AMA RESEARCH

The New Management Reality:

AI, Engagement, and the Invisible Work of Managers

AMA GLOBAL
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The Manager's Job Has Quietly Changed

Managers say they're more engaged than ever. Employees don't see it. This contradiction sits at the heart of AMA's 2026 Management Survey. Managers are spending more time making decisions, navigating uncertainty, and reviewing AI-assisted work. Employees judge engagement by what they experience—communication, coaching, feedback, and availability. Evidence suggests both groups may be right. Managers and employees define engagement differently. At the same time, managers' work is increasingly unobservable cognitive work, such as planning and deliberation.

What Has Not Changed

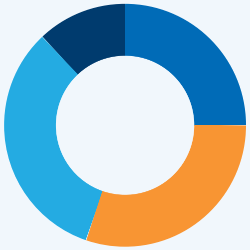
In May 2026, AMA asked managers and individual contributors about ways their roles and job responsibilities have changed in the past 12 months. There were no significant differences in the answers of respondents in the United States and other global regions, nor were there significant differences in responses among global regions. Major industries represented in the 2026 survey were:

- 11% Information Technology
- 8% Business/Professional Services
- 8% Healthcare
- 7% Manufacturing
- 6% Banking/Finance/Insurance

Of the 75% of respondents who manage staff, 34% have 10 or more years of management experience. Of the respondents with 10 or more years of management experience, the majority identify as either vice-president level or senior managers. Likewise, managers with 5-10 years of management experience identify as holding senior positions. In sum, the majority of survey respondents identify as senior managers.

