps emerging leaders act. But acting with confidence and alignment depends on what they model and communicate—especially when it comes to culture and purpose.

That's why the next trend focuses on a capability that separates managers from true leaders:

TREND 5: THE CONFIDENCE TO COMMUNICATE PURPOSE AND CULTURE

In 2025, many emerging leaders stepped into roles with accountability, deadlines, and team expectations—but without a clear sense of how to connect those responsibilities back to the company's bigger mission. They could manage tasks, complete reports, and lead check-ins. But when asked to

motivate their team, reinforce a company value, or explain why a particular initiative mattered—they struggled to find the words.

The pressure to “get it right” often led to silence. Many worried that they would say something wrong, sound too formal, or appear inauthentic. For others, it wasn’t a lack of desire—it was a lack of training. They hadn’t been shown how to speak with clarity about purpose, especially in moments of change, challenge, or resistance.

This communication gap left teams feeling disconnected, unclear, or disengaged. And for the emerging leader, it led to a quiet erosion of influence. Without a consistent and confident voice, even strong performers became weak culture carriers—despite being placed in positions of leadership.

“I know we’re supposed to lead with values, but I don’t want to sound like I’m just repeating a mission statement. I want to mean it—but I don’t know how to say it.”

— Emerging team lead, logistics sector

The Organizational Blind Spot

Most companies assume that leadership communication will improve naturally over time—or that values will “trickle down” from the top. But in 2025, it became increasingly clear that this assumption is costing organizations alignment, engagement, and retention.

Gen Z and Millennial employees rank purpose and values at the top of what they expect from employers.

Executives may set the tone at the top, but the tone employees actually experience—the voice they hear most often—is their immediate manager. And if that manager doesn’t speak the mission, clarify values, or reinforce the “why” behind the work, then the organization’s culture exists in theory only—not in practice.

According to Gallup’s 2025 data, only 27% of employees strongly agree that their manager consistently communicates company values. That number is even lower among newer, first-time leaders. The result is a leadership gap that extends beyond performance—it’s a gap in meaning, trust, and identity.

This is especially dangerous in multi-generational teams. Gen Z and Millennial employees rank purpose and values at the top of what they expect from employers. If their leaders can’t speak to those values in a compelling and authentic way, they disengage—or leave.

The Leadership Skill Needed for 2026: Purposeful, Authentic Communication

Emerging leaders must be taught that leadership communication isn’t just about information—it’s about inspiration and alignment. Their job isn’t just to tell people what to do. It’s to help people see why the work matters, how it connects to the bigger picture, and how their contributions reflect the company’s purpose and values.

This kind of communication builds trust, shapes culture, and drives performance. It also strengthens the leader’s presence. When emerging leaders learn to speak with clarity and authenticity about the mission, they gain credibility—not because of their title, but because of their conviction.

Authentic communication also bridges generational divides. In 2025, leaders who were able to adapt their message to the style of their team—whether through in-person storytelling, written updates, or team celebrations—saw stronger cohesion across teams of mixed ages, backgrounds, and work styles.

Ultimately, leadership communication is not about having the perfect words. It's about being rooted in purpose and speaking from that place with consistency.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT: Leaders Are Culture Carriers

Marc Koehler often shares a truth learned beneath the surface of the ocean: “On a submarine, it’s not just the captain who leads. Everyone is a culture carrier.”

In elite environments like the Navy, the ability to communicate clarity, urgency, and shared values isn’t optional—it’s the glue that holds performance and trust together. That principle extends into business. When leaders communicate clearly, the team calibrates. When they don’t, the team drifts.

In *Fast Attack Leadership*, leaders are trained to build systems of communication that reinforce purpose and values not just in town halls or strategy meetings—but in how they run daily huddles, recognize their people, onboard new teammates, and give feedback.

This reinforces a critical truth: *If you lead a team, you are the culture.* Whether you know it or not, your words shape how others show up. And your silence does too.

Supporting Data from 2025

58% of employees in 2025 said their company’s stated values did not match their day-to-day experience.

(Gartner Culture & Communication Study, 2025)

Teams with managers who consistently connect their team’s work to the organization’s mission are 23% more engaged.

