

The 2026 CEO Agenda: Where Ambition Outpaces Execution

Our latest CEO survey finds leaders confident in their vision. But amid rising turbulence, most organizations aren't built to deliver it.

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At a Glance

- ▶ The best performers run two tracks simultaneously: delivering today while building tomorrow's growth engine.
 - ▶ Yet fewer than half of CEOs believe that their organizations can adapt and execute at the speed the market now requires.
 - ▶ AI should help. But most CEOs use it for productivity gains alone, and more than 80% aren't satisfied with the results.
 - ▶ The path forward: Build adaptability and resilience, strengthen execution, and scale AI beyond pilots.
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Ask CEOs how confident they are in their strategy, and most will say very. Ask whether their board is aligned, their leadership team committed, their ambition clear: same answer.

The vision is there. But it requires companies to simultaneously take their current core business to full potential and build new growth engines.

That's difficult enough in placid times. In the face of today's turbulence, fewer than half of the CEOs we surveyed believe that their organizations are agile enough to adapt and execute. Middle layers remain bureaucratic. Decision processes slow rather than accelerate. AI, often treated as the solution, is deployed narrowly. And more than 80% of CEOs aren't satisfied with what it's delivering.

This is what our 2026 CEO Agenda Survey reveals: not a crisis of leadership at the top but a gap between where strategy is set and how it is delivered.

The threats are clear; the organizations aren't ready

For most of the past century, strategy was a deliberate craft. The business landscape shifted slowly enough that leaders had time to see it coming, deliberate, and respond. Today, every decision a company makes is effectively a prediction, a bet on the future. Making better predictions about business shifts has become the first step in successfully navigating them.

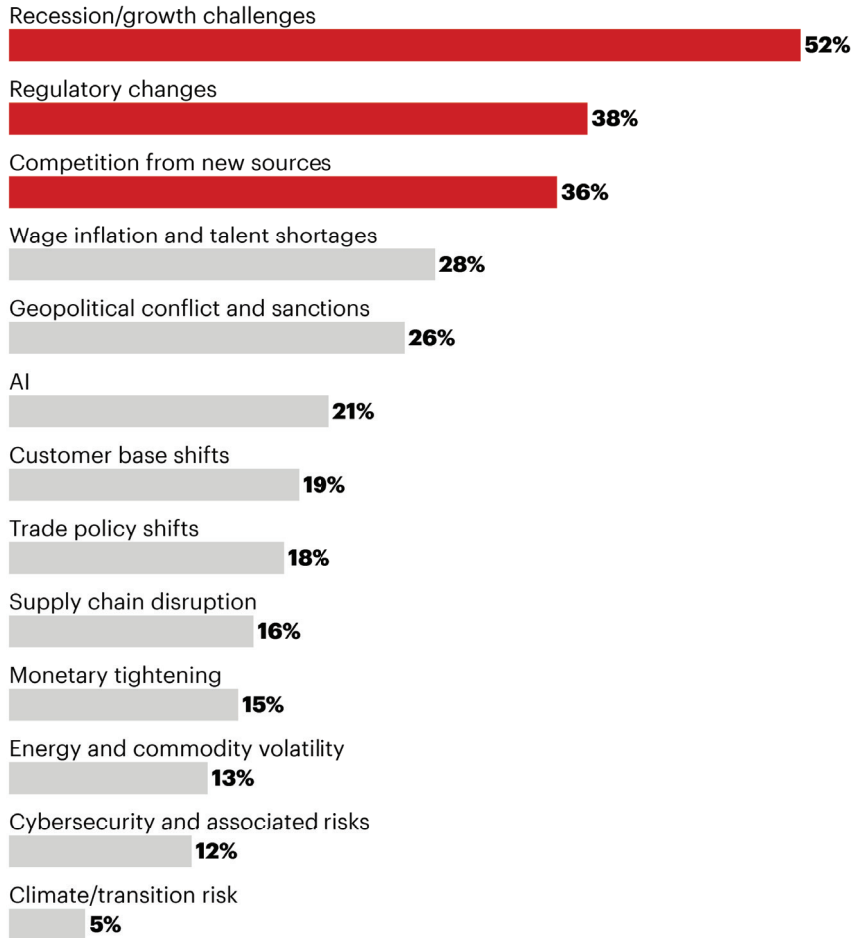
Conviction turns those predictions into competitive advantage. When leaders have it, they can move faster and commit more fully. When they don't, they must spread their bets, keep options open, and watch industry signals more carefully.

