

DREAMS Survey Report



Freia in brief

Freia is a consulting partner in people leadership and work ability, delivering impactful solutions for organizations in both the private and public sectors.

We help to

- Elevate operational and leadership culture
- Coach executive teams, key personnel and supervisors
- Manage sickness absences and work ability risks
- Enhance collaboration with occupational health services
- Empower employees to take responsibility for their own well-being

Our team consists of 16 results-oriented experts who are ready to develop your operations in a bold, participatory, and knowledge-based manner.

Our mission is to create shared success.

www.freialife.com



Content

DREAMS SURVEYS REPORT

Intro	4
Research info	5
Abbreviations	6
Respondents	7
Represented industries	8

RESULTS ORGANIZATION

Organizations' situational overview	10
Six most common barriers to growth	11
Solutions to growth barriers	12
What are needed competencies?	14
Where organizations plan to invest?	15
Organizational growth perspectives	16
Growth connections	17
Organization and growth	18

RESULTS INDIVIDUAL

What do leaders need solution for?	19
Own vs organization's performance	21
Leader's own courage	22
Executive's own energy and vitality	23

DREAMS

What kind of leader would you like to be?	25
What is your long-term dream?	27
What are you going to do next?	29

SUMMARY

Key results	31
Conclusion	32
Team	36



Intro

The DREAMS Executive Survey has been conducted in 2020, 2022, 2024 and 2026. The purpose of the study is to encourage leaders to pause and reflect on the major questions shaping the future of work.

The 2026 DREAMS Study focused on the key drivers of future success and the conditions for growth – from both the individual and organizational perspective. Data from the previous DREAMS studies (2020–2024) was used as a comparative baseline.

More than 200 leaders participated voluntarily in the survey. A distinctive feature of this year's respondent group was the exceptionally high number of CEOs. In addition to Finnish participants, responses were collected from across Europe and the United States.

We sincerely thank all participants for dedicating time to reflect on these meaningful topics. The insights generated from these valuable moments of reflection have been distilled into this report. We hope the findings inspire you and support your organization on its path toward sustainable success. Dreams come true when the direction is clear.

Keywords: Dreams, growth, shared success, business, competitive advantage, future orientation, workplace vitality





Research info

- DREAMS –survey was conducted 8.1.2026-20.2.2026
- Marketing: email, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram
- Language versions: FIN/ENG
- Key numbers: 24 questions, response time ~9 min, 37% of the respondents are CEOs, 19 different industries
- 211 managers responded, 203 of them allowed usage of data.
- Management groups: CEO & CFO, HR, Sales & Marketing, Development, Customer Relations, Board Member, Other management positions
- Analyses
 - Qualitative: AI-assisted thematization, classification, and content analysis
 - Quantitative: t-test, comparison of means and distributions, cross-tabulation SPSS 30.0
- The study was conducted by the expert company Freia Ltd.
- The study was conducted without external funding.

Abbreviations

EXECUTIVE CLASSIFICATION

CEO	=	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	=	Chief Financial Officer
HR	=	Human resources
S&M	=	Sales & Marketing
R&D	=	Research & Development
CUS	=	Customer relationships
Board	=	Board member
Other	=	Other position

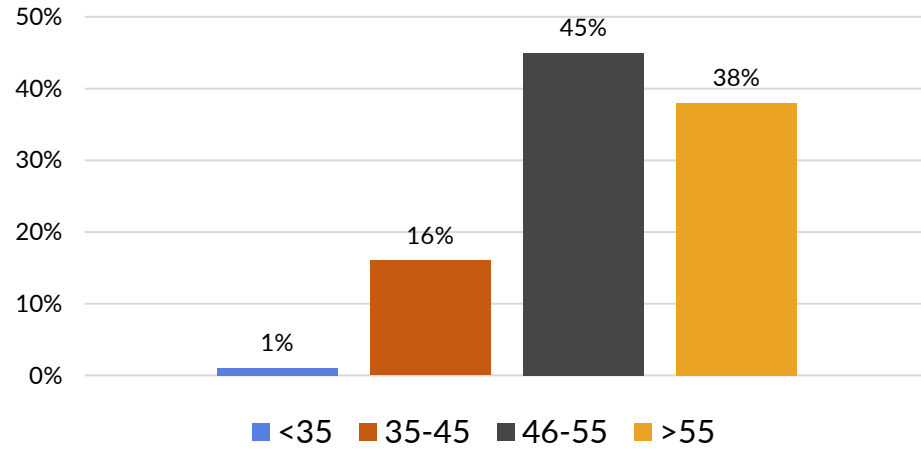
RESEARCH

N	=	The total number of cases
p	=	The value of statistical significance
**	=	Statistically significant result

