

# Leading without a landing

Leadership perspectives on the new  
reality of organisational change



A Global Study by

**H/ADVISORS**

**YouGov®**

## Foreword

# The context of change in 2026.



Trade policy shifts overnight. AI capabilities advance faster than organisations can absorb them. Geopolitical fragmentation has moved from background risk to active business constraint.

Against this backdrop, we surveyed more than 600 senior leaders across seven markets and nine industries. We wanted to understand how organisations are actually experiencing change – what the drivers are, where pressure is coming from, and how well leaders and organisations are equipped to succeed in an environment marked by major transformation.

What we found challenges some comfortable assumptions.

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## Executive summary

### 01 The pace and scale of change are intensifying – and leaders expect no relief.

Three-quarters of senior leaders say the pace of change in their organisation has accelerated over the past twelve months. More than eight in ten expect the scale of change initiatives to increase further in the year ahead. Only 2% anticipate a decrease.



### 02 Technology and AI are the headline drivers of change – but the real story is convergence.

Over three-quarters of leaders believe that technological developments will drive change in their organisation in the year ahead. Three-quarters say the same about AI.

But these aren't outliers. Nearly as many say the same thing about economic conditions (69%), customer expectations (66%) and competitive pressures (65%).

The implication is stark: the next twelve months won't be defined by a single tech revolution – because change isn't arriving in waves. Leaders will need to navigate multiple transformations all at once, with no breathing space between them.

**75%**

say the pace of change has accelerated.

### 03 Employees can handle change, but they can't handle confusion.

Poor planning and unclear strategy emerge as the single biggest obstacle to successful change, with around a third of all leaders placing it in their top three threats. Inconsistent communication ranks third. Resistance from middle management? It ranks sixth.

These findings suggest that the real risk isn't resistance, it's ambiguity. Consequently, the problem is often misdiagnosed: change doesn't fail because people resist it. It fails because they can't understand it.

### 04 Communication is valued but underfunded.

95% of leaders say communication contributes strongly to the success of change initiatives. Yet, "budgets flow to operational and technical delivery" ranks as the #1 challenge to securing budget for change communications, with communication expected to happen within existing resources. The gap between what leaders say matters and where money actually goes is stark.

## 05 CEOs are confident. HR leaders are sceptical. Both may be right.

A consistent confidence gap runs through the findings: CEOs report the highest confidence in their organisation's readiness for change, while Heads of HR report the lowest. Both groups are broadly positive, but the difference in degree matters. It suggests a tension between strategic ambition at the top and perceived capacity on the ground.



# 95%

say communication  
is critical to success.

## 06 Leaders need understanding, not just toolkits.

When asked what would help them lead change more effectively, leaders prioritised “a better understanding of the change strategy and rationale” (ranked first, selected by 38% of respondents), and “greater alignment between leadership levels” (ranked second at 37%). Fewer respondents emphasised the need for “ready-made materials and toolkits” (ranked last at 14%). While toolkits play an important supporting role, leaders indicate they are most effective when underpinned by clarity, alignment, and credibility.

## 07 Some risks may be hiding in plain sight.

M&A ranks among the least likely drivers of change that leaders expect, identified as a future challenge by only 24% – yet market forecasts point to accelerating deal activity in 2026. New leadership (25%), cultural transformation (23%), and reputational risk (32%) also rank lower than external conditions might suggest. Leaders appear well prepared for the pressures they can see, but less so for those that emerge unexpectedly, creating a potential readiness gap.

## About the research

In late 2025, H/Advisors commissioned YouGov to survey senior leaders on their experience of organisational change. We sampled:

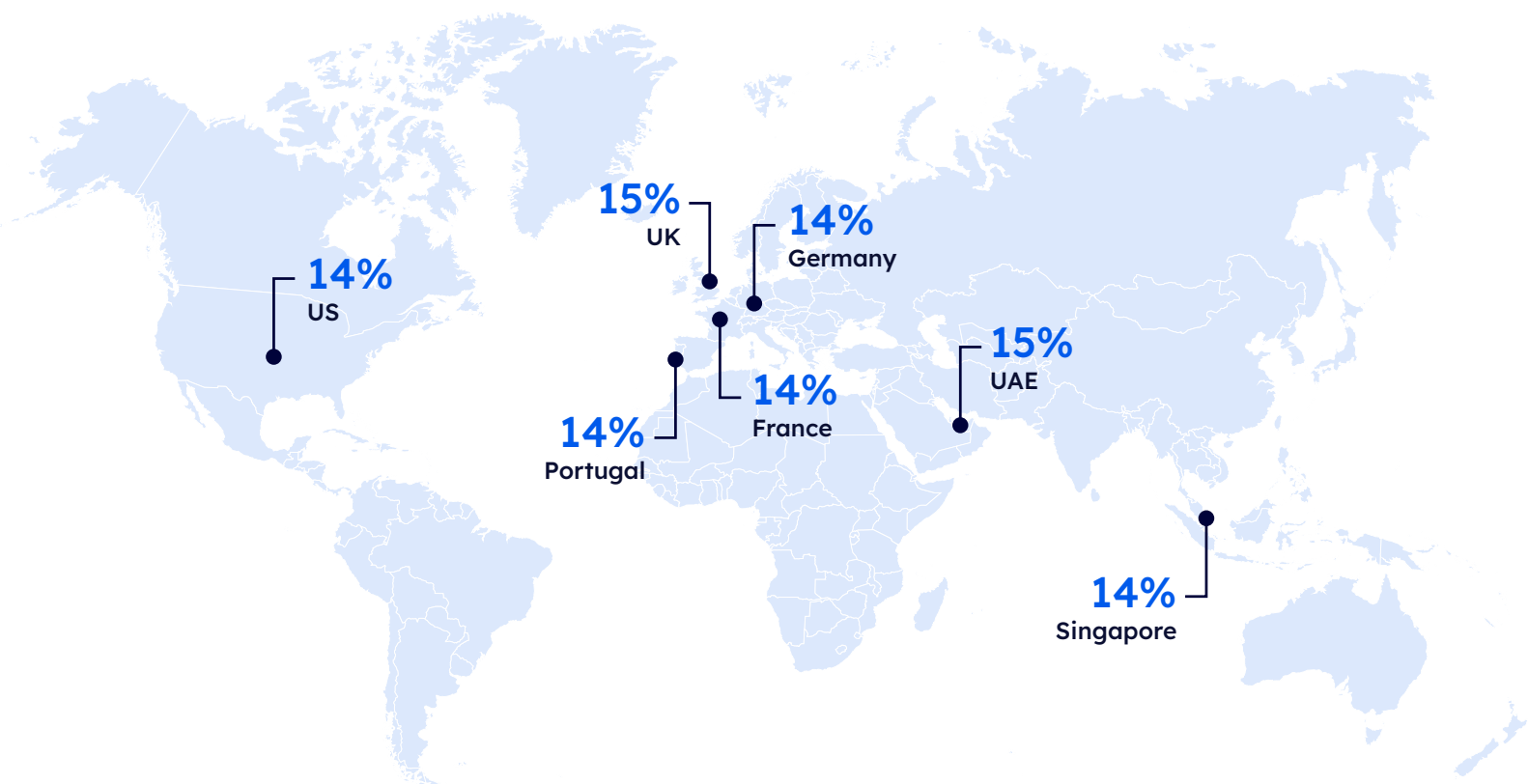
**622** respondents in organisations  
of at least **500** employees  
across **7** markets  
and **9** industries

The survey explored the evolving landscape of organisational change and the role of effective communications in driving business success.

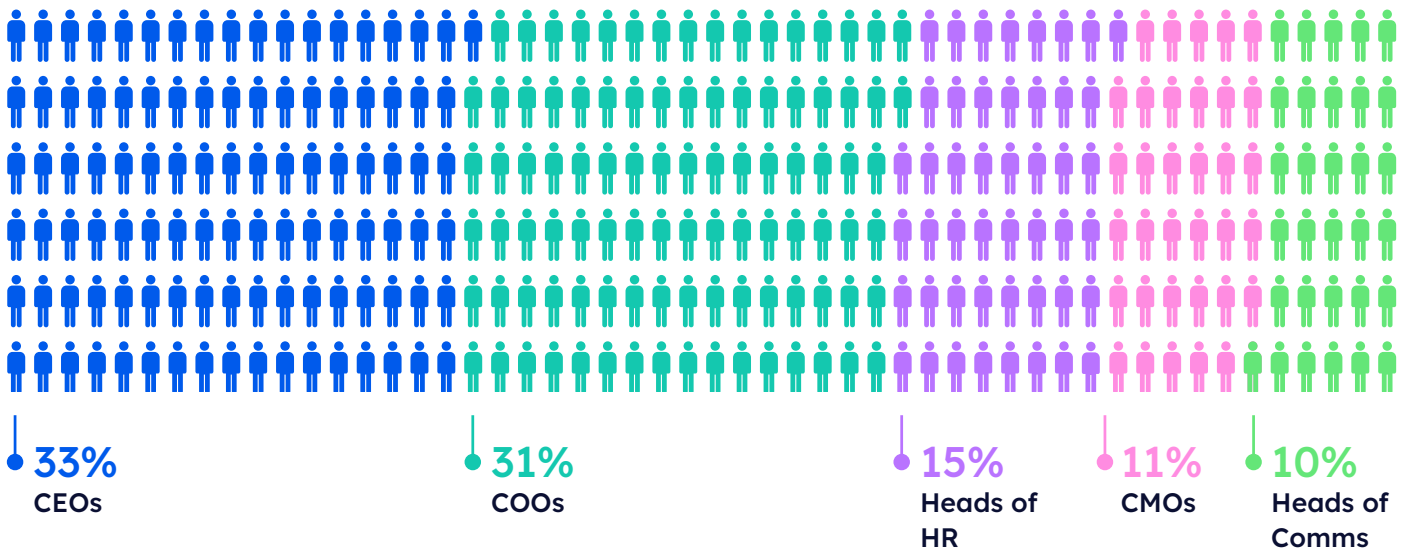
Questions focused on the pace and scale of organisational change, external and internal drivers of change, employee sentiment, leadership enablement, investment in change communications, barriers to success, and future outlook.



### Distribution by market:



Distribution by role:



Distribution by industry:



# 01

## The new reality.

Change as the operating environment.

For most of the last century, organisational change followed a familiar pattern: plan, launch, land, recover. Transformation was a project – demanding, disruptive, but ultimately finite. Leaders could promise their people that things would settle down eventually.

That model has collapsed.

**75%** of leaders say the pace of change has accelerated over the past twelve months. Only 3% say it has slowed.

**82%** expect the scale of change initiatives to increase even further in the year ahead. Only 2% expect a decrease.

**75%** believe their organisation has changed more than the average for their industry – a statistical impossibility that speaks to how widespread the sense of accelerating change has become.

