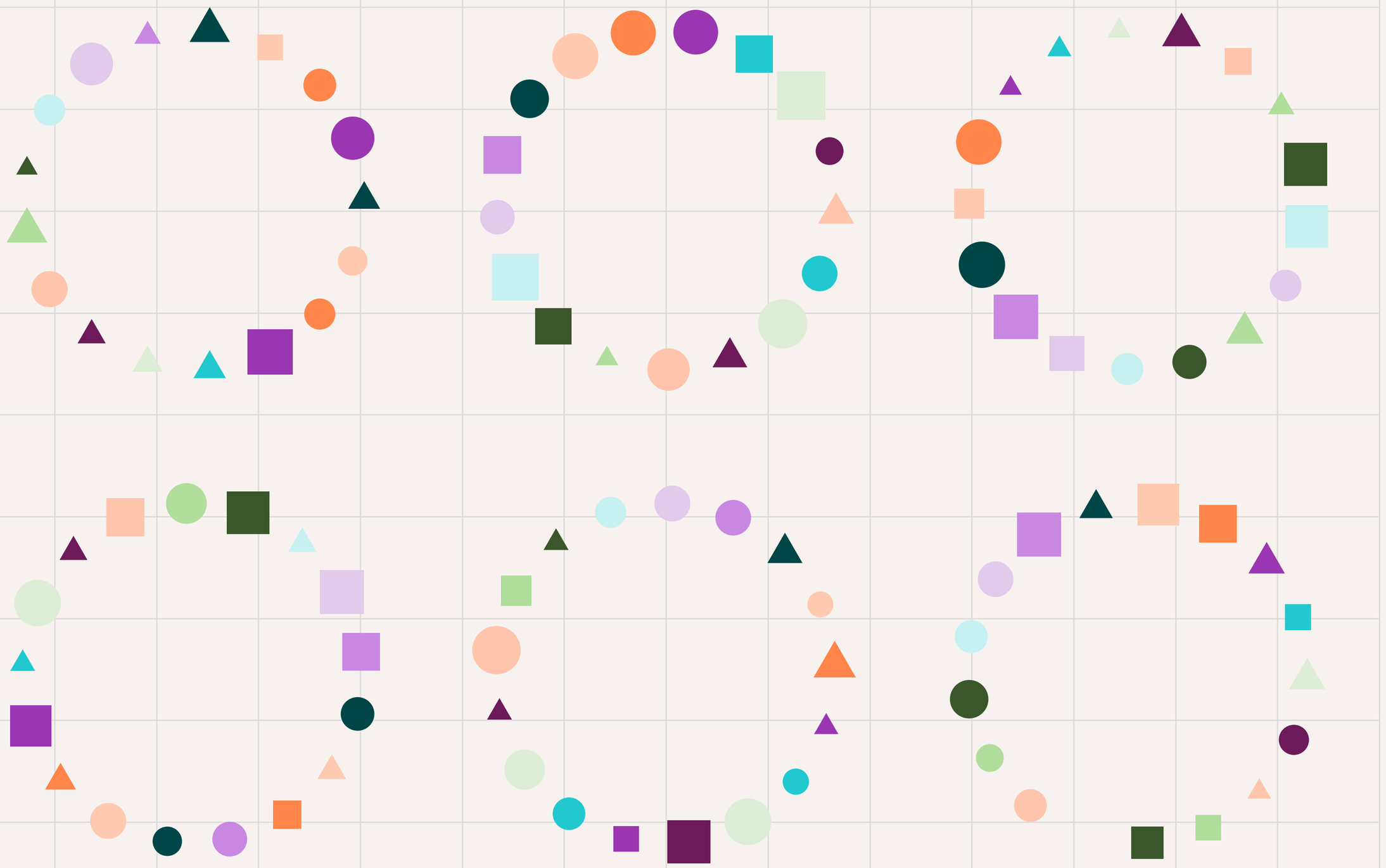
2026 PEOPLE SCIENCE REPORT

Performance Culture *by design*



Culture Amp

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Letter from our CEO

Most organizations know how to start. Far fewer know how to finish.

That is the clearest pattern in the first year of data from Culture Amp's Performance Culture Diagnostic, which covers more than 100 companies. Across all six dimensions we measure, companies are good at the opening move and much weaker at the one that follows. They set clear standards, then go quiet when those standards are missed. They announce a strategy, then let it go stale. They buy the tools, then never build the habit of working differently with them.

That gap is what separates the strongest cultures from the rest. The biggest single difference between Peak Performance and Disconnected companies is whether leaders take action on survey results: 69% versus 48%. People notice whether their company finishes things, and it shapes whether they believe the company will succeed.

Engagement still matters. It tells you whether people are connected to their work. It doesn't tell you whether your culture can perform. That takes the whole leadership team, not only HR. Culture is where strategy takes hold or gets stuck, and every leader shapes it through the loops they close or leave open.

This is a hard moment to design culture. Everything is moving, nobody has a settled answer, and we're being asked for answers anyway. I see this uncertainty as the argument for design, not against it. You don't need to know where any of this lands to start closing loops. The companies doing well in this data didn't guess right about the future. They kept going after the announcement.

As you read, pick one loop your organization has opened and not closed, and finish it.



Caroline Rawlinson
Chief Executive Officer, Culture Amp

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A common concern regarding performance culture is that organizations haven't defined what success looks like. Across all six dimensions, however, that is clearly not the issue. Standards are well-defined, strategy generally lands, and individuals can see their place within it. What is missing is consistent follow-through on everything that comes after.



Data in this report collectively show that organizations cannot rely on initial intent or strategy announcements alone; they must systematically follow through on accountability, decision rights, learning norms, and energy management to turn performance culture into a competitive advantage.

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What's in this report

The world of work has been subjected to immense change over the past couple of years. You know the list of usual suspects: AI disruption, geopolitical pressures, changing regulations, looking back for lessons learned in the pandemic, return to office swings, and a workforce with a widening age gap. The culture inside of your organization adapts to social forces like these.

Your employees and the culture they collectively assume evolve to meet the conditions and norms around them. But designing for the culture you want is far harder than it seems. A 2025 Gartner study showed that less than half of Chief People Officers (CPOs) say their culture is successfully accelerating employee performance (47%). The data we share in this report unpack why that might be the case.

These benchmarks are being shared here for the first time. They come from an evolution in our own thinking around engagement at Culture Amp. They collectively measure and diagnose performance culture. And the organizations that have elected to adopt this approach early are **trailblazers**. They were willing to change how they frame employee feedback altogether and ask hard questions along the way.

We found that companies that have implemented the Performance Culture Diagnostic (PCD) survey score in the double digits above our customer base overall on communicating a clear strategy and on giving each other constructive feedback. So what they're doing, trying, and designing is having a positive impact.

The CPOs at the companies represented in this benchmark are likely among those who aspire toward a high-performance culture. They're the CPOs who see performance culture as a force they can design. They're adjusting the conditions around performance culture instead of just reacting to it.



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Performance culture explained