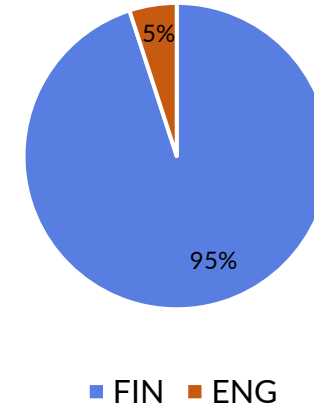


Respondents N=203

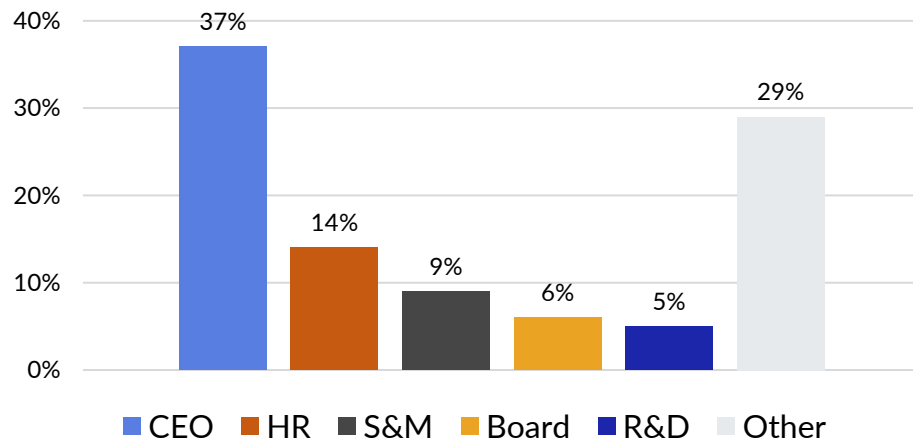
AGE GROUP



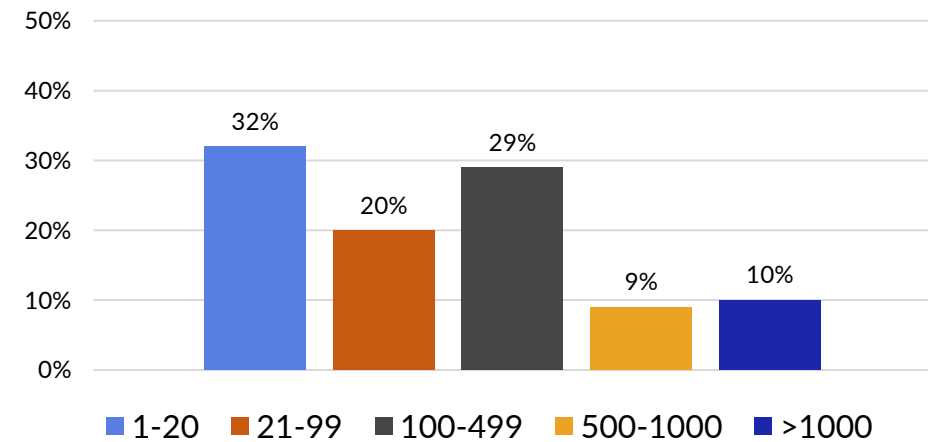
LANGUAGE



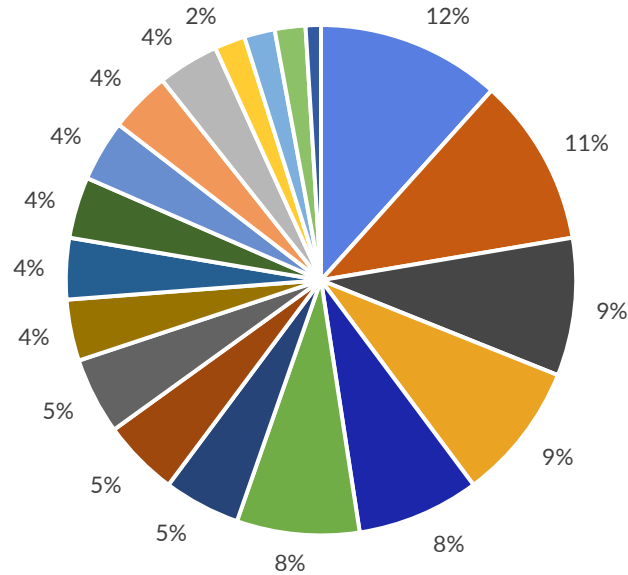
EXECUTIVE ROLE



SIZE OF THE ORGANISATION (STAFF)



Represented industries N=203



- Industrial
- ICT
- Arts, sports and recreation
- Construction
- Transportation and storage
- Agriculture and forestry
- Mining and quarrying

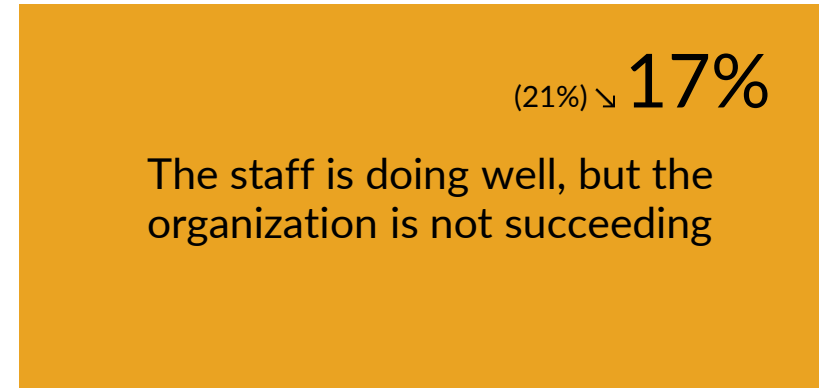
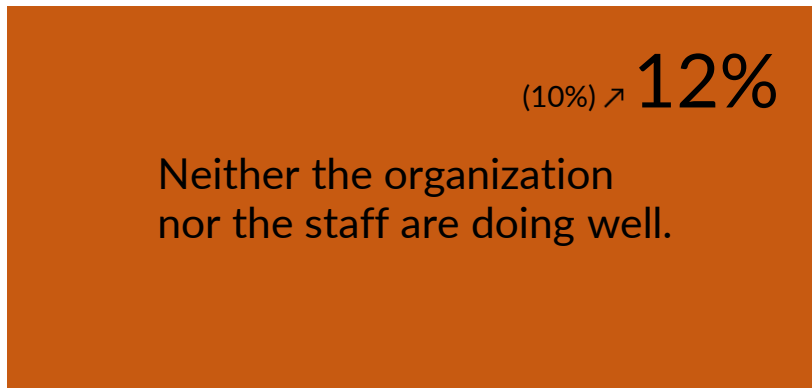
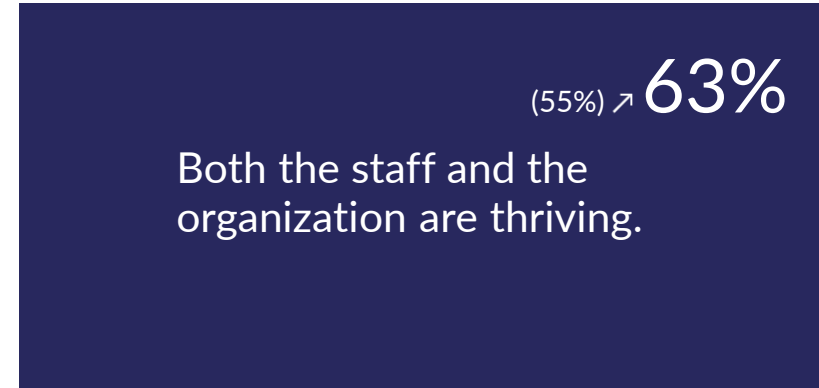
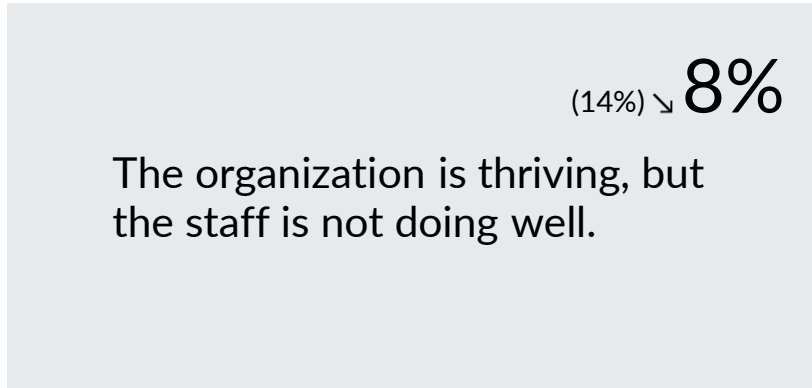
- Professional, scientific and technical activities
- Financial and insurance activities
- Enviromental management
- Administrative and support services
- Energy
- Acommodation and food service activities