The traditional change curve assumed recovery time between initiatives. Today, leaders describe overlapping programmes, competing priorities, and transformation fatigue that never fully resolves. The cumulative effect is not just operational strain, but erosion of trust and energy over time.

There is no “after,” only faster. Leaders who promise their people that things will settle down are making a promise they can’t keep.

“When employees experience too many changes in quick succession, they become exhausted and cynical: ‘Here we go again.’”

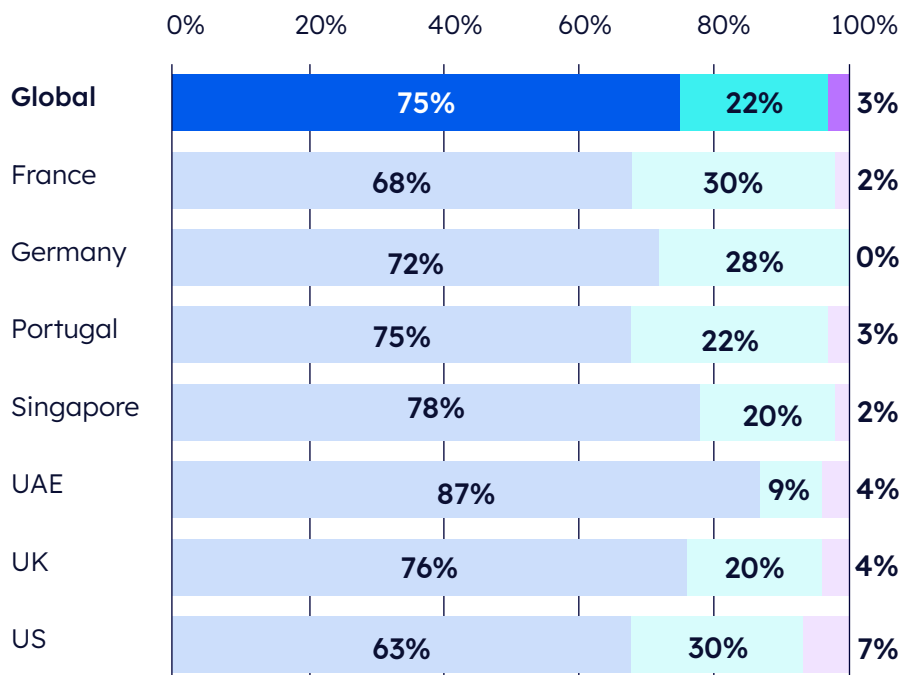
- CEO, US



## Change is accelerating, everywhere

Over the past 12 months, how would you describe the pace of change in your company?

■ Faster than recent years ■ About the same ■ Slower than recent years



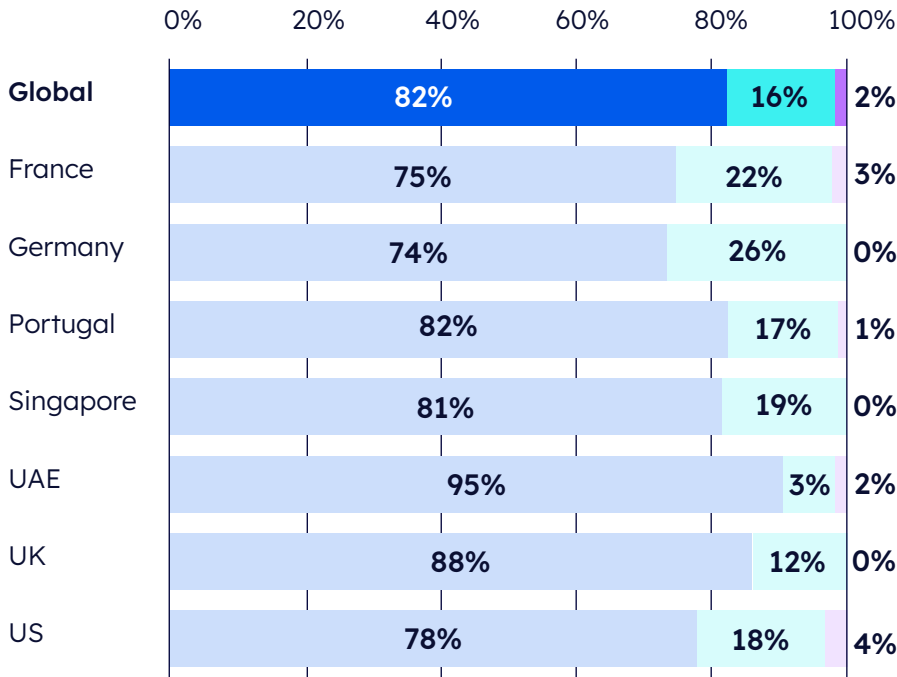
Globally, three-quarters of respondents say the pace of change has increased over the past year.

This figure rises even higher in some markets, such as the UAE, where nearly nine in ten leaders report acceleration.

Change appears to be speeding up everywhere, with only a very negligible minority seeing a slowdown.

### Over the next 12 months, how do you expect the scale of change initiatives in your organisation to evolve?

■ Faster than recent years ■ About the same ■ Slower than recent years

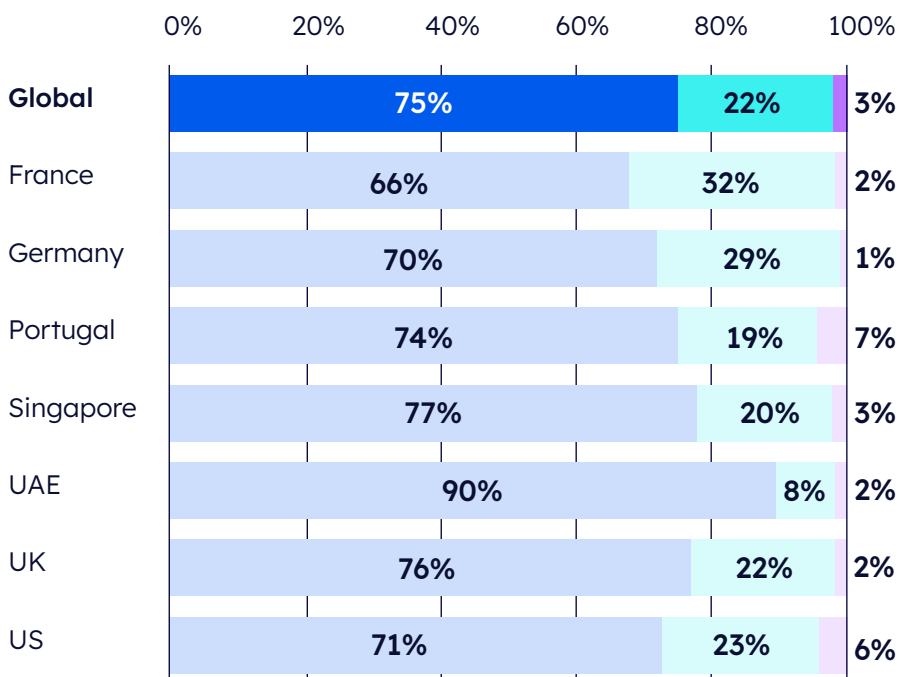


**If the past year was fast, the next looks faster.**

More than eight in ten leaders expect further acceleration over the next 12 months. This climbs to 95% in the UAE and 88% in the UK. Plans to scale back are almost non-existent.

### Over the past 12 months, to what extent has your company changed compared to the industry/sector?

■ More ■ About the same ■ Less



**Most leaders believe they're ahead of the curve,**

with three-quarters claiming their company has changed more than the industry average. But that cannot be true for everyone. Instead, these results suggest the pace of change today is so intense that it feels exceptional – when in fact the extraordinary has become the norm.

## Regional variations

The pace of change is accelerating everywhere, but the intensity varies by market:

### UAE

**The UAE reports the strongest sense of acceleration.**

with 87% of leaders claiming that the pace of change has increased and 95% expecting further intensification. This reflects the region's ambitious economic diversification agenda and rapid digital transformation. Many UAE leaders describe organisations that are actively expanding digital and AI capabilities.

**“We explore new, emerging technologies.”**



### US

**The US shows relative normalisation.**

63% of US leaders report accelerated change in recent months, which, though still a majority, is notably lower than other markets. US organisations may have been living with continuous change longer and therefore adjusted their expectations accordingly.

**“We don't just endure change; we are structurally designed to capitalise on it.”**



### Germany

**Germany shows the highest scepticism about organisational readiness.**

While most agree that their organisation is well-equipped for change, Germany saw the highest percentage of leaders disagreeing, too. This points to a more cautious outlook, which is consistent with broader concerns surrounding European competitiveness and industrial transformation.

**“There are too many factors over which our company cannot exert any influence. Above all, they are rarely foreseeable, so you can't prepare for them.”**



## What this means

**The implication is clear: change has become the operating environment, not a phase that will pass.**

This demands a shift in how leaders communicate. Rather than framing change as a temporary disruption to be endured, they need to build organisational capacity for ongoing adaptation. The goal is no longer to “land” change – it's to sustain momentum while maintaining coherence and trust.

# 02

## What's driving the pressure?

If change has become continuous, what's fuelling it? We asked leaders to rate the likelihood that various factors would drive change in their organisation over the next twelve months.

## External drivers

Technology emerges as the dominant external driver, with 77% citing **technological advancements**, and 75% pointing to **AI and automation**. Together, these results signal a business landscape being reshaped by capabilities that didn't exist at scale five years ago.

