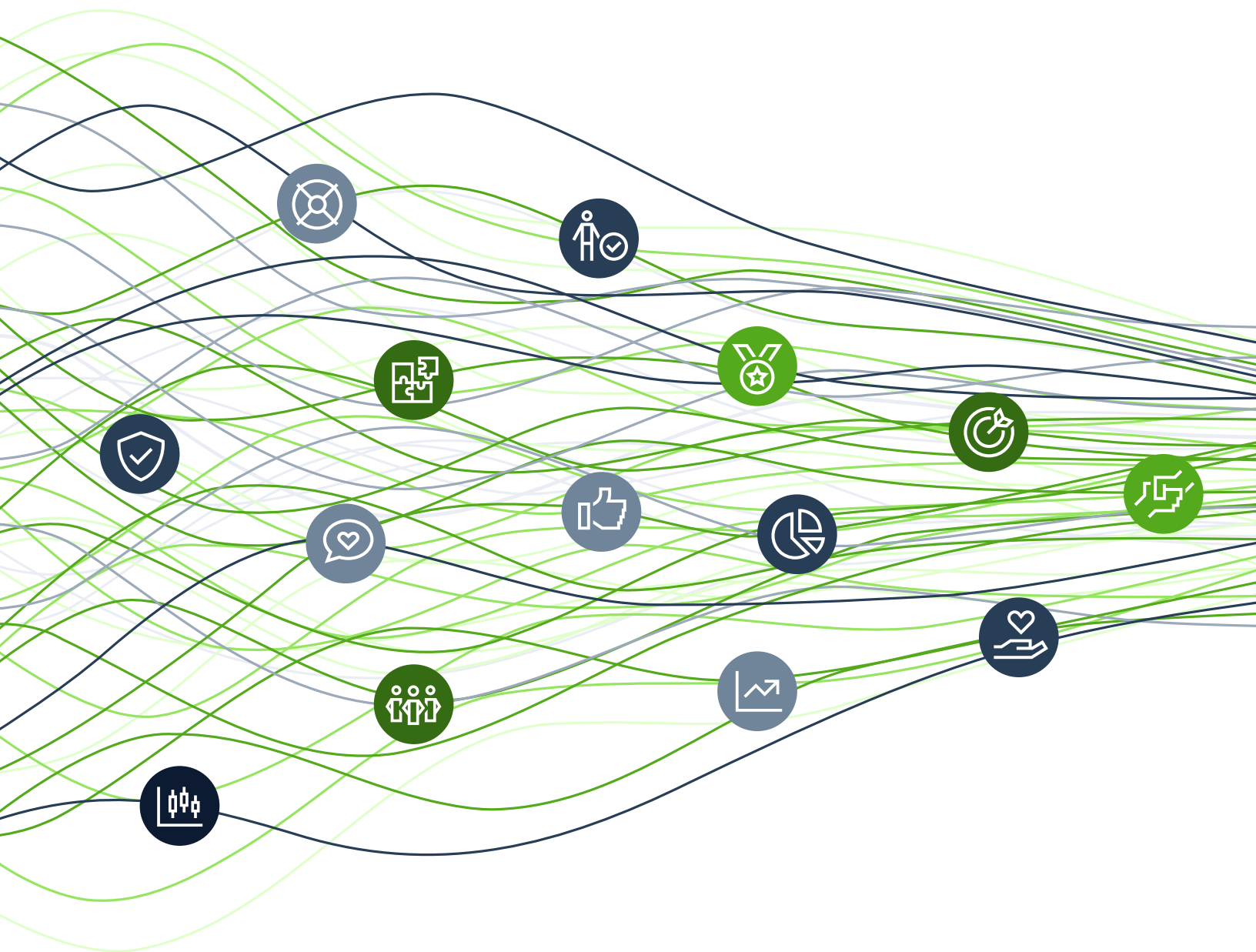


Trust in Turbulence: The 2026 State of Organizational Trust

How Organizations Absorb Disruption Without Losing Trust



ABOUT THIS REPORT

For more than 40 years, SparkEffect has specialized in the intersection of leadership development and organizational resilience. This research builds on our previous report and continues a longitudinal study of how organizations systematically build and leverage trust as a measurable business asset. This report also explores new territory: the impact of AI integration on teams, the interventions that foster repair or exacerbate rupture, and a deeper dive into the critical yet precarious role of managers in creating trust.

The findings provide a foundation for practical tools and frameworks that help leaders respond to disruption strategically, minimizing its impact while creating opportunities for greater resilience and competitive advantage.

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Trust remains a strong predictor of organizational performance

This year's Trust research did two things: it tested whether the patterns we identified in 2025 would hold, and it pushed deeper into the mechanisms behind them. The 2026 findings reinforce the relationship between trust, disruption, intervention, and organizational performance, while also revealing where that relationship is most vulnerable, and where organizations have the greatest opportunity to strengthen it.

→ **Trust remains a strong predictor of organizational performance.**

High-trust organizations report 35% higher revenue scores, 47% higher retention scores, and 46% higher customer and industry reputation scores than low-trust organizations.

→ **Disruption is increasingly the norm, not the exception.**

Eighty-five percent of respondents experienced at least one significant disruption in the previous 24 months, up from 71% in 2025. Much of that increase is tied to AI-related disruption.

→ **How organizations respond to disruption matters enormously.**

Trust falls sharply when disruption goes unaddressed, but even modest intervention improves outcomes. High-quality intervention can raise trust and Trust Elasticity above the levels reported by employees who experienced no disruption at all. Only 32% of respondents received support from a direct manager, the most common intervention reported.

→ **Direct managers are the clearest point of leverage—and one of the most vulnerable.**

Manager support is the intervention most strongly associated with increased trust, and 84% of recipients say it was handled well or very well. But managers operate with little margin for error, particularly when organizational change directly alters employees' jobs, responsibilities, technology, or sense of security.