(Gallup Workplace Report, 2025)

Only 1 in 4 emerging leaders say they feel confident communicating company purpose in their own voice.

(LinkedIn Learning Workplace Report, 2025)

Employees who trust their immediate manager to model and reinforce company values are 2.8x more likely to stay during times of disruption.

(Harvard Business Review, 2025)

These numbers don’t just reveal a communication gap. They reveal a leadership trust gap—one that can be closed by developing communication confidence in those rising into roles of influence.

How to Equip Emerging Leaders for 2026

Organizations must treat communication not as an afterthought—but as a leadership discipline. To prepare emerging leaders to carry culture through communication, they must be equipped with both frameworks and practice. That means:

- Teaching mission-to-metrics messaging: helping leaders tie tasks and KPIs back to the organization’s purpose
- Providing values-based recognition tools: giving language for celebrating when team members live the company’s values
- Offering purpose storytelling workshops: showing how to share authentic stories that reinforce the mission in team settings
- Training leaders to handle value-conflict moments: when speed, ethics, or pressure challenge alignment, leaders need language to lead with integrity
- Embedding communication practice into weekly rhythms: huddles, feedback loops, and project kickoffs should all include mission and value tie-ins

When these tools are normalized, emerging leaders don’t just become better communicators—they become alignment amplifiers, keeping teams connected to what matters most, even during chaos and change.

Leadership Readiness

When emerging leaders communicate with purpose, align work with mission, and model culture with clarity, they stop simply *managing people*—they start mobilizing them.

And when you build all five capabilities explored in this report—confidence in decision-making, mission alignment, influence, real-time application, and communication—you don't just get better leadership. You get leadership readiness—the single most important advantage for navigating what comes next.

Leadership Readiness: What Organizations Need Now

This section serves as a *culminating insight* that connects all five trends into a clear strategic imperative: build leadership readiness now—or fall behind.

If the turbulence of 2025 revealed anything, it's this: most organizations weren't short on strategy—they were short on ready leaders.

They had goals, missions, initiatives, and investor decks. What they lacked was a pipeline of people with the confidence, clarity, and alignment to lead inside the uncertainty. And no group felt this gap more deeply than emerging leaders—those promoted into roles they weren't prepared for, handed responsibility without training, and tasked with motivating teams without ever being shown how.

These are not under-performing individuals. They are high-potential assets operating in underdeveloped systems. Leadership Readiness is the answer.

What Is Leadership Readiness?

Leadership Readiness is not theoretical. It's not about titles or tenure. It's about building leaders who can act decisively, align teams, adapt under pressure, and mobilize others—starting now, not years from now. It means developing people who:

- Make decisions with incomplete information
- Connect daily work to strategic purpose

- Lead across generations and roles without formal authority
- Apply tools in real time, not just in training sessions
- Reinforce mission and model values through communication

Leadership readiness isn't about being perfect. It's about being prepared to lead when it matters most—when the plan breaks, when pressure rises, when people need direction. It's about creating consistency of leadership across your entire organization—not just at the top.

Why It Matters for 2026

According to DDI's 2025 Global Leadership Forecast:

- **Organizations that focus on early-stage leadership readiness are 4.2x more likely to financially outperform peers.**
- **They are 6.2x more likely to have highly engaged workforces.**
- **And they are 8.5x more likely to respond rapidly to market shifts.**

Meanwhile, the failure to invest in readiness has consequences:

- Slow decision-making
- Team misalignment
- Executive bottlenecks
- Culture drift
- Retention loss—especially among Gen Z and Millennial leaders who feel unsupported and undervalued

In today's multi-generational, hybrid, high-stakes workplace, you can't afford to wait until leaders "grow into" readiness. You have to build it—on purpose, with purpose.

Leadership Perspective

Marc Koehler's Fast Attack Leadership framework has always focused on readiness, not rank. The submarine doesn't wait for permission. The crew doesn't guess. Every person on board knows their role, understands the mission, and can lead under pressure—because they've been trained to.

That same clarity and urgency is now required in every boardroom, plant floor, and innovation lab.

When emerging leaders are equipped with the five skills in this report, they no longer slow the system down—they become the system's strength.

