Leadership Development

Cultivating Critical Skills for Employees at All Levels



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A Note From the Sponsor



The current era of work might be characterized as "building the plane as we fly it." For most organizations, the changes coming right now are coming from all directions at a frequency and intensity that we've never experienced before. Change is no longer a moment to ride out, but a constant state of flux.

Amid this change, many organizations have unintentionally responded by stacking more pressure onto leaders and assuming they will simply absorb it. We have seen what that looks like in practice: leaders operating in survival mode, doing their best to stay afloat with little energy left to coach, connect, and develop their teams. As this ATD research shows, the leadership cracks are quickly growing deeper and wider within organizations, exposing critical vulnerabilities.

That is why SIY Global is proud to sponsor this research, and why we believe the future requires EQ-powered leadership development. Emotional intelligence is not only about managing emotions when things get hard. It is also about engaging emotions as data and fuel to clarify what matters, make better decisions under uncertainty, build trust, and inspire others to move through change with purpose. When leaders can recognize what is happening within themselves and respond with skill, they steady their culture in difficult moments and unlock the kind of leadership that helps people perform, grow, and thrive.

About the Sponsor

SIY Global delivers EQ-powered leadership development, which puts emotional intelligence at the root of every leadership skill. Born from the premier emotional intelligence program at Google, we now serve leading organizations worldwide to develop high-performing, change-ready leaders. To learn more about SIY Global, visit siyglobal.com.

Executive Summary

In *Leadership Development: Cultivating Critical Skills for Employees at All Levels ,* ATD Research examines how organizations implement leadership development at all levels, what leadership skills are most important to organizations and learners, and how organizations and learners benefit from leadership development programs. The study surveyed 214 talent development (TD) professionals, 104 C-suite executives (excluding HR and TD executives), and 1,035 working Americans (learners).

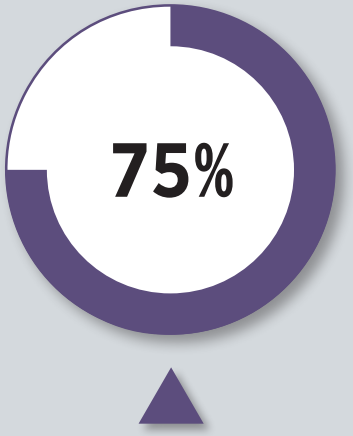
Some key findings from this study include:

- **Leadership development is a high priority** for organizations.
- **Organizations have been providing leadership development to executives, directors, and managers for a while** but more recently started offering it to individual contributors.
- **Organizations experience a continuation of organizational culture and a strengthened leadership pipeline** when they offer leadership development at all levels.

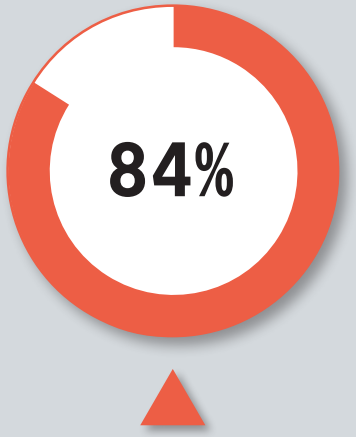
This study delivers benchmarking data on leadership development at all levels and includes resources and advice for organizations wanting to improve their leadership development programs or expand their offerings.



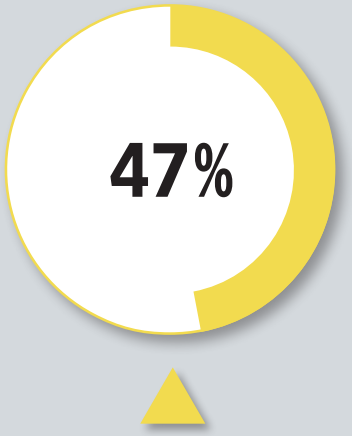
By the Numbers



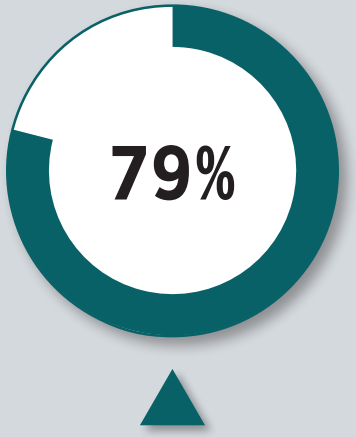
of C-suite executives say leadership development at all levels is a high priority.



