The Future Belongs To Leaders Who Trust Their People

Work feels different as we head into 2026. When I speak with HR leaders, there's often a moment when someone pauses and admits just how heavy the past year has felt – the pace of decision-making, the pressure to support people through change, and the sense that everything is moving faster than the systems designed to manage it. With two thirds (63%) of HR professionals saying they're leading the biggest workplace shift in decades, often with smaller teams and fewer resources, it's no surprise that 59% are experiencing higher emotional strain.

Yet in the middle of all this pressure, some patterns have become clearer. You can see what's working, even if the year has been difficult. The organisations staying steady are the ones where leaders create a sense of belonging, and people feel seen and heard. Those themes now feel less like ideas and more like the foundations of the year ahead. Here are my predictions for 2026.

Trust And Clarity Become The Defining Leadership Skills

The leadership behaviours I expect to dominate in 2026 are trust and clarity, to help reduce any uncertainty and fear. Today's workforce is navigating yet another once-in-a-generation transformation, following the impact of the pandemic on work models. Now AI is changing how people get work done. What hasn't changed is what people want: to do meaningful work without sacrificing their wellbeing. In practice, that might look like using AI tools to reclaim hours of deep-focus time, structuring weeks around a genuine four-day schedule, or building a career without needing to uproot a whole life just to be closer to an office.

In teams that start from trust, this isn't hypothetical, neither are they perks. They're the foundations of a healthier, more sustainable way to work in a world that isn't slowing down.

Our HR Health Check Report reinforced this direction. Around two-thirds (61%) of HR leaders believe trust will matter more than pay in retaining talent. That tells you everything about what people value now. When employees feel trusted, they show more initiative. They solve problems faster. And they stop wasting energy proving they're "on" and start putting their energy where it belongs – on the work that matters.

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AI And Skills Open New Pathways – If Culture Keeps Up

As we move into 2026, AI is becoming every employee's most influential teammate. The question for organisations is no longer whether to use AI, but how to integrate it meaningfully into human work. The most forward-thinking companies are redesigning roles, leadership, and culture to ensure that technology enhances human creativity, productivity and empathy, as well as decision-making if they want AI and human collaboration at scale.

Organisations that invest in continuous learning, psychological safety, and people-first decision-making will turn AI from a disruptor into a catalyst, opening pathways for every person to develop, contribute, and thrive.

Our research shows more than half of HR leaders expect AI to take over administrative work by 2026. If that happens, it frees HR – and everyone else – to focus on strengthening leadership skills for managing and supervising AI agents.

But technology alone won't unlock this next era of growth, culture has to keep pace. For this to work, transparency is essential. People need to understand how AI is used, what data informs decisions, and how these tools support their growth.

In 2026, the organisations that get the most from AI will be the ones that use it to elevate people, not replace them. As work moves faster than traditional job titles can keep up, skills become the common language linking how companies hire, design new roles and set expectations for how work is delivered.

Teams that understand their strengths, invest in the right mix of technical, social, and cognitive capabilities, and use AI to open new pathways will be the ones that stay adaptable, confident, and ready for whatever comes next.

Culture Becomes The Difference

With 58% of HR leaders expecting leaner teams next year, culture shifts from backdrop to business strategy. By 2026, people will choose organisations where belonging, fairness, and shared purpose feel real where culture isn't a poster or a promise, but something lived every day. Experience design goes far beyond perks now. It's about emotional connection, psychological safety, and meaningful work that helps people feel grounded even as expectations rise.

As AI reshapes roles and skills evolve on faster cycles, culture becomes the stabilising force that helps teams stay confident, connected, and ready for what's next. It shapes how work feels, how people respond to pressure, and whether trust and clarity show up as genuine behaviours. The future belongs to leaders who trust their people, define outcomes clearly, and use technology to open opportunity, not restrict it.

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