They don't just inherit leadership roles. They earn the ability to shape what's next.

What Organizations Will Get In 2026 When They Build Leadership Readiness

- Faster decisions, fewer escalations
- Increased team alignment and trust
- Greater resilience in times of disruption
- Improved retention of high-potential talent
- More distributed leadership capacity—at scale

Most importantly, they gain leaders who are ready to act not just when it's easy, but when it counts.

The organizations that win in 2026 won't be the ones with the best plans. They'll be the ones with the most ready leaders to bring those plans to life.

SECTION FOUR:

How Leading Organizations are Developing Emerging Leaders Now

As 2025 unfolded, organizations that weathered disruption most effectively did not do so by chance. They did so by intentionally building systems to develop leadership readiness early, across levels—especially among emerging leaders—and focusing on alignment, real-world practice, and multi-generational capability.

This section explores what these forward-moving organizations are doing differently—not just in theory, but in practice—and the measurable results they are seeing.

Structured Emerging Leader Programs with Real Outcomes

Across industries in 2025, companies began investing in formal programs designed exclusively for emerging leaders, recognizing that “sink-or-swim” promotions produce inconsistent results.

Some global benchmarking research notes that top leadership development frameworks today include programs from established institutions which specifically target up-and-coming leaders and focus on *practical readiness* rather than academic theory

alone. These structured programs tend to integrate assessments, coaching, and hands-on application—all critical elements for emerging leaders who must act with confidence under uncertainty. [RedactAI+1](#)

These programs support emerging leaders in building the kinds of competencies examined earlier in this report—including decision framing, influence without authority, and communication of purpose.

Mentorship and Sponsorship Models that Bridge Experience Gaps

Another key element successful organizations have in common is mentorship and sponsorship—pairing emerging leaders with seasoned executives to accelerate their development and alignment with organizational purpose.

For example, the rise of industry mentorship initiatives in 2025—such as the launch of structured mentoring cohorts in professional associations and nonprofits—demonstrates how mentorship is being used to build leadership confidence and network strength early in careers. A six-month mentoring program launched in

Singapore and Hong Kong by a global AV nonprofit illustrates how tailored mentoring can support professional development even in specialized fields, pairing high-potential individuals with senior leaders to build capability across regions and contexts. [TV Tech](#)

These structures provide more than advice—they create a development ecosystem that contextualizes leadership learning within the organization’s culture and mission, helping emerging leaders translate big-picture strategy into everyday execution.

Real-World, Cross-Functional Leadership Labs

High-performing organizations in 2025 also invested in leadership labs—real work environments where emerging leaders tackle cross-functional challenges in teams, not in isolation.

...experiential environments replicate the ambiguity and complexity of real leadership moments...

One municipal example saw a community leadership lab designed to prepare emerging civic and nonprofit leaders through a mix of communication training, project management, team building, and engagement with real community stakeholders. The first cohort, comprised of participants recommended by peers and employers, completed more than 30 hours of structured learning and delivered a youth event as a culminating project, reinforcing both skills and mission alignment. [Lake County Star](#)

These experiential environments replicate the ambiguity and complexity of real leadership moments far more effectively than classroom sessions, and they reinforce behaviors that matter: alignment to mission, communication with diverse teams, and execution under pressure.

Partnering Academic Rigor with Business Practice

Organizations increasingly collaborated with academic institutions to co-create leadership readiness pathways that blend research rigor with hands-on business application.

In 2025, Hyundai Motor India launched its ARISE Core Talent leadership program in partnership with top academic institutions, combining leadership labs, business case simulations, and cross-functional problem solving to fast-track readiness among

high-potential employees. The program's multi-phased design reflects a deeper commitment to long-term organizational health rather than short-term training events. [The Times of India](#)

These hybrid models (academic + business) align leaders with both strategic thinking and execution capacity—a key combination for emerging leaders operating in multigenerational and complex work environments.

Leadership as a Network, Not a Hierarchy

In companies that are developing leaders most effectively in 2025, leadership isn't seen as a rank or title—it's viewed as a network of behaviors and relationships. Organizations actively break down silos by implementing:

- Peer learning cohorts
- Cross-departmental leadership rotations
- Multi-mentorship structures

These approaches equip emerging leaders to navigate complexity by building strong relational capital and cross-functional fluency—essential skills in volatile contexts where decisions ripple beyond functional boundaries.