Our 2026 CEO Agenda Survey puts hard numbers on this new reality. CEOs cite macroeconomic uncertainty, regulatory and geopolitical volatility, and technology disruption as their top threats. These pressures are raising the cost of hesitation and putting a premium on adaptability and resilience.

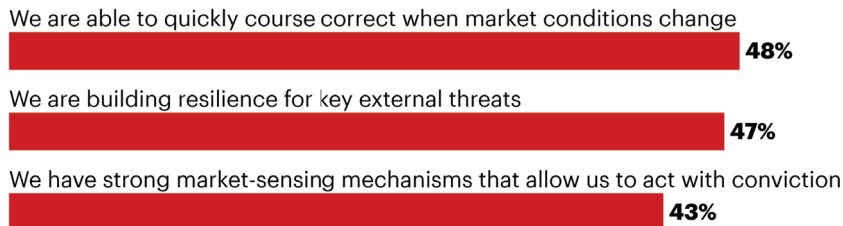
The 2026 CEO Agenda: Where Ambition Outpaces Execution

Yet fewer than half of the CEOs we surveyed feel confident that their organizations can do any of this well. They are least confident in the very capabilities that turbulence demands: course correcting quickly, investing in resilience, and building the market-sensing mechanisms needed to make future bets with conviction.

Percentage of CEOs who ranked the following threats in their top three



Percentage of CEOs who agree/strongly agree with the given statements



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

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The leadership challenge is not to forecast the future perfectly; it is to build an organization that can respond faster and with more conviction than competitors.

One organization, two agendas: The best CEOs run both

Every CEO is managing two distinct time frames simultaneously. The first is immediate: delivering against plan, hitting operational targets, meeting stakeholder commitments. The second is longer: building the capabilities, growth engines, and business models that will determine competitive position three to five years out.

In a turbulent environment, these two agendas can feel like they compete for the same resources, leadership bandwidth, and organizational energy. But our survey shows that the strongest companies are not choosing between the core and the future when it comes to value creation; they are running both. And the gap between them and everyone else is widening.

The companies that are gaining share are more likely to be taking their core business to full potential while simultaneously building new growth engines. That combination is what separates them, and it requires a different kind of strategic discipline. Delivery decisions, such as operational efficiency, performance against plan, and stakeholder commitments, need to be made on a short time cycle, with clear accountability and visible progress. Development decisions, such as innovation, new capabilities, and growth options, require longer time horizons, more tolerance for uncertainty, and different success metrics. Only about half of the CEOs we surveyed, 52%, agree that they have the right routines for running and changing the business simultaneously.

Delivery and development are equal priorities for leadership teams

“What are your top priorities as a leadership team for 2026?”

By percentage of mentions in top three



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

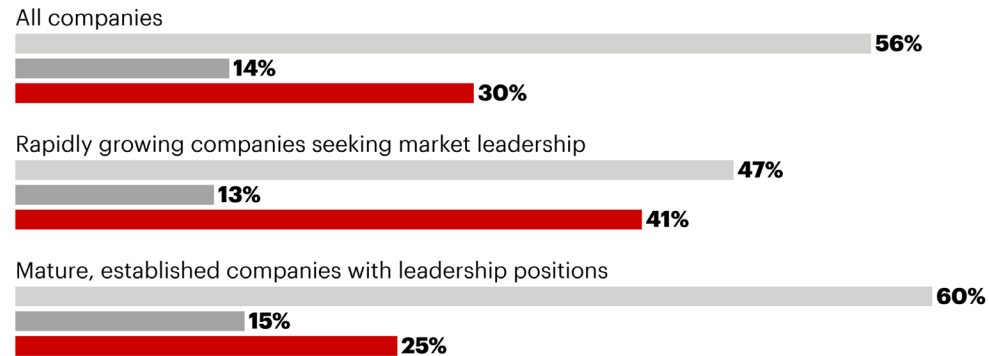
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Share gainers both strengthen the core and build new engines

“Over the next five years, what do you see as the biggest opportunities for growth?”