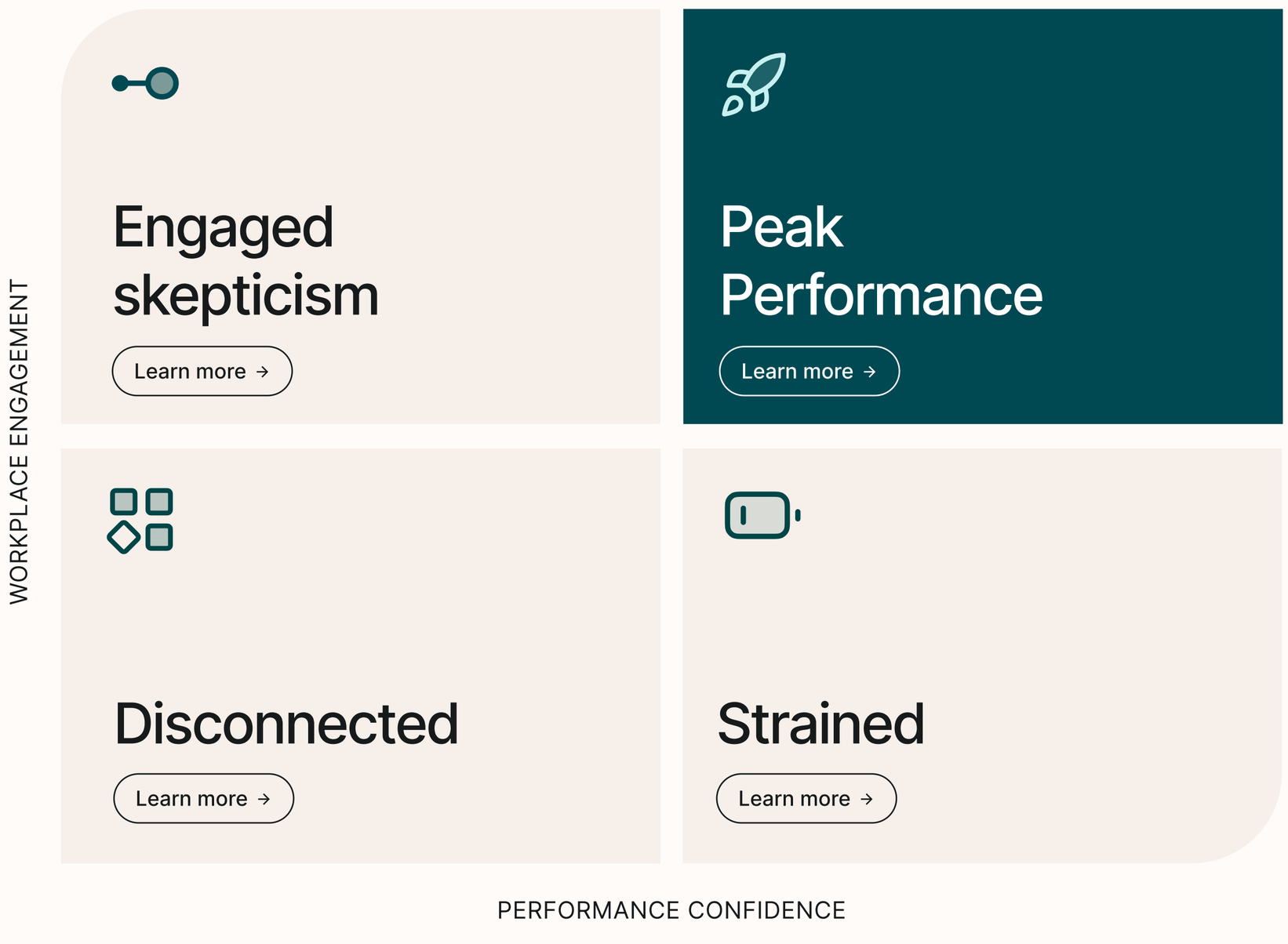
Performance culture is measured using two equally important outcomes, or indices.

Workplace engagement measures an employee's connection to their work and the organization. But engagement alone doesn't tell you whether a culture can perform. For that, you also need **performance confidence**, which captures employee belief in the organization's capacity to succeed.

Where a company sits on the two indices determines its place in the Performance Culture Quadrant, and our earlier report on the quadrant covers these states in detail. Essentially, a company's position in the performance culture quadrant reflects how well their culture is positioned to succeed over time.

Our Performance Culture Quadrant

Your culture map to peak performance



Peak Performance is the culture type to be. It's where employees are engaged and have a high belief that the company will succeed. We found that, compared to other culture states, Peak Performance companies had a 47% point stock price change advantage, 21% more high performing employees, and a high 88% retention rate.

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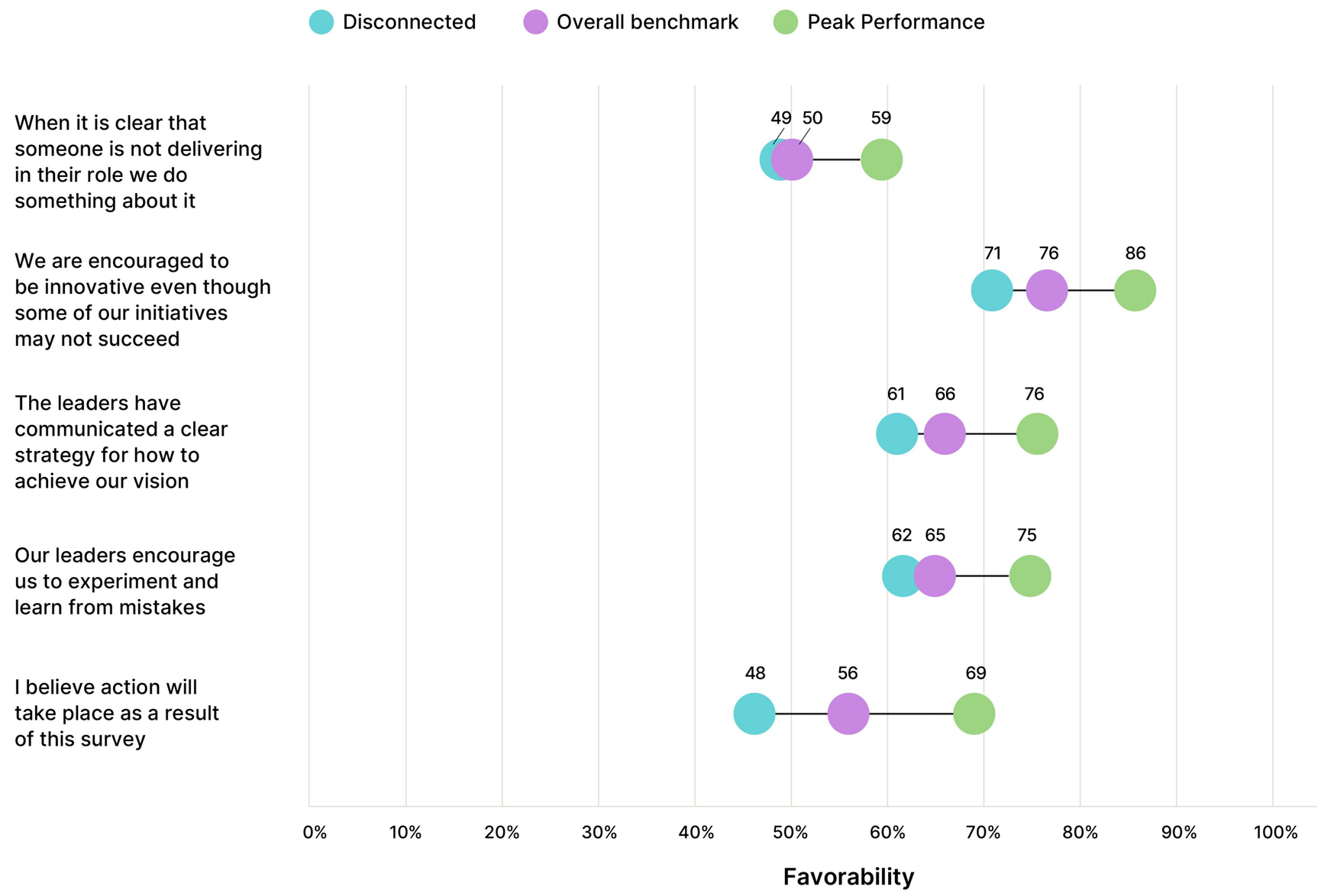
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New to this report is the finding that Peak Performance companies and the individuals within them are more likely to be encouraged to experiment and innovate. They also have a clearer strategy they're operating within. And they hold people more accountable, including the leaders whom employees believe will take action on their feedback.

Peak performance companies excel at clarity, experimentation, and accountability



The largest delta between Disconnected companies (low engagement and low belief that the company will succeed) and Peak companies is around taking action on survey results. Disconnected companies sit at 48% and Peak Performance companies at 69%. It reflects whether a company is the kind of place where things get finished, and it turns out to be the pattern underneath everything that follows.