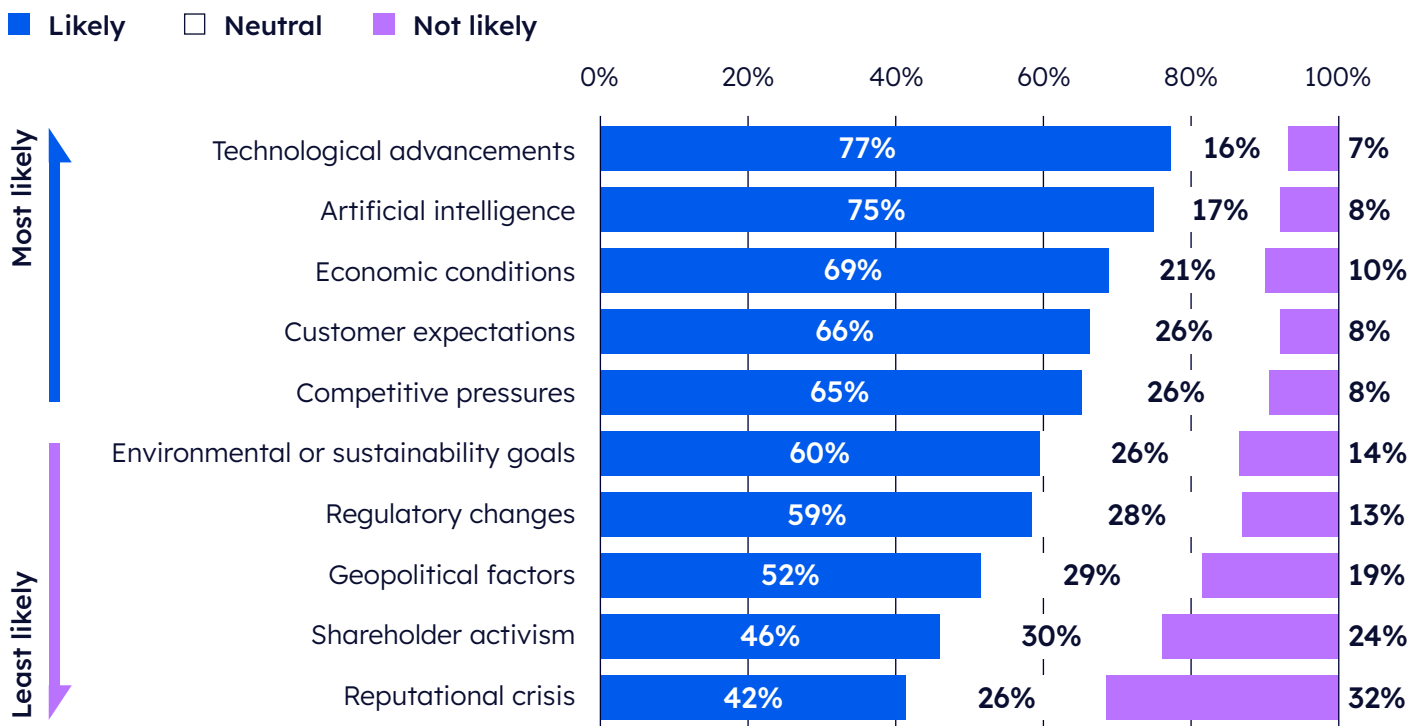
But technology is not the sole concern. A second cluster of factors follows closely behind, all of which relate to market forces: **economic conditions** (69%), **customer expectations** (66%), and **competitive pressures** (65%). This suggests that leaders are balancing rapid technological disruption with pressing shifts in the economic environment.

Leaders aren't responding to a single transformation – they're contending with convergent forces that amplify one another.

**“Evolving technology, competitive pressure, and workforce expectations demand continuous adaptation to remain efficient, innovative, and successful.”**

- COO, US

On a scale from 1 to 5, how likely is it that each of the following external factors will drive change in your organisation in the next 12 months?



## Internal drivers

Leaders describe the pace of change as accelerating and shaped largely by forces outside their control. But when they look inward, the story shifts.

**Internally, leaders expect change to be planned, purposeful, and driven by strategic intent rather than sudden shocks.**

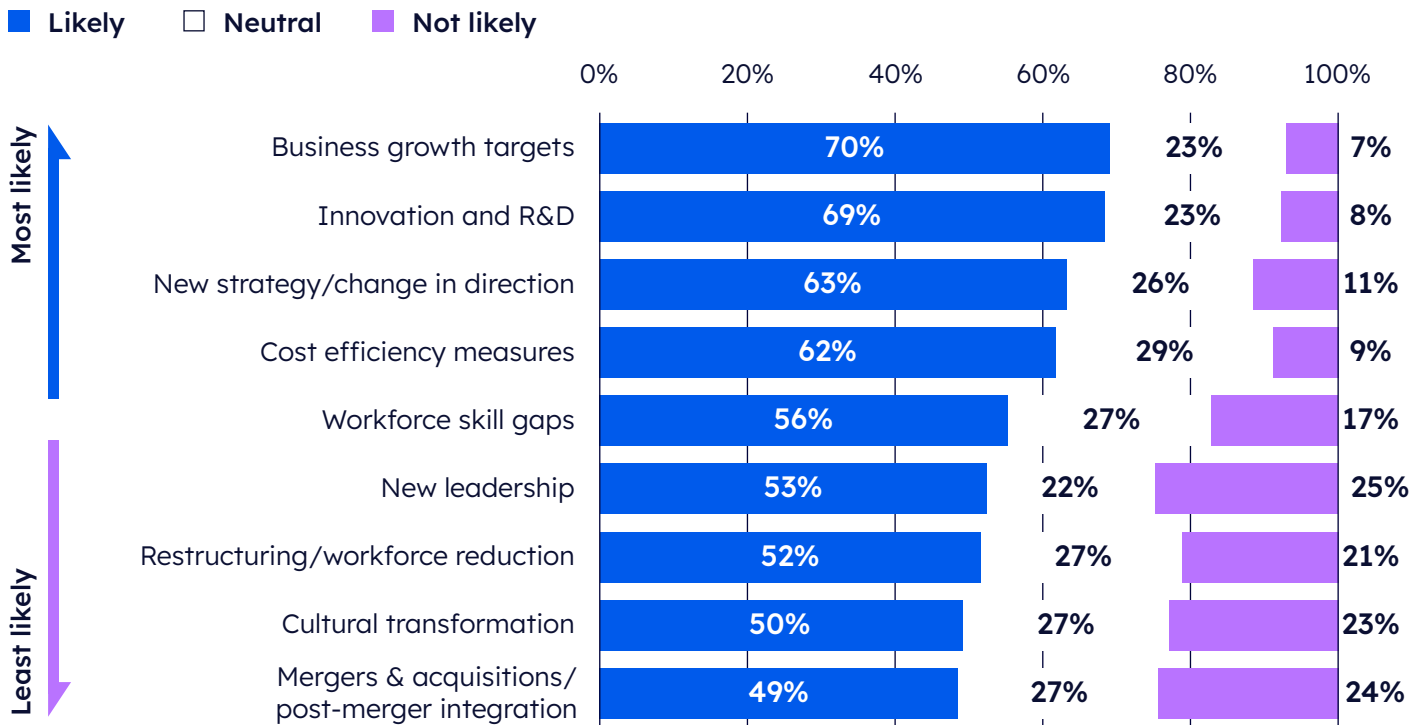
This is reflected in the internal drivers they consider most likely to trigger change: **business growth targets** (70%), **innovation and R&D** (69%), and **a new strategy or change in direction** (63%).

These answers present transformation as a deliberate choice, rather than a reactive response to disruption.

Conversely, **M&A and post-merger integration** rank among the lowest internal drivers (24%). We return to this later – it may represent a significant blind spot.



**On a scale from 1 to 5, how likely is it that each of the following internal factors will drive change in your organisation in the next 12 months?**



# The convergence challenge

The pattern across both external and internal drivers reveals something important: leaders expect change to stem from predictable, systemic pressures (such as technological advancements or business growth targets), rather than isolated shocks (like M&A integration or shareholder activism). Yet even when the main drivers are more foreseeable, organisations still need the capacity to respond when disruption hits unexpectedly.

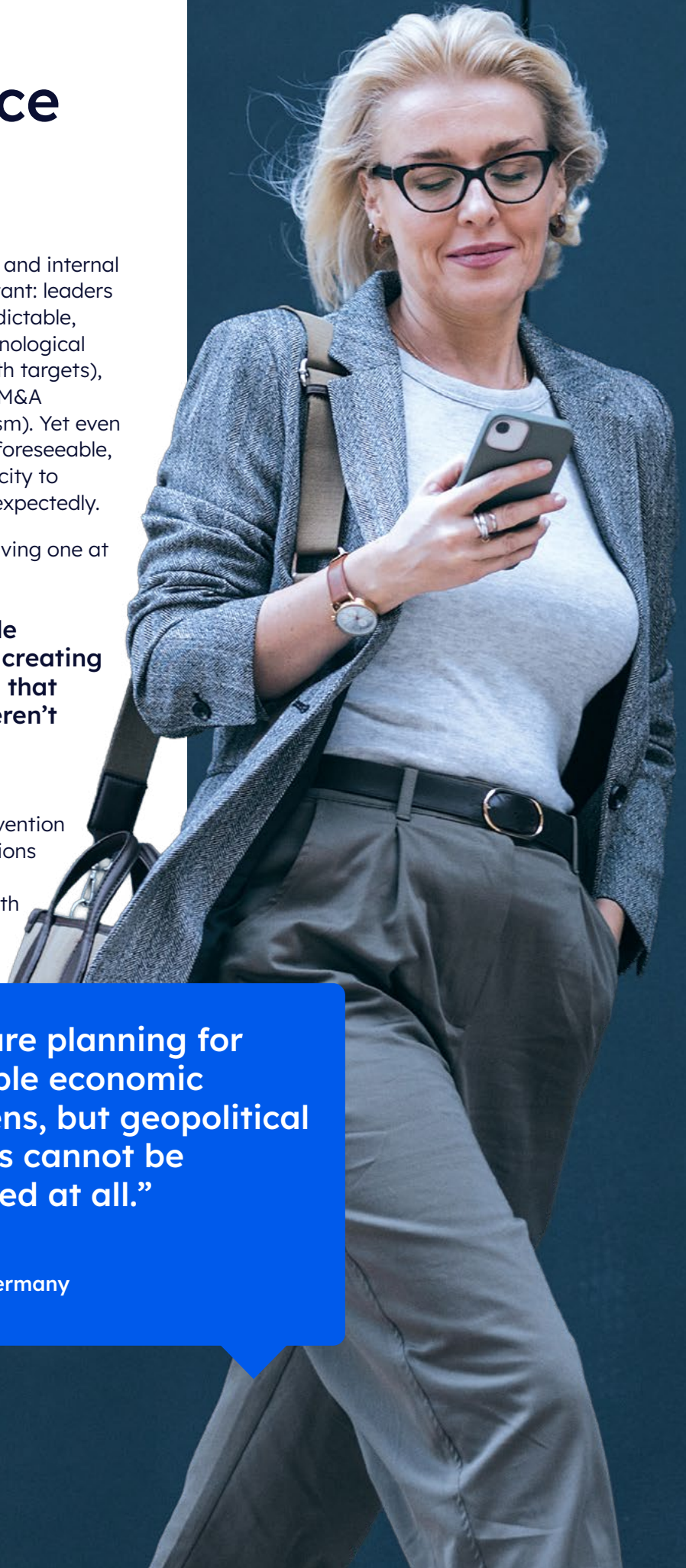
Crucially, these drivers aren't arriving one at a time.

**Leaders are facing multiple pressures simultaneously, creating a converging change load that traditional approaches weren't built for.**

When change is continuous and overlapping, project-based intervention is no longer sufficient. Organisations need infrastructure for ongoing adaptation, not just initiatives with end dates.

**“We are planning for possible economic burdens, but geopolitical events cannot be planned at all.”**

- CEO, Germany



# 03

## Where change breaks down.

We asked leaders to identify the most significant barriers to successful change, and the findings are unambiguous: leaders believe change fails because of confusion, not resistance.