Percentage of CEOs

■ Taking our core business to full potential
 ■ Reinventing our core business
 ■ Building new growth engines



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

Running two agendas simultaneously requires deliberate choices about where to invest and where to cut. Cost transformation is most powerful when it funds the future. No CEO leads a company with the ambition of becoming permanently smaller. The goal is to shrink where it doesn’t matter in order to grow where it does.

Execution is the bottleneck

CEOs are clear about where the gap lies: translating strategic intent into measurable outcomes across complex, fast-moving markets. It shows up in four places.

1. **Routines:** Most organizations lack the frontline routines that make strategy real, the repeatable behaviors that tell the front line what the strategy actually means for them day to day.
2. **Capabilities:** Fewer than half of the CEOs we surveyed are confident that they have the right people in the right roles or a credible plan to close the gap. The shortfalls are specific: technical and data skills, AI expertise, and the programs to identify who has what and develop them fast enough to keep current.
3. **Behaviors:** Ownership, curiosity, and risk taking are in short supply. CEOs want less command and control and more of the entrepreneurial energy that characterized their companies at their best.
4. **Governance:** Decision making is too slow and too centralized. Only half of the CEOs we surveyed say that their governance processes are simple enough to support speed and agility. The deeper problem: Decision processes are unclear, accountability is diffuse, and the structures in place were built for a different time.

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The ambition gap is small; the execution gap is large

Percentage of CEOs who agree/strongly agree with the given statements

CEOs have a bold ambition and vision of where the business needs to go ...

Our investments and strategic decisions are focused on the future and on what matters most **83%**

Our ambition is inspiring and energizes people in the organization **76%**

Our company has a bold vision of where the business needs to go and why it matters **75%**

... and most are confident their executive team and board are aligned and supportive ...

My executive leadership team is aligned, incentivized, or committed to the ambition **87%**

We share with the board a strong understanding of how shareholder priorities link to strategy **76%**

... but CEOs are less confident that they can translate strategic intent into outcomes

We encourage the risk-taking and innovation necessary to deliver on our full potential **52%**

We have the right routines for running and changing the business simultaneously **52%**

We have a clear plan to build or acquire the skills we need **48%**

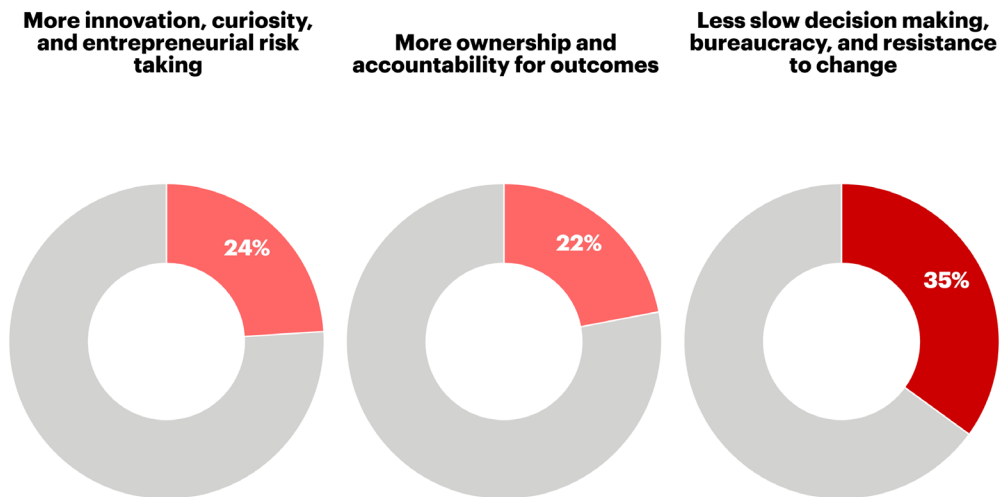
We have the right people in the right roles doing the right work to deliver our ambition **46%**

We have programs that address broad talent needs while accelerating high potential talent **43%**

CEOs want more ownership and collaboration, less bureaucracy and command and control

"What is the one leadership behavior that you would like to see more of/less of?"

