

RADICAL CANDOR

The Trust Gap

Why caring personally and challenging directly matter more than ever.

STATE OF THE WORKPLACE INSIGHTS / APRIL 2026

Feedback feels more fraught than ever. We hear it every day from executives, managers, HR leaders, and individual contributors across our community.

Helping people love their work and the people they work with is what we do, so we decided to dig deeper. We wanted to understand different perspectives on the problem, unpack what's really going on, and offer practical, tactical tips on how to work together better.

We asked people to name the most pressing people issues in their organization. Here's what we learned.

About this survey: 603 professionals across all levels, company sizes, and industries took part, including executives, directors, managers, HR leaders, and individual contributors. The data compares what leadership sees versus what employees on the ground experience. All responses are self-reported. Survey data analysis, fact-checking and report design were supported by AI tools.

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Executives want honest communication across their company. Meanwhile, employees don’t feel safe giving it.

EXECUTIVES

The feedback issue.

45.8% of Executives selected a lack of honest feedback across the company as their top concern. Their open-text responses highlighted accountability gaps, communication breakdowns, and management capability.

INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES

The trust issue.

45.2% of IC Employees selected psychological safety and trust as their top concern. Their open text pointed to mass layoffs, broken promises, micro-managing, and constant restructuring as the primary drivers of their distrust, hence their reluctance to give feedback.



“Having hard conversations - we tend to shy away from difficult discussions so that we do not make the other person feel bad.”

HR respondent
Organization size: 51–200 employees



“Trust erosion wrapped in politeness; brittle psychological safety; fear of retaliation”

IC Employee
Organization size: 51–200 employees



“Leadership has expressed a desire for transparency, but key decisions are often communicated without context or rationale.”

IC Employee
Organization size: 201–1000 employees



“Many companies now appear reluctant to support middle managers who are often the scapegoat.”

Manager
Organization size: 1000+ employees

68% of people globally worry that business leaders deliberately mislead them – up 12 points since 2021.

Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025
edelman.com/trust/2025-trust-barometer

56% of workers feel safe trying new approaches. Employees with the highest psychological safety are 72% more motivated than those with the lowest.

PwC Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey, 2025
pwc.com/gx/en/issues/workforce/hopes-and-fears.html

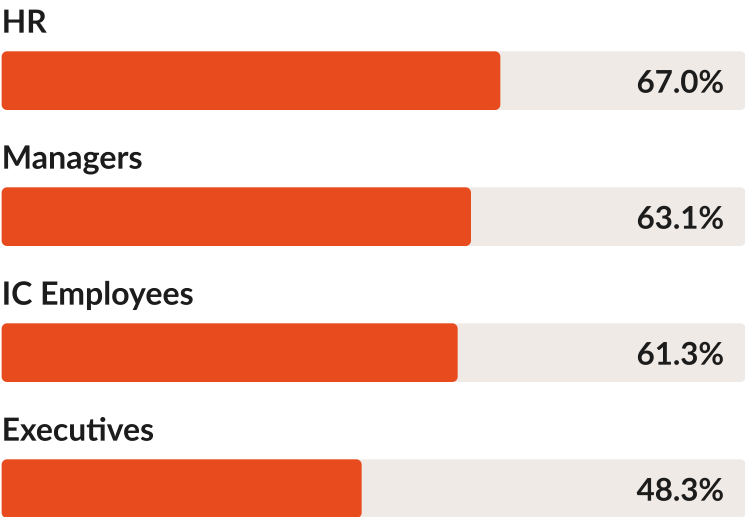
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WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The silence is loud.

We asked *"How often do you observe people staying silent when they likely have concerns or different opinions?"*

Most said people stay silent "very often" or "often" when they have concerns. Executives observed it least at 48% — it's even worse than they think.



