

Ambitious Employees. Underprepared Managers.

*A Growing
Organizational Risk*



Organizations today face a paradox in talent development. Employees remain highly motivated to grow, develop new skills, and advance in their careers, yet many report they are not receiving the performance support, leadership guidance, or developmental opportunities necessary to fully succeed. At a time when organizations are navigating rapid technological change, workforce transformation, and increasing complexity, the ability to develop people effectively has become a critical business imperative.

The findings in this research reveal an encouraging but urgent reality: Employees are not disengaged but optimistic, ambitious, and eager to learn. However, many organizations fall short in creating the systems, managerial capability, and learning culture required to harness that motivation into sustained performance and organizational growth.

This research highlights a widening gap between employee aspiration and organizational support. Employees consistently identified the need for stronger communication, more effective coaching, clearer expectations, and greater leadership development. At the same time, many managers reported being promoted into leadership roles without sufficient preparation or training.

The implications extend far beyond employee satisfaction. Organizations that fail to equip managers and embed development into the flow of work risk decreased engagement, reduced productivity, weakened leadership pipelines, lower retention, and diminished organizational agility. Conversely, organizations that prioritize continuous learning, manager development, and human leadership capabilities are better positioned to attract talent, improve performance, foster innovation, and outperform competitors.

Research Overview

The 2026 AMA Talent Development Study examined employee and manager perspectives related to talent development, leadership preparedness, workplace performance support, and organizational learning culture. Over 1,000 respondents globally represented a broad range of professional backgrounds, industries, and organizational experiences, providing insight into the current state of workforce development and managerial effectiveness.

Summary of Findings

Several clear themes emerged from the research, which will be described in more detail in the following pages:

- 1 Employees are highly motivated to grow and develop professionally
- 2 Employees want more support, guidance, and coaching from managers
- 3 Many managers feel underprepared for leadership responsibilities
- 4 Foundational human capabilities remain the most significant skill gaps
- 5 Employee development is most effective when learning is reinforced through application in the daily flow of work
- 6 Organizational barriers continue to limit development opportunities



Why This Matters

The future competitiveness of organizations increasingly depends on their ability to develop adaptable, capable, and resilient people. Technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient. Employees and managers alike must navigate ambiguity, communicate effectively, make sound decisions under pressure, collaborate across teams, and continuously learn new skills.

Organizations that intentionally develop these capabilities will gain significant advantages in these key areas:

- Higher employee engagement and retention
- Increased productivity and performance
- Improved collaboration and innovation
- Enhanced employee well-being and motivation
- Stronger ability to attract top talent
- Stronger leadership pipelines
- Greater organizational adaptability

The findings of the research provide evidence that employees are eager to develop the right skill set to support their career aspirations. The challenge for organizations is to ensure they are equally prepared systematically to nurture that growth.

Employees Are Optimistic and Motivated to Grow

One of the most encouraging findings from this research is that employees remain highly motivated to learn, grow, and advance in their careers. Contrary to common narratives surrounding disengagement or workforce detachment, respondents demonstrated a strong desire for professional development and future advancement.

When asked what matters most to them professionally, respondents identified opportunities for growth, work-life balance and developing new skills as priorities. Additionally, confidence in future career advancement remained remarkably high, with 87% reporting feeling somewhat to very confident about their future advancement opportunities, while only 12.9% reported feeling not very confident or not confident at all.

These findings reveal a workforce that is not passive or disengaged, but instead highly ambitious and proactive about their personal growth.



The future competitiveness of organizations increasingly depends on their ability to develop adaptable, capable, and resilient people.

Why Employee Motivation Matters to Organizations

Employee motivation and optimism are critical organizational assets. Highly motivated employees are more likely to:

- Take initiative and pursue innovation
- Engage more deeply in their work
- Seek opportunities to improve performance
- Contribute positively to organizational culture
- Remain committed during periods of change and uncertainty
- Invest in long-term career growth within the organization

When organizations fail to support motivated employees with meaningful development opportunities, the consequences can be significant. Employees who feel unsupported may become frustrated, disengaged, or more likely to seek growth opportunities elsewhere.