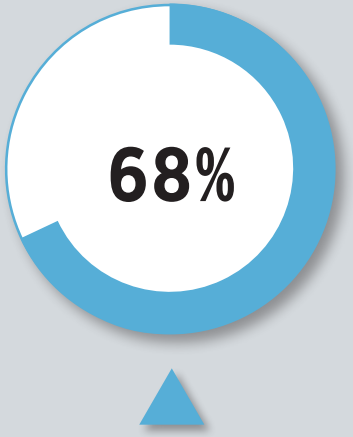
of C-suite executives think decision-making skills are very important for all employees.



of organizations offer leadership development at all levels.



of organizations experience a continuation of organizational culture when providing leadership development at all levels.



of learners experience improved job performance because of leadership development.

Introduction

As organizations face rapid change and increasing complexity, leadership development can no longer be limited to those with formal titles. Modern workplaces benefit when everyone is equipped to think critically, collaborate, and respond confidently to challenges in their roles. This approach not only strengthens individual performance but also creates a more agile and resilient organization that's prepared to navigate the challenges of the future.

Jeff Daigle, senior learning and development manager at Rosendin, emphasizes why developing leadership skills matters for everyone: "Leadership skills are life skills. Somewhere, someone's looking up to you. We all have opportunities to lead in our life, and when those opportunities present themselves, you want to be prepared and ready to act with confidence."

Brandon Dickey, lead learning and development trainer at Rosendin, shares a similar sentiment: "We have influence on people every day through our attitude, communication, relatability, and decision making. You do not need a title to be kind to somebody, to de-escalate conflict, or to stick up for someone who's treated unfairly. Many times, those people that model professionalism under pressure are the ones who are looked to as leaders, and that doesn't come with a title."



Report Findings



Leadership Development at All Levels Is a High Priority

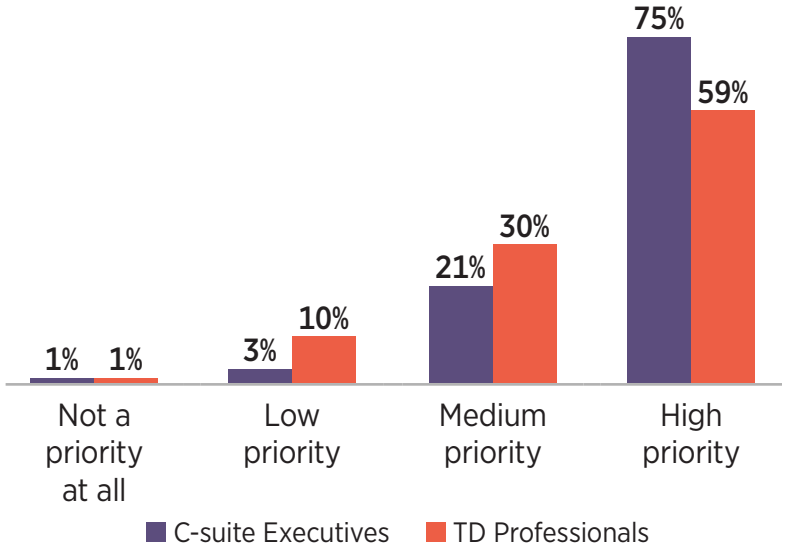
Leadership development at all levels is a high priority for many C-suite executives and TD professionals. Seventy-five percent of C-suite executives say that it's a high priority, compared with 59 percent of TD professionals.