**Poor planning or unclear change strategy** emerges as the single greatest barrier, cited by 34% of leaders as a top-three challenge.

**Lack of employee understanding and buy-in** follows closely at 31%. Importantly, this points to a problem of comprehension, rather than outright resistance.

**According to leaders, employees are not necessarily refusing change; they're struggling to understand it.**

**Inconsistent or unclear communication** ties for second at 31%. Leaders report that when employees receive conflicting messages – or no message at all – they fill the gap with anxiety and assumption.

Written responses reinforce this point. Whether citing a “lack of clarity on the objective” as a key barrier (as one French leader did), “unclear success metrics” (US), “unclear vision” (UK), or “unclear instructions” (UAE), **respondents across geographies agree that early-stage ambiguity is a critical risk.** In the absence of strategic clarity, change often breaks down at the starting line.

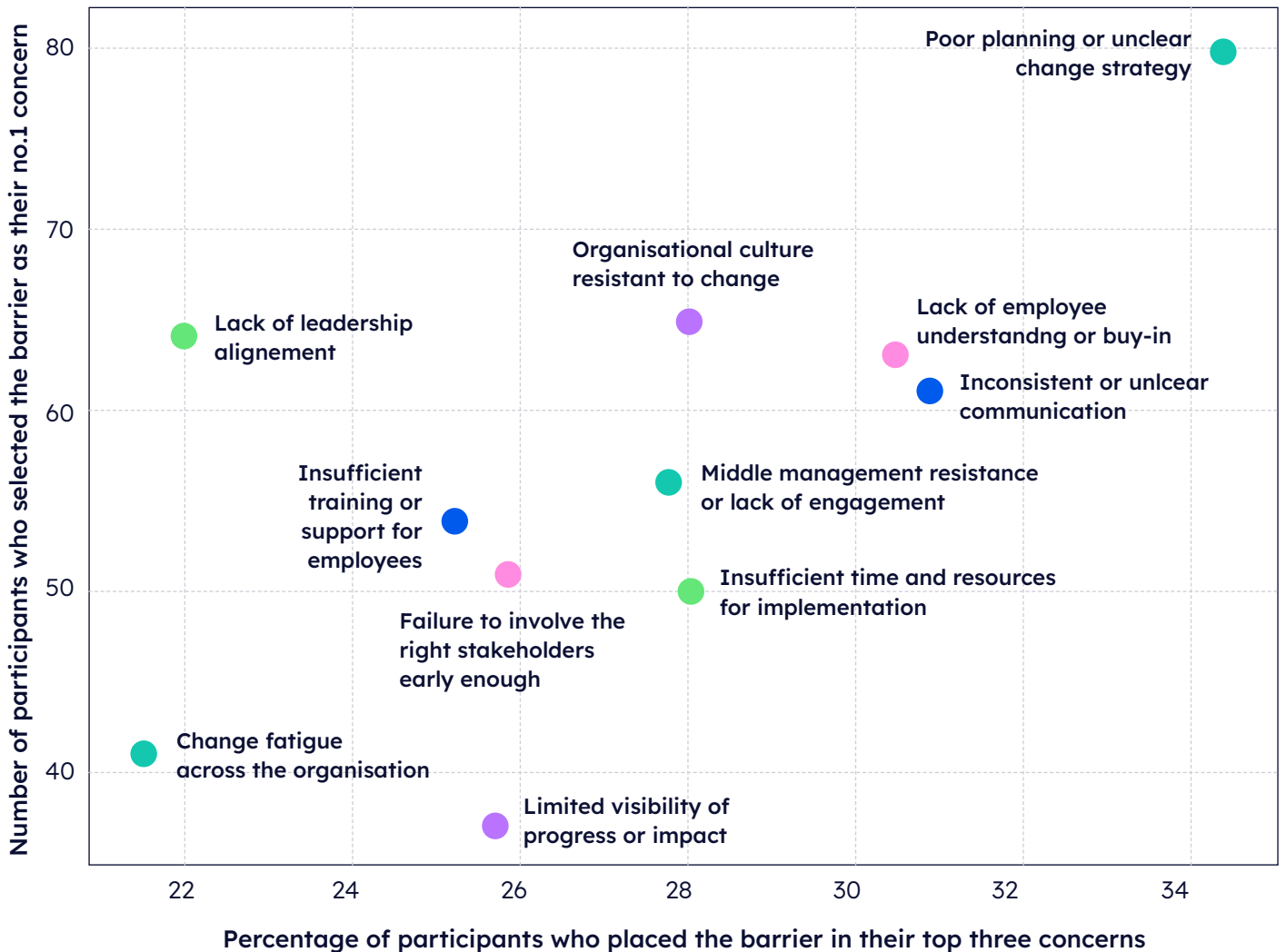
# The biggest barriers to successful change

This scatterplot ranks each factor by:

- How widely it is considered a threat (i.e., how many leaders classed it as one of their top three barriers)
- How intensely it is felt as a threat (i.e., how many leaders classed it as their number one barrier)

The further right a barrier sits on the X-axis, the more broadly it is recognised as a threat. The higher it sits on the Y-axis, the more often it is seen as the single biggest obstacle to successful change.

**Notably, “poor planning or unclear change strategy” is both the most widespread and most acute.**



“Lack of understanding on the part of the employees involved in the process” can hinder successful change.

- COO, Portugal

## The resistance myth

One finding deserves particular attention: resistance from middle management ranks sixth, cited by only 21% of leaders.

This challenges a common narrative. Transformation efforts are often designed around overcoming resistance – toolkits, training, and incentives aimed at reluctant managers. But leaders’ responses suggest the real problem lies upstream.

**Leaders believe people can handle change, but they can’t handle confusion.**

As one respondent in Portugal noted, a “lack of understanding on the part of the employees involved in the process” can hinder successful change.

When strategy is unclear, communication is inconsistent, and leaders at different levels tell different stories, the result looks like resistance. But it’s actually a rational response to ambiguity. People hesitate and protect themselves when they don’t understand what’s happening or why.



## In leaders' own words

When elaborating on the biggest barriers to successful changes in their organisations, leaders' responses clustered around three recurring failure modes: Change fails when it lacks coherence, change fails when it exceeds human capacity, and change fails when leadership credibility erodes.

Countries differ mainly in which of these failure modes is most dominant, though all three tend to surface everywhere to some extent.

### 01 Change fails when it lacks coherence.

Too many parallel initiatives, unclear ownership, poor governance, competing priorities. This was particularly pronounced in responses from France and Germany.

- “One of the biggest barriers is multiple projects running in parallel and creating confusion” – Head of Comms, France
- “The lack of a clear and reassuring strategy for change” – CEO, Germany
- “The change plan is disconnected from actual business scenarios” – Head of Comms, Singapore

### 02 Change fails when it exceeds human capacity.

Fatigue, exhaustion, insufficient time to absorb one change before the next arrives. UK, US, and Singapore respondents particularly emphasised this theme.

- “Change fatigue and overwhelm from the number and pace of the changes happening” – Head of Comms, Singapore
- “Low employee motivation moving forward” – COO, UK
- “When too many changes happen at the same time, people get overwhelmed” – Head of HR, US



### 03 Change fails when leadership credibility erodes.

Inconsistent messages, weak sponsorship, visible gaps between what leaders say and what employees experience. This appeared across all markets.

- “Leaders who lack training” – COO, Portugal
- “Inconsistent or misaligned leadership, where senior managers do not give the same message or level of support, which confuses employees and slows down change” – COO, UAE
- “The key factor that often gets missed, especially in tech, is the importance of a leader's personal authenticity and vulnerability. As a CMO, I've found that trust isn't just about transparent communication or participation; it's about showing my team that I'm a human being” – CMO, US

# 04

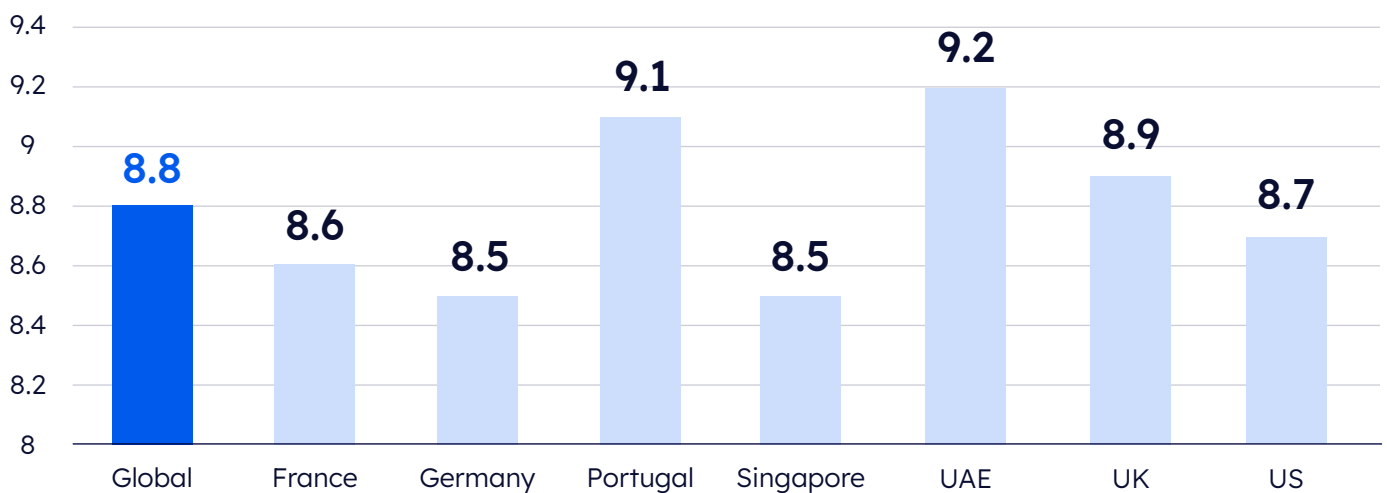
## The investment gap.

If unclear communication is a primary barrier to change, how are organisations investing in change communications?

The answer reveals a significant disconnect.

## An overwhelming 95% of leaders say communication contributes strongly to the success of change initiatives.

On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you think effective communication contributes to successful change in your organisation?

