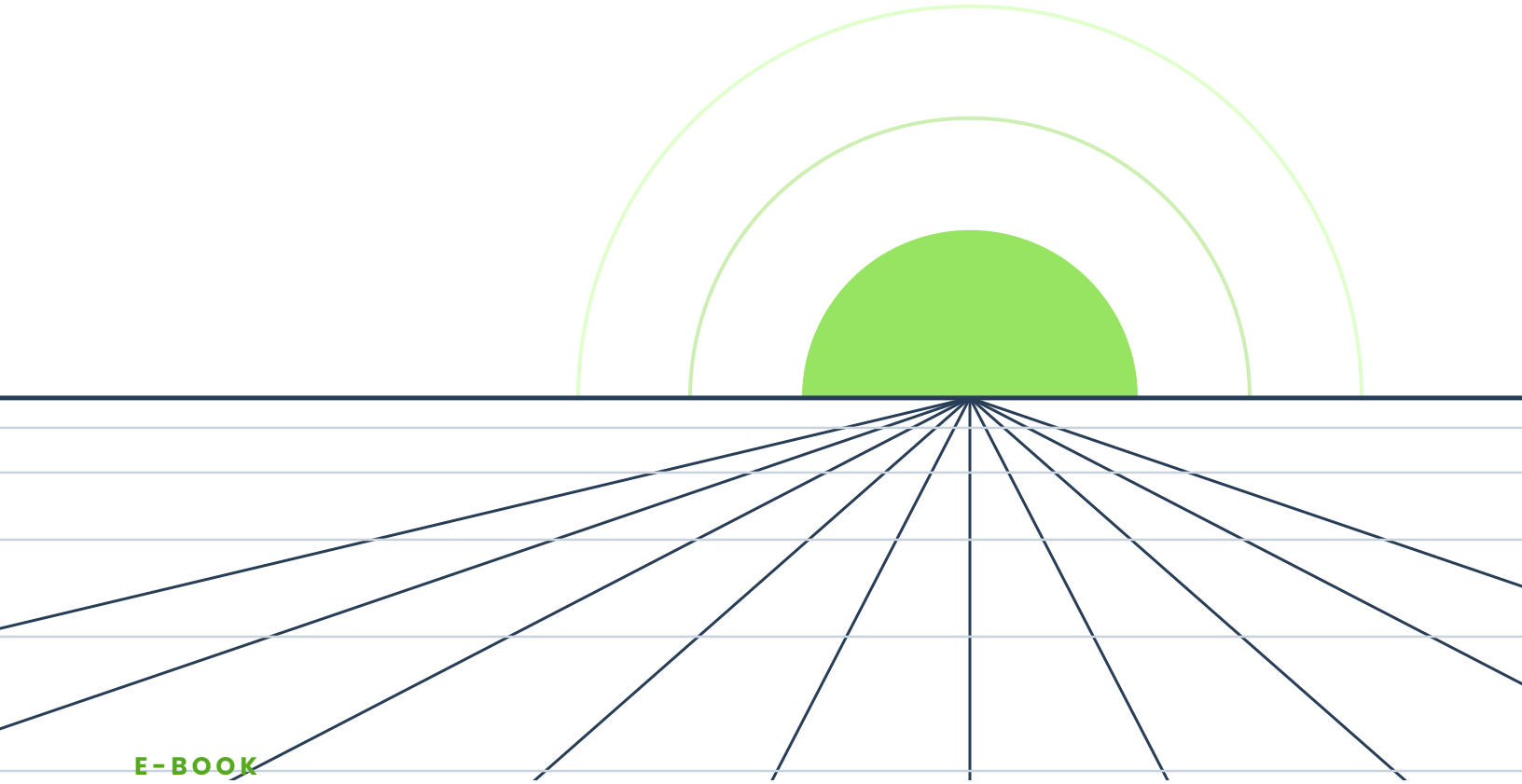
SparkEffect



E-BOOK

The New Frontier of Manager Development

A companion to Trust in Turbulence: The 2026 State of Organizational Trust

Change is the New Normal

Dana is a senior product leader at a growing software company. She was expensive to hire. Her company poached her from a competitor because she is very good at her job, and she took it because she believed in the work and in the people running the company. That was two years ago.