- Social and health services
- Education
- Other service activities
- Public administration and national defense
- Wholesale and retail trade
- Real estate

Results



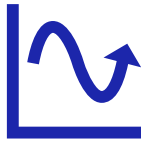
Which of the following describes best the current state of your organization?



(percentage in 2024)

Six most common barriers to growth

Economic conditions and
market uncertainty
(n=73)



Availability of skilled
workforce and personnel
resources (n=45)



Challenges in strategy and
leadership
(n=44)



Regulation, legislation and
public-sector impacts
(n=40)



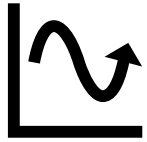
Lack of investment and
financing capacity
(n=37)



Barriers in
organizational culture
(n=24)

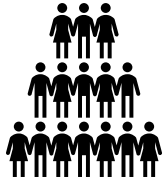


Solutions to growth barriers



Economic conditions and market uncertainty

- Strengthen future-oriented work: create three alternative future scenarios and clarify the decisions that apply to all of them.
- Protect cash flow and optimize the cost structure without cutting the fundamentals required for growth.
- Expand market channels: utilize new segments, partnerships and service designs.



Availability of skilled workforce and personnel resources

- Build a skill strategy: define the skills needed in the next 12–36 months and how they will be acquired (recruitment, training, partners).
- Improve workforce retention: invest in leadership quality, clarify learning paths and ensure that rewards are appropriate for the current situation.
- Leverage technology (AI, automation) to reduce routine workload.



Challenges in strategy and leadership

- Simplify the strategy: define three main objectives and measurable key indicators for each.
- Ensure execution: each leader is responsible for one critical strategic capability.
- Establish a shared leadership model: consistent decision-making, prioritization and communication methods.



Solutions to growth barriers



Regulation, legislation and public-sector impacts

- Conduct regular regulatory reviews and assign one responsible person to monitor changes.
- Build an advocacy plan (e.g. through industry associations).
- Optimize processes so that regulatory-related administrative work is automated whenever possible.



Lack of investment and financing capacity

- Prioritize investments with the shortest payback time and the strongest impact on growth.
- Utilize alternative financing options: Business Finland, EU programs, venture capital, or partnership investments.
- Create a clear investment principle: approve only projects that support the three primary strategic objectives or drive growth.

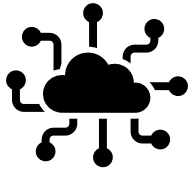


Structural and cultural barriers in the operating environment

- Identify slow structures: which processes or decision-making practices slow things down the most? Remove or simplify them one by one.
- Start cultural change with small steps: regular experimentation, rapid feedback and coaching oriented leadership.
- Strengthen shared direction: communicate goals openly and make progress visible.



What new competencies does your organization need in order to grow over the next three years?



Artificial intelligence and digital capability

Utilizing AI in work processes, data analysis and knowledge management, developing digital services and processes, automation and strengthening technological competence. This is not just a theme for a single team but a broad organizational-wide fundamental capability. (n=63)



Leadership and strategic capability

Human-centered, consistent and goal-oriented leadership; change leadership and strategy execution; the ability to set direction, prioritize and build a unified culture; coaching-oriented leadership and ecosystem leadership. Leadership capability is directly linked to the organization's ability to grow: the capacity to implement change and to engage people in strategic transformations. (n=39)

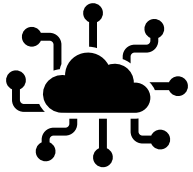


Sales and marketing competence

B2B and international sales, enterprise sales, service design and productization, marketing (especially digital and data-driven), customer understanding and customer experience. Leaders emphasize that growth requires the ability to package, productize and sell more effectively – not only to develop internally. (n=21)



Where organizations plan to invest in leadership and people development over the next three years?



Utilizing artificial intelligence and digital capabilities

Leaders view AI as a strategic necessity that requires investment both in skills and in tools. (n=49)



Leadership and supervisory work development

Coaching-oriented and participative leadership, change leadership and strategy execution, leadership team and supervisor training, and building shared operating models and a cohesive leadership culture. Many leaders emphasize that growth requires unified, consistent and human-centered leadership. (n=42)



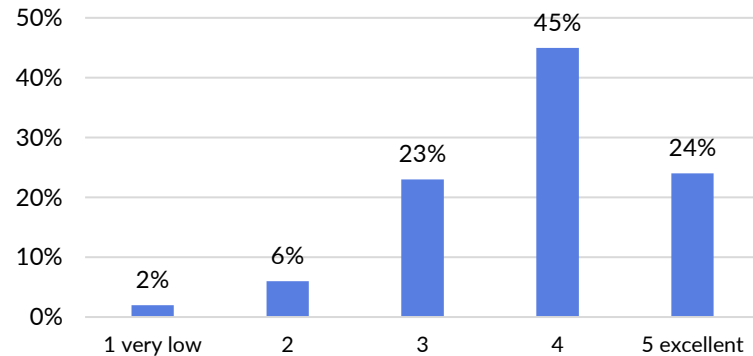
Competence development and training

Continuous learning and professional training, industry-specific expertise, project skills, language skills and support for new role structures, as well as building personalized growth paths. Leaders invest in competence development across the entire organization, not only at leadership or specialist levels. (n=32)