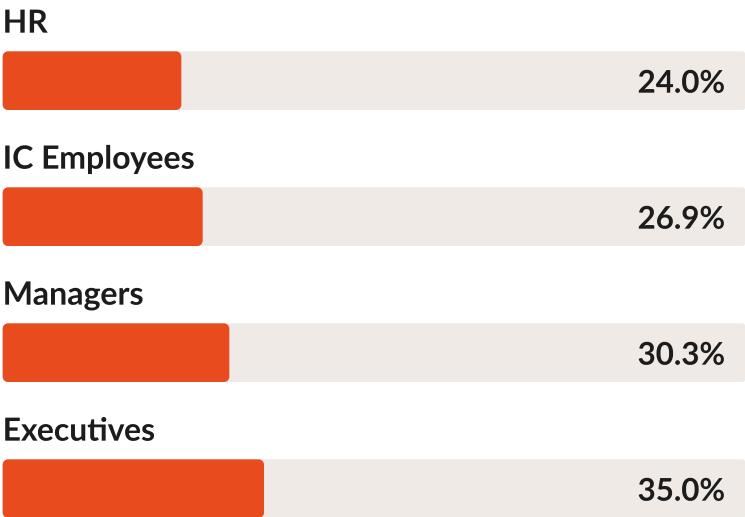
How often do you observe people staying silent when they likely have concerns or different opinions?

% that selected "Very Often" or "Often"

Direct and respectful feedback is not the norm.

We asked *"How often have you observed feedback that is both direct and respectful?"*

Few said it was happening often. Workers feel this more acutely than executives.



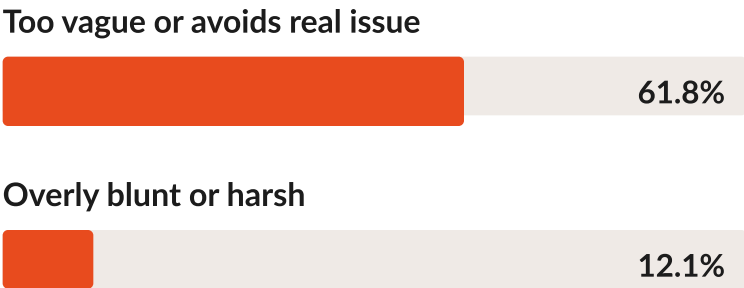
How often have you observed feedback that is both direct and respectful?

% that selected "Very Often" or "Often"

Feedback fails because it's not direct.

We asked *"What goes wrong when feedback misses the mark?"*

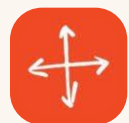
Across every role, the answer was the same. Feedback is too vague and sidesteps the real issue.



What goes wrong when feedback misses the mark?

% of all respondents (Execs, Managers, HR, ICs)

Executives want honest communication across their company. Meanwhile, employees don't feel safe giving it.



Our take

Leaders who want more feedback must make it safe to speak up.

—
**And it's worth it.
Trust pays off.**

FROM RADICAL CANDOR

"It turns out that when people trust you and believe you care about them, they are much more likely to

1. accept and act on your praise and criticism;
2. tell you what they really think about what you are doing well and, more importantly, not doing so well;
3. engage in this same behavior with one another, meaning less pushing the rock up the hill again and again;
4. embrace their role on the team; and
5. focus on getting results."

Radical Candor (p.10)

THE QUESTION LEADERS SHOULD BE ASKING

"What can I do to make it safe to speak up?"

THE PATH FORWARD

- Model the direct communication you're asking for.
- Solicit feedback and reward the candor when you get it to build a culture of psychological safety.

HR says managers lack the feedback skills they need. Managers say they just don't have the time.

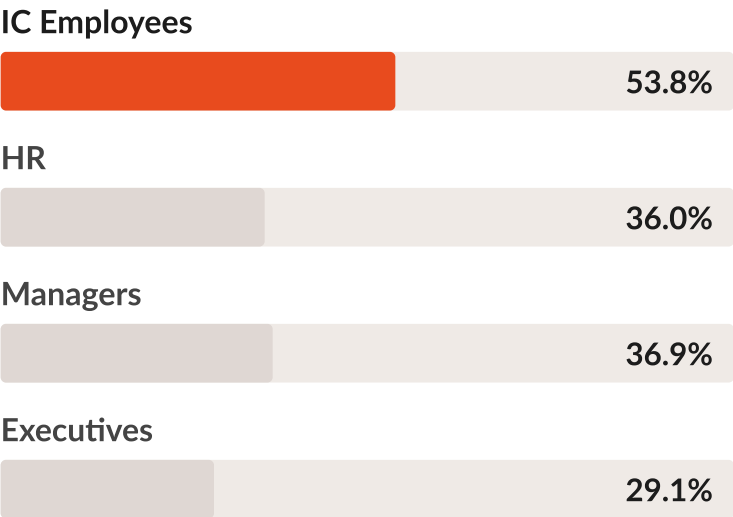
HR

The capability issue.