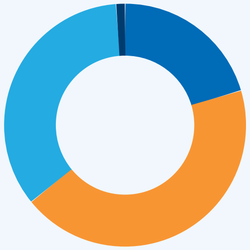
Tenure in Management

- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years



Seniority of Participants with 10+ Years of Experience

- Frontline manager
- Mid-level manager
- Senior manager
- VP

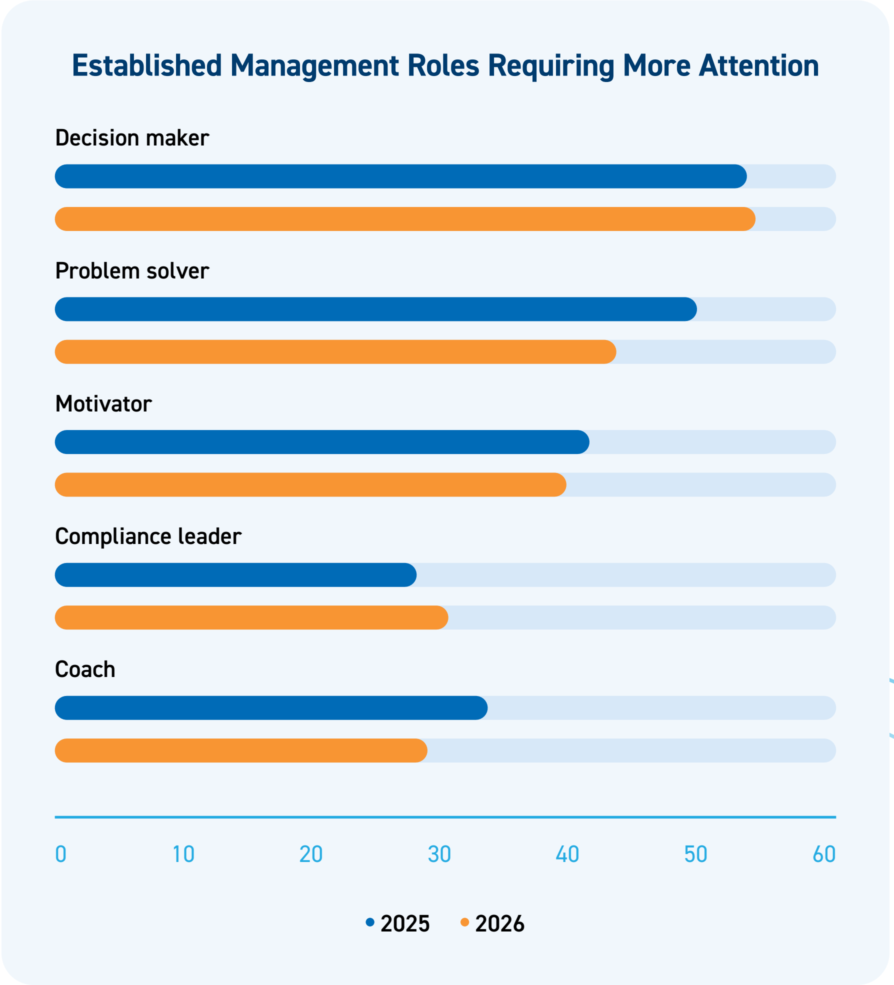


ABOUT THE RESEARCH

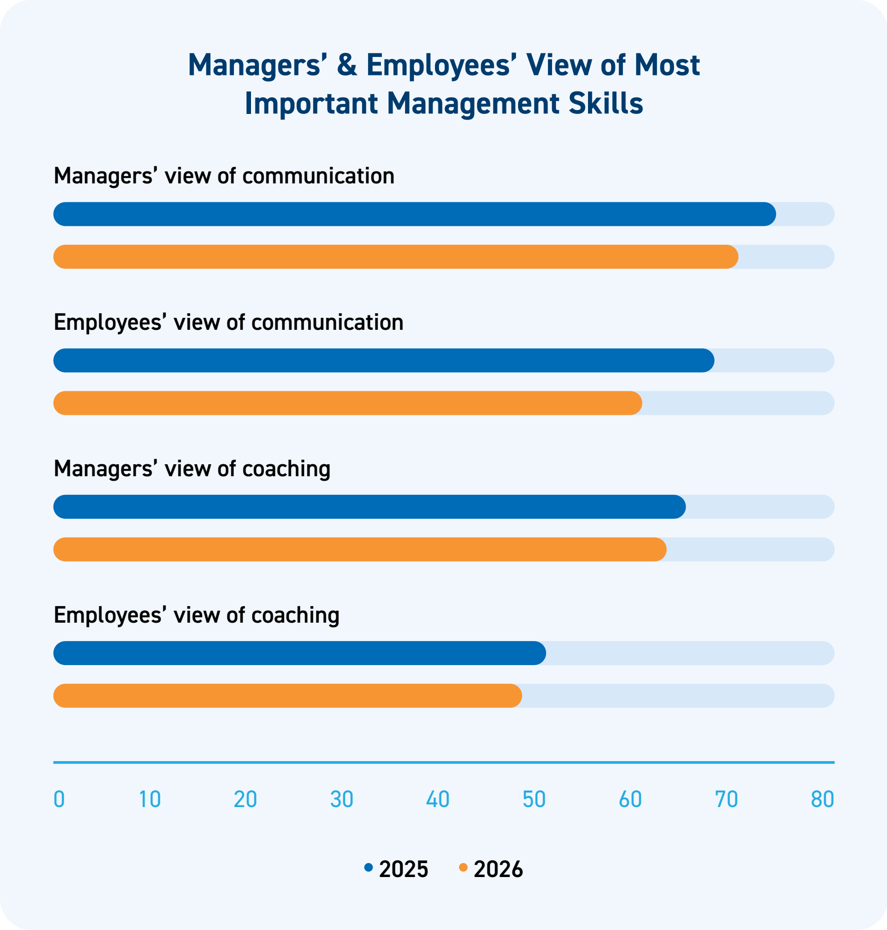
- 1,088 respondents
- Global audience spanning 7 regions
- 75% managers and 25% individual contributors
- Conducted in May 2026
- Comparable to AMA's 2025 study

As in 2025, managers in 2026 continued to identify managing an expanded workload, helping employees manage anxiety and stress, helping employees manage frequent change, and collaborating across the organization as the most urgent new parts of their role.

Similarly, managers in 2026, like those surveyed in 2025, continued to indicate that the consistent parts of their roles requiring the most increased attention and effort in the past 12 months were: making decisions, solving problems, and motivating employees. Managers indicated coaching employees required slightly less attention in 2026 than 2025, while serving as a compliance leader required slightly more attention.