Emerging leaders in these environments can tap into broader internal networks and gain exposure to diverse perspectives, enabling them to lead with both influence and alignment, even without formal authority.

Reinforced Purpose Alignment Across Levels

Research from 2025 shows that internal alignment—where employees understand and engage with organizational purpose—directly correlates to performance outcomes. Companies that intentionally connect leadership development to mission realize measurable improvements in engagement and execution speed. [Exec.com](https://www.exec.com)

Forward-leaning organizations make this connection explicit through:

- Purpose-aligned leadership competencies
- Development frameworks that start with mission and end with measurable behavior

- Incentives tied to both individual and team alignment outcomes

For example, **companies that invest strategically in leadership development report 25% better business outcomes than peers with less emphasis on development.** [Exec.com](https://www.exec.com)

This underscores that leadership readiness isn't just “nice to have”—it materially affects performance.

What Sets These Organizations Apart

In 2025, the most effective emerging leader pipelines shared:

1. Development systems integrated into work, not separate from it

Leaders learned by doing, not just observing.

2. Alignment mechanisms at every level

Expectations, language, and measurable outcomes all pointed to the same mission and values.

3. Cross-generational design

Programs were intentionally designed to bridge generational perspectives, not patch them.

4. Multi-layered support systems

Coaching, mentoring, labs, and academic partnerships created a layered support network.

5. Measurement and accountability

Outcomes weren't just attendance or completion—they were tied to behaviors and business results.

Emerging Leaders Require a New Approach to Leadership

Emerging leaders do not become ready by accident. The organizations that outpace their competitors in 2026 are doing something that many others still struggle with: they have built leadership readiness into the fabric of how work gets done.

They haven't outsourced leadership development to occasional classes. They haven't left it to chance or hope. They have built systems that align expectations, capabilities, and mission from the first step in a leader's journey.

When emerging leaders are prepared with clarity, confidence, and alignment, they don't just absorb a culture—they reinforce and elevate it. This also extends the company's culture across the whole team, rather than with one person with the potential to walk out the door taking all culture activities with them. And that's the difference between organizations that survive disruption—and those that shape the future.

SECTION FIVE:

Embedding Readiness in 2026: The New Culture of Leadership Development for Emerging Leaders

In the aftermath of 2025's volatility, one thing has become clear: the way most organizations develop leaders is no longer sufficient. The outdated, episodic, and one-size-fits-all approaches that once passed for "leadership training" were stress-tested—and they failed.

What's replacing them isn't a curriculum. It's not a better LMS, a new badge, or a checklist of competencies.

It's a new culture of leadership development—one that sees readiness not as an outcome of tenure or title, but as a deliberate outcome of how the organization operates every single day.

This shift isn't about adding leadership development to your priorities. It's about building it into your operating system. The organizations that are getting this right aren't developing leaders off to the side of the business. They're doing it in the center of it.

From Interventions to Infrastructure

Everyone is responsible for creating an environment where leaders can emerge, grow, and lead in real time.

Most organizations treat leadership development as an intervention. Something you offer after someone has shown “potential.” A reward for performance. A corrective for a skill gap. A program to attend once a year—then return to the chaos of the job, unchanged.

But in high-readiness cultures, leadership development is infrastructure. It’s built into how people meet, plan, debrief, celebrate, and course-correct. It’s as consistent and essential as your accounting systems or customer service protocols.

And it’s not owned by HR. It’s owned by the business. Everyone is responsible for creating an environment where leaders can emerge, grow, and lead in real time.

“You don’t develop leaders by taking them out of the work. You develop leaders by designing the work to develop them.”

— Marc Koehler

What Emerging Leaders Actually Need from Their Organizations

Today’s rising leaders are stepping into more complexity than any generation before them. They’re managing cross-functional teams. They’re influencing without authority. They’re making real-time decisions that affect customers, revenue, and culture. And they’re doing it with less support, more ambiguity, and higher expectations than ever.

