

What CHROs Are Prioritizing This Fall

A three-minute read for HR leaders, fall 2026.

- 1. Leader and manager development is the top priority again.** SHRM found 46% of CHROs named it a top 2026 priority, first among 16 HR practice areas for the second straight year. Gartner's Evanta survey also ranks it first.

Question to ask your team: Which leadership skills matter most for us next year?

- 2. The money is following, and it is aimed at the middle.** The Conference Board found 50% of CHROs increased investment in leader and manager development over the past six months, ahead of AI or automation for HR or operations (36%). Of those investing, 49% focused on mid-level managers and 47% on frontline and first-time managers.

Question to ask your team: Is our development spending reaching the managers who carry the most weight?

- 3. AI is on nearly every agenda, but few are investing in leaders' AI capabilities.** SHRM reports 92% of CHROs expect greater AI integration in 2026, yet The Conference Board found that of CHROs investing in leader development, only 2% are putting any of it into AI capabilities for their leaders. Its head of human capital research, Robin Erickson, points to "developing leaders who can lead with AI, not just alongside it."

Question to ask your team: Are our leaders learning to lead people who use AI, or only the tools?

- 4. Change has to become routine, and culture has to show up in daily work.** Gartner, drawing on 426 CHROs, links leaders who make change routine to a three times higher probability of healthy change adoption, and says embedding culture in daily work can raise employee performance by up to 34%.

Question to ask your team: What routine will make this quarter's biggest change stick?

- 5. Managers are stretched thin.** Gallup data reported by Business Insider show managers averaged 12.1 direct reports in 2025, up from 8.2 in 2013, and 97% also do individual-contributor work. The Conference Board found 35% of CHROs name mid-level manager roles among the hardest to fill.

Question to ask your team: What could we take off our managers' plates?

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Managers are being asked to lead bigger teams, more change, and a new technology at once. Development that sticks has to fit that reality.

Prepared by Forge Leadership Experiences, Philadelphia. Sources: SHRM (Feb 2026); Gartner (May 2026); Evanta (Gartner) (May 2026); The Conference Board Q1 2026 (Apr 2026); The Conference Board Q2 2026 (Jun 2026); Business Insider on Gallup data (Jan 2026).