Our survey respondents shared some reasons why:

- "Leadership isn't just about titles. We are all leaders. It's about influence, ownership, and impact. Every person in an organization, from the front line to the executive suite, has opportunities to lead, make decisions, solve problems, and help others succeed."
- "Leadership skills involve human skills such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. I believe these skills can be developed and implemented by all people, regardless of the job they do, and can lead to greater productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, job satisfaction, and happiness."
- "There is an aspect of leadership in most roles—even if it isn't leading people. It may be leading a project, leading change, or leading a customer. There are soft skills related to leadership that everyone can use."

Leadership development at all levels is a high priority for C-suite executives and TD professionals.

Question: In your opinion, how much of a priority is it that all employees develop leadership skills?



47 Percent of Organizations Provide Leadership Development at All Levels

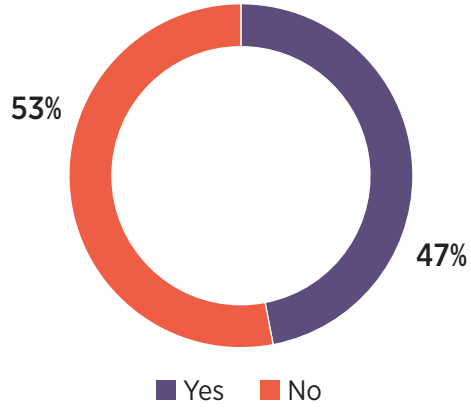
Although organizations tend to view leadership development at all levels as a high priority, less than half provide leadership development to employees at all levels.

Budgetary constraints were cited as a barrier to providing these programs. One survey participant shared, "While it's ideal to develop leadership skills in all employees, bandwidth and budget constraints only allow us to focus on developing current leaders, with a small program for aspiring leaders."

For organizations that want to provide leadership development at all levels but are constrained by budget or resources, Dickey shares a helpful reminder that "leaders are defined by their actions, not by their credentials. I don't know a single leader who said people follow them because they took enough classes." His advice is that "leadership begins with serving others and creating opportunities for others to lead. Mentorships and on-the-job training are among the most powerful informal tools at your disposal, not only for boosting capability but also shaping your culture."

Less than half of organizations provide leadership development at all levels.

Question: Does your organization provide leadership development at all levels?



(Respondents: TD Professionals)

Leadership Development for Individual Contributors Is Newer

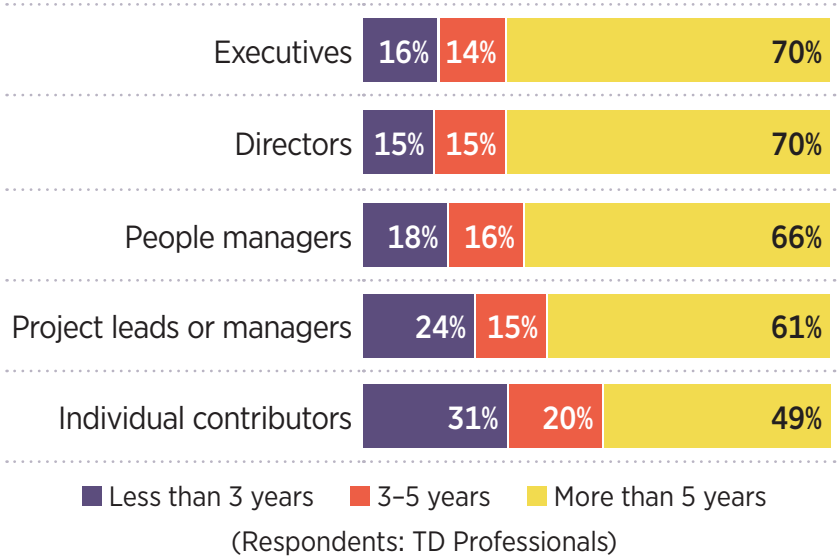
ATD Research asked organizations offering leadership development at all levels how long they have offered it to each group. Most respondents have offered it to executives, directors, people managers, and project managers for more than five years.