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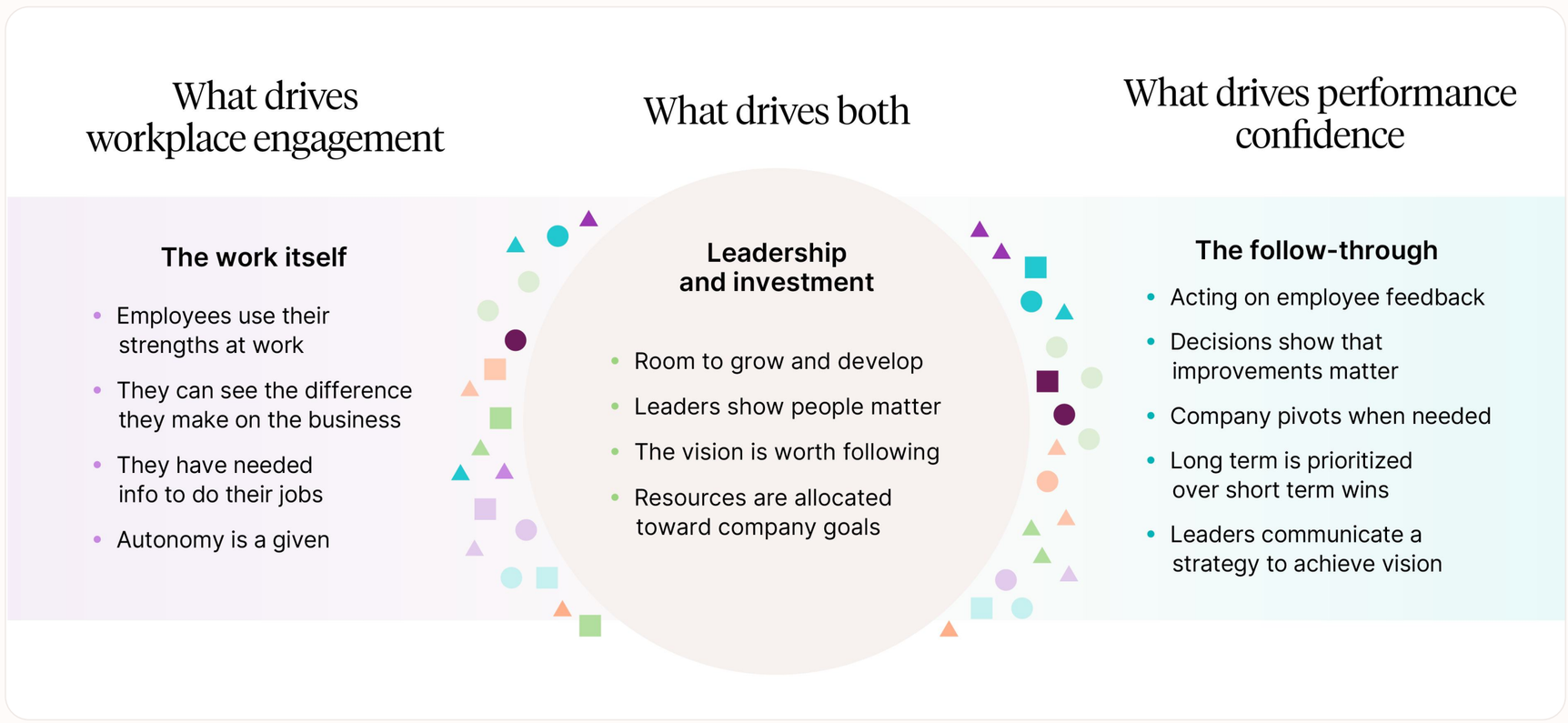
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What drives performance culture

Driver analysis identifies what is most closely related to an outcome, going beyond knowing what is simply the highest and lowest scoring. This is what we found when we analyzed the two outcomes.



Workplace engagement is driven by the work and the means to do it.
Engagement is largely a question of the immediate conditions of the job and work itself. So, a company with an engaged workforce will have employees in roles where they can use the skills they're good at, see that their work makes a difference, and understand how it connects to where the company is headed.

Performance confidence is driven by follow-through.
It is driven by employees' judgment of the organization itself. Whether employees believe the company will succeed depends on whether they have clarity on where the organization is headed long term and whether the organization changes course when something isn't working.

Both are driven by leadership and investment.
This tells us that organizations cannot rely solely on the work itself or the organizational follow-through; leadership behavior and strategic investment serve as the foundational bridge connecting workplace engagement to belief in the company's success.

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EVOLVE to Peak Performance

Designing a Peak Performance company requires a look across several dimensions of employee experience at work. To create our new diagnostic tool, we completed an extensive literature review and iterative concept development process to unravel the realities of sustained performance at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Ultimately, our research surfaced six dimensions that underscore performance culture.

Our performance culture diagnostic measures the two indices and these six unique dimensions. Overall, organizations can achieve high performance. But we found that for organizations to sustain that high performance, they must continue to EVOLVE.

EXCELLENCE	The company sets high standards, holds people accountable to them, and iterates to reach those standards.
VISION	The company has a clear and stable vision while adapting the strategy as needed to achieve it.
OWNERSHIP	The company makes it clear who owns what and provides the resources needed to drive decision-making clarity.
LEARNING	People at the company learn by seeking feedback, new technologies, and encouraging experimentation.
VOICE	The company creates the environment for employees to speak up and work cross-functionally.
ENERGY	The company sustains energy through teamwork, rest, and recovery after sprints.

The remainder of this report takes a semi-deep dive into each of the six EVOLVE dimensions, citing patterns in the benchmarks and exploring what leaders can do to grow in those areas.

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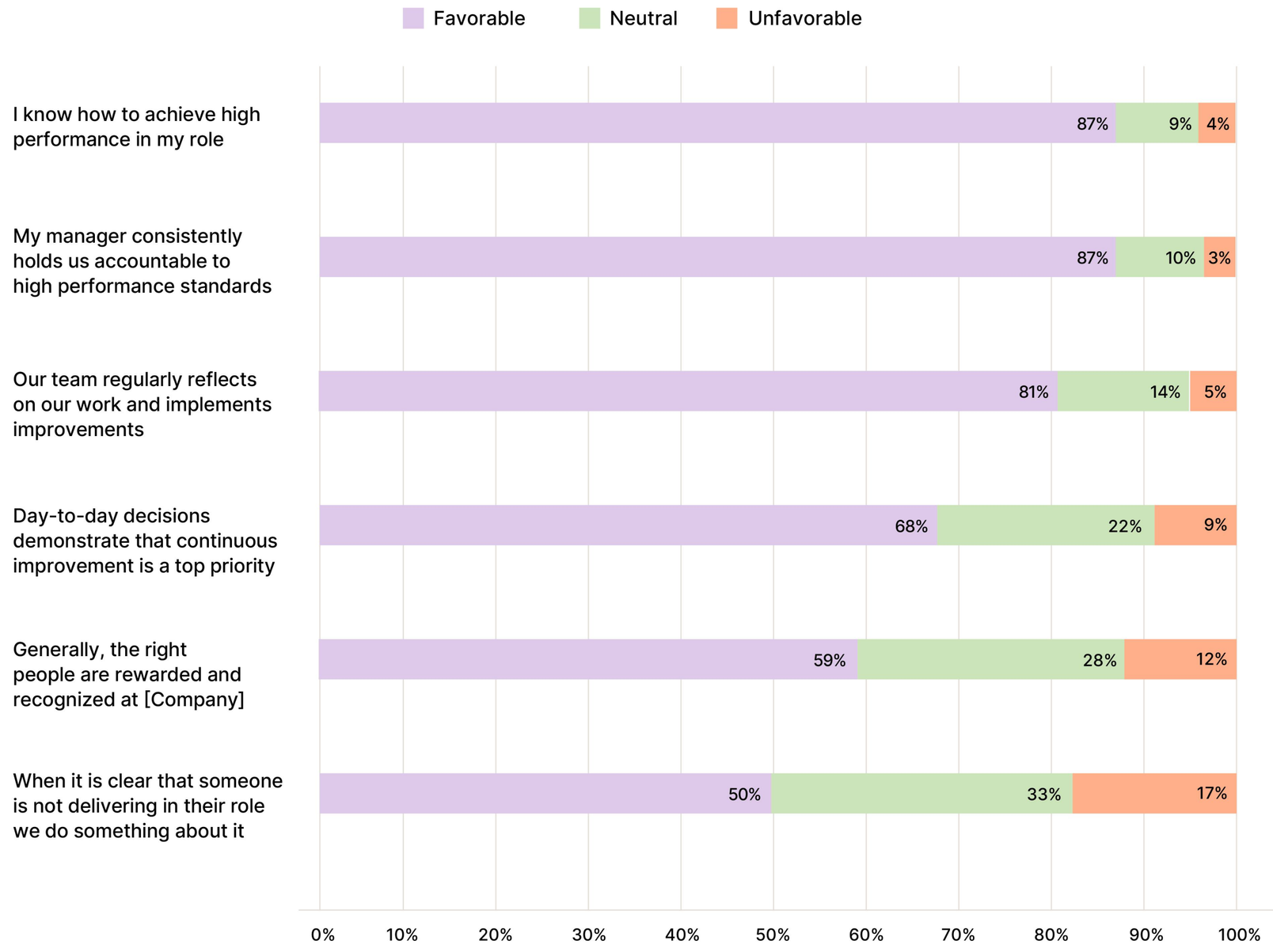
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Engineer EXCELLENCE

While most employees clearly understand performance standards (87%), organizations struggle to match that individual clarity with systemic follow-through, leaving a disconnect between what employees know is expected and what the organization actually enforces or rewards.