Last year her executive team decided to move aggressively on AI, both in the product and in how the company works. What followed was a small layoff inside the product organization, several voluntary departures at the leadership level, and a restructure. Her team was told to work differently and to build AI into their process in ways most of them never had. Senior leadership said very little about any of it. **So it fell to Dana.**

The work changed, the people changed, and the ground changed, all inside one quarter. Dana is a real person. We have changed her name and some identifying details to protect her privacy. We will come back to her a few times in this paper, because most of what we describe here happened to her.



Most of the HR and L&D leaders we speak with are deep in 2027 planning right now, and a substantial share of that plan points at managers. When we say manager in this paper, we mean the person an employee reports to, at any level. For some people that is a frontline supervisor, for others a director or a VP, and the dynamics we describe hold up and down the structure.

The reasons companies need to develop their people leaders are familiar. When a senior leader leaves, the people positioned to step into the role are fewer and less ready than the org chart suggests. Manager turnover keeps resetting teams just as they begin to gel. Technology rollouts stall between the announcement and actual adoption. At SparkEffect, we label these needs as disruptions, and in our 2026 Trust in Turbulence research, 85% of the 600 people we surveyed had experienced at least one in the past two years.

Most of them had more than one. On average, people reported somewhere between two and four, often running at the same time.

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It is worth looking at what those disruptions actually were. Sorted, they fall into four groups.

DISRUPTION	SHARE	
The work changed	New AI tools	35%
	Ongoing use of AI	31%
	Role changed significantly	24%
The people changed	Direct manager changed	25%
	Leadership turnover	22%
	Merger or acquisition	12%
The ground changed	Culture shift	24%
	Restructuring	23%
	Layoffs	20%
Something happened to them	Personal crisis	26%

Nine of those ten are decisions a company made. Only the last one is out of the organization's control. This matters because a decision can be made differently, sequenced differently, or communicated differently. The reality is that for some of these disruptions, it could become routine for the company, and not routine at all for the employees impacted.

Additionally, in our study, we measured six interventions that could support someone during a type of disruption shared above: support from a manager, fair treatment of employees, opportunities to ask questions or raise concerns, clear communication from organizational leadership, transparency about uncertainty and tradeoffs, and access to support or resources. Only 32% of respondents reported receiving support from their manager. That sounds low until you see it was the most common answer we received, which makes manager support the strongest single response an organization has but it isn't reaching more than 32% of employees.

However, lack of access to training isn't why so few receive the support they need from their leaders. 86% of the people leaders we surveyed said their organization provides training intended to help them lead through disruption. Getting access to training is pretty common. But what we found is that the training does not match what managers are now facing, for two reasons. The types and frequency of disruption managers face have outpaced the solutions available to them, much of which was built for one event at a time with a return to normal afterward. Second, this period of work asks managers to behave in ways most have never been trained for, especially around disruptions and trust.

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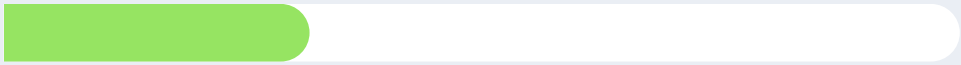
86%

of the people leaders we surveyed said their organization provides training intended to help them lead through disruption



32%

of respondents reported receiving support from their manager



Among the people who did receive manager support, 84% rated it very well or well handled, the highest mark anything in the study received. 79% said it increased their trust in the organization. **This paper is about how, if disruption is our new normal, we can develop leaders who can provide the support we so desperately need them to in a way that is sustainable and drives trust.**

What Employees Meant by Support

We asked people to describe, in their own words, what their manager did that helped most during the disruption. Almost nobody described a technical skill. They described a manager who could communicate and be transparent, who was real with them about job drift and job security, who listened with empathy and checked in, who helped them learn and could reduce their workload, and who influenced for the team and advocated for what they needed.

Six themes, and what people described were actions, not traits.

When people in this study said listening, they did not mean sympathy. They meant a manager who spent attention on them when attention had become scarce, and then acted on what they heard. Doing something is what registered as support.