However, leadership development for individual contributors tends to be a more recent addition. Forty-nine percent have offered leadership development to individual contributors for more than five years, 20 percent for three to five years, and 31 percent for less than three years.

There is a newfound importance for providing leadership development to individual contributors. According to the Center for Creative Leadership, individual contributors are "just as necessary for shaping the direction and execution of their organization's strategy as those in formal managerial roles. Yet, most individuals are not well-prepared to make themselves heard. They know their expertise and experience may be very important, but seldom are they equipped to exert the influence that their knowledge merits."[1] The center emphasizes skills in communication, influencing, self-confidence, and team leadership as areas of growth for individual contributors.

Nearly half of organizations have been providing leadership development to individual contributors for more than 5 years.

Question: How long has your organization been providing leadership development to the following employees?



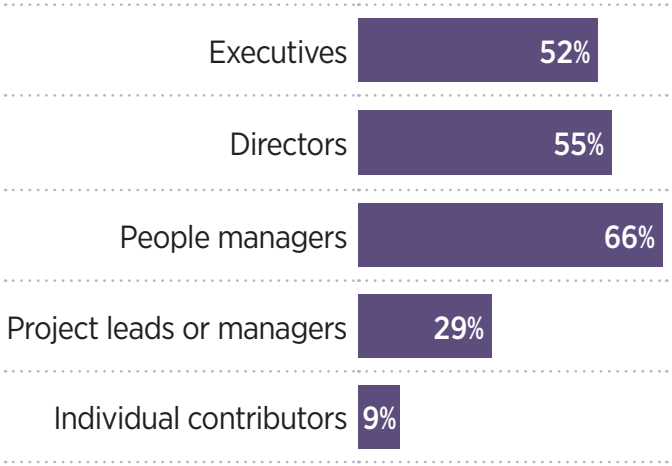
(Respondents: TD Professionals)

Two-Thirds of Organizations Mandate Leadership Development for People Managers

ATD Research asked organizations offering leadership development at all levels for which groups it is mandatory. Leadership development is most commonly mandatory for executives, directors, and people managers. It's especially common for people managers, with two-thirds of organizations requiring it. Leadership development is less commonly mandatory for project managers and individual contributors.

Leadership development is often mandatory for people managers.

Question: Is leadership development mandatory for the following employees? (Percent responding "yes.")



(Respondents: TD Professionals)

Executives Value a Variety of Leadership Skills

C-suite executives think it is very important for all employees to develop a variety of leadership skills. Most notably, 93 percent say communication skills are very important for all employees, and 84 percent say the same about decision-making skills.

Decision-making skills empower employees to evaluate a situation and determine the best path forward. The decision-making process entails recognizing the problem, generating solutions, evaluating alternatives, selecting the best course of action, and communicating the decision to others.[2]

C-suite executives think communication skills and decision-making skills are important.

Question: How important is it that all employees develop the following leadership skills? (Percent responding "very important.")



(Respondents: C-suite Executives)