Standards of excellence and employees' place within them are more clear than what happens after



Just half of employees around the world say that their company acts when someone is not delivering in their role. And not even three in five say the right people are recognized and rewarded for great work. Hello, performance ambiguity!

What to do about it

Close the loop. Our advice to leaders is to start with yourself: When a goal your team owns is missed, say so before anyone asks, and name what you'll do differently next time. Employees copy what leaders model; our research found direct reports were 19.7 times more likely to give continuous feedback when their own manager did. Accountability travels the same way. Employees will mimic their leaders' behaviors.

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The cost of that ambiguity multiplies as employees do the effort math. Employees will calibrate their own effort based on what they observe.

When neither great nor poor work draws a visible response, the standard for excellence becomes obscured.



Hanna Andersson

Made to play. Made to last.

"Excellence isn't defined by the standards we set but by how consistently we bring them to life.

We eliminated the safe middle in our performance rating scale, introduced clearer rubrics to define expectations, and strengthened calibration to drive more meaningful performance differentiation. We're also using employee feedback to reinforce leadership accountability and action. Employees don't just listen to what leaders say matters. They watch what we consistently do."

Davida Lindsay-Bell, Chief People Officer at Hanna Andersson

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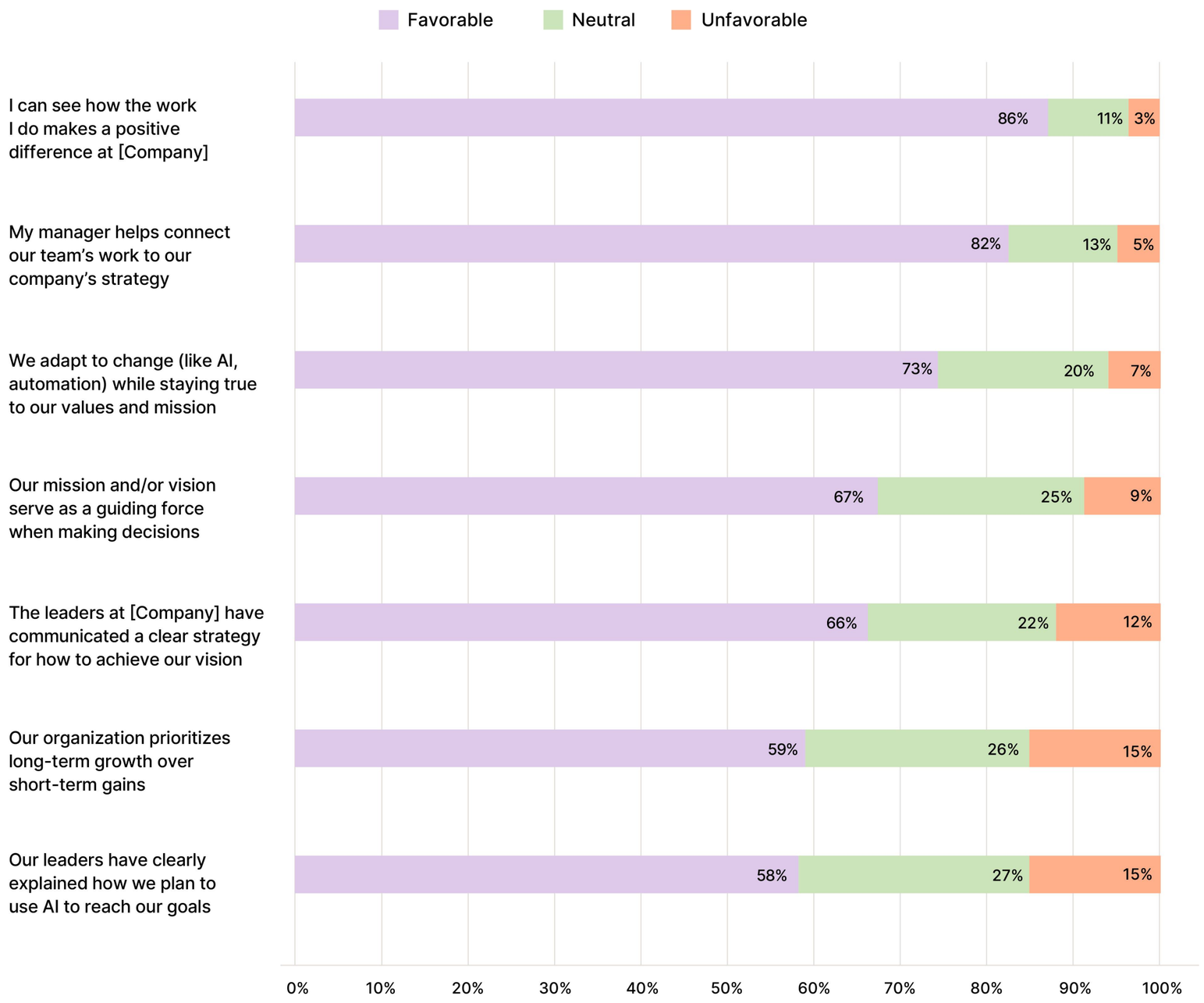
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Refine VISION

Of all the factors, vision may be the most challenging for businesses today. With AI continuing to disrupt industries, formulating meaningful goals and strategies to reach them can feel like shaking a Magic 8 Ball.

The good news is that employees are making the most of this moment. Most employees and their managers are connecting their contributions to company strategy, even in some cases where leaders aren't crystal clear on what the strategy is.

Employees claim their contributions are aligned even without knowing where the company is headed



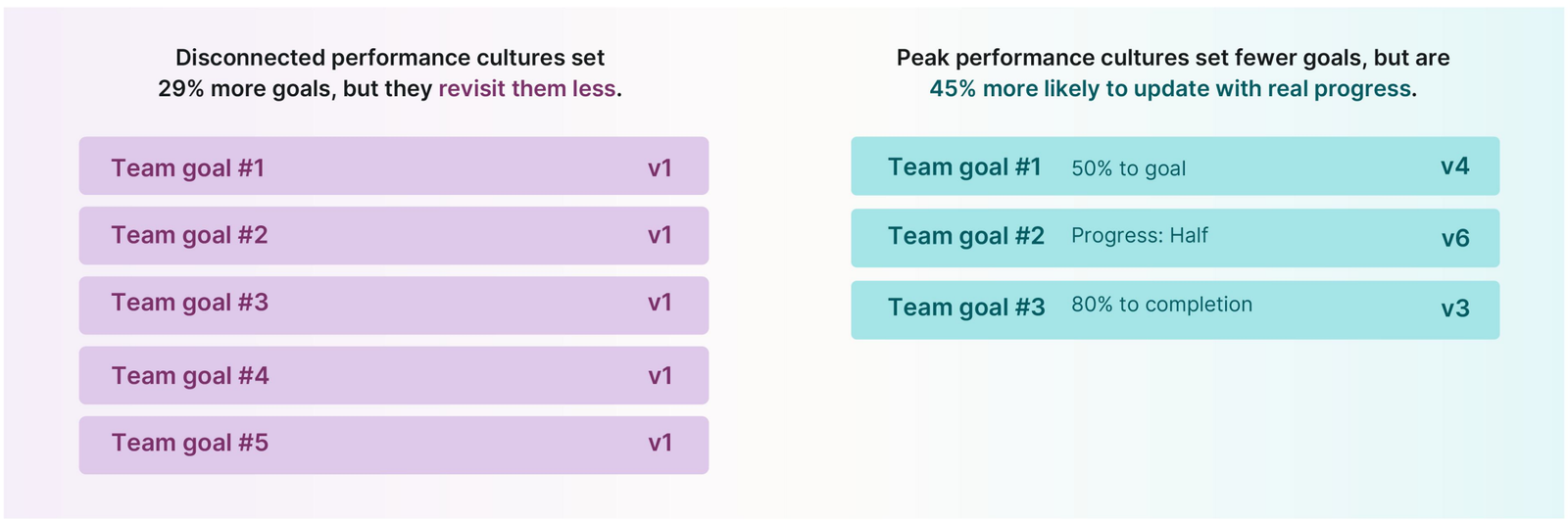
On AI, just 58% say the plan for using it has been connected to company goals. We get it. With how quickly AI is moving, it's hard to know what to anchor on. Even across the trailblazing companies in this benchmark, leaders struggle to connect AI experimentation directly to business outcomes. It raises the question of whether AI adoption has, in many cases, been the goal itself.