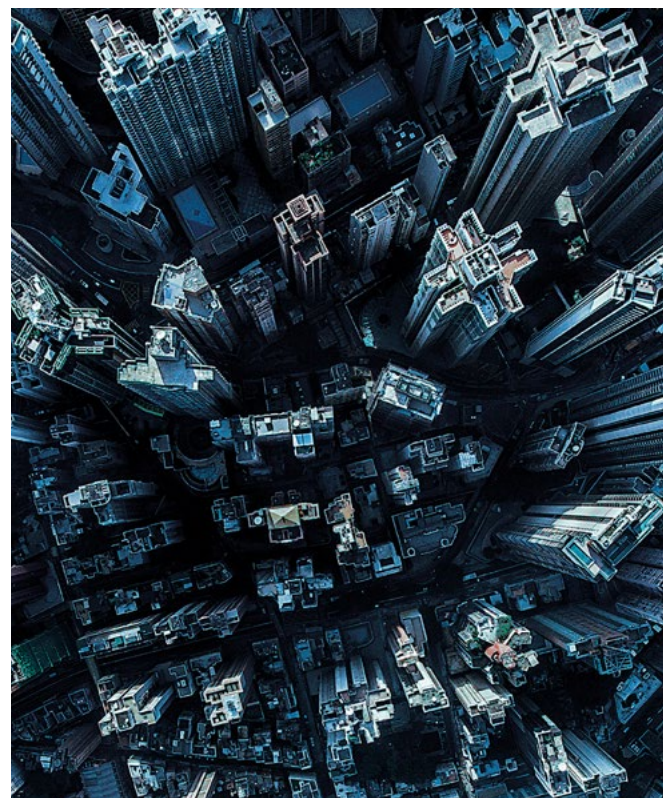


Yet, when asked to choose their top three challenges to securing adequate budget for change communication, a consistent set of constraints emerged. The percentages below show the proportion of leaders who included each challenge in their top three:

- **Budget is allocated primarily to operational and technical aspects of change (43%)**
- **Communication is expected to be delivered within existing resources (37%)**
- **Competing priorities that restrict communication investment (37%)**

The gap is stark. **Communication is almost universally recognised as critical, but it remains structurally underfunded and treated as secondary.**

This misalignment leaves organisations vulnerable to the very confusion that leaders identify as the leading cause of change failure.



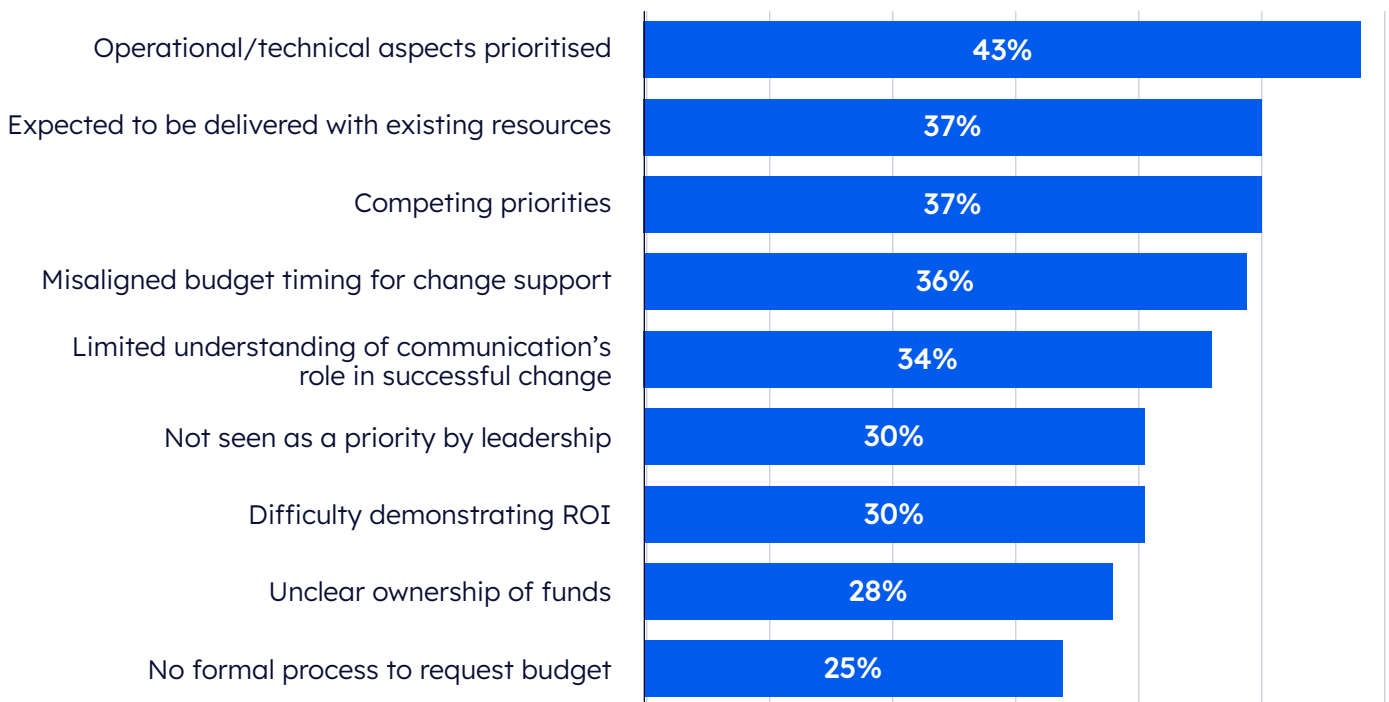
## The value- investment gap

95%

believe that effective  
comms contribute to  
successful change

### What challenges do you face when securing budget for change-related communications activities?

■ % of participants who selected the response as one of their top three challenges



“Change communication often competes with operational, IT, and project-specific budgets, and leaders may prioritise technical or visible components of the change over communication, even though both are equally important.”

- Head of HR, Singapore

## Why does the gap persist?

The relatively low ranking of “difficulty demonstrating ROI” is telling.

**Leaders aren’t saying the lack of investment in change communication is because they can’t prove it works – they’re saying budgets flow elsewhere regardless.**

This suggests the problem is structural and cultural, not analytical. Communication is seen as a “soft” cost, something that happens alongside the “real” work of transformation. When budgets tighten, it’s the first area absorbed into business-as-usual.

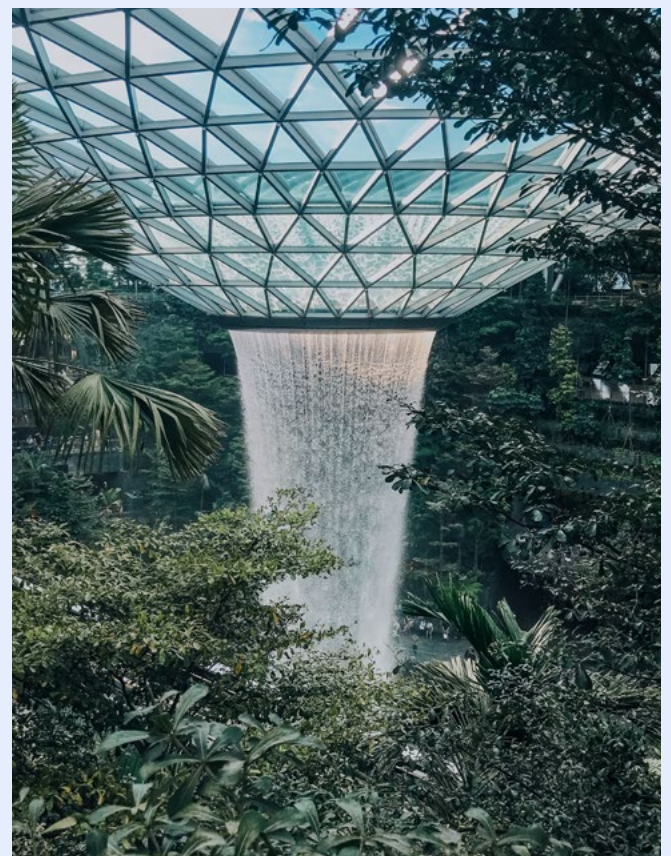
The irony is clear: **organisations underinvest in the capability their leaders identify as critical to success**, then wonder why change initiatives fail to land.

## The hidden cost of underinvestment

Underinvesting in communication doesn’t save money. It raises the cost of transformation through:

- **Slower adoption** as employees wait for clarity that never comes
- **Rework** as misaligned teams pull in different directions
- **Talent attrition** as high performers leave organisations they no longer understand
- **Reputation exposure** as internal confusion leaks externally – through Glassdoor, social media, customer experience, and media

These costs rarely appear in programme budgets. They surface months later, attributed to “implementation challenges” or “cultural issues” – euphemisms for what was actually a communication failure.



# 05

## The confidence gap.

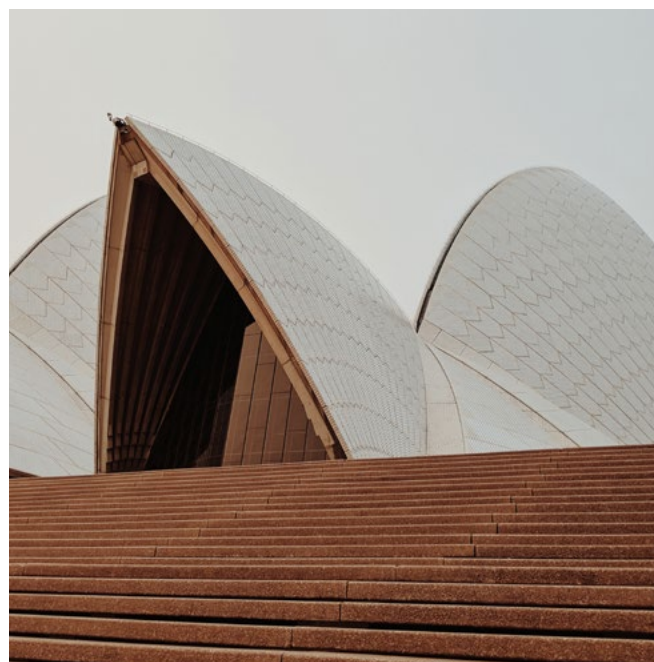
One of the most striking findings is a persistent gap between how different leaders perceive their organisation's readiness for change.