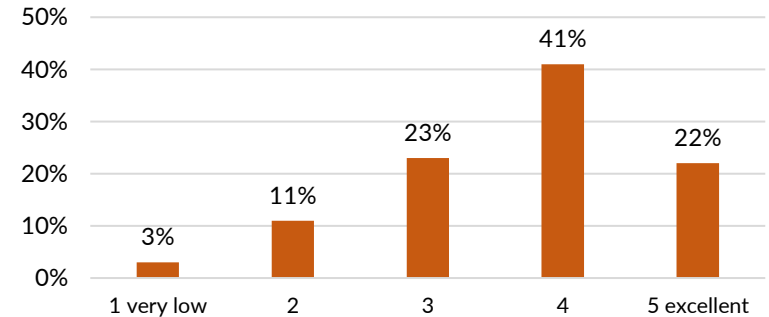


Organizational growth perspectives

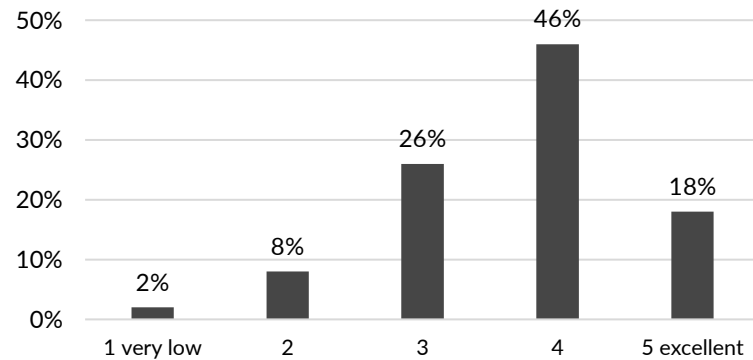
Does your organization's strategy clearly support growth over the next 3 years?



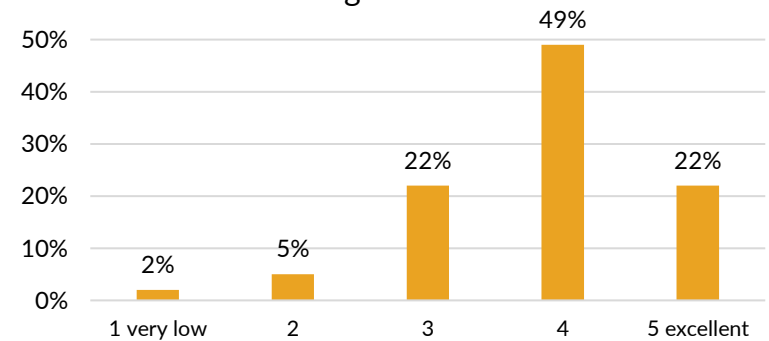
Does your organization have the courage to dream of significant growth and make the necessary changes quickly?



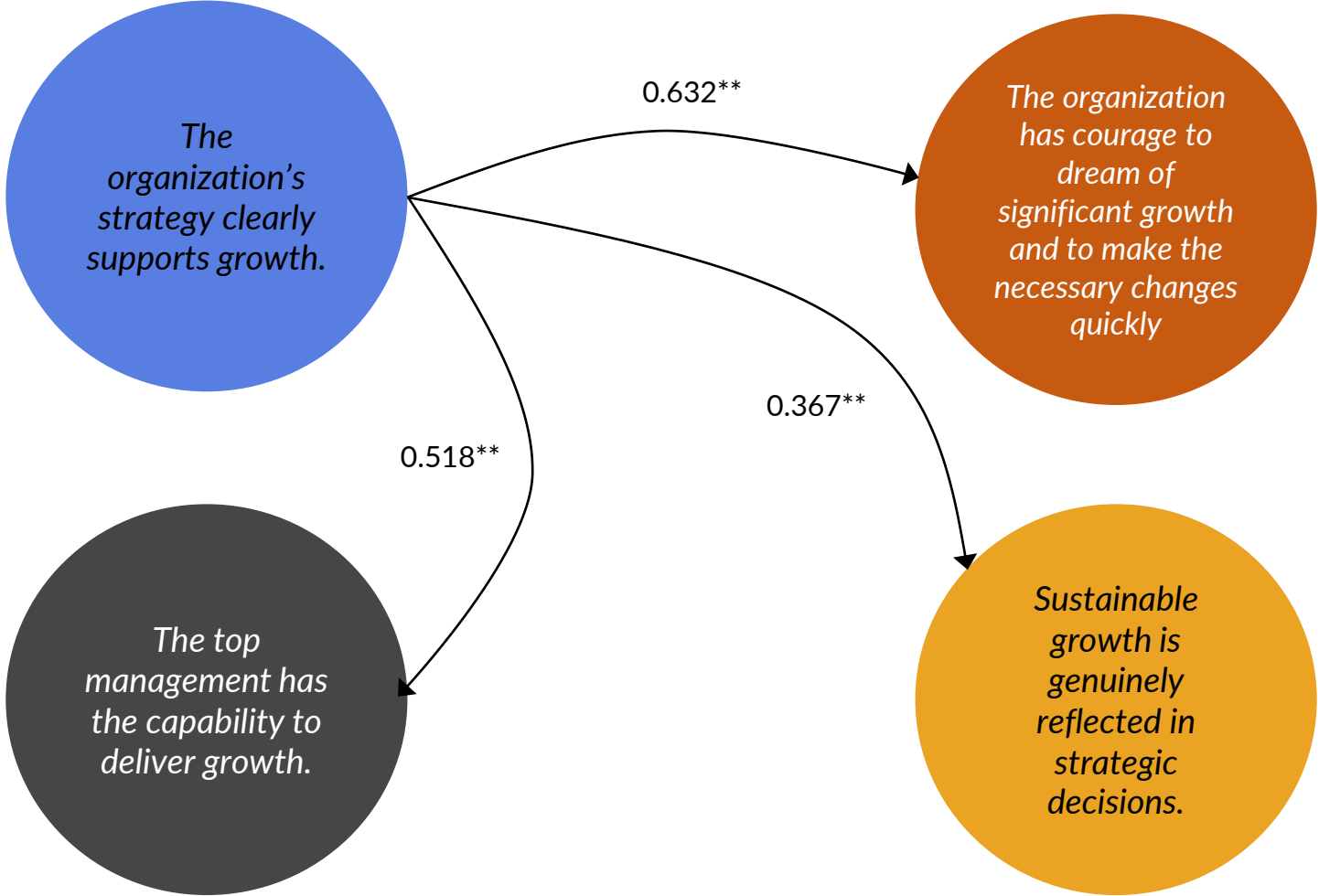
Does the top management have sufficient capability and leadership to realize growth?