→ **The opportunity is not to make managers do more, but to equip them better.**

Organizations should help managers translate change, give them the capacity and resources to support employee adaptation, and provide clear escalation paths for problems they cannot solve themselves.



Foreword: What We Learned Last Year, and What We Learned This Year

When we began studying trust in 2025, we were interested in a deceptively simple question:
What happens to trust when an organization experiences disruption?

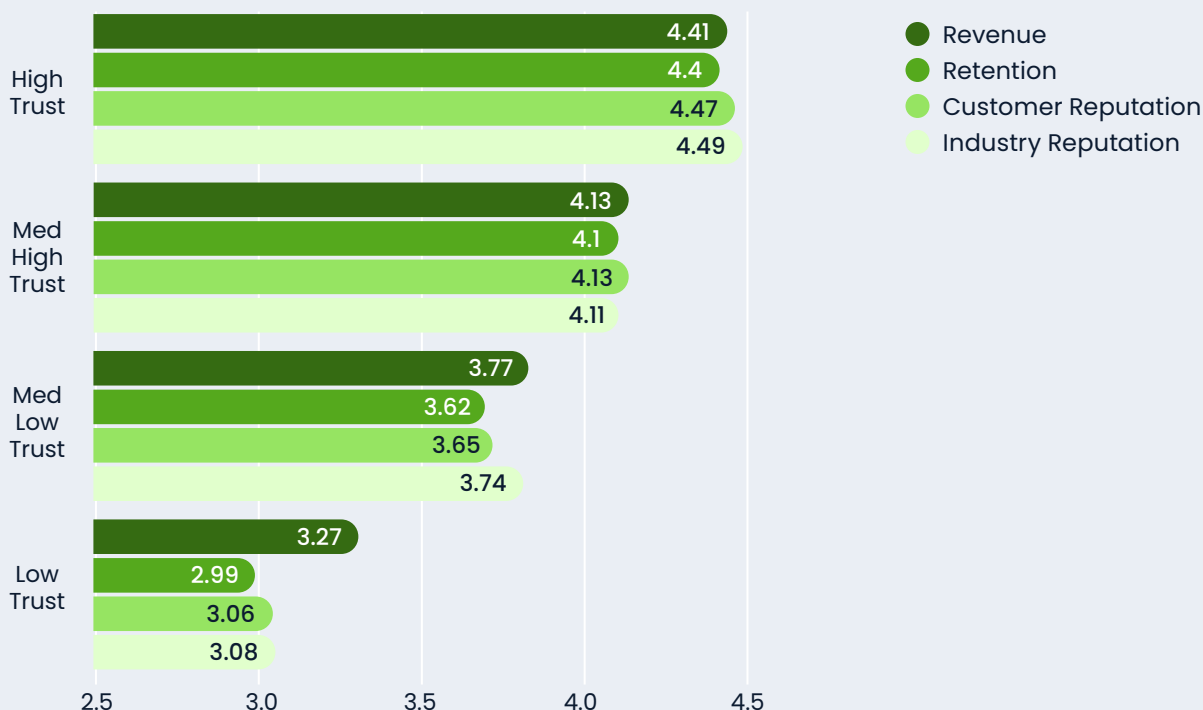
We found that while disruption creates operational challenges, it also changes the relationship between employees and the organizations around them. Our 2025 research revealed a clear pattern. Organizations with high levels of trust reported stronger revenue, retention, and reputation. When disruption occurred, trust became more vulnerable, but the damage was not inevitable. How an organization responds to disruption could preserve, restore, or even strengthen trust.

We tend to imagine organizational disruption as something to be survived: a period of instability after which leaders hope to return the organization to its former state. But our research suggested that when disruption was handled particularly well, respondents reported levels of Trust and Trust Elasticity that exceeded those of people who had experienced no disruption at all. Disruption creates vulnerability, but the way an organization responds to that vulnerability can strengthen the relationship rather than merely repair it.

The 2026 research gave us an opportunity to test whether those findings would hold, and they did.

Across another year of data¹, we again see a strong relationship between trust, disruption, organizational response, and reported performance. High-trust organizations continue to report dramatically stronger outcomes than low-trust organizations.

THE ROI OF TRUST



¹Data note: High Trust organizations report revenue scores 35% higher than Low Trust organizations, retention scores 47% higher, customer reputation scores 46% higher, and industry reputation scores 46% higher.

We also continue to see the cost of leaving disruption unaddressed. Among respondents who experienced no disruption, the average Trust Score was 82.4. Among those who experienced disruption but received no organizational intervention, the average Trust Score fell to 68.3, a 17% decline compared to the no-disruption control group.

Intervention changes the trajectory. Doing something following disruption improved average trust substantially. Doing it well improved trust above the no-disruption baseline. Respondents who experienced high-quality intervention reported an average Trust Score of 86.9, compared with 82.4 among those who experienced no disruption and 68.3 among those whose disruption went unaddressed.

**Average Trust Scores
based on disruption response:**

Disruption with
Quality Intervention

86.9

No Disruption/Baseline

82.4

Disruption without
Intervention

68.3



Organizations that handle a disruption well typically see higher Trust scores.

**When intervention
significantly
improved trust:**

41.5% higher
revenue scores

64% higher
retention scores

44% higher
customer reputation scores

47% higher
industry reputation scores

The same pattern appears when we look beyond Trust Scores to Trust Elasticity—the organization’s ability to absorb disruption and recover from it. Respondents who experienced high-quality intervention reported an average elasticity score of 42.85, compared with 39.75 among those who experienced no disruption and just 33.64 among those who experienced disruption without intervention. Even relatively poor intervention performed better than doing nothing.

In terms of business performance, those whose intervention significantly improved trust reported 41.5% higher revenue scores, 64% higher retention scores, 44% higher customer reputation scores, and 47% higher industry reputation scores.

In other words, the central finding from 2025 survived another year of scrutiny: **Disruption damages trust when organizations allow it to. But disruption can also become an opportunity to build trust and business performance when organizations respond well.**



**High trust scores correlate
to higher scores for revenue,
retention, and reputation.**

Disruption Is Becoming More Common

What has changed is the environment in which workplace trust plays out.