## While CEOs express high confidence, HR leaders adopt a more cautious view.

When asked to rate their organisation’s preparedness for change on a scale of 1-10:

**CEOs** report the highest confidence of any role, with a mean rating of: **8.4**

**Heads of HR** report the lowest, with a mean rating of: **7.5**



### HR is cautious

This gap persists across multiple questions. **HR leaders** are:

- Less likely to believe AI will be a significant driver of change (63% vs 79% of CEOs)
- Less likely to expect an increase in the scale of change in the year ahead (72% vs 82% of CEOs)
- More likely to cite employee capacity and wellbeing as constraints or limiting factors

Written responses draw out this gap more starkly. When asked to elaborate on their organisation’s readiness for change, several HR leaders noted challenges around trust, workload, and leadership:

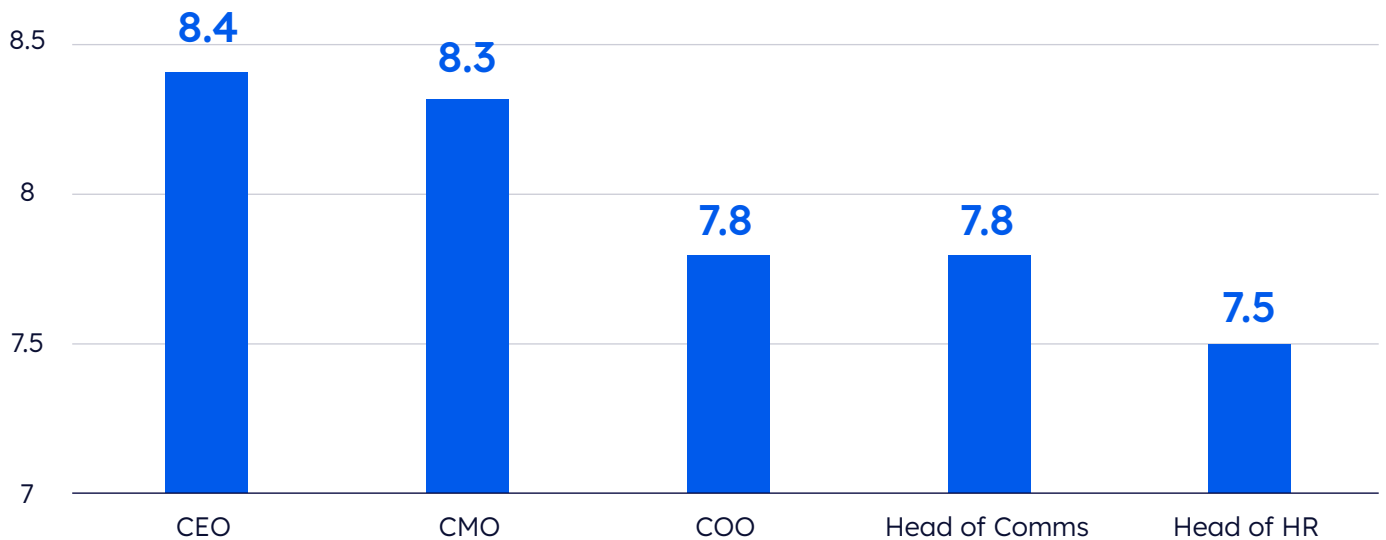
- “My company has lost the trust of its employees over the past several years with constant change and restructuring causing more workload for those still employed” (US)
- “There has been a relative delay in adapting to Artificial Intelligence” (Portugal)
- “Poor administration” (US)
- “Bad, clueless management” (US)

### CEOs are confident

In contrast, **CEOs** were far more likely to reflect positively on their organisation’s preparedness, often citing plans, strategies, and resources:

- “Because we always have proactive plans for development” (US)
- “We have a well-planned business forecast and a five-year plan” (US)
- “We’re a well-developed company with engaged employees who are up to new challenges” (Portugal)
- “Because our development continues in the direction of digitization” (Germany)
- “We foster a collaborative environment, encouraging teamwork and idea sharing, and have access to a range of resources, including technologies, equipment, and budget” (UK)

On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you believe your company is well-equipped to navigate current economic, social, geopolitical, environmental, and technological challenges?



## What explains the gap?

The gap isn't surprising when you consider where each role sits in the organisation.

### CEOs see strategic opportunity.

They're closest to investor expectations, market positioning, and competitive dynamics. From this vantage point, transformation is essential and achievable – the organisation must change to thrive.

### HR leaders see employee impact.

They're closest to employee sentiment, burnout rates, skills gaps, and the daily reality of asking people to absorb more change. From this vantage point, ambition is outpacing the organisation's ability to deliver.

In other words, CEOs may equate readiness with strategic intent and planning. HR leaders are more attuned to the operational and human constraints that determine whether change can actually be delivered.

**Both perspectives are valid. The danger lies in failing to bring them to the same table.**

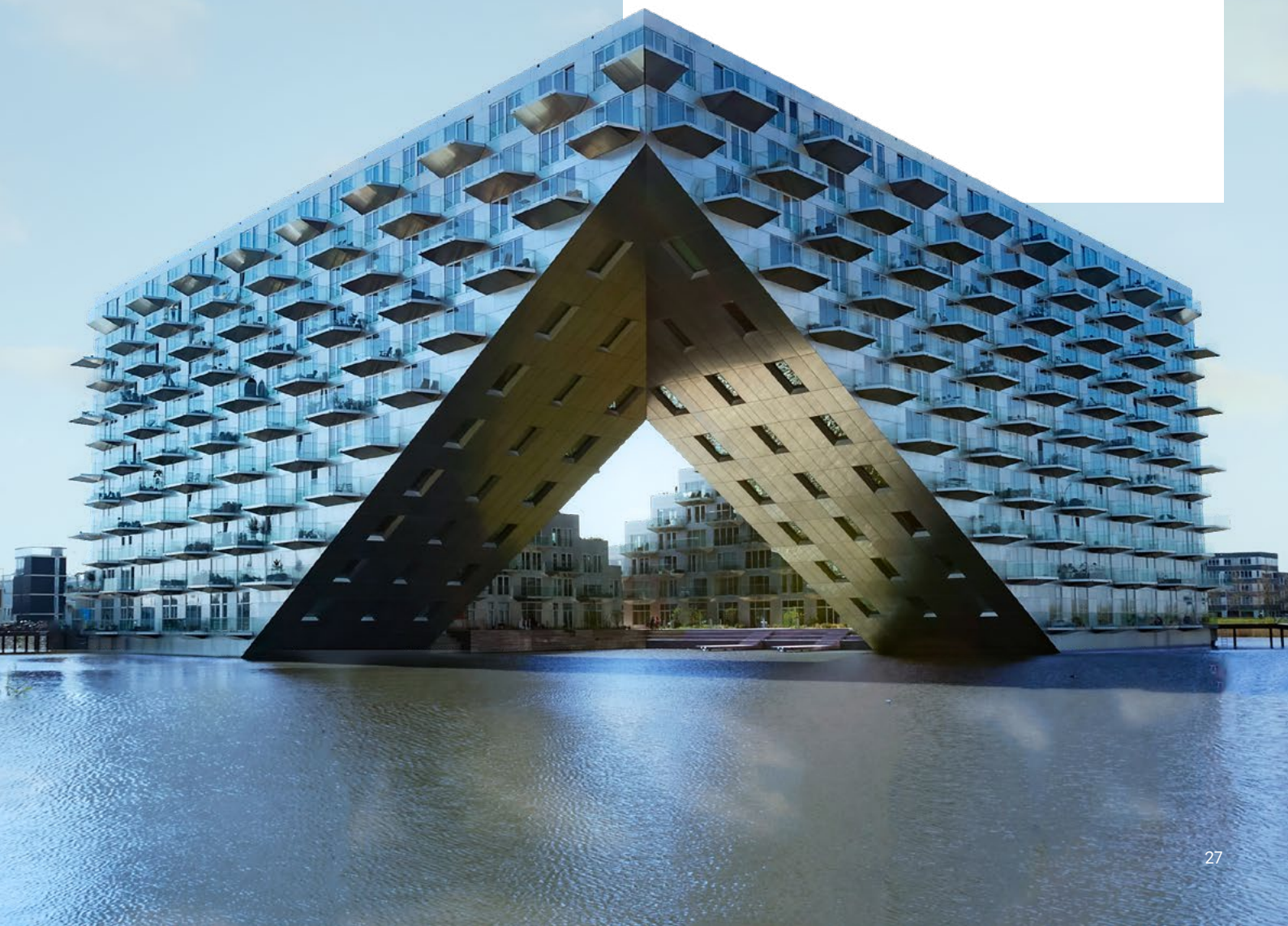


# Why this matters

When CEOs set transformation agendas based on strategic necessity, and HR leaders manage workforces already stretched thin, something has to give. Often, it's the quality of execution – change is announced but not absorbed, launched but not embedded.

The perception gap matters for reputation as much as execution. When senior leaders project confidence that employees don't share, credibility erodes. The gap between what leadership says and what the organisation experiences becomes visible – to investors, to customers, to potential hires.

Organisations that take this tension seriously – that actively reconcile CEO ambition with HR reality – will be better positioned to sustain change over time and protect the leadership credibility on which trust depends.



# 06

## The blind spots.

The research reveals where leaders expect pressure to come from. It also reveals where they may be underexposed.

### **M&A: The disconnect between market momentum and organisational readiness**

Deal activity is accelerating. Private equity dry powder remains at record levels. Valuations are attractive. Forecasters from BCG, Deloitte, PwC, and EY all point to increased M&A activity in 2026, with deal value up significantly in 2025.

Yet in our research,

### **M&A ranked among the least likely internal drivers of change**

– only 24% of leaders rated it as a probable factor in the year ahead. It also ranked in the bottom tier of challenges organisations expect to face over the next five years.

The qualitative findings show that leaders are not talking about M&A – yet, when they do talk about disruption, they describe things they cannot plan for. As one leader in Germany noted, “there are too many factors over which our company cannot exert any influence... they are rarely foreseeable, so you can’t prepare for them.”

## Market outlook

- Global M&A value up 40% in 2025<sup>1</sup>
- Financial buyer deal value, including PE activity, up 54% in 2025<sup>2</sup>
- Over 80% of dealmakers expect deal volumes to rise further in 2026<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lazard, “2025 M&A Review and 2026 Outlook,” January 2026

<sup>2</sup> PwC, “US Deals 2026 Outlook,” January 2026

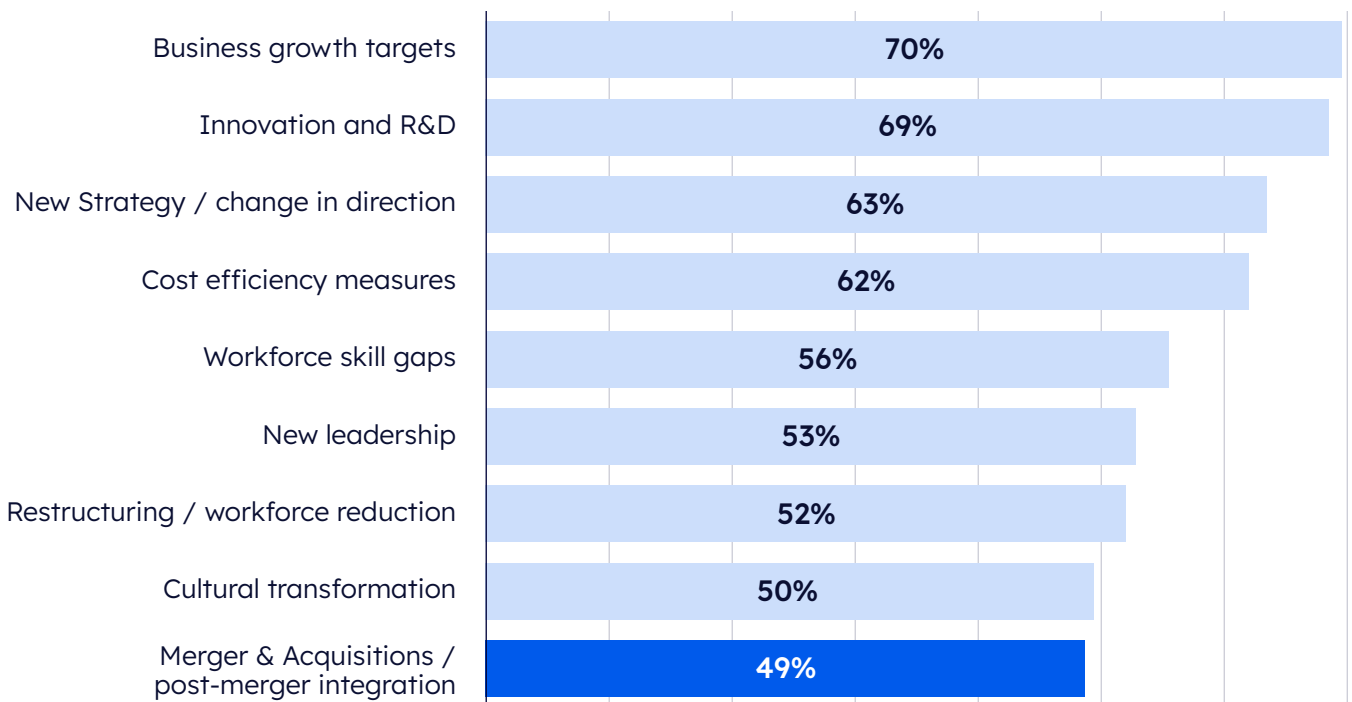
<sup>3</sup> Deloitte, “2026 M&A Trends Survey,” January 2026