Is sustainable growth, environment and responsibility genuinely considered in strategic decisions?



Connections between organizational operations and growth



(**A statistically significant correlation)

Organization ja growth

Leaders' views on their own organization and growth are moderately positive. The average scores across responses ranged from 3.6 to 3.9.

The organization's strategy most clearly supports growth in the following sectors:

- 1) Professional, scientific and technical activities
- 2) Manufacturing
- 3) Financial and insurance activities
- 4) Education

Leaders reported the most courage to envision significant growth and make rapid changes within professional, scientific and technical activities and within manufacturing. The third-highest level of growth ambition was reported in the health and social services sector.

Top management's growth capability was considered strongest in ICT, education and manufacturing. In contrast, the lowest perceived leadership growth capability was found in manufacturing, health and social services, and in arts, entertainment and recreation.

Sustainable growth, including environmental and responsibility-related perspectives, was viewed as being most effectively integrated in financial and insurance activities as well as in the energy sector.

Due to the nature of the industry, growth occurs largely on its own.

HR
Environmental sector

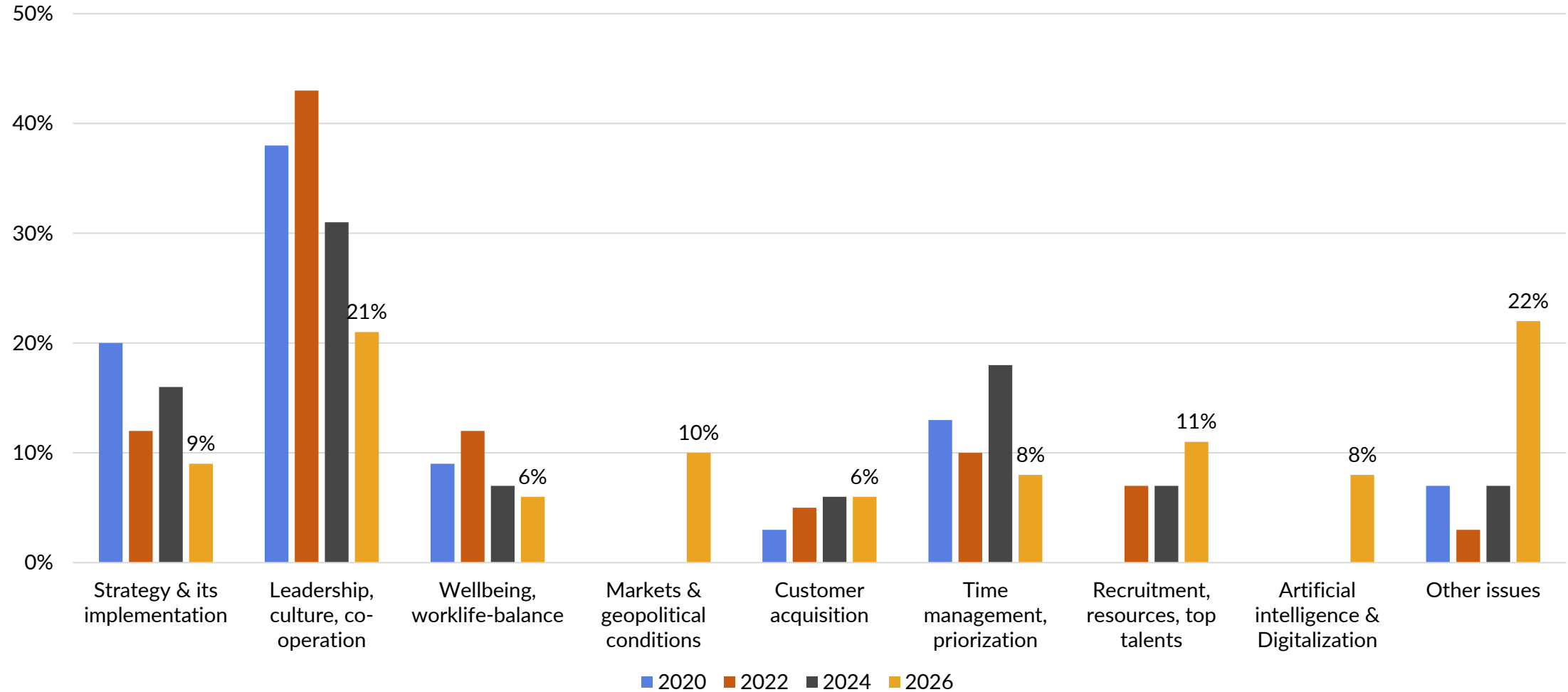
The aim is to create a fresh start and establish a new path for growth

CEO
Education

Building a growth-driven organization and winning market share

Sales director
Construction

What do leaders need solutions for right now?





What do leaders need solutions for right now?

When considering all leaders who responded to the survey, leadership, work culture, strengthening collaboration and clarifying leadership models emerge strongly. **Leaders are calling for leadership that above all reinforces working together.**

Compared to our previous studies, leaders are now more frequently seeking solutions related to resources — including competence, recruitment and financing. These are viewed as key drivers of growth.

Another highly topical theme is the utilization of artificial intelligence and digitalization in business.

Some leaders expressed frustration with the current market situation and geopolitical uncertainty, both of which drain organizational energy and weaken performance.

A notable difference compared to the previous survey is the wider variation in responses. A total of 22% of all responses were distributed across various individual themes. These needs ranged from personal time management to system procurement, improving board work, public-sector financial policy and improving predictability.

How to make a growth mindset a natural part of the organizational culture?