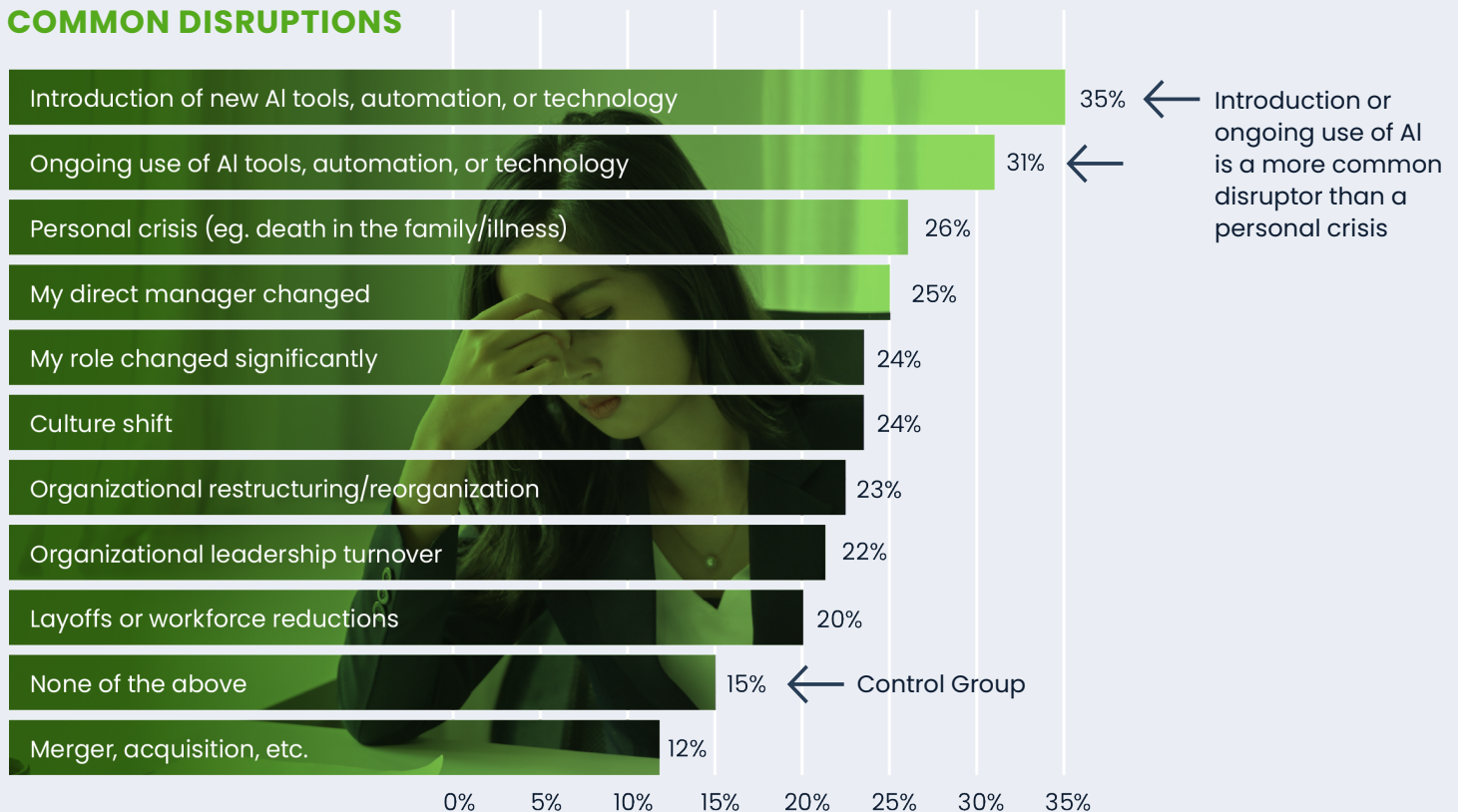
In 2025, 71% of respondents reported experiencing at least one significant disruption in the previous 24 months. In 2026, that figure rose to 85%, an increase of 14 percentage points.

Much of that increase appears connected to artificial intelligence. Forty-eight percent of respondents experienced disruption associated with either the introduction or ongoing use of AI, up from 37% in 2025.

48%

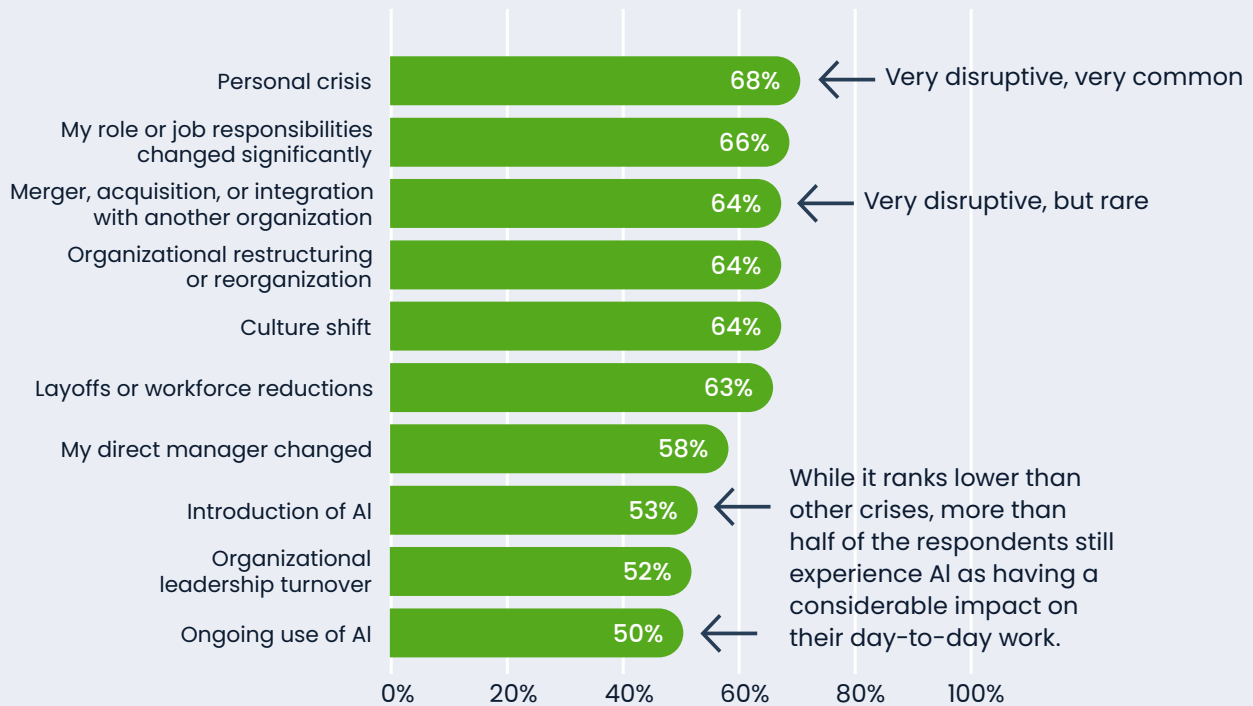
experienced
disruption
associated with
use of AI

