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LEADERS: READY, SET, GO?



By Lana Potgieter, Lighthouse Leadership Coaching & Development

Early in April, Gallup released its *State of the Global Workplace 2026* Report.

"The State of the Global Workplace report features annual findings from the world's largest ongoing study of the employee experience. The 2026 edition finds that global employee engagement fell to 20% in 2025, its lowest level since 2020, costing the world economy an estimated \$10 trillion in lost productivity."

"Who cares, and why does it matter?" you ask. Here is why I thought it was worth sharing.

The tools are improving. The people side is lagging.

Businesses are investing heavily in AI, automation, and smarter systems, expecting better productivity, faster execution, and sharper decision-making. Yet many leaders are finding that better tools do not automatically produce better results.

Gallup's report points to a hard but helpful truth: the issue is not simply whether the technology works. The issue is whether leaders and managers are ready to lead people through change.

Engagement is not soft. It is expensive.

Gallup found that global employee engagement fell to 20 percent in 2025, down from a peak of 23 percent in 2022. It also estimates that low engagement cost the world economy about \$10 trillion in lost productivity. That is not a morale issue alone. That is a performance issue.

When people are unclear, disconnected, poorly led, or emotionally stretched, exe-

cution slows, errors rise, accountability weakens, and strategy stalls.

The real bottleneck is often management

One of the most important findings in the report is that lower engagement among managers accounts for most of the recent downturn in overall engagement. Since 2022, manager engagement has dropped by nine points globally.

That matters because managers are the people translating vision into action. They are the ones clarifying expectations, coaching performance, reinforcing priorities, and helping teams navigate change.

When managers are overloaded, under-trained, or simply running on fumes, the whole business feels it.

AI adoption rises or falls with leadership

Gallup also found that in organizations investing in AI, one of the strongest predictors of employee adoption is whether the direct manager actively supports it. In fact, employees who strongly agree that their manager supports their team's use of AI are 98.7 times more likely to strongly agree that AI has transformed how work gets done in their organization. That statistic should stop us in our tracks.

Transformation does not usually fail first at the level of software. It fails at the level of leadership. If managers are unclear, hesitant, reactive, or unsupported, even strong technology investments will underdeliver.

This is not inevitable

Here is the encouraging part. Gallup found that in best-practice organizations, 79 percent of managers are engaged at work, compared with the global average of 22 percent. That tells us this is not fixed. It is influenceable.

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We are not powerless. We can equip managers instead of assuming they already know how to lead. We can create clarity instead of flooding people with competing priorities. We can communicate better instead of blaming teams for not "getting it." We can lead change in a way that builds trust rather than fatigue.

What leaders should ask now

If you are leading a business, this report is an invitation to ask better questions:

- Are our managers equipped to lead change well?
- Are our people clear on what matters most?
- Are we improving execution, or just increasing activity?
- Are we investing in tools while neglecting leadership capacity?

Those questions matter because the human side of performance is still the deciding factor. Start by looking at leadership readiness.

Look at capability. Look at clarity. Look at communication. Examine whether the team is truly equipped to carry the change you are asking them to embrace. AI is not failing. But leadership readiness may be.

And the good news is this: leadership readiness is something we can improve — intentionally, practically, and starting now.

Lana Potgieter is the founder of Lighthouse Leadership Coaching & Development, LLC, where she partners with business owners and leadership teams to cut through complexity, strengthen leadership capability, and improve execution. With more than 20 years of experience across the U.S., South Africa, and the U.K., she specializes in leadership coaching, manager development, and strategic clarity for sustainable growth. Call her at 484.347.0515.

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