CEO

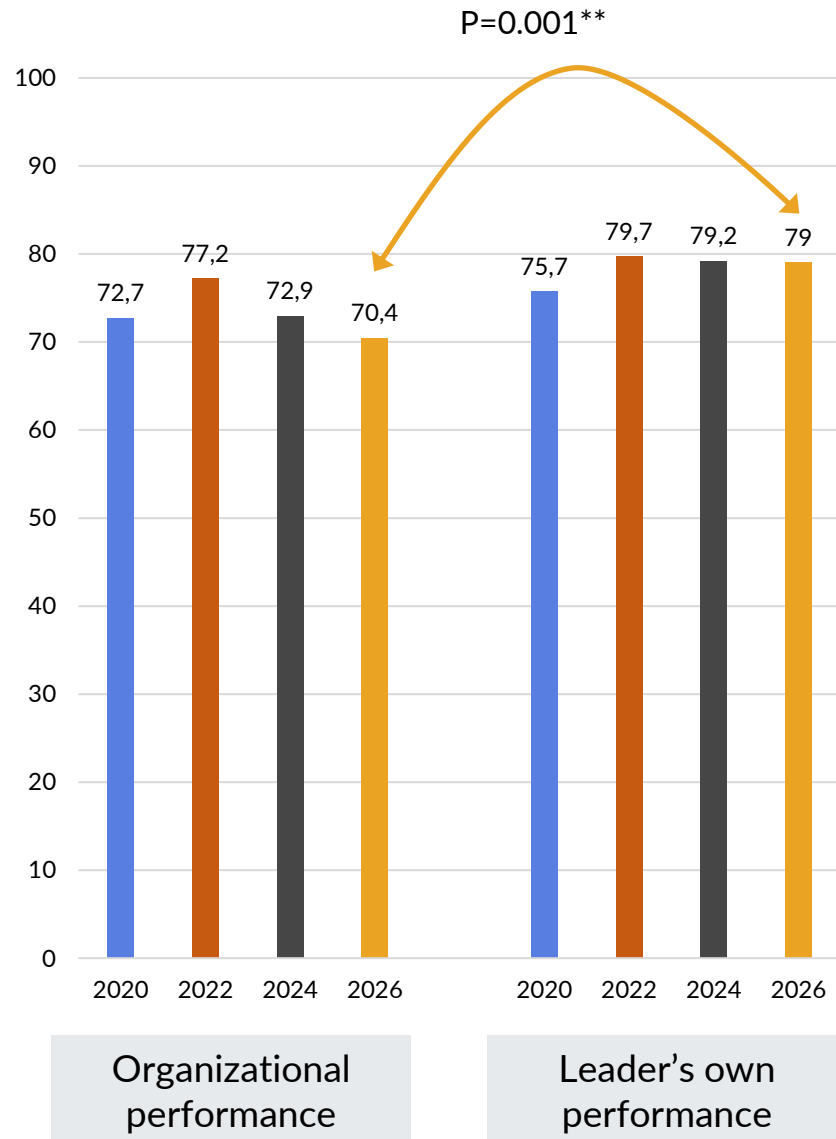
Solving the skills shortage, leading international business and coping with continuous uncertainty.

HR

Employee satisfaction, business forecastability.

Board member

Organizational performance vs. the leader's self-assessment



In the survey, leaders were asked to rate both their own performance and the organization's performance on a scale of 1-100.

Based on the responses, leaders' perception of organizational performance has continued to decline from the levels reported in 2022 and 2024.

Perceptions of personal performance have also decreased slightly, although they remain higher than during the most difficult phase of the pandemic in 2020.

The gap between leaders' views of organizational performance and their own performance remains clear. Leaders consistently rate their personal performance significantly higher than that of the wider organization ($p=0.001$).

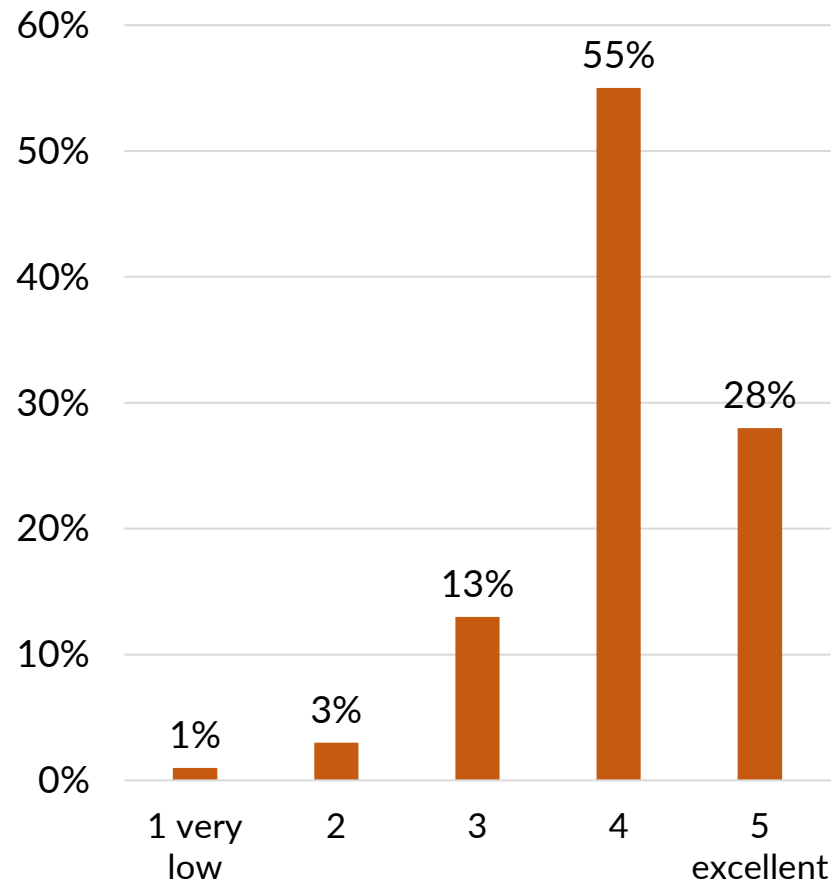
There are also notable differences between leadership roles. HR and IT leaders gave the highest self-ratings, scoring above 83. In contrast, CFOs and board members gave the lowest ratings for organizational performance, with scores below 59.

The leader's own courage to take growth-related risks

Based on the results, 28% of leaders rated their courage to take growth-related risks as excellent. In addition, 55% assessed their courage as fairly high on a scale of 1-5.