COMMON DISRUPTIONS



AI is not necessarily the most disruptive experience in every sense. Personal crises still have a greater impact on people's day-to-day work: 68% of respondents experiencing a personal crisis described its effect as considerable or extreme, compared with 53% for the introduction of AI.

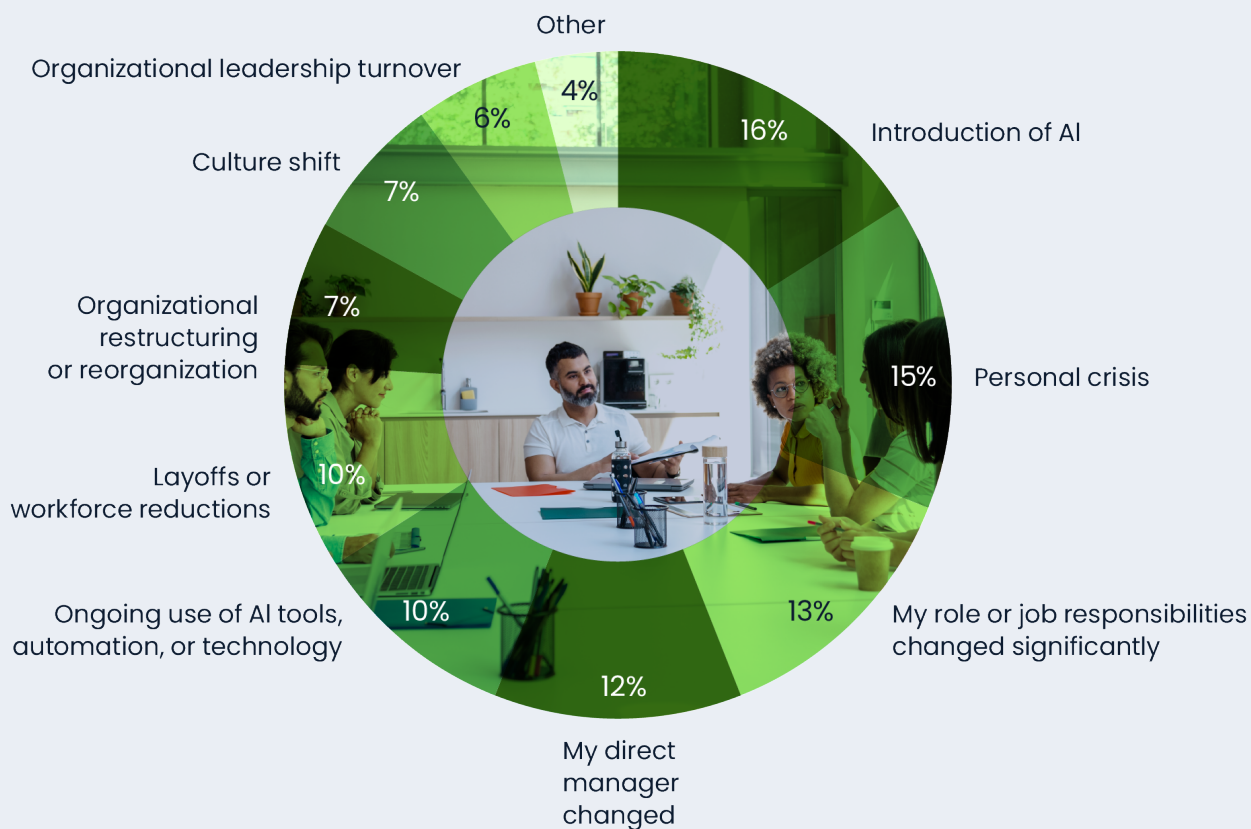
DISRUPTION | CHANGE TO DAY-TO-DAY WORK (TOP TWO)



AI drives a greater overall frequency of disruptions in 2026.