Learners Are Interested in Developing Communication and Decision-Making Skills

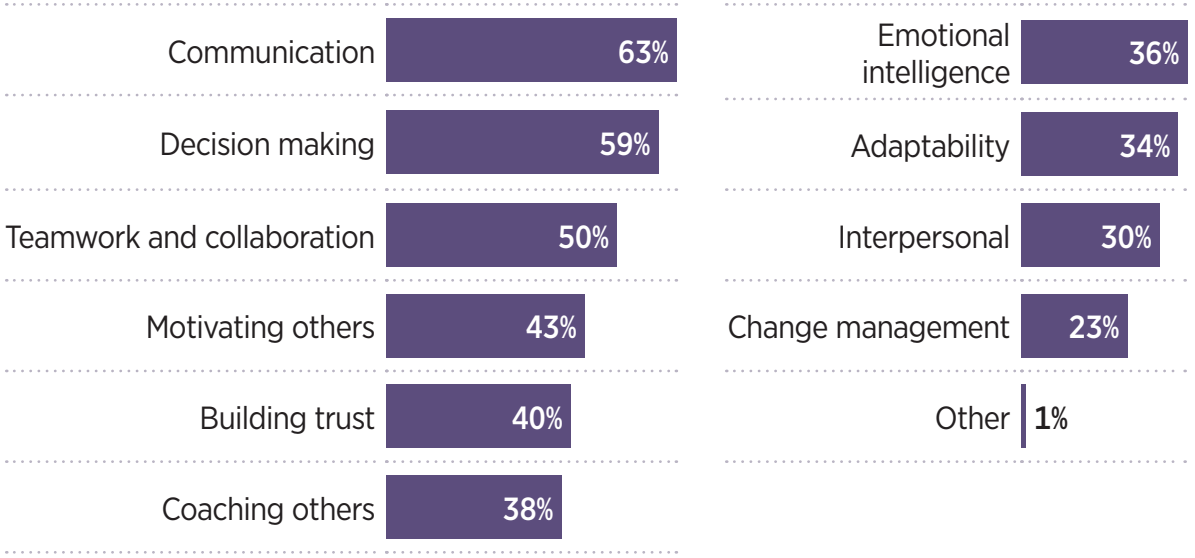
When asked to choose which leadership skills they are most interested in developing, learners most commonly chose communication and decision making.

Learners were less likely to choose interpersonal and change management skills, although a majority of C-suite executives say these skills are very important.

Dickey thinks change management skills are particularly relevant because "AI is here. Technology is moving so rapidly, and everybody is uncertain about what their job is going to look like. Change management is going to reduce resistance to new technology and new changes. There's a lot of burnout when people must change multiple times in one season of their job, so change management is a very important skill to have."

Learners are most interested in developing communication skills and decision-making skills.

Question: Which leadership skills are you most interested in developing? (Select up to 5.)



(Respondents: Learners)

Leadership Development at All Levels Has a Variety of Organizational Benefits

The most common benefits organizations experience when providing leadership development at all levels are a continuation of organizational culture and a stronger leadership pipeline.

DDI explains how providing leadership development at all levels is important to developing the leadership pipeline: "Succession starts at the bottom. Too many companies think of their leadership pipeline very narrowly, considering it only as a succession plan for executives at the top. But that's shortsighted and doesn't account for the rapid growth and change nearly every business is facing. You need to extend your efforts down to the front line and to emerging leaders. Why? This is where most of your talent is, and these people will move fast. If you don't spot your high-potential leaders here, you will lose them quickly."[3]

Providing leadership development at all levels contributes to a continuation of organizational culture.

Question: How has your organization benefited from providing leadership development at all levels? (Select all that apply.)



(Respondents: TD Professionals)

Learners Experience Improved Job Performance

More than two-thirds of learners have experienced improved job performance because of leadership development. Other common benefits include increased confidence and improved productivity.

"In my experience, leadership is almost always about treating people right, because employees that are treated right are going to do good things—they're typically going to be high performing employees," Daigle shares.

Learners experience improved job performance with leadership development.

Question: How have you benefited from leadership development at your current organization? (Select all that apply.)



(Respondents: Learners)