It turns out that the way a company goes about goal-setting impacts its performance culture, too.

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Companies with Disconnected performance cultures, where employees are neither engaged nor confident in where the company is headed, set 29% more goals than companies with Peak Performance cultures. But they also revisit them less. Peak Performance companies, on the other hand, set fewer goals, but are 45% more likely to update with progress, iterating as the strategy and company needs to shift.

More goals doesn't equate to better performance



Fewer goals, revisited regularly, drive greater Peak Performance.

This demonstrates that more goals doesn't equate to better performance. A smaller number of goals that you come back to regularly has a higher chance of achieving Peak.

What to do about it

Most guidance on vision says lead with the 'why.' But that advice assumes the reasoning behind a decision is the unclear part. In the middle of an AI revolution, **where visions are on the move, explaining the "how for now"** may do more for you than explaining 'why.'



Worth noting

"Our organization prioritizes long-term growth over short-term gains" (which is a high driver of Performance Confidence) and "Our leaders have clearly explained how we plan to use AI to reach our goals" are two of the least used questions, with fewer than 1 in 4 companies asking.

Curious, no?

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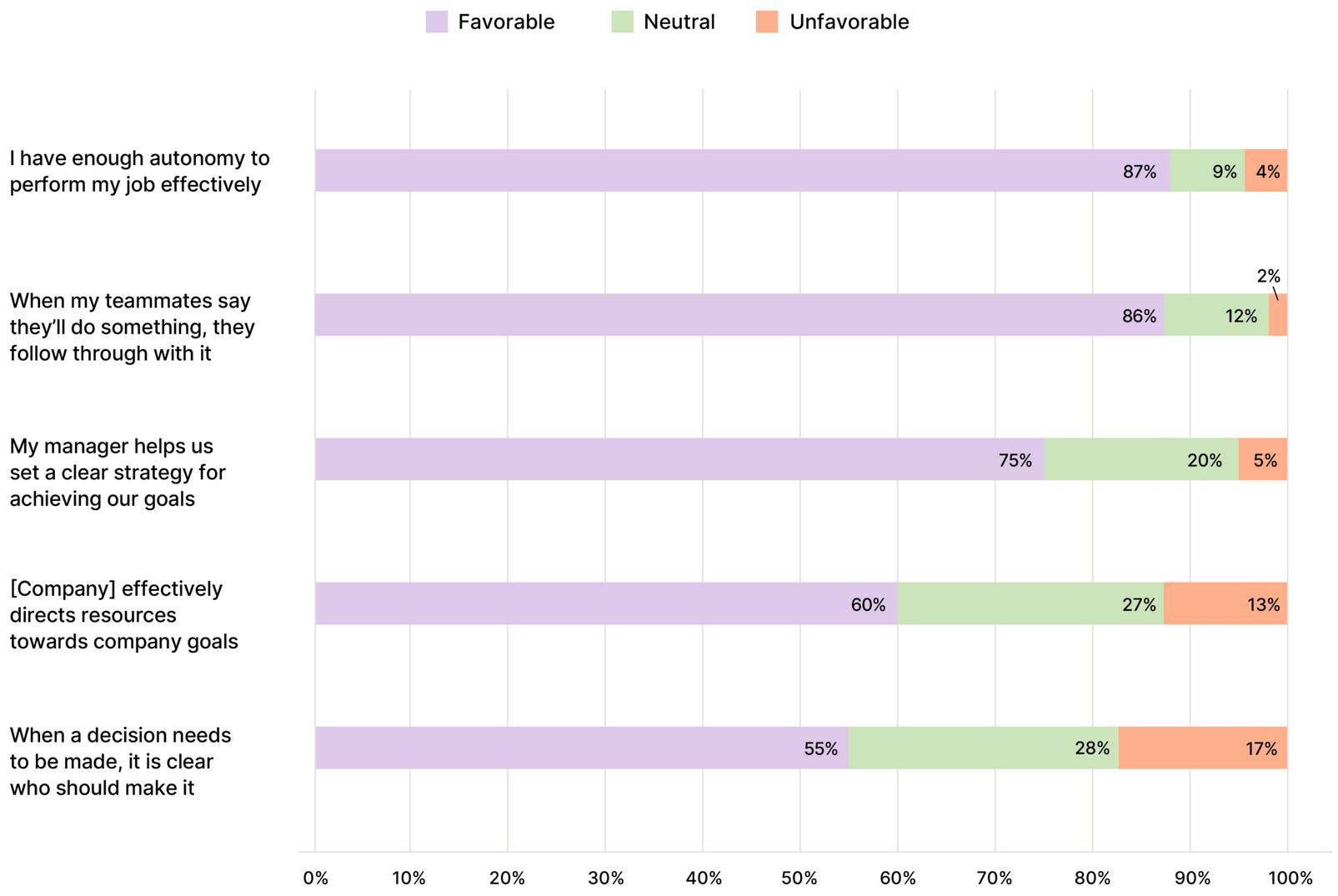
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Instill OWNERSHIP

Decisions, decisions. Why is it so hard? Take dinner as an example. There are too many restaurants nearby, too many options on the menu, and too many people who will be let down if we make a mistake! When it is so hard to decide where to go for dinner, we can see how it would be a far greater challenge for leaders to make lofty decisions within their businesses.

When it comes to ownership, the traditional pattern of proximity bias takes shape. What employees have visibility into, they rate relatively highly, and what they can't see, they rate lower.

Decision rights and resource allocation are the constraints when it comes to ownership and autonomy within organizations



When we combine people who disagree and people who are neutral, we have two in five employees who don't even know who should be the decision-maker in an organization. This data shows that in most organizations, the constraint on ownership is not how much room people have to act, but rather how little agreement there is about who gets to use it.

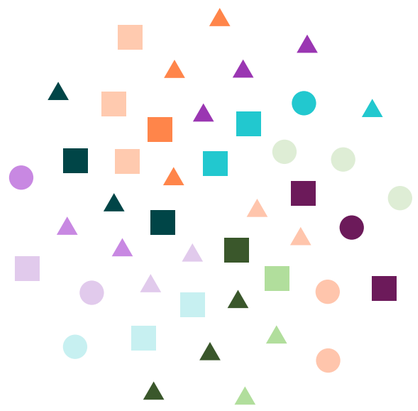
According to McKinsey, organizations tend to already know this about themselves. They found that just 20% of employees say their organizations excel at decision-making, and 61% say time spent making decisions is used ineffectively.

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A question we had while analyzing this data was where the confusion about decision-making actually sits. The intuitive assumption is that clarity improves as you move up the hierarchy, since senior people are closer to the decisions and should have the most clarity on what's within their scope to own. Splitting this item by leadership level shows almost the opposite.



Across the whole org, VPs have the least clarity around who should be making decisions. The ambiguity likely makes decisions slow, duplicative, and easy to reverse. And the cost of indecision lands on the layer responsible for converting strategy into delivery.



What to do about it

Pick a decision framework and apply it to the two decision areas that stall most often in your organization. RAPID and DACI are two that have been well tested in business settings. Do a small-scale test of a framework within your own team, and then roll out the one that sticks.