What they need is not another training program. What they need is:

- Clarity on the mission and how their work contributes to it
- A system of shared language and decision norms

- A psychologically safe environment to ask, reflect, make mistakes (fail to success), and learn
- Visibility into what “good leadership” looks like inside the organization
- Feedback systems that reinforce—not erode—their confidence
- Leaders above them who model readiness, not perfection

They don’t want to be over-mentored and under-empowered. They want to be challenged, trusted, and developed in motion.

Cultural Shifts in Organizations That Get It

The organizations that are retaining, promoting, and multiplying emerging leaders in 2026 have made a set of quiet, powerful shifts in how they think about leadership.

1. From Training to Modeling

They don't assume a course will fix readiness gaps. They invest in senior leaders modeling what they want repeated. The culture becomes visible. And the standard becomes shared.

2. From Role-Based to Responsibility-Based Leadership

They stop waiting for a title to unleash leadership behaviors. They encourage leadership at every level—especially in moments of decision-making, alignment, and influence.

3. From Top-Down Messaging to Bottom-Up Learning

They don't just cascade updates from the executive team. They use real-time feedback from the front lines to sharpen strategy and leadership messaging.

4. From High Performers → To High Multipliers

They stop looking for unicorns. Instead, they build repeatable systems that turn strong team leads into consistent mobilizers of others—scaling leadership capacity, not just individual talent.

5. From Compliance to Conviction

They don't define leadership success by box-checking. They define it by the level of conviction leaders show—in decision-making, in alignment, and in ownership.

Readiness Is a Cultural Output

Leadership readiness doesn't live in your org chart. It lives in your meeting cadences, your language, your rhythms, and how you respond under pressure.

If your company slows down when something breaks—it's a culture problem, not a talent problem.

If decisions stall until someone at the top signs off—it's not a hierarchy issue, it's a readiness issue.

If your younger leaders are burning out, opting out, or playing small—it's not about them. It's about what they've been given (or not given) to work with.

Readiness is an output of culture. And culture is built by what you repeat, what you reward, and what you reinforce.

Real-Time Learning as Culture

In high-readiness cultures, leadership development doesn't look like a classroom. It looks like:

- Weekly debriefs that start with "What did we learn?"
- Managers using simple reflection prompts in 1:1s
- Team leads aligning their updates to the mission each week
- Daily huddles with leadership development embedded
- Recognition tied to values, not just results

- Cross-functional projects designed to stretch influence, not just delivery
- Executive leaders sharing decisions and their decision-making process

In other words: leadership learning is happening constantly, visibly, and collectively.

And the most powerful part? It's scalable. When learning becomes a team habit, not just an individual effort, entire functions become more aligned, more adaptive, and more resilient.

What the Data is Telling Us

In 2025, the research caught up to what forward-thinking leaders already knew:

Organizations that embed real-time leadership rhythms (e.g., decision frameworks, mission alignment moments, reflection practices) are 4x more likely to develop confident, self-correcting leaders.

(Harvard Business Publishing, 2025)

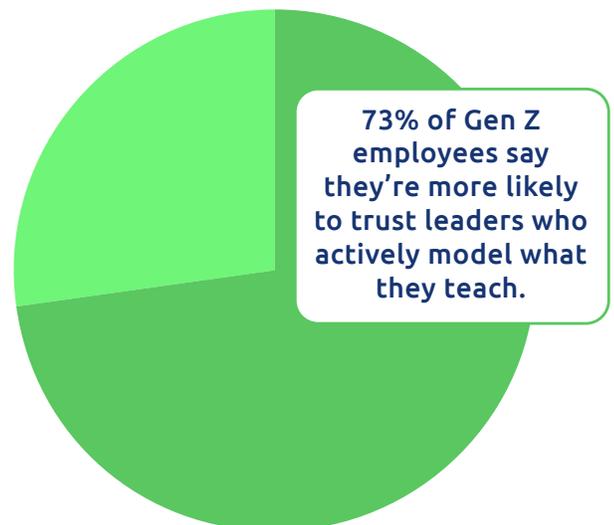
Daily or weekly leadership development touchpoints increased emerging leader retention by 44% year over year.

(DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025)

73% of Gen Z employees say they're more likely to trust leaders who "actively model what they teach" and "invite growth in daily work."