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Let's draw our focus on how the six sort themselves into groups. Communication, listening, and advocacy sit inside the relationship between a manager and their people. Job security, training, and workload relief do not. A manager cannot reassure anyone about the future if leadership has not been transparent with them, cannot source training without a budget, and cannot reduce a workload when the work has nowhere else to go. The data follows that split. Changes affecting job security were the least likely of anything we measured to be handled well, at 23%, and the most likely to reduce trust, at 31%. The same managers appear in both numbers, and the difference is what they were given to work with. **This is critical to understand as we build development plans: the ecosystem must support the training provided.**



It is worth being clear about what Dana is and is not. She is in the 86%. Her company brought in a consultant for the AI work, and she has been through leadership development. She will tell you most of it did not help much, and she will also tell you she could use more. She knows listening is not her strongest suit. She is not the most empathetic person in the room, and she knows that too. She is doing the best she can with what she has.

She is also not the problem. Her twelve direct reports and four dotted-line reports trust her, which is the hardest thing on this list to earn. She communicates well. She has gone upward for her team more than once and told them when it did not work.

So Dana has a real development need, and an organization that technically met it. Both are true, and neither one explains the quarter she had. The skills she does have get spent almost entirely on one thing: keeping very good people from quitting over a problem she did not create and cannot fix, while she works out whether she is going to quit too.

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Why manager support only reaches a third

SparkEffect's research measured what employees experienced, not what organizations provided. The gap between the two is where most companies have a problem. An organization can offer an intervention that nobody experiences, and the effect is the same as never offering it. **The 68% who did not report manager support likely did not have an absent manager. They had a manager who spent the disruption delivering the organization's decisions.**

> Dana spent that quarter delivering the organization's communication, interpreting policies she had not written, and answering questions about job security she had no information to answer. If you had surveyed her team that month and asked whether their manager supported them during the disruption, a fair number likely might have said no. They would not have been wrong. She was working at full capacity, and almost none of it was reaching them as support.

Think about where that work goes. When a company introduces a new system, someone explains it to the team. When a restructure lands, someone redistributes the work. In most organizations, that someone is the direct manager, whether or not any plan names them.

A manager can therefore work a disruption at full capacity and register in this research as having done nothing for anybody. Messaging a manager relays without translating passes through them and is experienced as the company acting. Support addressed to a person and shaped for their situation is experienced as the manager acting. **An organization that pushes more of its change work through managers is not increasing manager support. It is consuming the capacity that manager support depends on.**

This pattern is often sharpest around layoffs, where it is increasingly common for organizations to inform managers at the same time as their teams. The manager cannot translate the decision because they are hearing the news for the first time. They cannot answer questions about the future because they are equally in the dark. It is hard to be present for someone else while processing your own reaction, and impossible to advocate for anyone when the decisions were made in a room you were not in. In the week the organization most needs its strongest response, it has switched that response off. The people this costs most are usually not the ones leaving. They are everyone still there, watching how it was done. **Dana found out when her team did.**

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Three kinds of work on a manager's desk

Everything that lands on a manager during a disruption falls into one of three categories.

1. The first is work only the manager can do, because it requires knowing a specific person: what they are good at, what they are worried about, what their workload really looks like, how they learn.

2. The second is work the manager delivers but cannot originate. The conversation happens at their desk, but it depends on something the organization supplies first, whether that is information, budget, authority, or an escalation route. Train someone here without supplying the input, and you have prepared them for a conversation they cannot finish. Supply the input without the skill, and you get a capable person handling it badly in public.

3. The third is work that should not land on the manager at all. Administering policy, processing paperwork, chasing compliance, distributing resources that require no knowledge of the individual. It arrives at their desk because that is where things default to. Note what is not on this list. Relaying a message is not the manager's job, but translating it into what it means for one person is work only they can do, and the next section is mostly about that distinction.

Development has a role in all three, which is the part most often missed. In the first, we keep building the skill, because the moment belongs to the manager and nobody else can take it. In the second, we build the ecosystem around the leader so they can meet the moment when it comes. In the third, we still develop the behavior they need to translate and support a decision that was never theirs to make.

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Sort Dana's quarter into those three and the failure stops being general. The rationale for the AI investment, the explanation for the layoff, and the reasoning behind the new policies all belonged in the third category. They were company-wide decisions, and they should have come from leadership, in leadership's voice, to everyone at once. Instead Dana became the announcement, which meant the translation never happened and her credibility absorbed decisions she had no hand in.