CEOs rated their own courage slightly higher at 4.2 compared to other leadership positions at 4.1 and HR leaders at 3.7. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

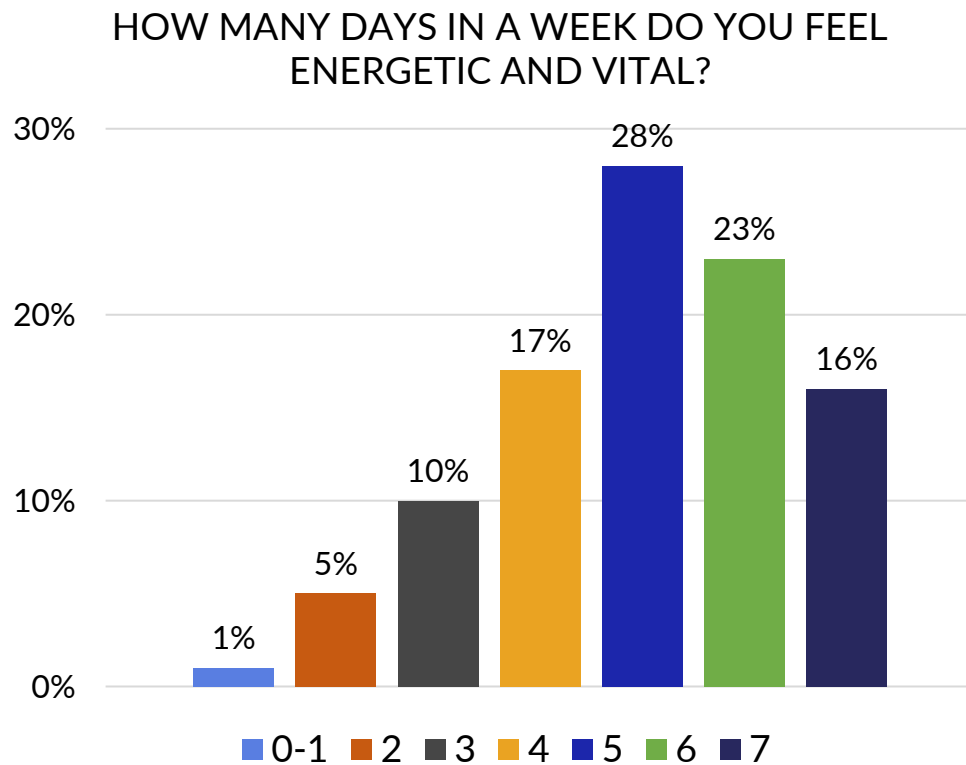
There were no differences in courage between age groups.



How to balance strategic courage with the owners' need for security?

CEO
Environmental sector

Energy and vitality perceived by the leaders



In the survey, leaders were asked to evaluate their own vitality on a scale of 0–7.

According to the results, leaders experience their personal energy levels as good on average five days per week. The overall average has remained at the same level as in the 2024 study.

For the majority of leaders, vitality appears to be at a healthy level. Only 16% reported feeling energized on fewer than four days per week.

One interesting finding was that younger age groups reported significantly lower vitality levels (approximately 4.5) compared to respondents over 55 years old, whose average vitality was around 5.2.

There were no statistically significant differences in vitality between different leadership roles.



Dreams



What kind of leader would you like to become?



A human-centered coach

Typical characteristics: attentive, empathetic, gentle, fair, approachable, people-oriented, coaching-minded and encouraging. *Core focus:* to build a psychologically safe and collaboration-driven culture. *Behavior in practice:* leads people based on their strengths, offers sparring and support for growth, and creates positive energy within the work community.



A visionary pathfinder

Typical characteristics: bold, visionary, pioneering, curious, innovative, adaptable and an “out-of-the-box” thinker. *Core focus:* drives the organization forward even when the path is unclear – dares to challenge the old and create something new. *Behavior in practice:* makes decisions in uncertainty, sets direction, inspires others and ignites a desire for growth within the people.



A results-driven and human-centered

Typical characteristics: results-oriented, firm, clear, demanding yet fair, understands business logic and manages processes effectively. *Core focus:* combines the leadership of ambitious performance targets with a genuinely human approach. *Behavior in practice:* makes difficult decisions when needed, while simultaneously caring for people and fairness.



What kind of leader would you like to be?



A strategic leader

Typical characteristics: strategic, able to understand complex entities, systematic, focused on what matters, structured and capable of prioritizing. *Core focus:* brings clarity to what the organization should focus on and how to move forward – reducing chaos. *Behavior in practice:* sets clear goals, makes strategy understandable in everyday work, and creates predictability and stability.



An inspiring culture builder

Typical characteristics: inspiring, motivating, positive, creative, energizing, enabling and connection-oriented. *Core focus:* strengthens team collective efficacy and creates an atmosphere where people can thrive. *Behavior in practice:* increases momentum and engagement, celebrates success, brings joy and meaning to work.

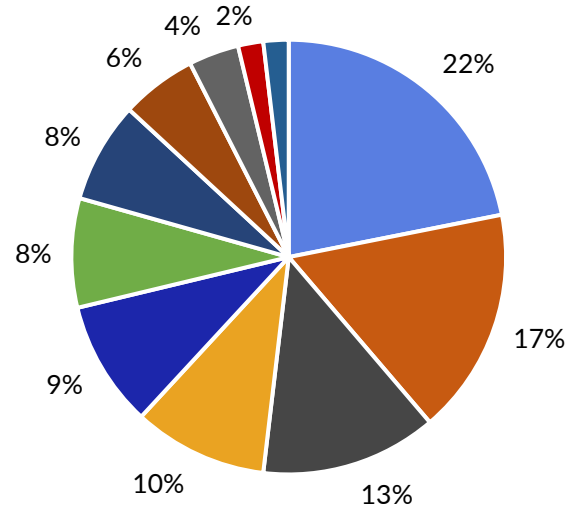


A fair values-driven leader

Typical characteristics: fair, just, trustworthy, appreciative, respectful and transparent. *Core focus:* leads through values and acts in ways that allow people to trust decisions and direction. *Behavior in practice:* builds a culture of trust, leads by example and demonstrates consistency in all situations.



What personal long-term dream would you like to achieve?



- Career & professional growth
- Life balance, freedom, personal time
- Learning & Self development
- Healthy retirement
- Meaningfulness & impact
- Sport events & merits
- Financial independence
- Experiences & leisure time projects
- Wellbeing & health
- Leadership development & team success
- Family & relationships

What personal long-term dream would you like to achieve?

The leading themes in leaders' long-term personal dreams were:

- 1) Career and professional growth
- 2) Financial independence
- 3) Life balance, freedom and personal time
- 4) Experiences and leisure-time projects

Leaders' responses differ from previous years' results. For the first time, dreams related to career and professional advancement became the largest category. These career-oriented dreams focus on increasing responsibility, reaching top positions and maintaining ambition.