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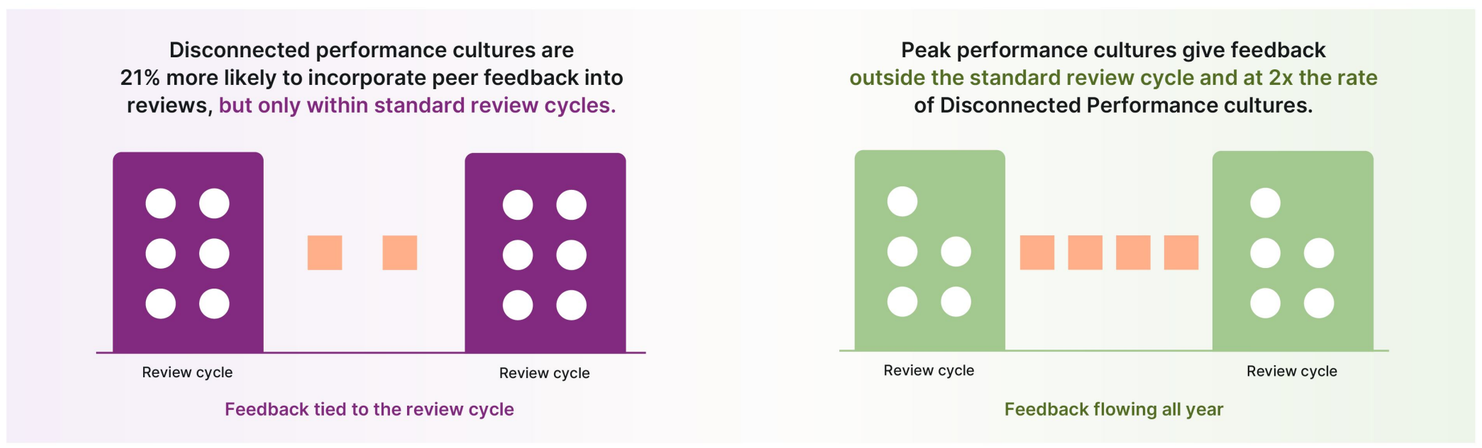
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Embed LEARNING

Great feedback doesn't wait until review cycles

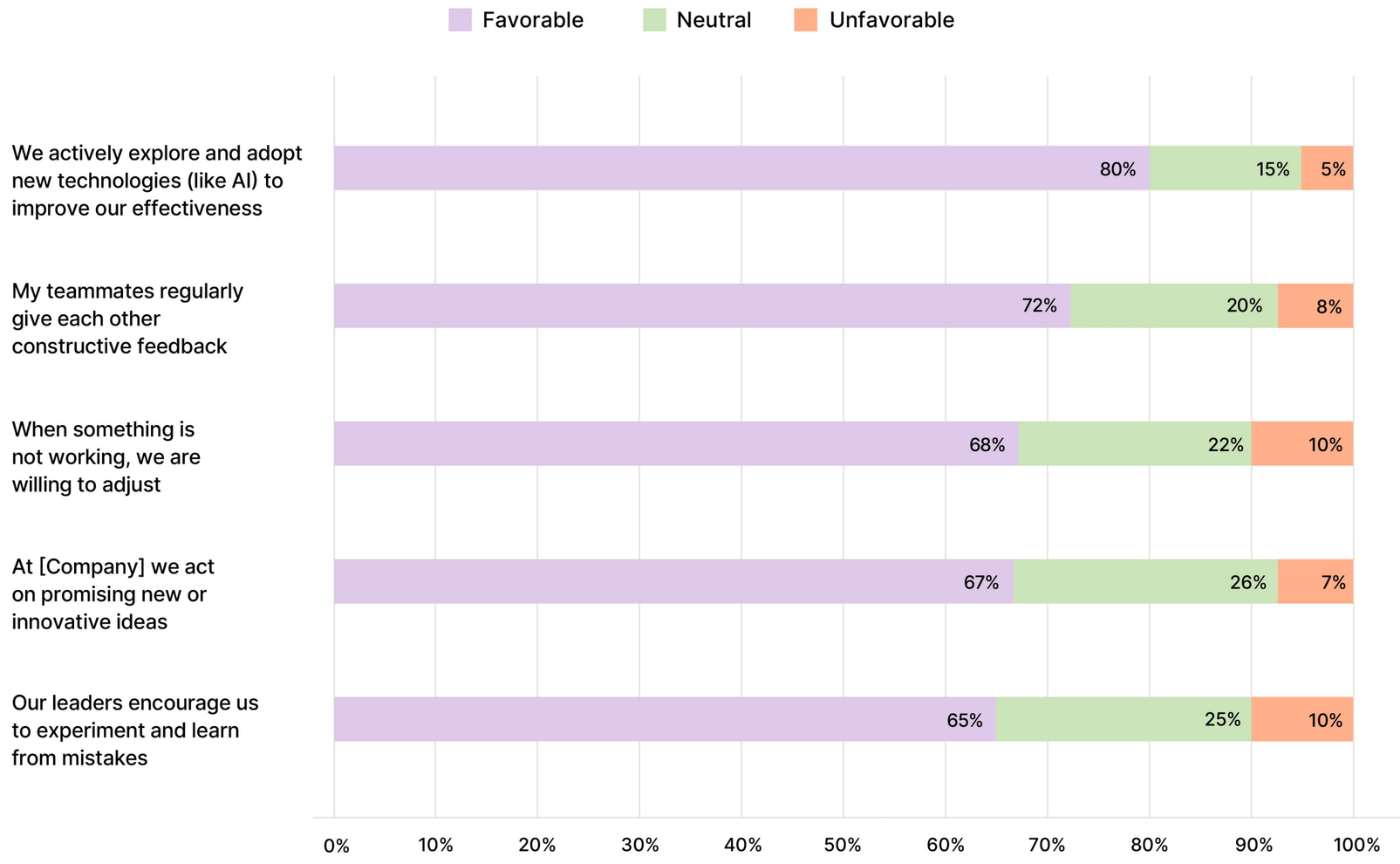


Peak Performance companies make feedback a habit of learning, not an event.

Learning happens at the individual and organizational levels. We found that how companies handle performance feedback is a microcosm of an organization's approach to learning. Disconnected companies are 21% more likely to be incorporating peer feedback into their performance evaluation cycles. But Peak Performance companies don't relegate feedback to these annual or biannual reviews; instead, they give peer feedback outside the cycle at 2x the rate of Disconnected companies. It may be that employees are quicker to ignore feedback that comes to them as a box-checking exercise and more likely to learn from continuous feedback. The good news is that, regardless of culture type, our benchmark data indicates that constructive feedback within teams is generally going well.

Additionally, four in five employees say they actively explore new technologies (such as AI, machine learning, and cloud computing) to boost effectiveness.

Organizations adopt new technologies, but lack conditions for sustained experimentation

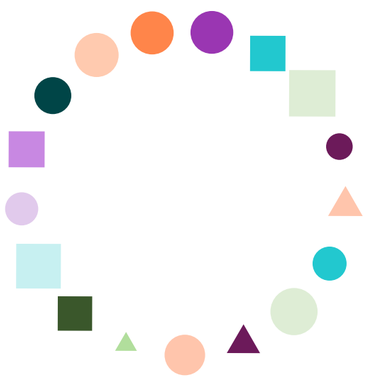


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The lower scores across these three items point to a lack of cultural permissiveness around trial and error. Do employees feel like kids brought to Disneyland, only to be held on a leash? Given the high proportion of neutral responses, employees simply may not see enough visible examples of adaptation, innovation, and experimentation to feel confident making a clear call. Could be either or both.

It could also be that in this age of AI, adoption is the easy part of change. The tools are arriving before the habits and norms of iteration are in place. That is an expensive way to manage a change, and MIT's State of AI in Business report from 2025 put a price on it. Of the enterprise AI pilots it reviewed, which cover $30-40 billion in gen AI spend, 95% delivered no measurable impact on the P&L (profit and loss). The researchers attributed the failures not to model quality but to "brittle workflows, lack of contextual learning, and misalignment with day-to-day operations."

The practical consequence of adoption without follow-through and iteration (be it due to tool inadequacy or a lack of cultural norms permitting trial and error) is losing out on actual transformation. Without permission to be wrong in public, people use new tools to do their existing job slightly faster, rather than to change how the job works.



What leaders can do

Consider sharing a specific project that didn't go as planned during an all-hands meeting. Talk through what was tried, what was learned, and what you'd adjust next time. When leaders openly share learning moments, it helps create an environment where everyone feels safe to innovate and learn.



OLX CEO, Christian Gisy, describes his organization's shift toward continuous learning:

"We stopped treating listening as an annual event. Now it's a loop. Our people tell us what matters, our managers get the data, and we show a quick, visible response. Every cycle teaches us something, and what we learn shapes what we do next."