## Research findings

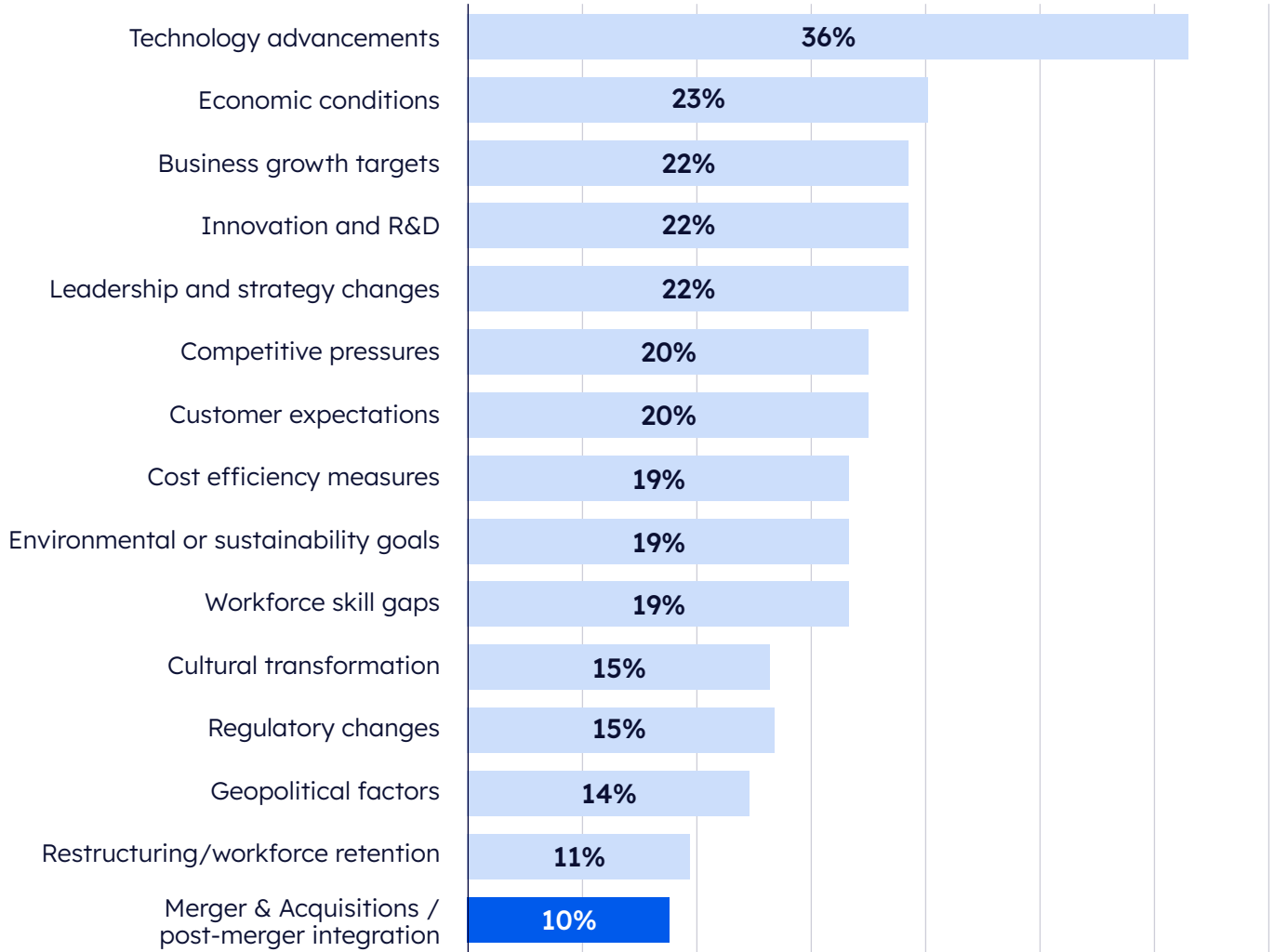
On a scale from 1 to 5, how likely is that each of the following internal factors will drive change in your organisation in the next 12 months?

■ % of participants who considered it likely to drive change



## What are the three biggest challenges your organisation will need to overcome to successfully adapt to future change?

■ % of participants who selected the response as one of their biggest challenges



## This gap matters

M&A is one of the most communication-intensive transformations an organisation can undergo. Integration, culture alignment, leadership transition, workforce uncertainty – all demand sustained clarity and visible leadership. And unlike technology adoption or cost efficiency, M&A often arrives with little warning for the teams expected to execute it.

If deal activity accelerates as forecast, many organisations will find themselves navigating high-stakes transformation without the readiness, resources, or communications infrastructure to do it well.

### For leaders:

Even if you're not planning a transaction, consolidation in your sector will reshape your competitive environment – and may make your organisation a target. The time to build communications capability is before you need it.

# Geopolitics and reputational risk: Background noise or emerging threat?

Two other findings stand out.

Geopolitical factors ranked mid-table as an external driver (52% rated it likely) – lower than technology, economics, or competitive pressure.

Reputational crisis ranked last among external drivers, with only 42% considering it likely.

At a time when the World Economic Forum ranks geoeconomic confrontation as the most severe short-term risk<sup>1</sup>, and trade policy can shift overnight,

**leaders appear to be treating geopolitics as background noise rather than an active risk.**

The low ranking for reputational crisis is also striking. Leaders seem to regard it as episodic and unlikely – something that happens to other organisations. But in an environment of continuous change, internal incoherence becomes external exposure. The gap between what leaders say and what employees experience doesn't stay internal for long. It surfaces in employee reviews, customer complaints, media coverage, and investor questions.

Reputation isn't just damaged by external crises. It's eroded by the slow leak of internal confusion.

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, "The Global Risks Report 2026," January 2026

## The implication:

Leaders are preparing for the pressures they can see and control. They may be less prepared for the disruptions that arrive from outside their operating assumptions.

# 07

## What leaders actually need.

We asked what support would enable leaders to navigate change more effectively. Overall, the responses suggest that strategic clarity and organisational alignment is prioritised over additional communication assets and resources.

The most frequently cited requirement was a **better understanding of the change strategy and rationale**, with 38% of leaders selecting this as a top priority. Close behind, 37% of leaders emphasised the need for **more alignment between leadership levels**, while 34% pointed to **greater leadership involvement from the start of change initiatives**.

By contrast, **ready-made communication materials and toolkits** ranked lowest, identified by only 14% of leaders.

This indicates that

**the primary challenge is less about providing additional assets or infrastructure, and more about strengthening leadership capability, coherence, and shared direction.**

That said, a regional nuance emerges in responses from the UK and US. Leaders in these countries were far more likely to highlight the enabling role of technology and digital platforms in supporting communication and engagement during change:

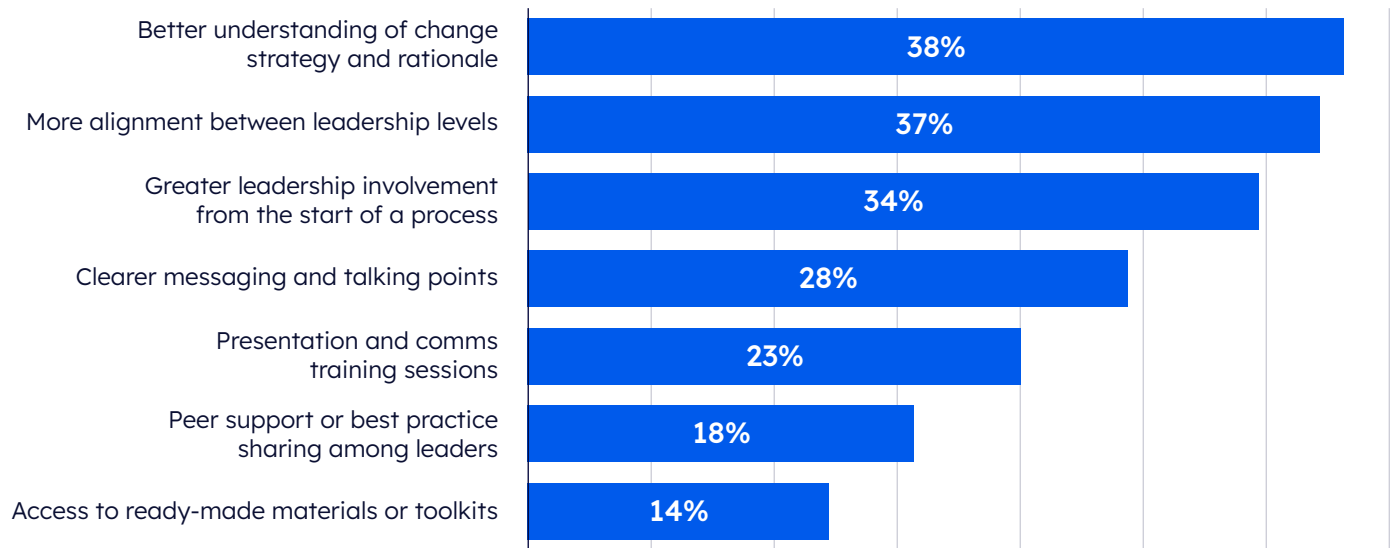
- **“They need software to reach and interact with staff on all devices” (COO, UK)**
- **“Upgrading to AI is the priority” (CMO, UK)**
- **“Digital dashboards tracking progress and employee sentiment” (COO, US)**
- **“Platforms for gathering real-time employee feedback” (CEO, US)**

In sum, leaders worldwide prioritise strategy and alignment over tools and assets. Yet in the UK and US, technology-based tools are the notable exception, with AI and digital platforms frequently cited as important enablers of effective change communication.