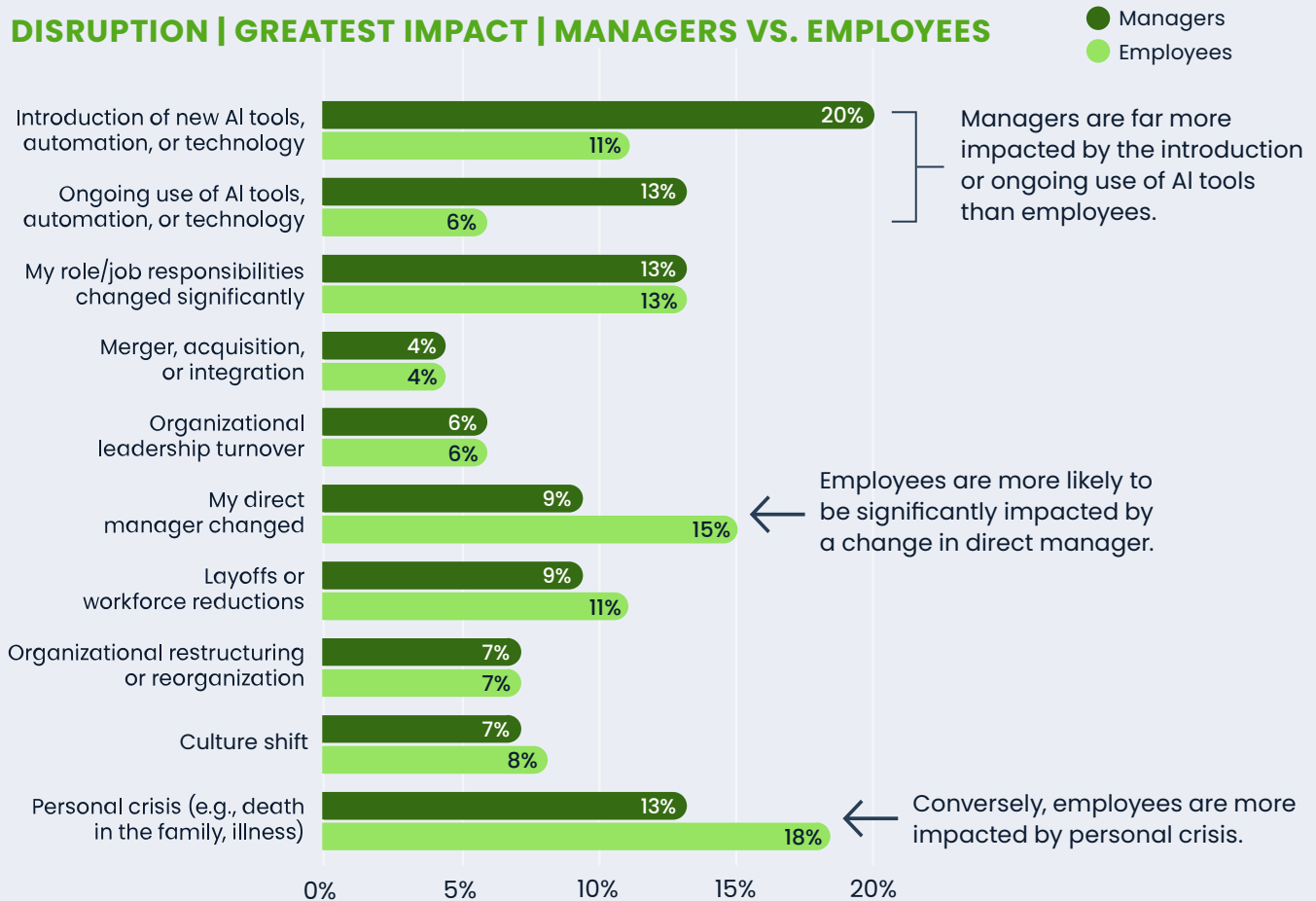
But AI's combination of reach and impact makes it different. When respondents were asked to identify the single disruption that had the greatest impact on them, the introduction of AI was the most frequently selected response at 16%, narrowly ahead of personal crisis at 15%.

DISRUPTION | GREATEST IMPACT



The experience is also different for managers. Managers were nearly twice as likely as employees to identify the introduction of AI as their most impactful disruption—20% compared with 11%—and were more than twice as likely to identify the ongoing use of AI as most impactful, 13% compared with 6%.

DISRUPTION | GREATEST IMPACT | MANAGERS VS. EMPLOYEES



Managers are twice as likely as their employees to experience AI as a disruption.

The people organizations depend upon to help employees navigate disruption are increasingly navigating significant disruption themselves.

And that observation brings us to the central question of the 2026 report.

Last year, we established that **trust matters**. We demonstrated the relationship between trust, disruption, recovery, and organizational performance.

This year, we wanted to know **how that relationship actually works**.

What happens between the disruption and the outcome? What does an effective intervention look like? Where does organizational support break down? Why are some forms of trust more resilient than others? And, in particular, what happens at the point where organizational disruption becomes personal: the relationship between an employee and their direct manager?

If the 2026 research validates much of what we learned last year, it also lets us take a closer look under the hood.



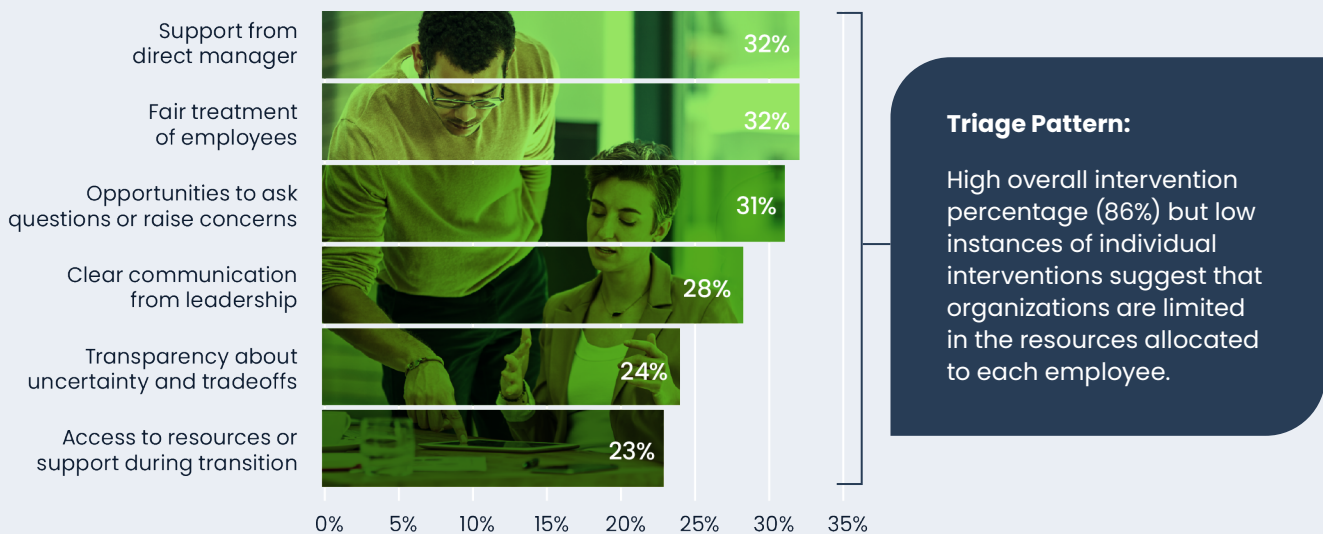
What happens at the point where organizational disruption becomes personal: the relationship between an employee and their direct manager?