This research suggests organizations currently possess a valuable opportunity. Employees are already motivated to grow. The competitive advantage lies in effectively channeling that motivation into meaningful capability development and performance outcomes.



Employees Want More Performance Support from Managers

While employees expressed strong motivation to grow, many also reported not feeling adequately supported in their day-to-day performance or long-term development aspirations. Managers play a central role in shaping employee experience, engagement, and performance. Yet the findings suggest many managers are not fully equipped to provide the coaching, communication, and guidance employees need.

The research revealed that only 27% of respondents said their managers were highly effective, while 66% reported not receiving frequent support, guidance or feedback from managers. Employees also identified several key areas that would most improve their manager's effectiveness.

WHAT WOULD MOST IMPROVE MANAGER EFFECTIVENESS?

Better communication and clarity of expectations



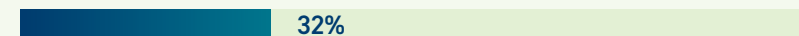
Stronger decision making



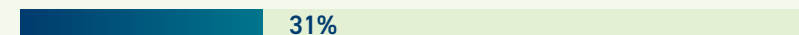
More consistent feedback and coaching



Greater empathy and emotional intelligence



Improved ability to navigate change and ambiguity



These findings are consistent with anecdotal comments from participants in manager and leadership development courses, and further suggest employees are seeking managers who can provide clarity, direction, coaching, and confidence during increasingly complex workplace conditions.

The Expanding Role of Managers

Today's managers are expected to do far more than supervise tasks or manage operations. Increasingly, managers are expected to serve as:

- Coaches and mentors
- Communicators and translators of organizational priorities
- Performance facilitators
- Capability builders
- Change navigators
- Culture influencers

When managers lack the skills or preparation to fulfill these responsibilities, organizations can see an impact in metrics such as reduced employee engagement, lower performance and productivity, increased confusion and misalignment, reduced learning transfer and skill application, and decreased trust and communication, resulting in higher turnover and burnout.

Organizations that proactively invest in strengthening managerial communication, coaching, and decision-making capabilities are more likely to create higher-performing and more resilient teams.

Core Human Leadership Capabilities Represent the Greatest Skills Gaps

The research revealed that employees perceive their largest skill gaps not in technical expertise, but in foundational human capabilities. Survey respondents identified their top personal skill gaps.

Employees seek managers who communicate clear expectations, make strong decisions, and provide consistent feedback and coaching.

MOST HELPFUL TO PERFORM EFFECTIVELY

Communicating clearly with diplomacy and tact

47%

Leadership and people management

46%

Critical thinking and problem solving

43%

Time management and prioritization

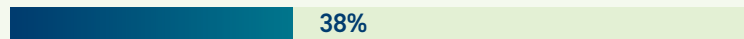
43%

MOST CHALLENGING IN DAY-TO-DAY WORK

Making decisions with limited information



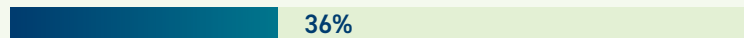
Working effectively with others



Communicating in sensitive or challenging situations



Prioritizing and managing workload



Human Capabilities Are Becoming More Valuable, Not Less

As automation and AI continue to reshape the workplace, uniquely human capabilities are becoming increasingly important differentiators. Organizations often focus heavily on technical upskilling, but this research suggests employees and managers continue to struggle most with communication, leadership, decision making, collaboration, coaching, critical thinking, prioritization, and navigating ambiguity.

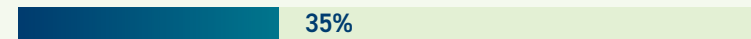
These capabilities directly influence team performance, culture, innovation, customer relationships, and organizational adaptability. The findings suggest organizations would benefit from recognizing these skills as essential business capabilities that drive operational effectiveness and long-term organizational success.