(Edelman Gen Z Trust Index, 2025)

This is no longer a "nice to have." It's a requirement for any organization that wants to survive, grow, and lead through complexity.



Final Insight

In 2026, the best leadership programs won't be found in binders or behind paywalls. They'll be happening on the floor, on the call, in the room. They'll be reinforced in every alignment check, every cross-functional pivot, every values-based recognition, and every mission brief.

Because in the highest-performing organizations, leadership isn't developed by accident. It's embedded. It's reinforced. And it's expected.

That's not just a culture shift. That's a competitive advantage.



SECTION SIX:

Projections: The Emerging Leadership Landscape Through 2026

If 2025 revealed the gaps and 2026 defined the capabilities, then the next decade will determine which organizations rise and which ones fall behind. The pace of change is not slowing. Disruption is not stabilizing. And the expectations of the next generation of leaders—especially Gen Z—are reshaping what leadership must be at every level.

The organizations that succeed through 2030 will be the ones that treat leadership development not as a program, not as a perk, and not as an HR function—but as a core strategic capability, essential to survival.

Below are the major shifts that will define the leadership landscape over the next five years—shifts every organization must prepare emerging leaders for now.

PROJECTION 1: AI Will Accelerate Decision-Making Pressure—Not Reduce It

By 2030, AI won't replace leaders—but it will expose weak leadership systems faster than ever. AI will:

- Compress decision timelines even further
- Increase the volume of information leaders must interpret
- Surface issues before humans are ready to address them
- Highlight misalignment and ambiguity instantly
- Require leaders to make judgment calls at unprecedented speed

Organizations that rely on top-heavy decision-making will become bottlenecked. Those that equip emerging leaders to act with confidence—using clear frameworks and mission-driven principles—will move exponentially faster.

In a world with AI, the value of leadership becomes even more human: clarity, trust, alignment, judgment, and courage. Emerging leaders who can integrate AI into decision-making—not hide behind it—will define the next generation of high-performance teams.

PROJECTION 2: Emerging Leaders Will Step Into Leadership Roles Even Earlier

Demographic shifts, rapid turnover, and flattened organizational structures mean that leadership pipelines will continue to compress. By 2030:

- First-time leaders will be younger
- Leadership responsibilities will be distributed widely
- Gen Z will be the dominant managerial cohort
- Teams will expect collaborative, transparent, inclusive leadership styles

Organizations that cling to the old model—where leadership is earned by tenure—will struggle to retain top talent and maintain execution speed.

The companies that thrive will treat emerging leaders as strategic assets and prepare them far earlier than previous generations ever needed.

PROJECTION 3: Influence Will Become the Primary Leadership Skill Across All Levels

Authority will continue to decline in relevance. Cross-functional work will rise. Hybrid teams will remain the norm. Generational diversity will deepen. By 2030, leaders who rely on positional power will struggle to mobilize teams at all. Emerging leaders must be able to:

- Build trust rapidly
- Navigate generational differences gracefully
- Communicate transparently

- Facilitate collaboration
- Rally people around purpose

This shift mirrors where Gen Z already excels— influence, authenticity, connection. Organizations that cultivate these strengths will unlock an entire generation of leaders prepared to move teams without needing titles to validate their role.

PROJECTION 4: Leadership Development Will Transition from Programs to Platforms

By 2030, leadership development will no longer be episodic. It will be continuous, integrated, and personalized. The old model of:

- annual workshops
- competency frameworks
- multi-day offsites

...will be replaced by systems that deliver:

- daily learning prompts
- real-time decision supports
- weekly alignment rhythms

- AI-personalized leadership nudges
- instant coaching moments
- habit formation tools

Leadership development will shift from an “event” to an “operating backbone.”

Gen Z’s learning preferences—bite-sized, experiential, interactive, and on demand—will drive this transformation. The organizations that move first will gain a leadership advantage that compounds year after year.

PROJECTION 5: Alignment Will Become the Most Valuable Leadership Currency

As volatility increases, organizational alignment will determine execution speed. The clearer the system, the faster decisions flow.