Some Organizations Use AI to Create Content for Leadership Training

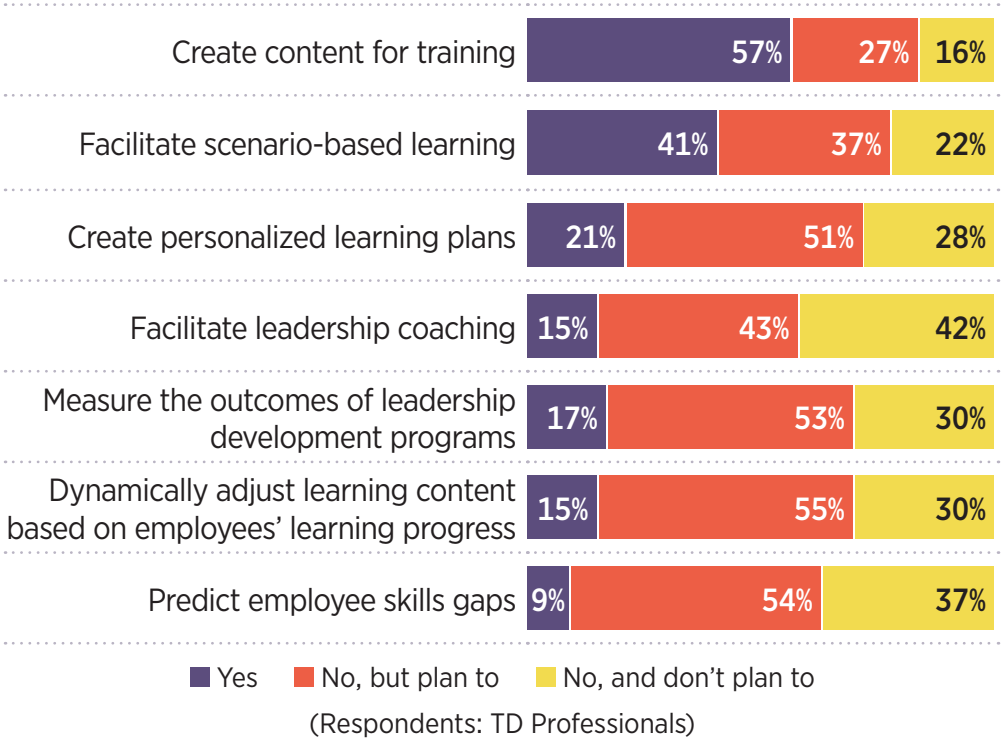
There are a variety of ways organizations can use artificial intelligence (AI) to support their leadership development programs. However, 57 percent of organizations report that the most common way is to create content for leadership training. Some organizations (41 percent) are also using AI to facilitate scenario-based learning.

Although the current use of AI to support leadership development is limited, some organizations plan to expand its use in the future.

In an ATD blog, Charles Good notes that "in many companies, AI is still seen as just a tool used to automate a task or deliver quick feedback. . . . However, when AI is [used] as a foundational layer of your leadership development strategy, it can do so much more. It becomes the engine that shapes your program, diagnoses growth needs, reinforces key behaviors, and provides rich insights to both L&D teams and coaches."[4]

57% of organizations use AI to create content for leadership training.

Question: Does your organization currently use AI for the following purposes when it comes to leadership development?



(Respondents: TD Professionals)

Action Plan

In this study, ATD Research examined how organizations implement leadership development at all levels, what leadership skills are most important to organizations and learners, and how organizations and learners benefit from leadership development programs. For organizations that want to implement leadership development at all levels or improve their existing leadership programs, ATD Research recommends these action steps:

- **Determine if your organization is ready for a leadership development program.** Is improving the leadership pipeline a priority? Do you value employee growth and development? Use this organizational readiness audit to examine six critical success factors of organizations with successful leadership development programs to determine if your organization is ready: td.org/templates-and-tools/organizational-readiness-audit-for-leadership-development-program.
- **If you're new to creating a leadership development program, consider using the ATD LEADS Model.** It outlines five critical steps: lay the foundation, envision the future, agree and articulate an action plan, design the developmental elements, and sustain progress. Visit td.org/templates-and-tools/leads-implementation-plan.
- **Establish your *why* before implementing AI for leadership development.** Determine what data you have about leadership and management success at your organization. See if there are areas your organization needs to improve. Think about which groups of employees are underserved and what behavior change would lead to better outcomes. To learn more, check out: td.org/product/td-at-work-guide--amplify-leadership-development-with-ai-coaching/252511.

Finally, whether your organization is new to leadership development or it has already established robust leadership development programs, all organizations should continue to learn and find resources that allow them to stay current in this area.