The job security questions sat in the second category. The conversation was hers to have. The information was not hers to produce, and without it she had three options that all cost her something: speculate, go silent, or reassure on credit.

The translation work, the only part that was genuinely hers, was the part she had the least time left for.



The six themes below are sorted against that frame.

THE THEME

Communication and keeping people informed

→ THE COMPETENCY

Translating change

→ THE BEHAVIOR

Communicates with honesty and context, even when it is hard.

Most people leaders were not part of the original decision. They were not in the room where the strategy was set, and in many cases they heard it at the same time everyone else did. Translation is what we are asking them to do anyway: take that strategy and help the team they lead understand what it means for them. Not what it means for the company. What does this mean for me, as a person contributing here now?

That is a skill, and it is not the same as communication. Clarity and context are what make it translation rather than relay. Even when the message is hard, it is the part that has to be built deliberately. It is not difficult to translate good news. It is difficult when a manager has to explain a decision they did not make, may not agree with, and cannot fully justify, and still give their team something true to work from. A manager can rarely say what will happen. **They can almost always say what is known, what is still open, and when more will be known.**

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THE THEME

Listening and emotional support

→ THE COMPETENCY

Checking in with intent

→ THE BEHAVIOR

Creates psychological safety alongside performance standards.

Many organizations have already trained in psychological safety and emotional intelligence, and we support more of it. The question is whether anyone has made the connection for leaders between that training and what it looks like now. Checking in with intent is that connection. Intentionality, rather than availability.

Creating psychological safety during a disruption includes something people usually leave out, which is continuing to speak to performance standards while everything else is moving. Safety is not the absence of expectations. A manager who stops naming the standard has not reassured anyone. They have added one more thing nobody can see clearly.

The other half is inviting dissent. People want to be able to grapple with what is happening around them, out loud, without fear of retribution, without being told they are not a team player or not on board. Somebody has to hold that space, and holding it increases trust rather than threatening it. **It also only works if what surfaces goes somewhere. A manager who asks, hears something real, and has nowhere to take it will stop asking.**

THE THEME

Reassurance about job security

→ THE COMPETENCY

Staying steady in uncertainty

→ THE BEHAVIOR

Stays centered in high-stakes moments. Aligns words and actions.

Our data found that most people were not handling one disruption. They were handling two to four, many of them at the same time, and on a larger team that means several different ones running across different people at once. For a leader, that means staying centered and emotionally regulated themselves, repeatedly, with no gap between events to recover in.

There is a growing trend here that concerns us. Managers are increasingly not included in decisions, or even told about disruptions, until the last minute. They find out with their team. Then we expect them to turn around immediately and be a steadfast resource, while they're still reacting to news they just heard. They are human too. The organization has to think about when it tells its leaders, because that timing is what makes the behavior possible or impossible.

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Aligning words and actions is the part people watch for. Only 23% said changes affecting job security were handled very well, the lowest of anything we measured, and those changes were the most likely to reduce trust, at 31%. What a manager can do without the answer is narrower than it sounds and more useful. Decline to speculate while saying plainly that the question is fair. Name who owns the answer and commit to a date by which they will have asked. **What they cannot do is reassure on credit, because credibility can go bankrupt in a single conversation.** And when the tradeoffs change, say so.

> Dana was asked a version of that question almost daily for two months and never once had the information to answer it. What she had instead was a choice between bad options, repeated until her team stopped asking her and started asking each other.

THE THEME

Training, tools, and helping people adapt

→ **THE COMPETENCY**

Diagnosing the learning need

→ **THE BEHAVIOR**

Coaches and develops others. Leads change without destabilizing.

This is where leaders who are coaches at heart become valuable to an organization, and it is more critical now than it has ever been. Our industry has been preaching leaders as coaches for decades. The reason it matters this much now is specific: what a manager has to understand is how this particular individual needs to adapt to a changed world, and which skills they will need more support on.

Generic training exists in most organizations and is not what people described. They described a manager who worked out what one person needed and put the right thing in front of them.

Which means a manager who has not been having development conversations is going to have a very tough road here. **If they cannot ask questions and really listen, they cannot diagnose anything, and the training the organization bought lands on nobody in particular.**

AI adds a wrinkle we have not accounted for. A rollout can invert the manager's information position, because someone on the team often understands the tool better than they do. We rarely allow people leaders to be novices. We expect expertise whether or not their function has ever touched the technology, and then we are surprised when managers avoid the subject.