Organizations Are Responding, but in Triage Mode

While the frequency of disruptions is increasing, and while 86% of organizations take some action when disruptions occur, efforts are scattershot.

Support from a direct manager—the most common leadership intervention—reached only 32%. Opportunities to ask questions reached 31%. Clear organizational communication reached 28%. Access to resources reached only 23%.

EXPERIENCES DURING DISRUPTION | INTERVENTION



This creates something of a **triage pattern**, in which the use of intervention is broad but shallow. Most organizations appear to be providing intervention. However, the majority of our survey respondents report that their organizations only offer one or two kinds of support following a disruption.

It is unclear whether organizations are not offering more interventions, or whether employees are unaware of the resources available to them; however, we would argue that an employee not knowing about a benefit is effectively the same as them having no benefit.

When employees engage with interventions, the results are mixed, with some reporting significantly improved trust, and some significantly reduced trust. The risk here is that the single intervention an employee receives may not be the one they need.



Disruption is common, but most employees only report one or two forms of support from their organization following a disruption.

That said, providing support following a disruption is critical; the value can't be overstated.

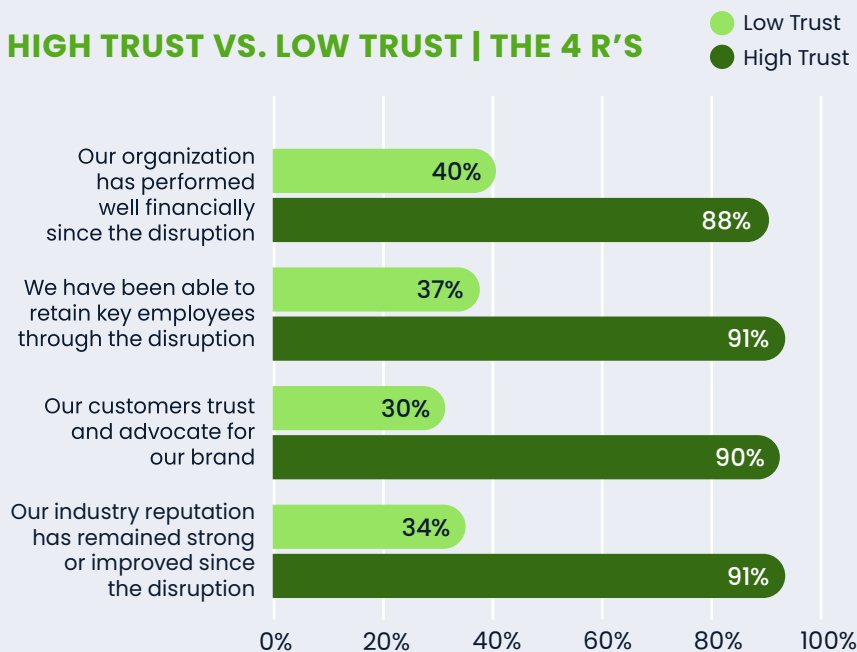
Doing something is generally better than nothing: modest-quality interventions correlated with an average Trust Score of 77.5, compared with an average of 68.3 among respondents who experienced disruption without intervention.

However, doing something well has a massive benefit: high-quality intervention pushed average trust to 89.7, well above the average of the control group who experienced no disruption at all.

A rise from 68.3 to 89.7 may appear modest on a 100-point scale, but it marks the difference between a Low Trust and a High Trust organization.

High Trust organizations enjoy 35% higher revenue scores, 47% higher retention scores, 46% higher customer reputation scores, and 46% higher industry reputation scores.

HIGH TRUST VS. LOW TRUST | THE 4 R'S



Compared to Low Trust Organizations, High Trust Organizations have:

35% higher
revenue scores

47% higher
retention scores

46% higher
customer reputation scores

46% higher
industry reputation scores

If effective intervention can produce higher trust and a greater capacity to recover from disruption, and if disruption itself is becoming more common, then being able to handle disruption well is becoming that much more important.

With organizations and managers already stretched thin, triage is likely here to stay.

The question, then, is what kinds of interventions are the most valuable, and how can organizations most effectively reinforce their capabilities?