Acknowledgments

ATD gratefully acknowledges the contributions of time and professional insights from the following subject matter experts:

- **Jeff Daigle**, Senior Learning and Development Manager, Rosendin
- **Brandon Dickey**, Lead Learning and Development Trainer, Rosendin



Survey Overview

Target Survey Population

The target populations for this research were talent development professionals, C-suite executives, and working Americans across a variety of industries. There were 214 talent development professionals, 104 C-suite executives, and 1,035 working Americans who completed surveys.

Survey Instrument

Three surveys were created for this study. Each targeted either talent development professionals, C-suite executives, or working Americans. The surveys were composed of a variety of questions related to leadership development.

Procedure

ATD Research distributed a link to an online survey targeted at talent development professionals which opened in October 2025 and closed the same month. ATD Research distributed a link to an online survey targeted at C-suite executives that opened in August 2025 and closed September 2025. ATD Research distributed a link to an online survey targeted at working Americans that opened in October 2025 and closed the same month.



Demographics of TD Professionals

Employment Status	
Employed full time	98%
Employed part time	2%

Organization Size	
Small (*1–99 employees*)	5%
Medium (*100–2,499 employees*)	48%
Large (*2,500–9,999 employees*)	24%
Extra large (*10,000 or more employees*)	23%

Industry	
Accommodation and food service	2%
Administrative, support, waste management, and remediation services	<1%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	<1%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	<1%
Construction	4%
Educational services	10%
Finance and insurance	15%
Healthcare and social assistance	15%
Manufacturing	11%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	8%
Public administration	9%
Real estate and rental or leasing	1%
Retail trade	2%
Transportation and warehousing	2%
Utilities	5%
Wholesale trade	2%
Other services	13%

Region	
Asia-Pacific	<1%
Canada	3%
Europe, UK, or Ireland	3%
United States	93%
Other	<1%

Span of Control	
Executive or director	20%
People or project manager	45%
Individual contributor	32%
Other	3%

Demographics of C-Suite Executives

Organization Size	
Small (*1–99 employees*)	8%
Medium (*100–2,499 employees*)	67%
Large (*2,500–9,999 employees*)	21%
Extra large (*10,000 or more employees*)	4%

Industry	
Administrative, support, waste management, and remediation services	2%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	1%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	1%
Construction	11%
Educational services	2%
Finance and insurance	19%
Healthcare and social assistance	4%
Information	15%
Management of companies and enterprises	1%
Manufacturing	16%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	11%
Public administration	1%
Real estate and rental or leasing	1%
Retail trade	5%
Transportation and warehousing	2%
Wholesale trade	3%
Other services	5%

Region	
Africa or Middle East	2%
Europe, UK, or Ireland	1%
Mexico	1%
United States	96%

Title	
CEO or president	60%
Chief financial officer	13%
Chief information officer	4%
Chief operating officer	3%
Chief technology officer	20%

Demographics of Working Americans

Employment Status	
Employed full time	98%
Employed part time	2%

Organization Size	
Small (*1–99 employees*)	29%
Medium (*100–2,499 employees*)	48%
Large (*2,500–9,999 employees*)	14%
Extra large (*10,000 or more employees*)	9%

Industry	
Accommodation and food service	5%
Administrative, support, waste management, and remediation services	1%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	<1%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	1%
Construction	6%
Educational services	9%
Finance and insurance	8%
Healthcare and social assistance	13%
Information	12%
Management of companies and enterprises	1%
Manufacturing	7%
Mining, quarrying, and oil or gas extraction	<1%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	6%
Public administration	2%
Real estate and rental or leasing	1%
Retail trade	7%
Transportation and warehousing	4%
Utilities	1%
Wholesale trade	1%
Other services	15%

Region	
Africa or Middle East	<1%
Asia-Pacific	<1%
Canada	<1%
Europe, UK, or Ireland	1%
Latin America or South America	<1%
Mexico	<1%
United States	98%

Span of Control	
Executive or director	27%
People or project manager	38%
Individual contributor	25%
Other	10%

ATD Resources

ATD has many free and paid resources for leadership development. Whether you have five minutes or five weeks, we have content that will fit your schedule.