51% of HR respondents said manager capability and confidence was their top concern. Their open-text responses pointed to widespread reluctance to give constructive feedback and conflict avoidance at every level.

Feedback rarely or never happens.

We asked *"In the past 6 months, managers have had the time and space to coach their teams."* More than half of IC Employees say feedback and coaching rarely or never happen in their organization.



% that selected "Rarely" or "Never"

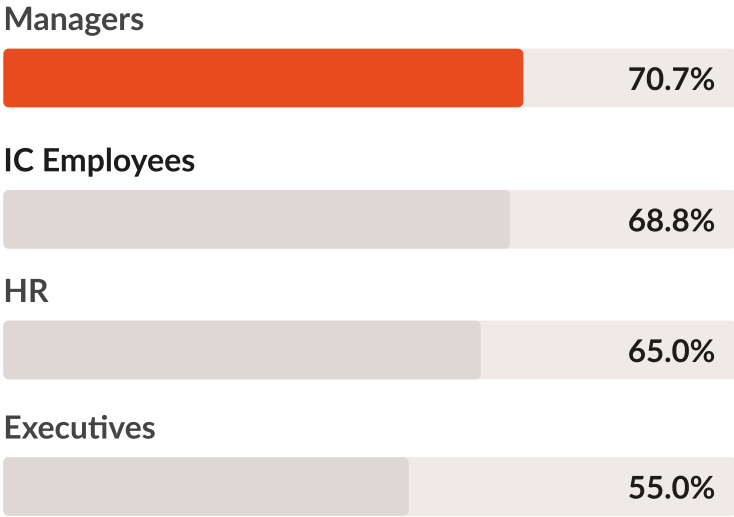
MANAGERS

The exhaustion issue.

48.3% of Managers said burnout was their top concern. Their open-text responses described a workforce that is exhausted, unclear on priorities, and losing trust in leadership.

Managers never practice before the job.

We asked *"How often are people given opportunities to practice giving feedback before becoming managers?"* Over 70% of managers said they rarely or never had a chance to practice before getting the role.



% that selected "Rarely" or "Never"

Trust in immediate managers has dropped from 46% to just 29% in three years. Employees who receive feedback from their manager are 9X more likely to trust their manager.

DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2025
ddiworld.com/research/global-leadership-forecast-2025

- Manager engagement has dropped from 31% in 2022 to 22% in 2025 — a nine-point fall.
- Only 44% of managers worldwide have received any management training.

Gallup, State of the Global Workplace, 2025 and 2026.
gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx

HR says managers lack the feedback skills they need. Managers say they just don't have the time.



Our take

Managers need both training and practice.

The fundamental building block of good management is feedback.



*"We promote people and hope for the best.
Manager bandwidth, manager skills, manager caring about the team — that's what's missing."*

Director, Organization size: 51–200 employees

Most managers don't fall short because they don't care. They fall short because they were never taught the fundamental building block of good management: feedback. **They also don't get opportunities to practice getting and giving feedback well, so they are learning the hard way — hard for them and for their employees.**

Kim Scott puts it plainly: "It's brutally hard to tell people when they are screwing up. You don't want to hurt anyone's feelings; that's because you're not a sadist. You don't want that person or the rest of the team to think you're a jerk. Plus, you've been told since you learned to talk, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Now all of a sudden it's your job to say it. You've got to undo a lifetime of training. Management is hard.

Radical Candor (p.xi)

Teaching feedback skills across an entire organization is best practice because feedback needs to happen up, down, and sideways. Also, this kind of shared training prepares future managers before they ever get the title, in a lower-stakes environment where it's safe to learn. Too often, managers get thrown into the deep end rather than being taught to do the job. And when they sink instead of swimming, they drag a whole team down with them.

But a single training is not going to undo a lifetime of "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Managers also need opportunities to practice giving feedback before they are in the heat of the moment.

Leaders say coaching, clarity, and trust are critical in the AI era. But investments say otherwise.

THE SKILLS GAP

Human skills will matter most.