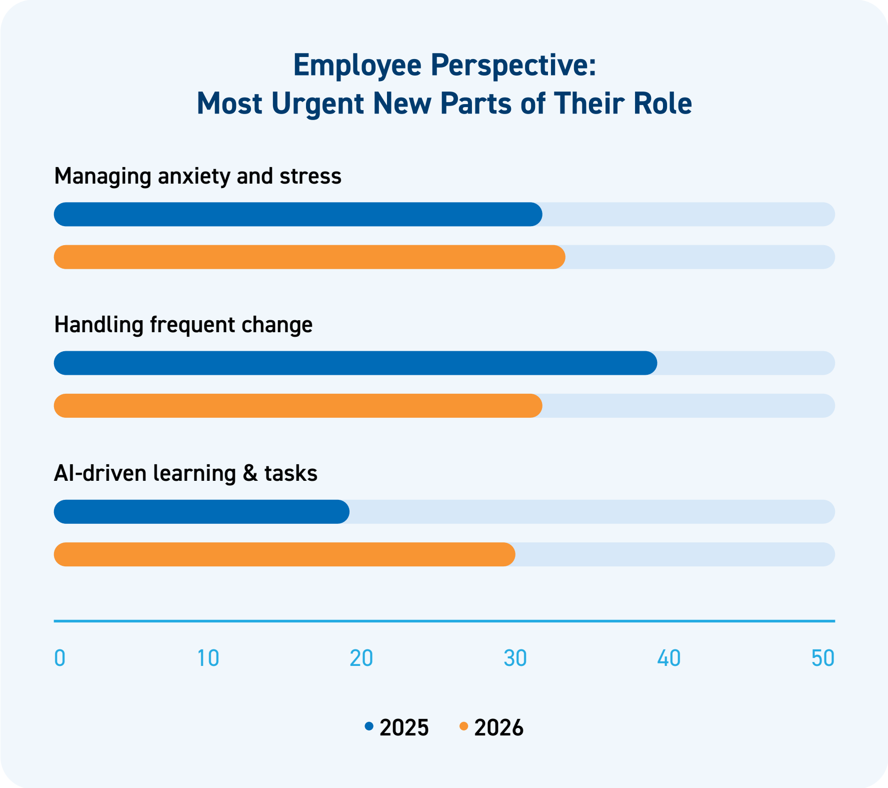
Managers and employees continued to agree that effective communication and coaching are among the most important management skills.



What Is Changing: AI Enters the Picture

While employees continued to assess managing anxiety and stress and handling frequent change as urgent parts of their roles, they also identified AI-driven learning and tasks as the third most urgent new part of their role. Respondents demonstrated a 63% increase in the urgency of AI adoption.

Managers indicated that supervising AI-driven tasks is a slightly more urgent new part of their role in 2026, an increase of 14%.



41% of managers indicated that using AI has increased their expectations regarding the volume of work employees should be able to complete in a given amount of time.

The 2026 survey also asked managers for more specific information about their uses of AI—36% of respondents answered that they use AI to handle routine or administrative work, and 36% indicated they have spent more time in the past year reviewing AI outputs. Thirty-one percent of managers said that their use of AI has changed the types of tasks they delegate to employees, and 30% rely more on AI-generated data and insights when making a decision. Managers did not, however, indicate they employ AI to actually make decisions. Strikingly, 41% of managers said that using AI has increased their expectations regarding the volume of work employees should be able to complete in a given amount of time. In other words, managers increasingly use AI to:

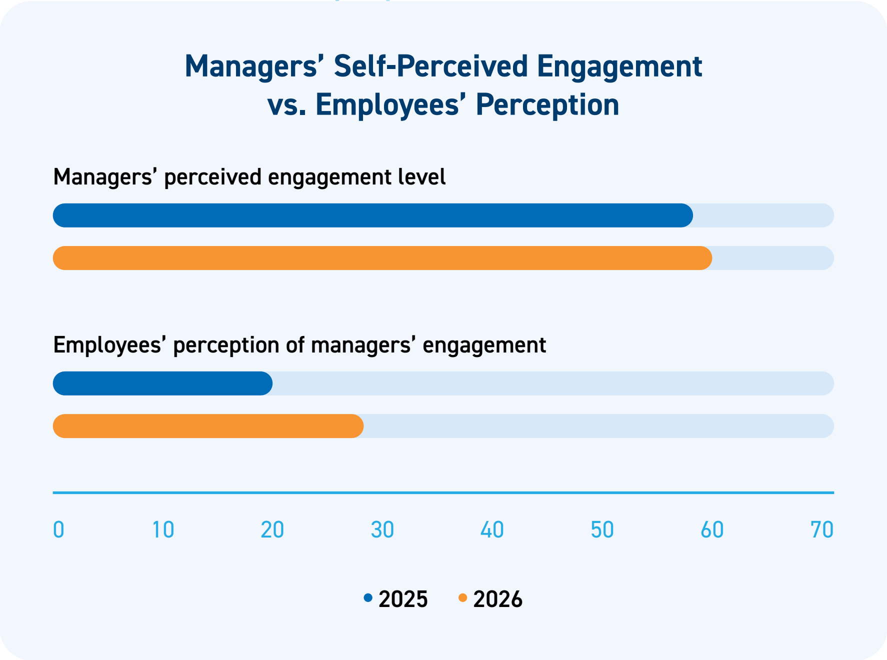
- Automate routine work
- Support decision making
- Delegate work differently
- Raise productivity expectations