ATD Certificate programs are comprehensive skills-based courses available to members and nonmembers. They're offered both live online and face to face.*

- The Creating Leadership Development Programs course will show you how to design and implement effective leadership programs, identify good future leaders, and demonstrate the impact of your programs on the bottom line. Visit td.org/education-courses/creating-leadership-development-certificate.

ATD Micro Courses assess your knowledge and tailor content in real time to meet your unique learning needs. These courses are only available to ATD Professional Plus members.

- The Developing a Leadership Strategy course teaches you how to develop a leadership strategy for your organization as well as how to implement it and measure results. Visit td.org/education-courses/l/micro-course/developing-a-leadership-strategy.

***TD at Work* guides** are written by TD professionals for TD professionals. Each issue takes a deep dive into one focus area.

- "Amplify Leadership Development with AI Coaching" provides an overview of what AI coaching is, how it can strengthen leadership development, and what to look for in a high-quality AI coaching solution. Visit td.org/product/td-at-work-guide--amplify-leadership-development-with-ai-coaching/252511

The ATD blog is filled with posts on a variety of topics.

- "Future-Proof Your Workforce: The Essential Role of Leadership Development" explores how leadership development can enhance organizational performance, boost employee retention, and strengthen the leadership pipeline. Visit td.org/content/atd-blog/future-proof-your-workforce-the-essential-role-of-leadership-development.

- "Best Practices for Leadership Development ROI Studies" outlines how the ROI Methodology helps organizations demonstrate program effectiveness and secure executive support. Visit td.org/content/atd-blog/best-practices-for-leadership-development-roi-studies.

**Not included in the price of ATD membership*

Not a member of ATD? Visit TD.org to join and gain access to ATD's resources, articles, whitepapers, webinars, and more.

Notes

1 Center for Creative Leadership, “Do Individual Contributors Need Leadership Development?,” December 17, 2025, ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/individual-contributors-need-leadership-development/.

2 Indeed Editorial Team, “Why is Decision-Making an Important Leadership Skill?,” December 11, 2025, indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/why-is-decision-making-an-important-leadership-skill.

3 DDI, “5 Best Practices to Optimize Your Leadership Pipeline,” September 21, 2023, td.org/content/professional-partner-content/5-best-practices-to-optimize-your-leadership-pipeline

4 C. Good, “The Future of Leadership is Personalized, On-Demand, and AI-Powered,” ATD Blog, June 3, 2025, td.org/content/atd-blog/the-future-of-leadership-is-personalized-on-demand-and-ai-powered.



About the Author and Contributors

The Association for Talent Development (ATD) champions the importance of learning and training by setting standards for the talent development profession. ATD is the largest, most-trusted organization for the professional development of practitioners in training and talent development, serving a worldwide community with members in more than 100 countries. Since ATD was founded in 1943, the talent development field has expanded significantly to meet the needs of global businesses and emerging industries. ATD's mission is to empower professionals to develop talent in the workplace.

The resources we provide to help talent development professionals increase their impact and effectiveness include our research. ATD's researchers track trends, inform decisions, and connect research to practice and performance. By providing comprehensive data and insightful analyses, ATD's research products, which include research reports, briefs, infographics, and webinars, help business leaders and talent development professionals understand and more effectively respond to today's fast-paced industry.



Rocki Basel, PhD, is the director of ATD research services and served as an editor for this report.



Tessa Guiv is a researcher for ATD and was the author of this report.



Paula Ketter is senior editor of publications and communications for ATD and served as an editor for this report.



Melissa Jones is the manager of ATD Press and served as an editor for this report.



Shirley E.M. Raybuck is a senior graphic designer for ATD and served as the designer for this report.

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