Across all roles, people skills greatly outranked technical skills as the key to future success. In addition, open-text responses named psychological safety, management skills, and honest communication as the foundations for healthy teams.

Human skills ranked higher than tech expertise.

We asked "Which skills matter most as work becomes more automated?"



% of all respondents (Execs, Managers, HR, ICs)

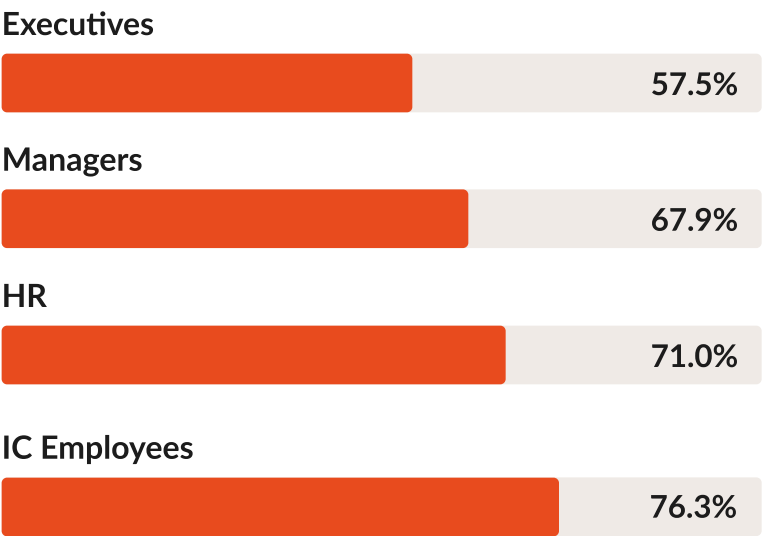
THE INVESTMENT GAP

Words and wallets don't match.

57.5% of Executives admit their organization is underinvesting in people development. 76.3% of frontline workers say there's not enough investment in people development.

More underinvestment felt further down.

We asked "Is your organization investing enough in leadership and people development?" The further from the top, the more acutely people feel the underinvestment.



% "Somewhat" or "Significantly underinvesting"



The hyper-focus on AI and other tech expansions (are) to the detriment of 1) leadership development, 2) relational skills that drive connection, trust and engagement, and 3) normalizing "healthy" discomfort (e.g., hard conversations, failures, diverse points-of-view and experiences) - because that's where growth lives.

Director, Organization size: 51-200 employees

Leaders say coaching, clarity, and trust are critical in the AI era. But investments say otherwise.



Our take

This moment is hard, but it's not new.

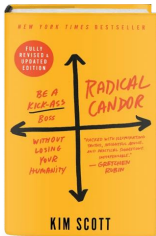
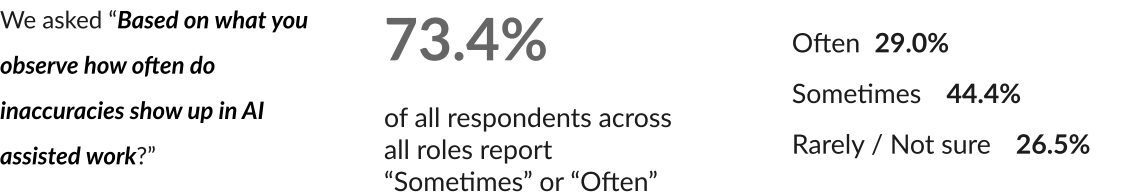
To succeed going forward, management skills must be both taught and valued.

Economic pressure, political instability, and rapid technological change. Leaders and teams have faced all of this before.

What is new is AI. It's accelerating everything: the pressure to move faster, the fear of being left behind, and the reality that AI makes mistakes that people need to feel safe enough to point out. AI is accelerating the need for human skills at exactly the moment many organizations are cutting both headcount and training budgets.

The more we automate, the more we need managers who can build a culture of feedback so that **employees will speak up when they notice AI getting things wrong**, share ideas for how to use AI to be more efficient and, most importantly, use AI to create whole new products or lines of business. If we think of people as costs to be cut, we won't get the best out of our teams — or AI.

AI INACCURACIES



Great teams start with candor. Explore training, join an executive roundtable, or try Compass for feedback practice. www.radicalcandor.com/trust-gap/thank-you