Direct Managers Are the Critical Point of Leverage

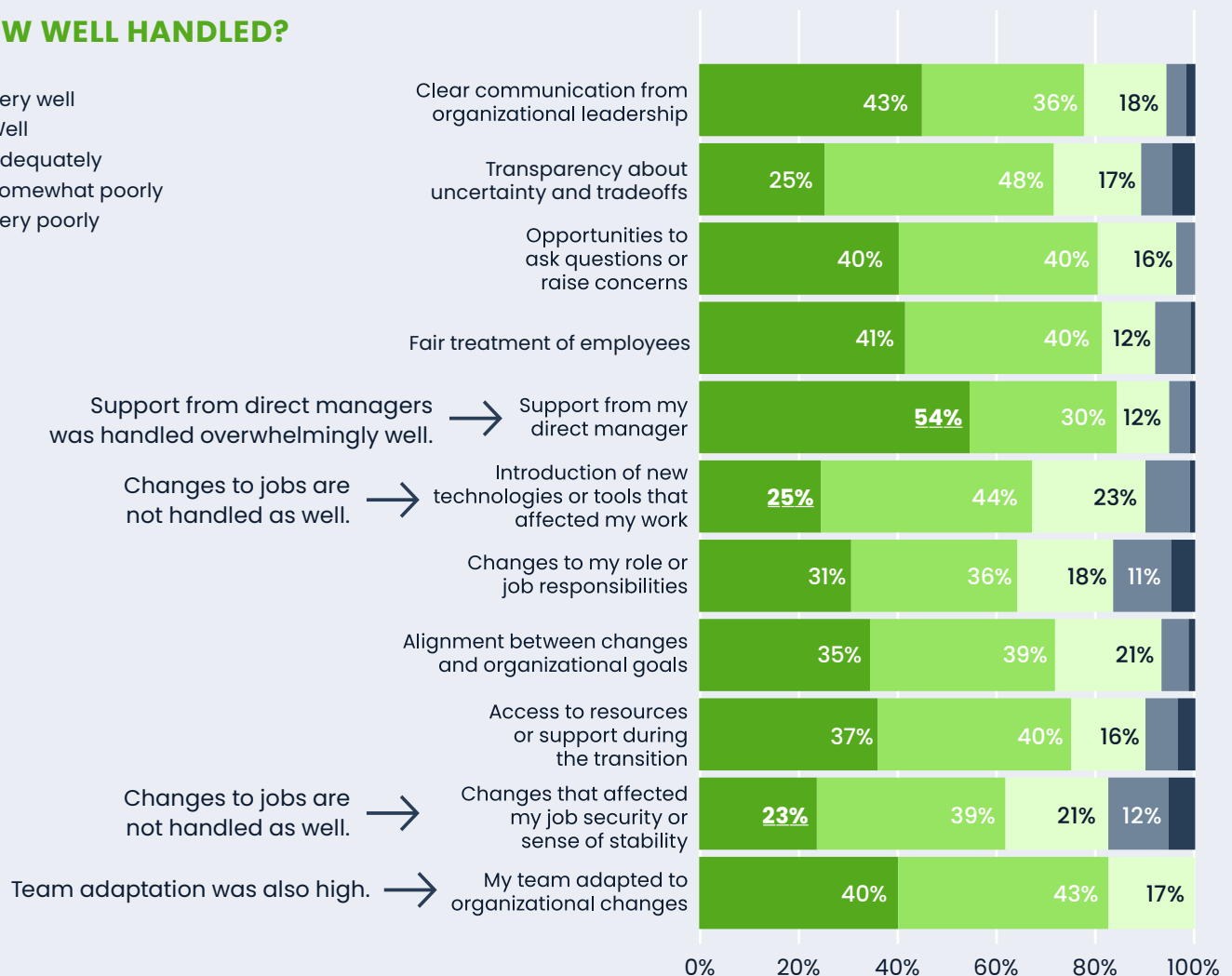
The clearest point of leverage may be the direct manager.

Direct managers sit closest to the employee experience of disruption. They are already the most common source of support, and when that support is delivered well, it is one of the strongest builders of trust. But the data also show the limits of relying on them alone. The opportunity is not to place more responsibility on managers, but to strengthen the systems, resources, and capabilities around them so they can respond effectively when disruption reaches their teams.

Employees generally evaluate direct-manager support very favorably. Among respondents who received it, 84% said that support was handled “well” or “very well,” the highest rating of any intervention measured. Only a small minority evaluated manager support poorly.

HOW WELL HANDLED?

- Very well
- Well
- Adequately
- Somewhat poorly
- Very poorly



Manager support is also the intervention most strongly associated with increased trust. Of the 32% of respondents who received direct support from their manager, 79% reported increased trust.

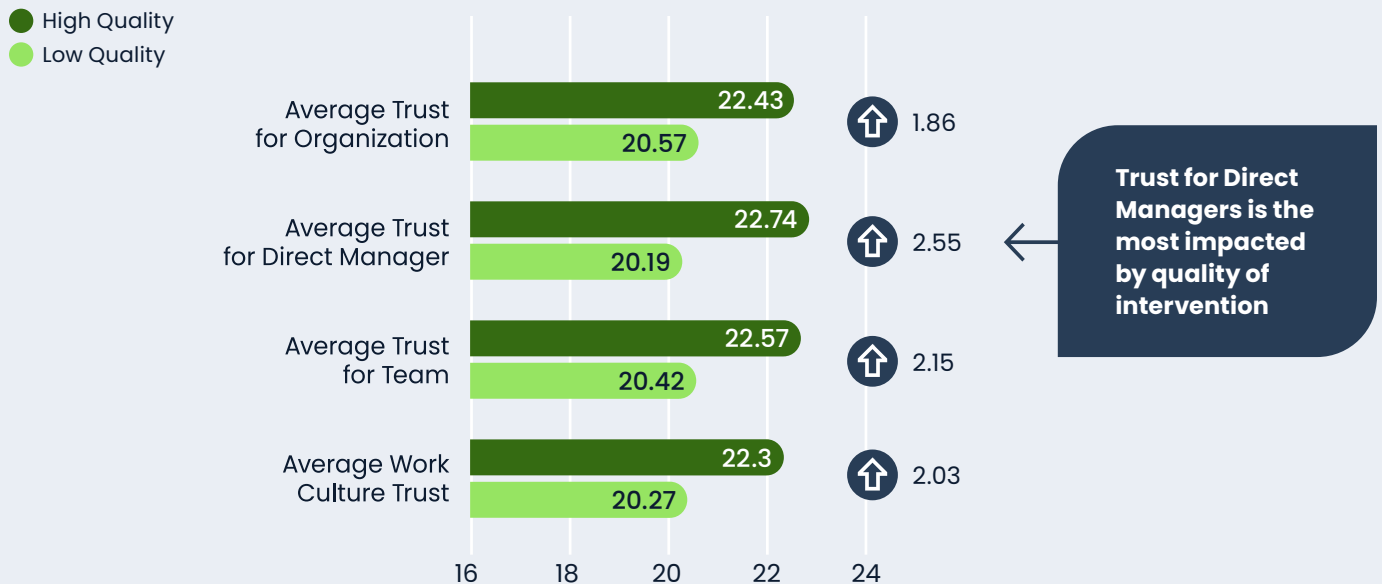
INTERVENTIONS BY TRUST IMPACT



Yet manager relationships also take the strongest hit when disruptions are not handled well.