Percentage of CEOs



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

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Execution is a system, not a slogan. It requires routines that make progress visible, decision processes redesigned for today’s pace, and proof points that show the organization what the new behaviors actually look like in practice. For CEOs, this means getting out of headquarters, connecting directly with the front line, and celebrating the people getting it right.

AI is everywhere, so why isn’t it working?

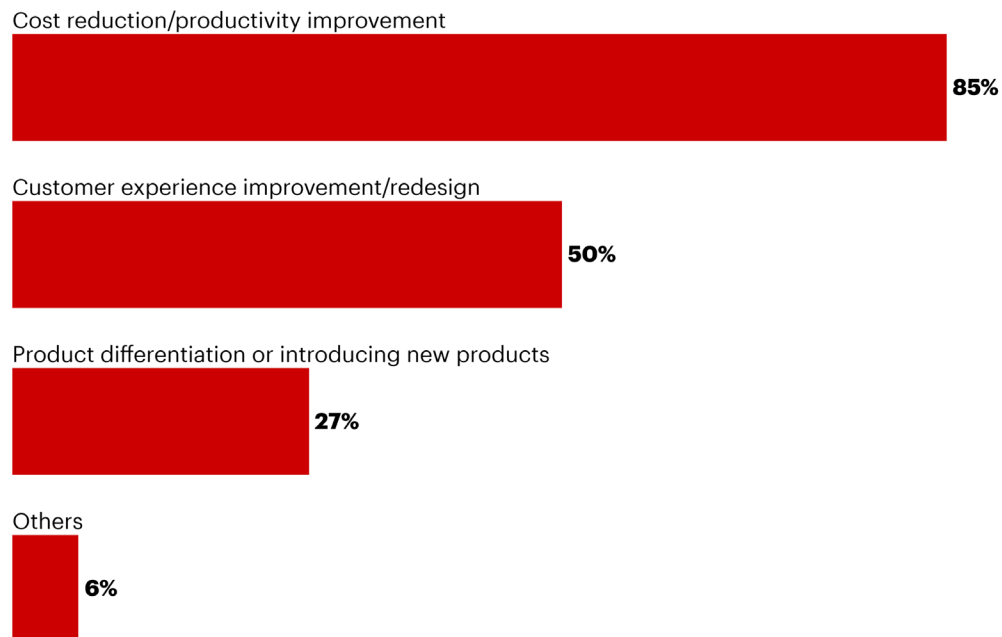
AI is high on the agenda, but most companies are still seeing too little value from it. More than 80% of the CEOs we surveyed are using AI for cost reduction and productivity improvements. That is a logical starting point, but it is not the full prize. And most aren’t satisfied with the results so far.

The bigger opportunity is to use AI to accelerate both delivery and development: improving productivity, reshaping customer experiences, building new capabilities, speeding innovation, and, in some cases, reinventing the business model.

The barriers are specific: Companies don’t have enough people who know how to make AI work, their data and platforms aren’t ready, and most efforts remain trapped in local pilots. One in five of the CEOs we surveyed also ranks AI among their top external threats, making the gap between AI ambition and AI results all the more consequential.

“What is the primary purpose of your AI transformation or experimentation?”

Percentage of CEOs



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

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“For the stated purpose of your AI transformation or experimentation, how would you rate the results to date?”

Percentage of CEOs

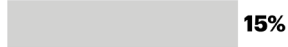
The results are below expectations so far (<40%)



Some results are being realized (41%–69%)



Most results are being realized (70%–99%)



Above and beyond the ambition (100%+)



“What are the biggest barriers or challenges associated with your AI transformation or experimentation?”