## What leaders need

In your view, what additional support would help your leaders communicate change more effectively? Please select all that apply.

■ % of participants who selected the response (not mutually exclusive)



### Leaders need clarity more than toolkits

Leaders aren't asking for better communication assets, they're asking for better understanding of the change. They need to actually understand the strategy they're being asked to communicate. Qualitative responses reinforce this emphasis, with one respondent in Portugal describing change as "a lot of work, without a clear, exciting vision of what will be achieved in the long-term."

#### The barrier to effective change leadership is credibility, not capability.

Leaders can't communicate what they don't understand. They can't align teams when they themselves lack clarity on strategy. They can't sustain visible presence when they're uncertain about the message.

### What this means for organisations

For leadership teams and those who support them, this finding is both a challenge and an opportunity.

#### The challenge:

Traditional support – message houses, cascade packs, talking points – addresses symptoms rather than causes. If leaders lack strategic understanding, better materials won't help.

#### The opportunity:

The most valuable investment sits earlier in the process. Helping leaders understand the "why" before asking them to communicate the "what." Building alignment before asking for advocacy. Creating space for leaders to engage with strategy, not just execute it.

# 08

## Looking ahead.

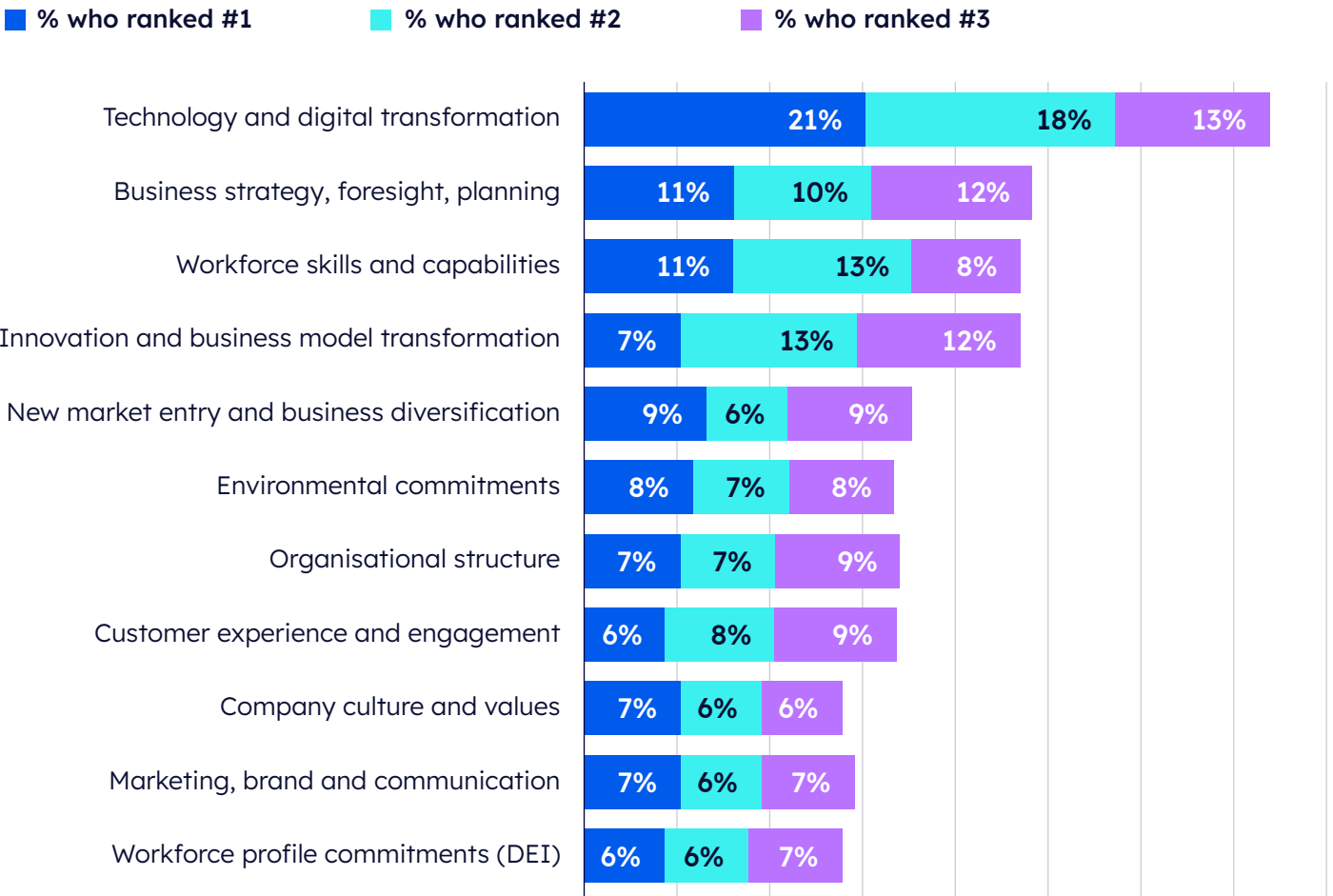
We asked leaders which areas of their organisation would require the most significant change efforts over the next five years.

**Technology and digital transformation** stands out as the dominant priority, selected as a top-three focus area by over half of leaders worldwide (52%).

**Business strategy, foresight, and planning (43%) and workforce skills and capabilities (39%)** are also major areas of focus, suggesting that transformation demands will span both digital and organisational capabilities.

## Future change priorities

Over the next five years, which areas of your organisation do you expect will require the most significant change efforts? Please rank your top three areas.



## The skills imperative

The third-place ranking for **workforce skills** deserves particular attention. In a world where AI capabilities are advancing faster than organisations can absorb them, and where 59% of the global workforce is estimated to need reskilling by 2030<sup>1</sup>, human capability emerges as a critical dependency.

**“We need to focus on digital transformation and technology adoption. As systems and tools evolve, employees will need training, support, and clear guidance to adapt effectively.”**

- CMO, Singapore

This perspective was echoed across geographies. In Portugal, it was emphasised that organisations need “training appropriate to the challenges that Artificial Intelligence poses in human resources management.” A US leader warned that “whenever new systems come in, people usually need extra training and support to feel comfortable”, while in the UK, a “skills shortage in technology and cybersecurity” was highlighted as a key challenge in the years ahead.

Taken together, these responses suggest that **leaders perceive the greatest risk not in the availability of technology itself, but in the organisation’s capacity to build the skills required to implement and sustain change.** Technology can be acquired and strategy can be developed, but without the workforce capability to execute and adapt, neither delivers value.

This reinforces the perception gap finding. HR leaders’ scepticism about organisational readiness may reflect a clearer view of the skills and capacity constraints that will ultimately determine whether transformation ambitions can actually be realised.

1 World Economic Forum, “Future of Jobs Report 2025,” January 2025





## What's not prioritised

The bottom of the list is also revealing. **Company culture and values** ranks eighth at 19%. **Marketing, brand, and communications** ranks ninth at 19%. **Diversity, equity, and inclusion** ranks tenth at 18%.

These findings don't imply that these areas are unimportant, but they do suggest that leaders view them as secondary to structural and capability-led transformation. **The change agenda is centred on technology, strategy, and skills, with culture and identity positioned more as supporting factors than primary drivers.**

Whether this proves sustainable remains an open question. Transformation often depends on the cultural and human foundations that enable new ways of working to take hold.

In other words, to deliver change in the areas leaders expect (such as technology), they may need to invest in change in the areas they currently deprioritise, like culture.

**“Organisational culture will require significant change efforts, including strengthening collaboration, modernising managerial practices, and encouraging greater transparency to sustainably support future transformations.”**

- CEO, France

## Implications for leaders

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The findings point to a fundamental shift in what effective change leadership requires.

### 01 From episodic to continuous

The traditional model assumed transformation as a temporary state to be managed through to completion. But when 82% of leaders expect change to intensify and only 2% expect relief, that model no longer applies.

**The shift:** Build organisational capacity for ongoing adaptation, not just project-based initiatives. Invest in infrastructure – communication capability, leadership alignment, feedback mechanisms – that can sustain transformation over time rather than supporting a single programme.

### 02 From clarity at launch to clarity throughout

Strategic communication has traditionally focused on the announcement: the cascade, the town hall, the initial engagement. But in continuous change, launch is just one moment among many.

**The shift:** Treat clarity as a continuous requirement, not a launch activity. Employees don't need to be told once – they need to be oriented constantly as context shifts and initiatives overlap. This requires sustained leadership presence and consistent narrative, not just campaigns.

### 03 From tackling resistance to building coherence

The findings challenge the assumption that resistance is the primary barrier to change. Poor planning, unclear strategy, and inconsistent communication rank far higher.

**The shift:** Focus less on overcoming resistance and more on building coherence. When people understand the strategy, leaders are aligned, and communication is both clear and consistent, resistance dissolves. The problem isn't people; it's ambiguity.

### 04 From instructions to understanding

Leaders are clear on what helps most – they need a stronger understanding of the change before they can communicate it effectively. Communication assets and toolkits remain valuable, but to unlock their impact, leaders must possess a clear understanding of, and confidence in, the change itself. It's a matter of sequence, not substitution.

**The shift:** Invest earlier in the process. Ensure leaders understand the “why” before asking them to communicate the “what.” Build alignment before asking for advocacy. When clarity is in place, toolkits can reinforce messages and support execution; without it, even the best assets will struggle to compensate. Ultimately, credibility, not capability, is the limiting factor.

## Four shifts for leaders

**01**

**Episodic ▶ Continuous**

Build for ongoing adaptation

**02**

**Launch ▶ Sustained**

Clarity is a continuous requirement

**03**

**Resistance ▶ Coherence**

The barrier is ambiguity, not people

**04**

**Instructions ▶ Understanding**

Credibility before capability



## About H/Advisors



H/Advisors is a leading global strategic communications consultancy, combining deep expertise in corporate reputation, crisis, financial communications, public affairs, and transformation.

We work with organisations navigating complex change – from strategy development through to execution and embedding. We help leaders build belief: developing the clarity, coherence, and communication capability that sustainable transformation requires.

We believe that how organisations communicate is inseparable from how they perform. Strategy that isn't understood can't be executed. Leadership that isn't visible can't build trust. Transformation that isn't sustained doesn't stick.

We work alongside leadership teams to develop narratives that connect strategy to experience, build alignment across levels, and sustain momentum through periods of uncertainty and change.

**To discuss the findings of this research or explore how we might support your organisation, contact:**

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