MOST VALUABLE DEVELOPMENT NEEDED TODAY

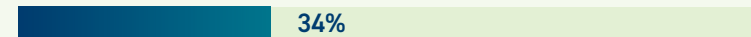
Digital and AI training



Communication skills



Leadership and management training



Employees and managers both struggle to communicate, make decisions, and lead others.

Managers Feel Insufficiently Prepared for Leadership Roles

One of the most significant findings in this research involves the preparedness of managers entering people leadership roles. Many organizations continue promoting high-performing individual contributors into management positions without adequately preparing them to lead others. The findings revealed 51% of respondents reported being promoted into people management without formal leadership training.

This creates what many organizations experience as the “accidental manager” phenomenon—individuals who possess technical expertise or strong individual performance, but who may lack the leadership, coaching, communication, and performance management capabilities required to lead teams effectively.

The Leadership Pipeline Risk

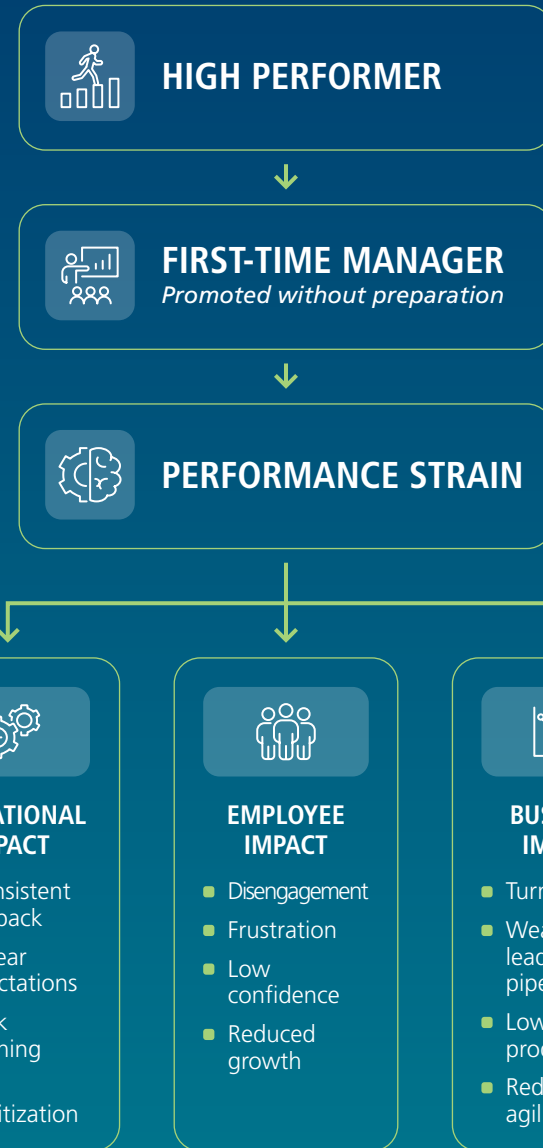
When managers are insufficiently prepared, organizations face significant risks, including inconsistent employee experiences, reduced team performance, poor communication and feedback practices, lower employee engagement, increased turnover among high-potential talent, weak succession pipelines, and reduced organizational agility.

Managers are expected to develop people, facilitate performance, navigate change, and strengthen culture. Yet many receive little formal preparation before assuming these responsibilities. Consequently, managers may end up spending a disproportionate amount of their time resolving performance issues, rather than proactively focusing on strategic ways to improve team effectiveness.

Organizations that fail to invest in first-time manager readiness often unintentionally create downstream performance and engagement challenges throughout the organization.



The “Accidental Manager” Pipeline



The Need for Intentional Manager Development

Preparing managers cannot be treated as a one-time training event. Effective manager development begins with structured onboarding into leadership roles, ongoing coaching and mentoring, and practical application opportunities. Combine this with feedback and reflection mechanisms, development embedded into daily workflow, and reinforcement of leadership expectations over time. Managers who experience professional development themselves are better equipped to pass it on to their teams and model support for their employees.

Organizations that intentionally prepare managers create stronger leadership pipelines and more sustainable organizational performance.