By 2030, alignment will be measured with the same rigor as financial health. Organizations will track:

- Mission comprehension
- Strategy clarity
- Communication consistency
- Cross-level trust

- Team coordination behaviors
- Decision velocity

The companies that invest in alignment systems—not one-time communication campaigns—will outperform those that leave clarity to chance. For emerging leaders, alignment will be the stabilizer that enables them to lead boldly, without second-guessing whether they are moving in the right direction.

PROJECTION 6: Purpose-Driven Leadership Will Become a Competitive Imperative

The workforce of 2030, led by Gen Z and the rising Generation Alpha, will choose where to work based on alignment with mission and values. They will expect leaders who:

- Communicate purpose transparently
- Demonstrate integrity consistently
- Connect decisions to meaning

- Show how their work makes a difference
- Build cultures grounded in humanity as much as performance

Purpose will no longer be a differentiator. It will be a requirement. Emerging leaders who understand how to translate mission into daily leadership behaviors will be the ones people follow.

PROJECTION 7: Organizations With Leadership at Every Level Will Outperform Those With Leadership at the Top

The ultimate projection is also the simplest:

The organizations that win through 2030 are the ones that stop treating leadership as a title and start treating it as a shared behavior.

Those that rely on a small number of senior leaders to set direction will fall behind.

Those that distribute leadership—supported by aligned systems and daily habits—will surpass competitors in speed, innovation, and execution. Emerging leaders will not simply participate in this shift. They will drive it.

Leadership's Future Is Not a Mystery—It is a Choice

2025 revealed the cracks. 2026 set the foundation. 2027–2030 will determine who adapts and who becomes irrelevant. Every projection leads back to a single truth:

Emerging leaders are the future—and the organizations that invest in their readiness will define the next decade.

The final section of this report brings it all home: what it means to build leadership at every level, and how purpose, clarity, and trust will elevate the next generation to lead us through a world where disruption is constant.

SECTION SEVEN:

2026 Challenge for All Leaders

The events of 2025 didn't just rattle organizations—they revealed something deeper. For years, leadership development was treated as a supportive function, a bonus for high performers, or a box to check when time allowed. But when disruption hit at scale, those assumptions were stress-tested. What emerged was a sobering realization: many organizations had built business strategies that were far more robust than the systems they'd built to support and scale leadership.

Gen Z and Millennial employees aren't waiting ten years to be invited into leadership.

According to the 2025 Global Leadership Forecast from DDI, **only 40% of leaders felt equipped to meet future challenges**, and just **31% of organizations reported having a strong bench of ready-now successors for critical roles**. That's not a pipeline problem—it's a readiness crisis.

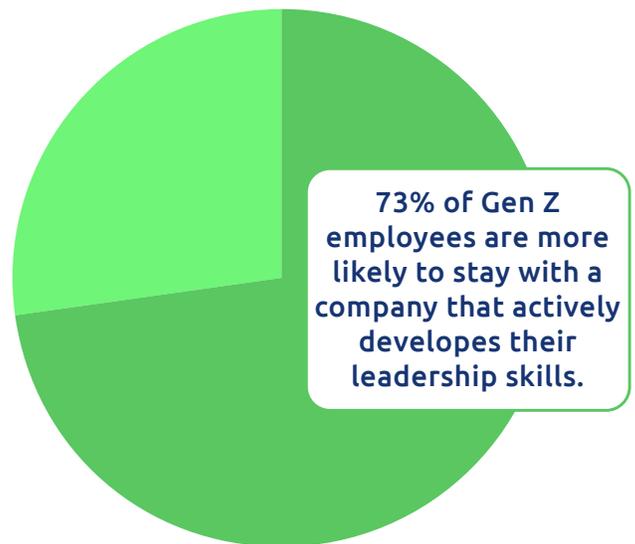
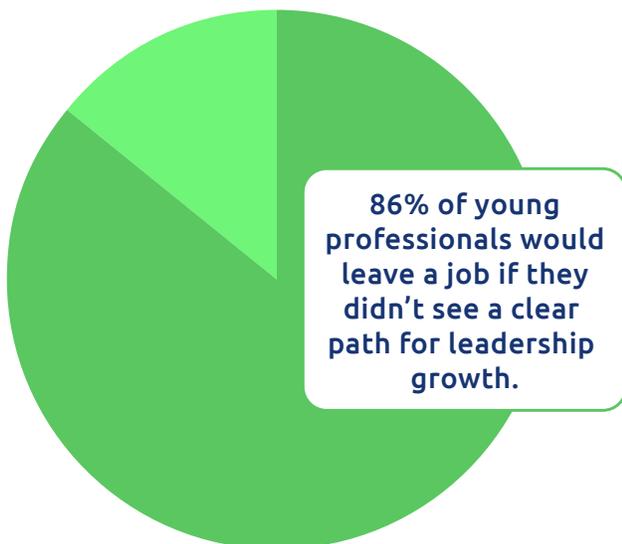
This is especially dangerous in a multi-generational workforce, where the expectations of leadership are shifting rapidly. Gen Z and Millennial employees aren't waiting ten years to be invited into leadership. They expect clarity, alignment, and development now—or they leave. LinkedIn's 2025 Workplace Learning Report found that **86% of young professionals would leave a job if they didn't see a clear path for leadership growth**. Edelman's Gen Z Trust Index revealed that **73% of Gen Z employees are more likely to**