Respondents demonstrated a 63% increase in the urgency of AI adoption.

AI isn't replacing managerial judgment—it is increasing the amount of judgment managers must exercise.

The Engagement Gap Persists

Most strikingly, managers continued to self-assess their engagement level as higher than employees perceived it to be—62% of managers said their engagement increased in the past 12 months, while 51% of employees said their managers' engagement level remained constant, and 20% of employees said their managers' engagement decreased.



Given that both managers and employees are spending more time incorporating AI into their work, and given that both agree on the importance of effective communication and coaching as management skills and roles, why does the difference between managers' self-perception of engagement, and employees' perception of managers' engagement persist?

Managers and Employees Define Engagement Differently

One answer may be the different ways managers and employees identify behaviors that indicate engagement. The 2026 survey asked employees to rank observable behaviors suggesting an engaged manager. Aligning with their assessment that key manager skills are communication and coaching, 53% of employees said that communicating openly and regularly with employees indicates manager engagement, while 42% named providing clear direction and expectations, and 37% said that both listening to employee concerns and feedback, and supporting employee growth and development, indicate engagement. Only 14% of employees rated managers encouraging innovation and new ideas as indicating engagement.

By contrast, only 16% of managers said that "talent developer" is a role that has increased in the past 12 months. In other words, one explanation for the continued gap in managers' self-perception and employees' perception may be that employees see talent development as a major indicator of engagement, while only a small percentage of managers focused on talent development in the past year.

The 2026 survey results suggest that managers recognize a different set of behaviors as indicative of engagement. Managers were queried about employee behaviors indicating engagement. Forty-nine percent of managers responded that enthusiasm about work indicates engagement, while 40% said that showing commitment to organizational success indicates engagement. Similarly, 38% of managers said that volunteering for new projects indicates engagement, 36% said that implementing feedback and contributing new ideas indicate engagement, and 34% said exceeding job description requirements indicates engagement.