Barriers to Development Continue to Limit Growth

Despite strong employee motivation and clear development needs, many respondents reported limited access to meaningful growth opportunities. Only 30% reported having sufficient opportunities to develop new skills. The most significant barriers included lack of time, limited manager support, competing workplace priorities and insufficient integration of learning into daily work.

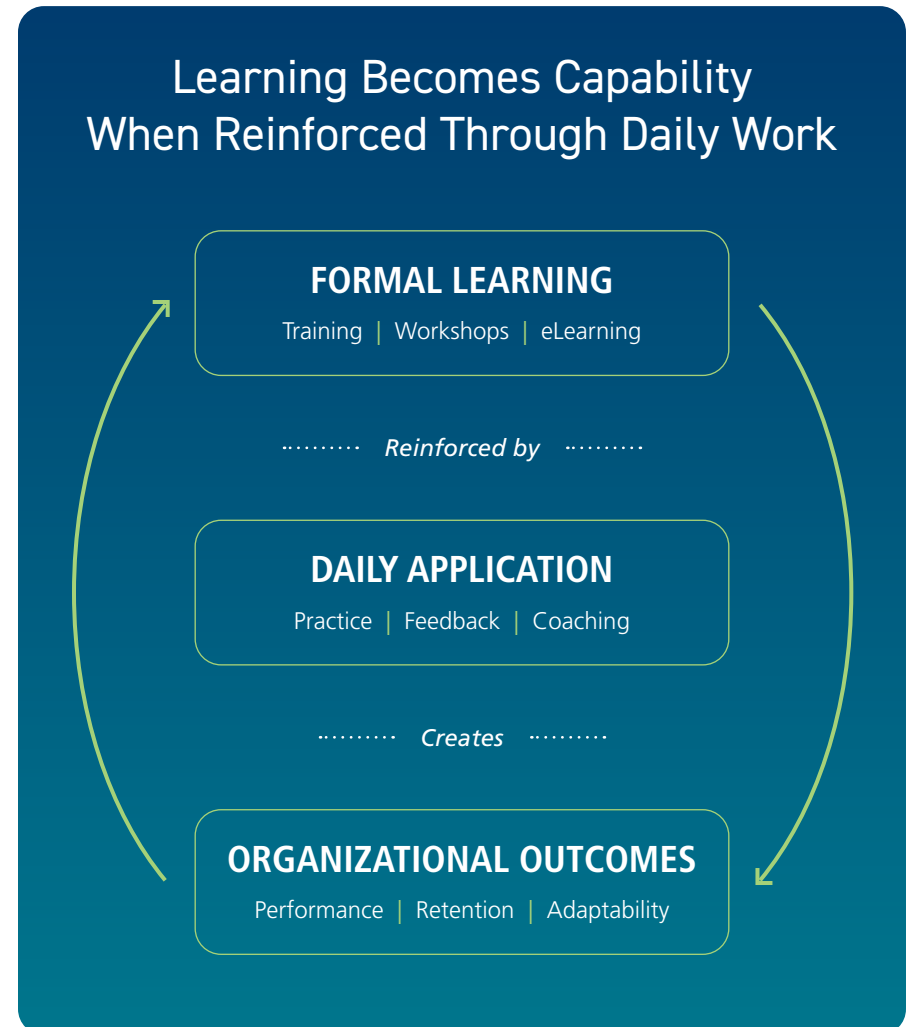
These findings suggest many organizations still treat development as an isolated event that is separate from work, rather than as an integrated component of performance and operations.

Daily Practice Fosters a Learning Culture

Traditional approaches to employee development, such as formal workshops, provide a high level of value on their own and can be further reinforced by on-demand learning tools, microlearning opportunities, and manager-led development integrated into daily responsibilities connecting new skills to their role and

organizational goals. Combine these available experiences, tools with real-time coaching and feedback, stretch assignments, experiential learning, and continuous performance conversations to achieve the greatest impact.

Learning organizations embed opportunities for development into the flow of work at every level and into the culture.





Learning organizations recognize that development is not an optional activity. It is a core driver of organizational capability, performance, and long-term success.