Percentage of CEOs who ranked the following in their top three

Our people lack the expertise and tools to support the change



We are focused on local pilots, not broad transformation



Our company data and platforms are not ready for adoption at scale



We have concerns about unproven returns on AI investments



We are still trying to navigate the risks and legal concerns



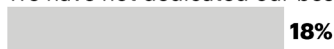
There is hesitance/resistance to adopting AI at the speed we need



We are unclear to what extent AI will impact our industry and company strategy



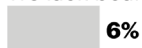
We have not dedicated our best leaders to the AI implementation



We are not modeling the behaviors needed to scale the impact of AI



We lack board or leadership support for large-scale AI adoption

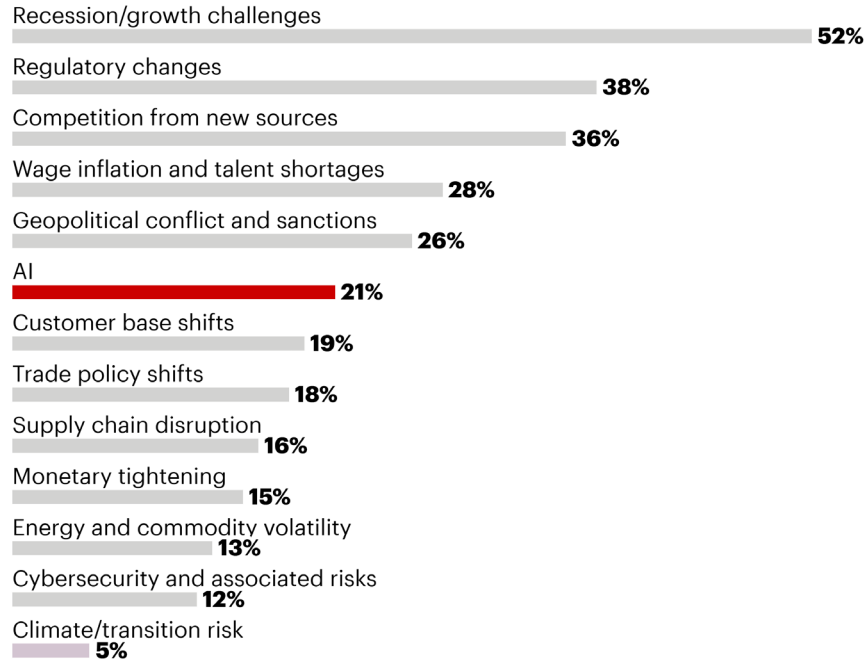


Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

The 2026 CEO Agenda: Where Ambition Outpaces Execution

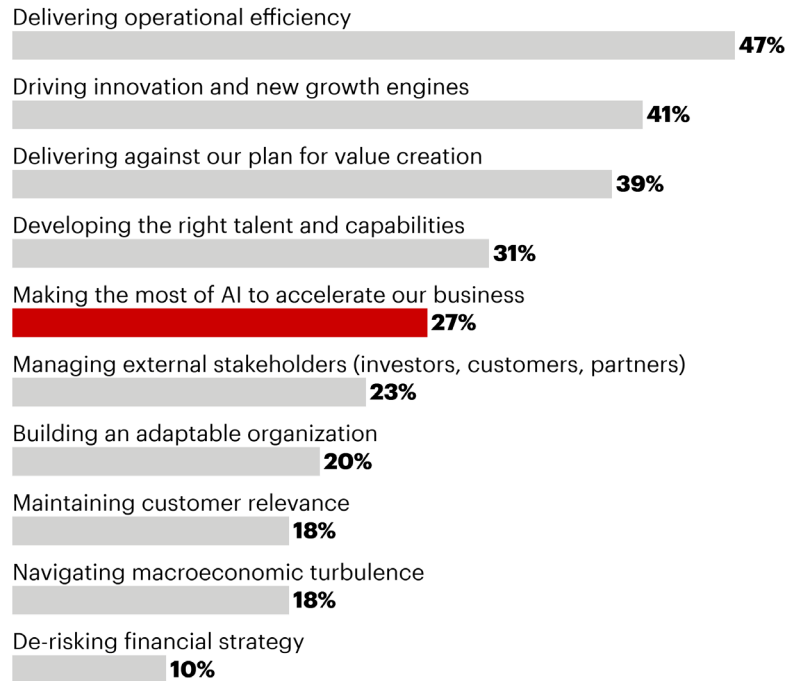
"What are the three biggest external threats that could impact your competitive positioning in the next 5 years?"