Their proximity to employees is both an asset and a vulnerability, particularly when disruption directly changes an employee's work, role, or sense of security.

TRUST SCORES | DOMAIN SCORES HIGH VS. LOW QUALITY INTERVENTION



In other words, managers can be an extremely effective frontline, but are also the most likely to take a hit when things are handled poorly.

Disruptions That Hit Closest to Home

If the direct manager is where organizations have the most leverage, the next question is which disruptions managers need help navigating.

The data point toward disruptions that change the employee's job itself. Thirty-five percent of respondents experienced the introduction of new AI tools or automation, 31% experienced disruption from their ongoing use of AI, and nearly a quarter experienced a significant change in their role or responsibilities.

These changes matter because they reach directly into employees' working lives. Two-thirds of respondents who experienced a significant role change said it changed their day-to-day work considerably or extremely. More than half said the same of the introduction of AI.

Disruptions that change an employee's job are among the most common:

Introduction of new AI tools or automation

35%

Disruption from ongoing use of AI tools

31%

Role or job responsibilities changed considerably

24%



Yet these are also areas organizations handle less consistently well.

Among the types of support examined, respondents were **nearly three times more likely to say that the introduction of new technologies was handled poorly, and over five times more likely to say that changes to their roles and responsibilities were handled poorly**, compared to support from direct managers.

And when those job-level changes go poorly, the consequences for trust are substantial. Changes affecting job security were the most likely to decrease trust in our study, at 31%, followed by changes to roles and responsibilities at 21%. The introduction of new technology decreased trust for another 15%. These were also the types of disruptions least likely to be handled well.

TRUST DESTROYERS | RANKING



Direct-manager support itself, by contrast, decreased trust for just 4% of respondents who received it.

This suggests that the vulnerability in the manager relationship may have less to do with managers themselves than with the kinds of changes they are being asked to mediate.

Managers sit at the point where an organizational decision becomes a change to someone's responsibilities, workflow, skills, or sense of security. Their proximity makes them uniquely positioned to help—but it also means they absorb the questions, anxieties, and uncertainty those changes create.

Equip Managers, Don't Load Them Up

The obvious solution might seem to be more manager training. But 86% of managers in our study already report receiving training or development intended to help them lead through disruption.

The opportunity is not to load on more training scattershot. It is to make sure they are equipped for the moments they are actually being asked to navigate, and prepared to navigate those moments well.

Our open-ended findings point toward three broad needs.

- 1 Help managers translate change.** Managers need enough information to explain what is changing, what is not, what employees should expect, and what remains uncertain. They cannot provide clarity the organization has not given them.
- 2 Give managers capacity to support adaptation.** Employees value training and coaching, but they also value time, flexibility, adjusted workloads, and tangible resources that make adaptation possible. Managers need something they can offer beyond reassurance.
- 3 Give managers somewhere to take problems they cannot solve.** Questions about job security, staffing, compensation, role design, or organizational strategy often exceed a manager's authority. Managers need clear escalation paths rather than being expected to manufacture answers or absorb the consequences themselves.

The goal is not to make direct managers the intervention. It is to make them an effective part of an intervention system.

Direct-manager support becomes less effective when it is expected to function alone. When manager support was paired with just one additional intervention, Trust Elasticity increased substantially.

The strongest support system, then, is not necessarily one in which the manager does more, but one in which the organization gives the manager more to work with.



Trust Elasticity: What Disruption Leaves Behind

This brings us back to Trust Elasticity.

The Trust Score tells us where trust stands in an organization. Trust Elasticity is the condition of an organization following a disruption.

Elasticity combines measures of whether teams performed, roles remained meaningful, manager relationships held, employees understood the direction of the organization, and people believed there was a plan for future disruption. It also incorporates reported financial performance, retention, customer trust, and industry reputation. In that sense, it provides an integrated picture of what the organization looks like after it has been tested.

The differences are substantial.



Our intervention quality data also suggest something important about what organizations should be trying to accomplish. At lower levels of quality, trust outcomes are highly variable. As intervention quality improves, that range narrows and severely negative outcomes become increasingly uncommon. Eventually, the returns begin to flatten.



Quality is not only about raising the ceiling. It is about removing the floor.

That changes the goal. Effective disruption management does not require endlessly optimizing every intervention. It requires building a strong and consistent enough response that the organization reduces the likelihood of disruption producing catastrophic trust outcomes.

It also means that organizations need to treat responding to a disruption as a routine part of how they operate because those decisions do not disappear once the immediate disruption passes. Their consequences remain in the relationships, capabilities, and performance of the organization.

Trust Elasticity gives leaders a way to evaluate what those decisions leave behind. The direct manager is a critical part of that capability because managers stand where organizational change becomes employee reality. But they cannot be the entire system. They need information they can translate, resources and flexibility they can use to help employees adapt, and clear pathways for problems that exceed their authority.

Conclusion | Trust as a Performance Metric



Trust isn't a by-product of good times—it's forged in disruption.



Disruption is common enough that avoiding it is no longer a meaningful strategy. What will increasingly distinguish organizations is how consistently they can absorb it without allowing trust and organizational capacity to collapse.

In other words, all organizations will encounter disruption, but not all will successfully weather it.

Where we need to focus is how we pass through the disruption, and what sort of organization we are when we come out the other side.



Make Trust Your Measurable Competitive Advantage

Get your Trust Performance Index assessment and strategic roadmap.



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