stay with a company that actively develops their leadership skills—before they're promoted.

The answer isn't more content. It's not another program, badge, or portal. What today's emerging leaders need—and what 2026 demands—is a culture where leadership is expected, supported, and developed in real time.

This means shifting away from viewing leadership as a static role and instead treating it as a shared system: one that shows up in how decisions are made, how priorities are aligned, how feedback is given, and how people are recognized.

Organizations embracing this shift are already seeing the payoff. Harvard Business Publishing's 2025 report found that **companies embedding leadership growth into the rhythm of business were 6.8x more likely to respond rapidly to disruption and 4.2x more likely to report confidence in leadership at every level**. These aren't marginal gains. They're transformative outcomes—and they're available to organizations that make readiness a cultural commitment, not just an HR initiative.



The real risk isn't acting too soon. It's waiting too long.

Most organizations still rely on a promote-then-develop model. But in the uncertainty of 2026, that delay has consequences.

When development lags behind responsibility, emerging leaders feel unsupported. Decisions stall. Alignment breaks down. And promising leaders either burn out—or opt out.

The longer you wait to develop leadership capacity, the more you risk losing your future leaders.

And the sooner you embed readiness into the way your business runs, the more your leaders will be able to rise when it matters.

What High-Readiness Organizations are Doing Differently

They're not relying on one-off programs. They're not isolating leadership to the top. They're not making people wait to be developed. Instead, they're building:

1. Decision-making rhythms that teach judgment

2. Alignment rituals that connect teams to the mission

3. Recognition systems that reinforce culture in motion

4. Reflection moments that normalize growth

5. Building psychologically safe places to fail to success

6. Leadership language that scales across departments and generations

Leadership Becomes Embedded. Readiness Becomes Inevitable.

According to Gallup (2025), organizations that consistently connect leadership development to purpose see:

23% higher engagement, 41% stronger trust, 29% lower turnover among emerging leaders.

This is no longer theory. It's competitive reality.

A Challenge to Every Leader:

If you believe the future of your company depends on its people, then the future of your people depends on how you prepare them to lead.

Not someday. Now. Don't wait for the next crisis to ask who's ready. Don't wait until someone has the title to teach them how to lead. Don't wait until disengagement shows up in your metrics to start building alignment.

Start with what you control:

- Align your teams weekly to the mission
- Reflect out loud so others can learn
- Share decisions and how they were made
- Recognize the behavior you want repeated

These aren't "nice to haves." They're leadership development—done in the real world, in real time.

The Next Chapter of Leadership Won't Be Written in the Boardroom

It will be written by the people you choose to develop now. The team leads, the first-time managers, the problem solvers quietly leading from the middle.

Your culture will either call them up—or leave them behind. So here's the question:

Are you building a culture that creates readiness—or waiting for it to appear?

The organizations that lead in 2026 won't be the ones with the most training. They'll be the ones with the most aligned, trusted, and prepared leaders at every level. And if you build that now, your people won't just be ready.

They'll lead what's next.