Percentage of CEOs who ranked the following threats in their top 3



"What are your top priorities as a leadership team for 2026?"

Top strategic priorities (by percentage of mentions in top three)



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

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AI won't scale through technology alone. The evidence suggests that 20% to 30% of the value comes from the tools themselves; the rest comes from reimagining how work actually gets done. That takes more than a portfolio of pilots; it requires the CEO to treat AI as a core business agenda item, set clear priorities, and build the cross-functional teams that can redesign work, not just deploy tools.

CEOs are trapped by their own calendars

CEOs want to spend more time outside the company with customers, peers, advisers, and thought leaders. Inside the company, they want more time with the board and leadership team on strategy and transformation.

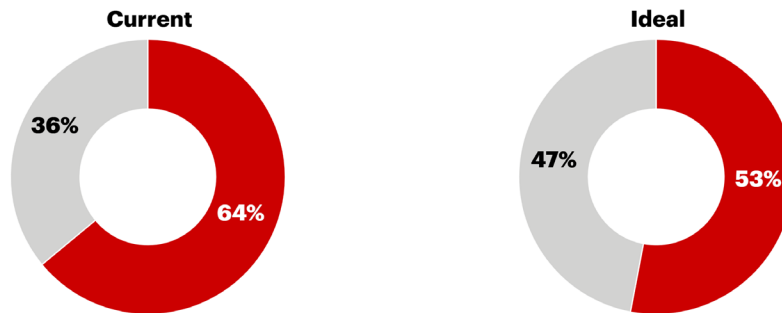
But too often, their calendars tell a different story: Routine operations, recurring meetings, and low-value work crowd out the agenda only the CEO can own. Only 41% of those we surveyed say that their calendar protects time for deep work, and only 41% maintain an evergreen stop list to prune low-value initiatives. Without both, the CEO becomes the bottleneck.

CEOs want to reallocate time toward customers, learning, strategy, and transformation

“What would be your actual and ideal time allocation (internal vs. external)?”

Percentage of CEOs

■ Internal ■ External



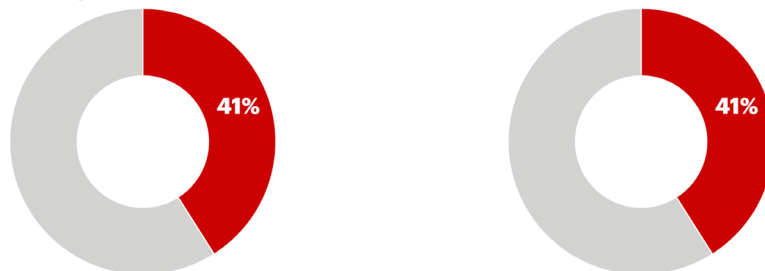
“How strongly do you agree with the following on how you spend your time?”

Percentage of CEOs who agree/strongly agree with the given statements

■ Agree/strongly agree

My calendar protects time for deep work on the highest-value topics

I keep an evergreen stop list and regularly prune low-value initiatives



Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

The 2026 CEO Agenda: Where Ambition Outpaces Execution

A CEO's time is one of their company's scarcest resources. They must actively design their own agenda, not passively inherit it, which means ruthlessly protecting time for the strategic execution work that only they can do: staying close to customers, making the few critical choices, shaping the leadership team, and building the organizational resilience that won't happen if the CEO is buried in operations. It also means building a leadership team capable of carrying the rest so that the CEO isn't the last line of defense on decisions that should never reach their desk.

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From strategy to legacy

The CEO agenda is becoming broader and more human, not narrower and more technical.

Our survey makes that pattern clear: CEOs are most confident in ambition and alignment, the parts of the job that point outward and forward. Confidence fades on execution, operating model, speed, and personal sustainability, the parts that determine whether the organization can actually deliver.

But strategy is about making things happen. It is about action. A problem with execution is ultimately a strategy failure.