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THE THEME

Reducing workload and giving people time

→ THE COMPETENCY

Renegotiating the work

→ THE BEHAVIOR

Prioritizes in complex environments. Makes expectations explicit.

This is the newest of the six as a competency, and it is really about leaders who can prioritize effectively, delegate, and create strategic alignment across their team. Prioritization has always been part of the job. What has changed is the volume of reality-shifting disruptions arriving at once, which changes how the work itself gets done.

Go back to what the data says about what breaks trust. **Trust decreases most when people's roles fundamentally change.** That is the moment people tend to break with their manager and with the organization, and it is exactly the moment renegotiating the work applies. A manager who can reset what the job is, and what good looks like while someone learns it, is stabilizing the team rather than absorbing the shock privately.

Making expectations explicit is where this usually fails, and the reason is structural. Most organizations treat adaptation as something that happens on top of the existing job, so a manager who says it is fine to come up to speed gradually is contradicted by every date on the calendar. People believe the calendar. Accountability is only fair if the standard moved when the work did, and a manager can only move it if someone gave them that authority before the disruption arrived.

THE THEME

Advocacy and having the employee's back

→ THE COMPETENCY

Advocating upward

→ THE BEHAVIOR

Influences without politics or positional power. Anticipates early.

This is influence on behalf of the team, without politics, from a position of strength rather than positional authority. Part of it is anticipation, being strong at seeing the challenges a team is going to face before they land, because the advocacy that works usually happens earlier than the moment it is needed.

It goes a long way for a team member to see their leader advocating for them. People can tell the difference between a manager who tried and lost and one who never tried. What they will not tolerate is the third version, where the manager agrees privately, offers sympathy, and takes it nowhere.

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> Whether any of it survives depends on whether escalation goes anywhere. Ask a manager how many of the last five things they raised upward came back with an answer, and you learn more about the organization than you do about the manager.

There is a second reason advocacy is rare, and it sits inside the manager. In the behavioral data we work with elsewhere, assertiveness runs low across US business culture, regardless of gender, and that pattern is tied to burnout and to people leaving. A manager who will not assert on their own behalf is unlikely to do it on anyone else's. Most programs treat advocacy as a communication skill rather than as what it actually is, which is a willingness to stand up for someone else and risk being told no.

Capacity, and the arithmetic nobody runs

Trust elasticity is our measure of how much capacity an organization has to absorb the next disruption. We treat it as a performance measure rather than a sentiment score. Direct manager support, received with no other intervention alongside it, was associated with the lowest average trust elasticity of any single intervention in the study, at 36.84. The same support alongside one additional intervention was associated with 41.43.

The reality is that an organization positioning the manager as its entire answer is not getting the outcome it wants.

Because all of it assumes a manager with the time to do it, and that is the weakest assumption in most 2027 plans. Fifteen minutes a week of individual contact across seven direct reports is nearly two hours. Across sixteen, it is four, and four hours a week of personal attention is not available to somebody who also has a job. Managers run this arithmetic themselves and then decide who gets the time.



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The arithmetic gets tighter when disruptions overlap, which in this data they usually do. A manager is rarely handling a single event of change. They are handling a technology rollout for the team, a role change for two people, someone's personal crisis, and the aftermath of a reorganization that took a colleague away, while absorbing the same events themselves. Managers were roughly twice as likely as their employees to name AI as the most impactful disruption they experienced. **The people an organization depends on to keep everyone else steady are often the least steady in the building.**

> Dana has twelve direct reports and four dotted-line reports. Fifteen minutes a week of real individual attention across sixteen people is four hours. By the end of that quarter she was also managing the rollout, two role changes, the aftermath of the layoff, and a team that had started taking recruiter calls, while absorbing the same events herself.

It is worth stopping to notice how high a bar the six themes set when you read them as a set. Present, available, aware of what is going on with each person, able to teach enough to get someone started, willing to go upward on their behalf. People are describing something close to a camp counselor, and they are describing it as the baseline. The question is not whether that is reasonable. It is whether we have built anything that would let a person meet it.

We believe there are five things that can support people leaders that go alongside the training they get.

