

High Tech + High Touch = Effective Leaders

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Executive Summary

This article presents findings from the 10th annual Leadership Development Survey, a longitudinal study conducted jointly by Training magazine and Wilson Learning, drawing on responses from more than 9,000 L&D practitioners over a decade, including 1,115 respondents in the most recent cycle. The central argument is that effective leadership development requires an integrated combination of high-technology tools — particularly generative AI — and high-touch human practices such as executive involvement, manager coaching, and applied learning experiences. Neither approach alone is sufficient. Key findings include: generative AI adoption among surveyed organizations more than doubled from 23 percent to 49 percent year-over-year; high-performing organizations are significantly more likely to use both AI and relational development methods; overall leadership development effectiveness has improved only modestly from 49 percent in 2017 to 54 percent in the current survey period. Six outcome-based indicators are used to differentiate high-performing from low-performing organizations. The article concludes that technology-enabled scale, when coupled with executive commitment, coaching, character development, and real-world application, yields the highest reported effectiveness. Investment in leadership development as a share of training budgets has remained near 25 percent outside of COVID-period spikes.

Key Insights

1. Generative AI adoption in leadership development more than doubled in one year — from 23 percent in 2024 to 49 percent in the 2026 survey cycle — yet AI adoption alone does not account for performance differences between high- and low-performing organizations.
2. High-performing organizations report executive involvement in leadership development activities at a rate exceeding 80 percent, compared to approximately 40 percent in low-performing organizations — a two-to-one gap that the survey identifies as one of the strongest differentiators.
3. Overall leadership development effectiveness has increased only modestly over the 10-year study period, rising from 49 percent in 2017 to 54 percent currently, suggesting that neither successive waves of eLearning, virtual learning, nor AI adoption have produced transformative aggregate gains.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations aiming to improve leadership development effectiveness are observed — in this dataset — to combine generative AI for personalization and scale with high-touch elements such as coaching, mentoring, executive sponsorship, and applied learning assignments, rather than relying on technology platforms in isolation.
- The survey data indicate that governance structures, AI literacy investment, and incremental implementation — starting with contained tasks before scaling to simulations and media content — are

practices associated with higher-performing organizations in their generative AI adoption.

Frameworks Mentioned

360-Degree Review — A multi-source feedback method explicitly cited as a learning methodology used more frequently in high-performing leadership development organizations.

Action Learning — An applied learning methodology involving real organizational challenges, cited as a high-touch development practice associated with higher-performing organizations.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The survey's 10-year longitudinal design and large cumulative sample (9,000+ respondents) provide a stable baseline for trend analysis. The use of six outcome-based effectiveness indicators to differentiate performance groups adds methodological structure beyond simple self-report. The distinction between correlation and causality is explicitly acknowledged in the text regarding AI adoption and effectiveness. **Limitations:** The study is co-produced by Wilson Learning, a leadership development vendor whose commercial offerings align directly with the article's central recommendation of relationship-based, high-touch development — creating a material conflict of interest. All data are self-reported by L&D practitioners, introducing social desirability bias and recall error. The effectiveness metric is composite and proprietary, making external validation impossible. The survey excludes external L&D providers, which may skew results toward in-house practices. Geographic concentration (62 percent U.S.-only organizations) limits global generalizability. The causal mechanism between any specific practice and leadership effectiveness is not established.

Organizational Practice

Surveyed high-performing organizations integrate generative AI into leadership development planning, assessment, design, and evaluation while simultaneously maintaining executive participation in program delivery, manager coaching of new leaders, character development programming, 360-degree feedback, mentoring, and applied learning assignments such as stretch and challenge roles. Low-performing organizations are observed to use both high-tech and high-touch methods at substantially lower rates, with adoption figures below 60 percent for most methods compared to 80 to 90 percent among high performers.

Strategic Implications

The data pattern — stable overall effectiveness gains despite successive technology waves — suggests that technology adoption in leadership development may be a necessary but insufficient condition for performance improvement. The sustained primacy of coaching and communication skills across the 10-year dataset, combined with the modest aggregate effectiveness gain, points toward persistent implementation gaps rather than methodology shortfalls. The rapid year-over-year doubling of generative AI experimentation signals a potential inflection point, though the survey's own findings caution against interpreting technology adoption as a standalone driver of outcomes. The growing share of organizations anticipating decreased investment in leadership development may represent a tension point if effectiveness expectations tied to AI efficiency do not materialize at scale.