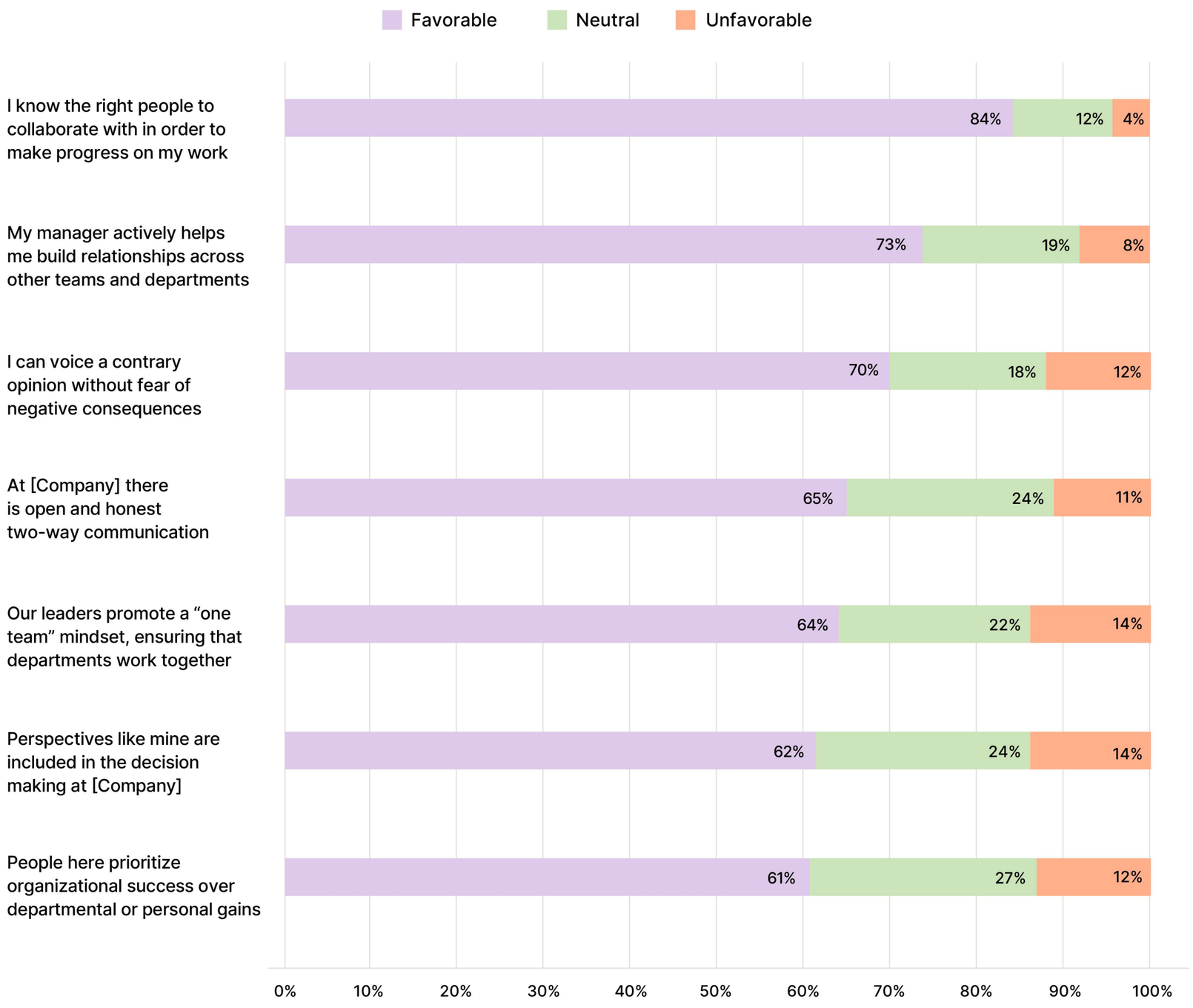
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Harness VOICE

Voice goes beyond who is trusted with the microphone or who gets a say, though those things are vital to it going well in an organization. The voice dimension includes interdepartmental collaboration and how effectively teams across the organization step up to help one another achieve key business-wide goals. Imagine the org where *"color outside the lines"* is a colloquialism and *"stay in your lane"* is never said.

According to these initial benchmarks, collaboration is going well. People can find each other and work together.

Despite collaboration going reasonably well, teams may be too myopic in their pursuits



It is what's hiding behind the collaboration that should give leaders pause. A company made of well-run departments is not the same thing as a well-run company. Silos optimize locally, and the shortfall appears wherever work has to cross a boundary, which is where most of a strategy actually lives. Performance confidence is likely to take a hit then, because employees cannot reasonably believe an organization is capable of meeting its goals when the only evidence available to them is their own slice of it.

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We see teams at Peak Performance companies hold the health of the business ahead of the visibility of their own function 6% points more than the average and 13% points more than Disconnected companies.

Similar to insights gleaned in the 11th Annual Women in Work Report, we found that splitting these items by gender reveals inequity. We found that women score 5% points lower on having their perspectives included in decision-making and on being able to voice contrary opinions. They also score four points lower on open, two-way communication and knowing who to collaborate with. The risk of such a discrepancy is that members of the group can start to feel like their context is unwanted or their perspective won't change anything. They stop raising concerns, sharing ideas, or challenging plans early. The company may still look busy and collaborative, but it is losing the information and judgment of a major swath of people doing the work.



What leaders can do

Driving a true "one team" mindset starts at the top with C-suite alignment and visible cross-departmental presence. To embed this down the line, require that one goal per team be cross-departmental, making collaboration a structural condition of success and creating shared accountability across boundaries.

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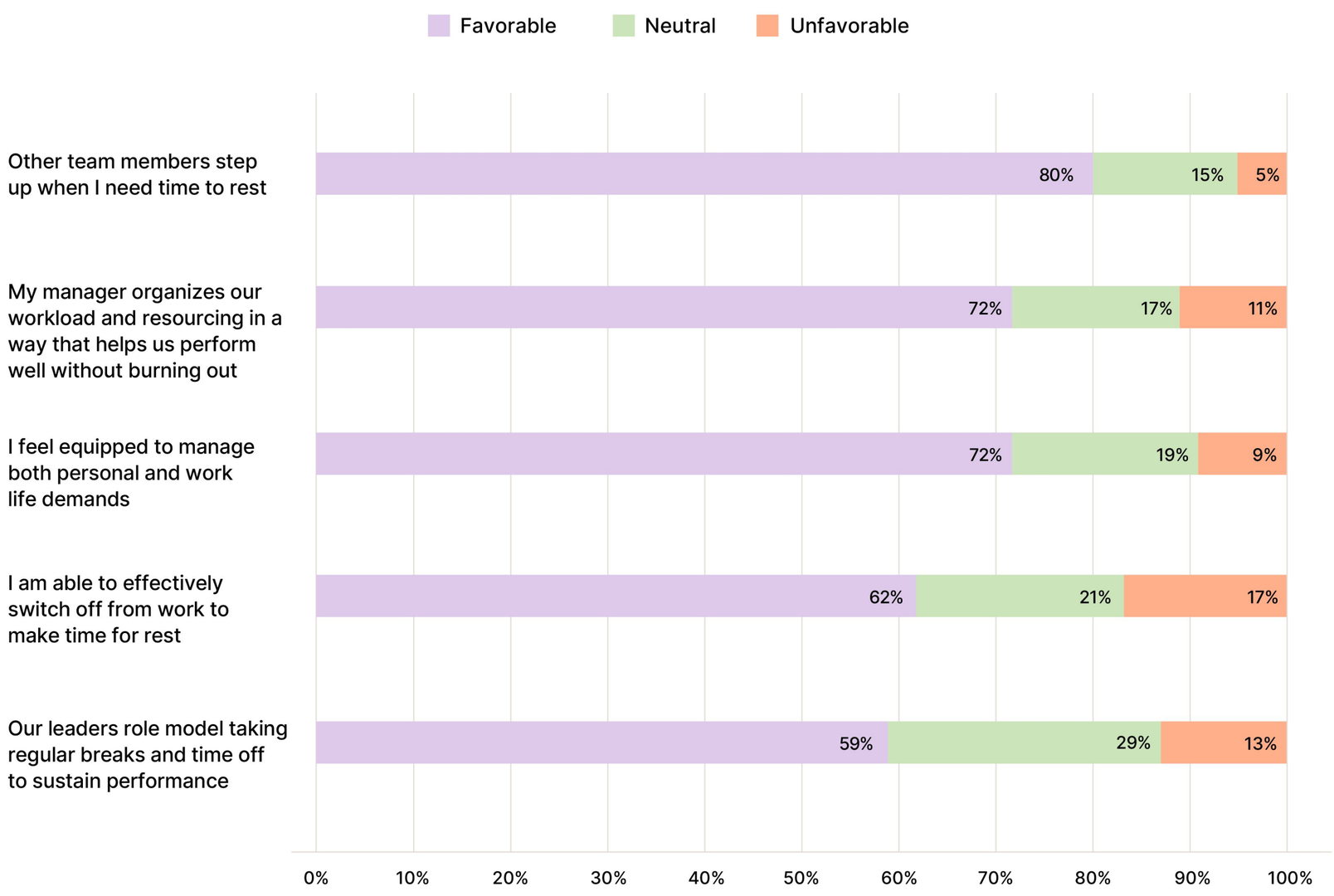
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Sustain ENERGY

Because humans aren't machines and can't run 24/7, sustainable success relies on intentionally building in time for rest and recovery. Organizations that foster balanced conditions for high performance consistently outperform those that push continuously without supporting employee wellbeing.