→ Manager load.

Protecting manager time during change assumes the disruption ends and the time comes back. In our data, it mostly does not. If you want more than 32% of your people to receive manager support, people leaders' time needs to be considered day in and day out.

→ Decision authority granted in advance.

Decide once what a manager can adjust without approval, whether that is a deadline, a workload, a schedule, or a modest spend, and leave it standing. Discretion that has to be requested each time mostly goes unused.

→ Escalation routes with named owners and response times.

Questions about job security, compensation, staffing, and the gap between what people are told and what they are experiencing keep arriving, so somebody has to own each of them and answer within a set time. Set up fresh for every event, the route arrives after the manager has already had the conversation.

→ A written statement of what is not the manager's job.

Every task nobody else claims lands on the manager and stays there. Clearly documenting what is not their responsibility allows them to hand off tasks without appearing incapable, and preserves their time for the work only they can do.

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→ **Support that reaches people without going through the manager.** Clear communication from organizational leadership reached 28% of our respondents, transparency about uncertainty 24%, and access to resources 23%. All three can come straight from the organization. Build them into how the company communicates, and they happen without costing a manager an hour.

Two things follow, and neither is a question about training content.

The first is that nearly every program treats the manager as the stable party, and our data say otherwise. A program that never acknowledges this teaches behavior that only works for somebody who is not living through the same event.

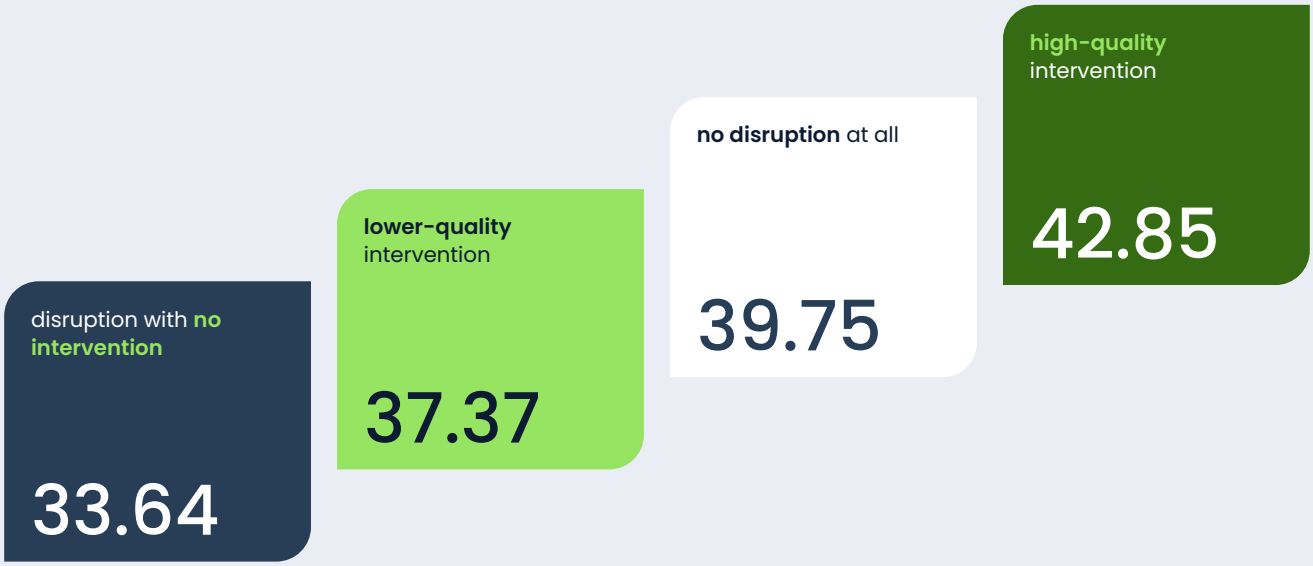
The second gets asked least and decides the most, which is whether the manager can apply any of it. Development budgets are growing, but the pace of work is not changing to match. Someone in a six-month coaching engagement, with nothing lifted off their plate and a disruption landing in month three, does not have the capacity to work on themselves.