Financial independence included aspirations for exits and greater financial freedom. Balancing the strongly career and financially oriented dreams, many leaders expressed desires related to life balance and personal time. These dreams reflected a wish to reduce work-related demands, enjoy life more fully, find peace of mind and free up time for personal wellbeing.

A long-standing favorite in earlier surveys — the dream of retiring healthy — ranked seventh this year.

Dreams related to experiences and leisure-time projects centered on longer sabbaticals from work, travel to unique long-distance destinations, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and acquiring or building a holiday cottage.

*Significant
responsibility in
meaningful work*

*Production
director*

*To go hiking in
the Alps*

CEO

*A better balance
between work
and free time*

HR

*Financial
independence as
company owner*

Board member



What are you going to do next to achieve your dream?

I will update my competencies.
(n=30)



I will prioritize my time and reorganize my daily routines.
(n=28)



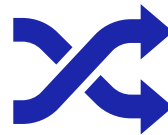
I will renew our growth and business actions.
(n=27)



I will invest in wellbeing, recovery and physical fitness.
(n=27)



I will make a bold career change.
(n=18)



I will strengthen my leadership approach.
(n=14)



Summary



Key results in 2026

- 63% of leaders assess the current situation as one in which both the organization and its people are performing well. This is the highest share in the history of the DREAMS study.
- 83% of leaders consider their courage to take growth-related risks to be either good or excellent.
- The key barriers to growth were identified as: (1) economic conditions and market uncertainty, (2) availability of skilled workforce and personnel resources, and (3) challenges in strategy and leadership.
- In operational day-to-day work, leaders most often seek solutions related to leadership and work culture (21%), resourcing, recruitment and skills shortage (11%), and market conditions (10%). A notable difference compared to the previous survey is the wider variation in responses, with 22% of responses falling into other individual challenges.
- Leaders perceive their own performance as clearly higher than their organizations ($p=0.001$).
- Goals related to career and professional growth were the most common personal dreams among leaders. The second most common dreams were related to financial independence, and the third most common to life balance.



Conclusions 2026

1. Leaders who responded to the survey represent a wide range of industries and organizational sizes in Finland. In addition, a small number of respondents participated from Europe and the United States. The responses were direct and honest, offering clear perspectives on both organizational and personal growth. **The conclusions in this report should therefore be interpreted as the voice of growth-oriented business leaders about the present and the future.**
2. **The respondent group was highly growth-capable.** Most leaders represented organizations that are already performing well. Leaders feel confident in making decisions that support growth, and overall assessments related to growth were moderately positive. A sense of optimism and capability forms a strong foundation for future growth.
3. **Some organizations are clearly on a growth trajectory,** supported by favorable megatrends and current market conditions. For others, the situation is the opposite. Industry cycles are weak, and the geopolitical environment is dampening growth prospects and investment appetite.
4. **Economic conditions and customer caution are the most common barriers to growth,** but they cannot be addressed merely by reacting or waiting. The focus must shift toward demand activation and strengthening commercial engines – such as delivering clear customer value, modern productization and skilled sales execution.
5. **In some organizations, growth is hindered by challenges in strategy execution and leadership,** including unclear responsibilities, delays in decision-making and inconsistent supervisory practices. A shared, systematic leadership approach, firm prioritization and a coaching-oriented mindset are the fastest levers for shifting leadership behavior.



Conclusions 2026

6. Over the next three years, **organizations plan to invest in AI, automation and data-driven decision-making – both as tools and as employee capabilities.** This trend appeared consistently in both capability needs and investment plans. AI is seen as a transformation of operating models, not as a separate project.
7. **Developing personnel was particularly emphasized in growth-capable organizations.** At the same time, leaders expressed concern about employee wellbeing and workload. To address these challenges, capability strategies emphasize recruitment, upskilling and career-path management. At the same time, everyday work should be lightened through digitalization, clearer prioritization and role redesign.
8. The increased share of positive assessments regarding both organizational and employee success indicates a genuine leadership intention to balance performance with wellbeing. **This reflects a sustainable and responsible mindset.**
9. As in our previous studies, **leaders wish to see reductions in regulation.** Regulatory requirements, public-sector steering and bureaucracy slow down growth and investment. Future-oriented work in organizations includes regular regulatory reviews and constructive, sector-wide advocacy efforts.
10. **Career and professional growth were the most common personal dreams among respondents.** This resonates well with the theme of this year's study. Advancing in one's career and taking on significant responsibilities – combined with the desire to lead meaningful entities – are key personal motivators for leaders. Respondents' perceived energy levels, self-assessed performance and sense of efficacy were high.
11. It is likely that psychologically well-resourced leaders were more inclined to participate in this study. **Overall, the results inspire confidence in organizations' and leaders' ability to succeed despite challenging economic conditions and global geopolitical instability.**



Authors of the research report

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Päivi is an experienced and enthusiastic trainer for people and work communities, and she relates to the challenges of humane life with curiosity. She knows how to use her professional expertise in supporting communities and individuals to succeed and reach their goals. Supporting comprehensive well-being is meaningful to Päivi, and it inspires her time after time.

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Tapani is an experienced trainer of managers. He has trained people from top leaders to line managers of listed companies. He has studied self-awareness in 360-degree appraisals and written a doctoral thesis on leadership. Tapani is a fearless reformer of working life.

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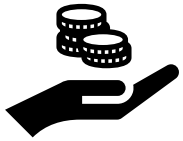


In which needs does our team provide support?



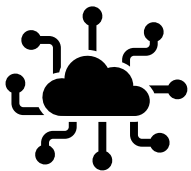
Strengthening leadership and strategic execution

The most significant barriers to growth were linked to leadership, organizational culture and change capability. Freia's coaches help build courage and a unified leadership approach that engages people in strategic goals and increases the ability of key individuals to execute change under time pressure and in uncertain market conditions.



The organization and its people succeed together

The DREAMS data shows that organizations cannot grow if their people are exhausted. We help our client organizations reach their growth targets in a sustainable way. We strengthen coaching-oriented leadership and ensure that work ability and career-path management processes are effective. These improvements are directly reflected in employee vitality, organizational profitability and workforce retention.



AI-based collaborative workshop for the entire organization

AI-related solutions should be adopted, yet practical experimentation and everyday application among employees often lag behind. We can deliver a secure, digital, AI-enabled collaborative workshop for a team or the entire organization on any theme defined by senior leadership. The content is easily customizable, AI enhances the workflow even for large groups, and every employee can participate in their own native language.



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