Unlike the proximity bias pattern seen in other dimensions, energy follows a different path. Support at the team and manager levels tends to score highest, self-assessments of personal capacity fall in the middle, and leadership modeling of sustainable work practices receives the lowest scores.

Organizations have done better to build peer support structures than leaders have done modeling performance sustainability



We also found a 23% point gap between the C-suite and VPs regarding managers organizing workload and resourcing to maximize performance. The people an organization relies on to distribute a sustainable workload down the chain are reporting that nobody is doing it for them. But leaders at each layer seem to protect their direct reports a little better than the one above them.

This marks the second occurrence of this pattern in the benchmark data. Two distinct questions across different factors yield the exact same trend line, with directors and VPs consistently scoring lowest. Positioned between senior leadership and frontline execution, these middle leaders witness firsthand how decisions and workloads are handled, yet often lack the authority to shape them. Meanwhile, the substantially higher scores from the C-suite reveal a clear disconnect between how sustainable work practices appear from the top versus how they are experienced one level down.

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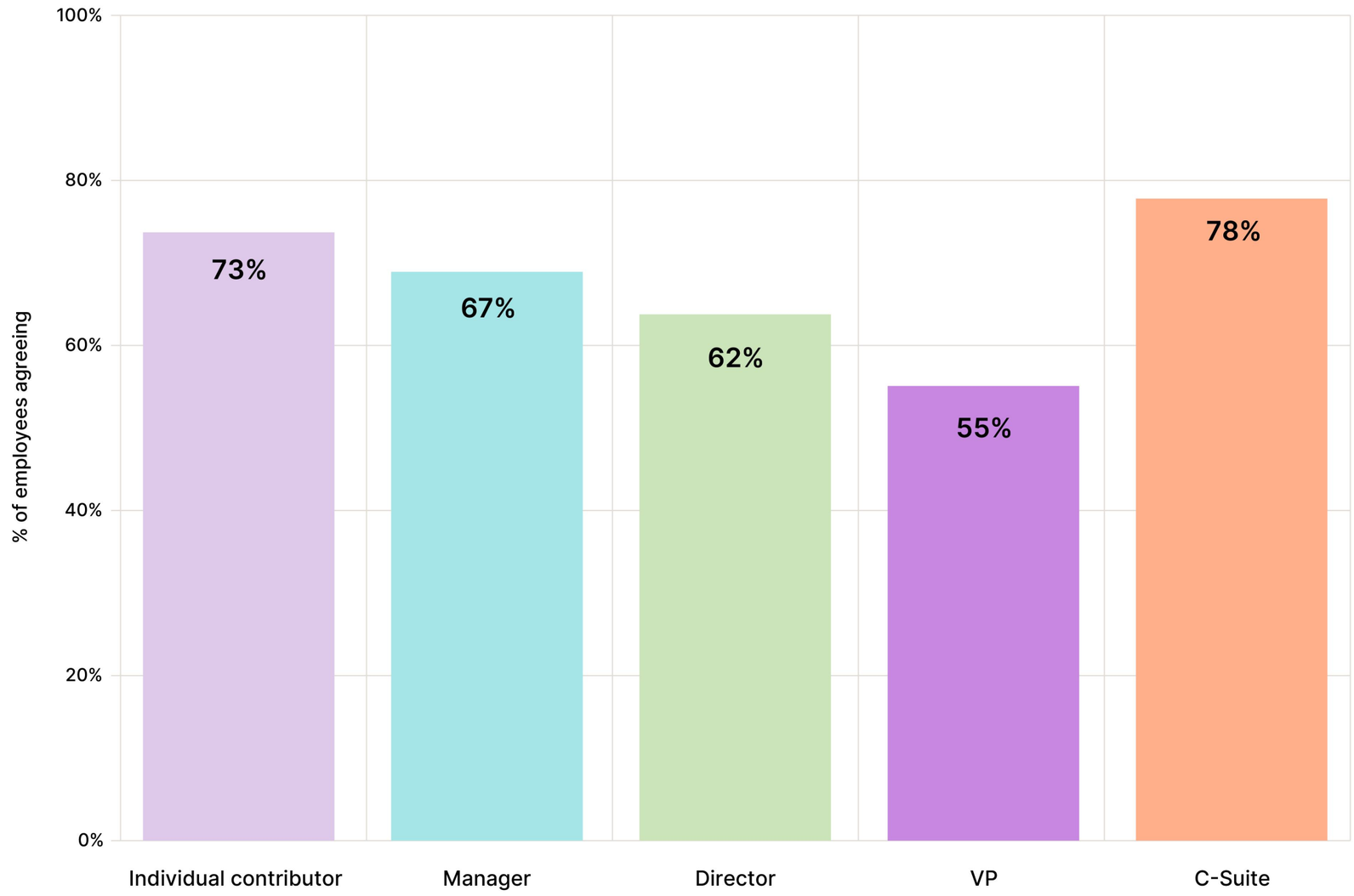
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Outside of the C-Suite, each level protects their direct reports a bit better than the one above



My manager organizes our workload in a way that helps us perform well without burning out

And, once again, we can't ignore the AI of it all. Employees, now tied to their 24/7 always-on AI agents, may feel more pressure to produce than ever. Today, organizations are asking employees to maximize on AI-driven productivity gains while management layers thin out and spans of control widen. Management scope is creeping, and there is likely less structure to guide them. These benchmarks show how much the VP and director levels have been carrying as cultures evolve to meet internal and external pressures.

Yet, this challenge also presents a vital opportunity for leaders. By actively prioritizing wellbeing and establishing sustainable work habits, organizations can recharge their workforce, protect their leaders from burnout, and unlock resilient, long-term performance.

What to do about it

Make workload, balance, and energy regular topics in your 1-on-1s. Facilitate candid conversation in smaller-group meetings about what is critical and what can be reprioritized. Bring wellbeing into prioritization conversations so employees are supported to do their best work.

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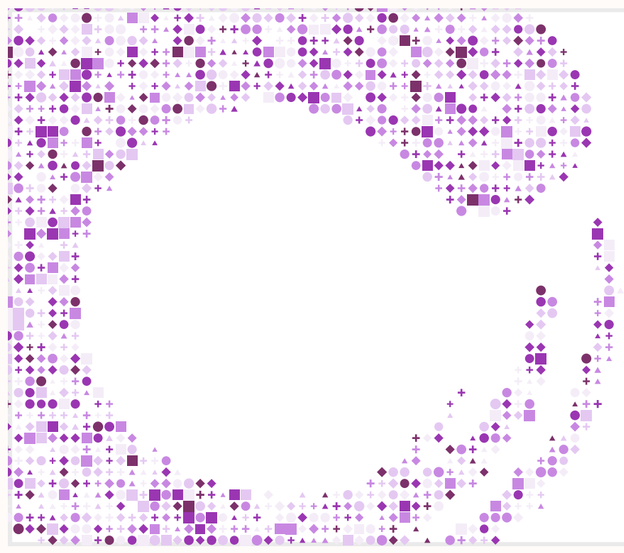
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Go forth and design:

You are being asked to design culture while the ground moves, with no settled answers about AI, or headcount, or what the work will even look like in three years. Design usually assumes a destination, and you have not been given one. But the pattern in this data suggests the destination was never really the point.



> Performance confidence is built by closing loops, visibly, over and over, until people come to understand that this is a place where things get finished.

The trailblazing organizations featured in this report show that high performance isn't reserved for companies that guess right about the future. It belongs to the ones willing to ask uncomfortable questions, measure what truly drives capability, and systematically close their operational loops.

When you shift your focus from measuring engagement for engagement's sake to building performance confidence, everything changes. You give your people clarity on where the business is going, clarity on who makes decisions, and the trust that their feedback will lead to progress.

The tools are in your hands. The data is clear. Now, it's time to build the habit, finish the play, and design a culture positioned to win over time.

About the research

This report draws on the first year of data from Culture Amp's Performance Culture Diagnostic, collected between July 2025 and July 2026. The diagnostic is modular, so the base varies by question: The most widely adopted questions were asked by 3,807 companies representing roughly 2.3 million employees, the least by 29 companies representing more than 19,000. Culture type comparisons require all eight outcome questions, which 104 companies asked.

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