So what follows is not less investment. It is investment paired with a decision about time. **Capability and conditions are not competing answers; they multiply.** Give a manager information, discretion, and a working escalation route without the skill to use them, and you get a badly handled conversation. Build the skill and supply nothing, and you get a capable manager guessing in public. The organizations where manager support reaches past a third have done both.

What Good Looks Like

The business case for this type of development plan runs through Trust Elasticity. A trust score tells you where an organization stands; trust elasticity tells you what a particular disruption left behind and how much is left for the next one, and unlike revenue or turnover, you can read it at the time rather than eighteen months later. Respondents who experienced a disruption with no intervention reported the lowest average in the study, at 33.64. Lower-quality intervention was associated with 37.37. High-quality intervention was associated with 42.85, above the 39.75 reported by people who experienced no disruption at all.

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Two details point at the manager. The weakest element of elasticity across the sample was whether the relationship with the direct manager improved, at 3.70 out of 5, while the strongest was whether the team performed well, at 4.09. And at low intervention quality, trust outcomes vary enormously from one respondent to the next, while as quality rises the range narrows and severely negative outcomes become uncommon. **Quality does less to raise the ceiling than to remove the floor.** An organization depending on a single channel has a floor problem by design.

That connects to what executives already track. Respondents at high-trust organizations in this study reported revenue scores 35% higher than those at low-trust organizations, retention 47% higher, customer reputation 46% higher, and industry reputation 46% higher. The relationship is associative and holds at the organizational level. Manager-delivered support is associated with the largest trust gains of anything we measured, and trust and elasticity move together. Customer reputation is the one measure that does not rise when support after a disruption is handled well, and our read is that customer perception is shaped externally, through communications and brand, rather than by what employees experienced internally. And 40% of respondents sit in the two lowest trust bands, which is not a minority of badly run companies but a plurality of ordinary ones.

35%
revenue scores

47%
retention

46%
customer reputation

46%
industry reputation

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Where to start

If you are building a 2027 plan, start by sorting the work. Take what actually lands on your managers during a disruption, the questions their people bring them, and the work the organization hands down, and put each one in a category:

1. **Only the manager can do this.**
2. **The manager delivers it, but the organization has to supply something first.**
3. **The organization should own it outright.**

The first category is your development scope. The second is your supply list, and it is mostly information, discretion, and escalation. The third is a routing problem you can solve with a decision. Then ask one more question about the first two.



The answers you are not confident about are your development case, named specifically, about your own managers.

Run Dana's quarter through that sort, and the answer is not ambiguous. Most of what consumed her belonged in the third category and should never have arrived at her desk as her responsibility to originate. The second category was starved. The first, the only part that needed her specifically, got whatever was left.

Dana can work wherever she wants. That is why she was worth poaching, and it is why she is a flight risk now. Her company is not losing her to a better offer. It is losing her to the job quietly becoming something other than the one she took, which is a cheaper problem to fix and an easier one to miss. Retention is the outcome that moves most in this research, and those numbers usually get read as a story about keeping employees. **They are also a story about keeping the managers who keep employees.**

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When change reaches a person, they do not experience it as strategy. They experience it as a conversation with someone they know, a question about what happens next, a new expectation they are not sure they can meet, or a fear about whether they still have a place. Their manager is usually the one standing in front of them. What the organization decides is whether that manager is standing there alone.

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Make Trust Your Measurable Competitive Advantage

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Trust in Turbulence: The 2026 State of Organizational Trust

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.

Trust Research Report prepared by Aaron Delgaty, PhD and SparkEffect. 600 respondents.

THE SPARKEFFECT ADVANTAGE

The SparkEffect Advantage lies in its proven ability to guide organizations and their people through transformative change with confidence and clarity. With over 40 years of experience and the combined legacy of two premier firms, SparkEffect delivers evidence-based, tailored solutions that address the unique needs of leaders, employees, CEOs, and boards. Their values of trust, purposeful transformation, authentic accountability, and compassion inform every engagement, fostering meaningful relationships and driving measurable results.

SparkEffect's impact is demonstrated by industry-leading client satisfaction, global reach, and a track record of driving strategic shifts for thousands of organizations and more than 50,000 employees. Through their partnership with Career Partners International, SparkEffect offers comprehensive support and measurable impact in areas such as organizational transformation, leadership development, executive coaching, and career transition, making them the trusted partner for organizations preparing to meet future challenges.



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