Organizational Benefits of a Learning Culture

When learning is embedded into the flow of work and continued outside of the classroom, employees are more likely to apply new skills immediately, retain knowledge more effectively, improve confidence and capability, and experience greater motivation and engagement. Moreover, they will see development as relevant and practical to their everyday work. This fosters an organizational learning culture.

Organizations that build strong learning cultures often experience faster skill development, stronger innovation and adaptability, and higher employee satisfaction and engagement, which leads to increased retention of high-performing employees. At the highest levels, these organizations see improved organizational resilience, enhanced leadership capability at every level, and overall greater business performance and competitive advantage.

Recommendations for Organizations

The findings from this research suggest organizations have ample opportunities to strengthen leadership capability, employee development, and organizational performance by investing more intentionally in managers and learning culture.

1 Recognize and Harness Employee Motivation

Employees are already motivated to grow and develop. Organizations should capitalize on this momentum by providing comprehensive formal and informal learning pathways, career growth opportunities, continuous learning resources, internal mobility opportunities, and personalized development experiences. Organizations that proactively invest in employee growth are more likely to strengthen engagement, retention, and organizational commitment.

2 Strengthen Manager Communication, Coaching, and Feedback Skills

Managers' impact on employee performance and development tends to be underestimated. Organizations would benefit from prioritizing developing managers' abilities to communicate expectations clearly, provide meaningful feedback, coach employees consistently, facilitate difficult conversations, support employee growth, and navigate ambiguity and change. Strong managers create stronger teams.

3 Reinforce Effective Formal Learning with Daily Practice

Development is not separate from work. When a concept is learned in a formal experience and later applied and reinforced through practice on the job, it is more likely to be integrated into everyday operations. Leaders can support this integration through real-time coaching, intentional on-demand reinforcement through eLearning, peer learning and collaboration, performance feedback systems, stretch assignments, reflection, and continuous improvement practices. Learning cultures are built through consistent reinforcement in addition to learning events.

4 Double Down On Foundational Human Capabilities

The research clearly demonstrates that communication, leadership, decision making, collaboration, and critical thinking remain among the most valuable organizational capabilities. Organizations will be set apart when they intentionally develop communication and interpersonal effectiveness, coaching and leadership skills, decision-making capability, emotional intelligence, collaboration and conflict management, and adaptability and resilience. These capabilities increasingly differentiate high-performing organizations.

5 Enhance Preparation for First-Time Managers

By establishing more intentional pathways for leadership readiness before employees assume management responsibilities, organizations will be able to set new managers and their teams up for success. Readiness pathways may include leadership readiness programs, transition-to-management onboarding, mentorship and peer support, leadership simulations and experiential learning, and ongoing reinforcement and coaching. Preparing managers early helps prevent leadership capability gaps later.

6 Reframe the Role of Managers

Managers are no longer viewed solely as operational supervisors. Modern managers play a critical role in many ways, as capability builders, performance amplifiers, coaches and mentors, learning facilitators, culture carriers, and barrier removers. Organizations must help managers understand that developing people is not separate from performance, but rather is central to it. When managers actively support development, employees are more likely to apply skills, remain engaged, and contribute at higher levels.



Conclusion

This research presents both a warning and an opportunity for organizations. Employees remain optimistic, ambitious, and motivated to grow. However, many organizations are not yet fully equipped to support that growth through strong manager capability, integrated learning systems, and development-focused culture.

The most significant gaps identified in this study are not purely technical. They are deeply human: communication, leadership, decision making, coaching, collaboration, and navigating complexity and ambiguity. At the same time, many managers are being asked to develop others without having first been developed themselves.

Organizations that address these gaps proactively have an opportunity to create more engaged employees, stronger leaders, healthier workplace cultures, and more sustainable business performance.

The future of talent development will belong to organizations that intentionally build capability at every level through formal training and daily leadership behaviors, embedded learning opportunities, and a culture that views development as a strategic advantage.

Employees are ready to grow. Organizations that foster learning will grow with them.