CEOs still must set a bold ambition and lead with a full potential mindset. But our survey suggests that they also need to build high-performing teams, simplify ways of working, model the behaviors that they want to scale, and, critically, sustain their own energy over time.

That last point is underrated. Only 54% of the CEOs we surveyed agree that they have routines in place to sustain their own performance over time. The best CEOs think carefully about their own pace, their circle of advisers, and the moments that will define their tenure. They know that how they lead, with purpose, energy, and frontline focus, matters as much as what they decide.

The CEO role is not only about setting the agenda; it is about creating the conditions for the organization to deliver it and sustaining the personal energy to see it through. That means building the right team, designing the operating model around the unit of value creation, and reconnecting with the front line. The hardest part might be the most personal: managing your own energy as deliberately as you manage the business.

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CEOs are bullish on growth and leadership alignment, but confidence fades on execution

CEO agenda professional themes

Percentage of CEOs who agree/strongly agree with most statements

Strategy	Bold ambition	We have a clear direction of where the business needs to go and why it matters, and we align our decisions, investments, and capabilities accordingly	85%
	Full potential mindset	We have an ambitious, multiyear vision for the full potential value of the business, backed by bold choices on where to play and how to win, balancing short- and long-term moves	54%
People	Team, culture, and talent	We build high-performing talent and teams, with the right skills and culture to scale across the organization	55%
	Operating model	We have an operating model that enables fast decision making, clear accountabilities, and supports both running and changing the business at the speed required	58%
Execution and communication	Strategy into action	We keep leadership aligned, dedicate the right resources, and govern with the speed and clarity needed to deliver on our ambition	69%
	Stakeholder alignment	We keep strategy aligned to customers, board/shareholders, and the frontline, and we build external relationships and strong supplier partnerships	76%
Leadership and legacy	Character and style	We have a leadership team that lives the purpose, amplifies the customer and frontline voice, simplifies ways of working, operates as one team, and models learning	75%
	Personal sustainability	I have routines that sustain my performance over time, including energy management, prioritization, and a trusted network of support	54%

Source: Bain CEO Survey 2026 (n=100)

The path forward

The 2026 CEO agenda is not short on ambition; it is short on capacity, speed, and focus. The companies pulling ahead are solving for all three simultaneously, and the CEOs leading them are making it happen.

They are simplifying the agenda to a few big moves that connect strategy, execution, and their own time. They are linking cost transformation explicitly to growth and reinvestment. They are treating execution as a repeatable system, not a management aspiration. They are moving AI from a portfolio of pilots to a scaled business agenda. And they are bringing the human side of the CEO role into the room, recognizing that personal sustainability and energy management are not soft issues; they are the foundation on which everything else rests.

What CEOs need is not a longer list but a sharper one.

Questions for CEOs

The threats are clear; the organizations aren't ready

- What are the few external shifts that could most materially change our competitive position?
- Do we have the routines to make fast, fact-based decisions when volatility rises?

One organization, two agendas: The best CEOs run both

- Where is the core still underearning its full potential?
- Which growth engines deserve disproportionate investment now?
- Are cost programs explicitly linked to reinvestment and growth?

Execution is the bottleneck

- Which routines most directly connect strategy to measurable progress?
- Where do decision processes slow down the business?
- How are we using the customer and frontline voice to sharpen execution?
- Which leadership behaviors are we unintentionally rewarding?

AI is everywhere, so why isn't it working?

- Where can AI create measurable value over the next 12 months?
- Which AI use cases can reshape growth, customer experience, or the operating model?
- What is preventing successful pilots from scaling?
- Do we have the talent, data, and governance to industrialize AI?

CEOs are trapped by their own calendars

- What work can only you do, and are you actually doing it?
- What is on your agenda today that should never have reached your desk?
- Where are you being pulled into decisions because the organization below you lacks confidence or clarity?

From strategy to legacy

- What is the unit of value creation in our business, and is the organization designed around it?
- Does the leadership team amplify or dilute the customer and frontline voice?
- What defining moments will shape your leadership legacy?
- Are you surrounded by energy givers or energy vampires?

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