Employee Perspective: Key Characteristics of Manager Engagement

Manager Perspective: Key Characteristics of Employee Engagement

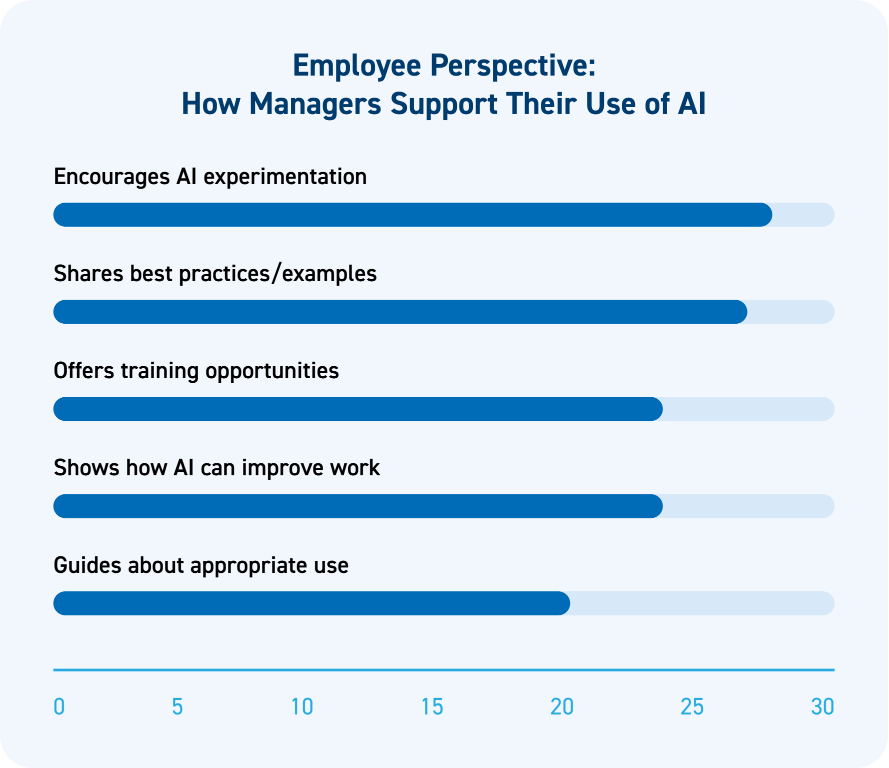
The Invisible Work of Management

It is reasonable to infer that managers may apply the same standards to themselves, assessing their own engagement in terms of enthusiasm for work, commitment to organizational success, volunteering to take on new work, and exceeding what their jobs require. If managers thus define their own engagement, they would not necessarily be focused on the behaviors employees associate with manager engagement: communicating regularly, providing clear direction, listening to employee feedback, and attending to employee development needs.

Longitudinal data across AMA's 2025 and 2026 surveys suggests that managers increasingly spend time thinking, prioritizing, navigating ambiguity, weighing risks, and evaluating AI outputs. This means managers increasingly spend time refining and applying their own personal judgment to uncertain, unprecedented situations. AMA's data also suggests that employees rarely observe this work, perhaps because employees are seeking clear information and direction, as well as managers' availability for feedback, coaching, and talent development.

AI Is Not Reducing Managerial Work

Another explanation for the continued gap in manager and employee perceptions of managers' engagement may be that managers have focused on AI-driven learning and tasks in the past 12 months. While employees have likewise experienced managers as supporting their AI adoption, only a small percentage of employees view encouraging innovation and new ideas, of which AI adoption is an example, as a form of manager engagement. In sum, managers increasingly give time to supporting AI adoption, while employees do not see this attention as a form of engagement.



The 2025 Whitepaper theorized that the engagement perception gap may in part be explained by the fact that managers perceive their engagement as cognitive—the invisible work of making decisions and solving problems. The results of the 2026 survey lend further evidence to support this theory. As noted, managers continue to identify making decisions and solving problems as the most urgent parts of their roles. Managers have also indicated that while they use AI to provide data that supports decision making, they still exercise their own critical thinking when deliberating alternative courses of action to execute a choice. This suggests that AI is shifting managerial work, not eliminating it. Thus, the majority of managers see themselves as increasingly engaged year after year due to their ever-increasing cognitive load. This engagement may be invisible to employees, who define manager engagement more in terms of time spent with employees (coaching, giving feedback, explaining reasons behind a decision, and so forth).

Managers use AI to support decision making while still exercising their own critical thinking.

Closing the Gap

This research suggests that organizations can benefit from defining manager expectations more clearly by measuring both observable management behaviors (such as coaching techniques and frequency of feedback conversations) and unobservable cognitive behaviors (such as planning, deliberating, and emotional regulation). Likewise, organizations should support decision making capability, not just AI adoption.

It further suggests that managers at all levels, with any range of experience, would benefit from enhancing the specific communication skills of explaining priorities and their decision-making processes, not just outcomes—managers need to enhance their ability to make their cognitive work more visible, particularly given that they use AI to support, rather than replace, their personal judgment. At the same time, managers could increase employee efficiency and effectiveness by meeting employee expectations for clear and frequent direction, transparent communication regarding organizational mission and priorities, regularly sequenced development conversations, and more intentional coaching. A further conclusion is that employees would benefit from understanding that effective management increasingly involves invisible (unobservable) cognitive work, thus recognizing the unseen demands of managers. Similarly, if managers should attend to employees' needs for developmental feedback and coaching, employees should be more deliberate in providing feedback to managers regarding their communication needs.

While AMA's survey data highlights a perception gap between managers and employees, it also suggests managers are not actually less engaged in their work. Rather, managers' work is increasingly less observable. As AI accelerates decision making and organizations become more complex, managers' effectiveness will increasingly be measured not only by the quality of decisions they make, but by how effectively they help employees understand those decisions. Organizations that make invisible manager behaviors visible will build stronger trust, stronger engagement, better performance, and thus be in a stronger competitive position overall.

FIVE ACTIONS ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD TAKE

1. **Redefine manager success beyond visible activity**
2. **Teach managers to explain decisions—not just state them**
3. **Harness the power of critical thinking along with AI for better decision making**
4. **Measure coaching and decision quality**
5. **Help employees understand the invisible work**