RESEARCH REVIEW, 9 OCTOBER 2026

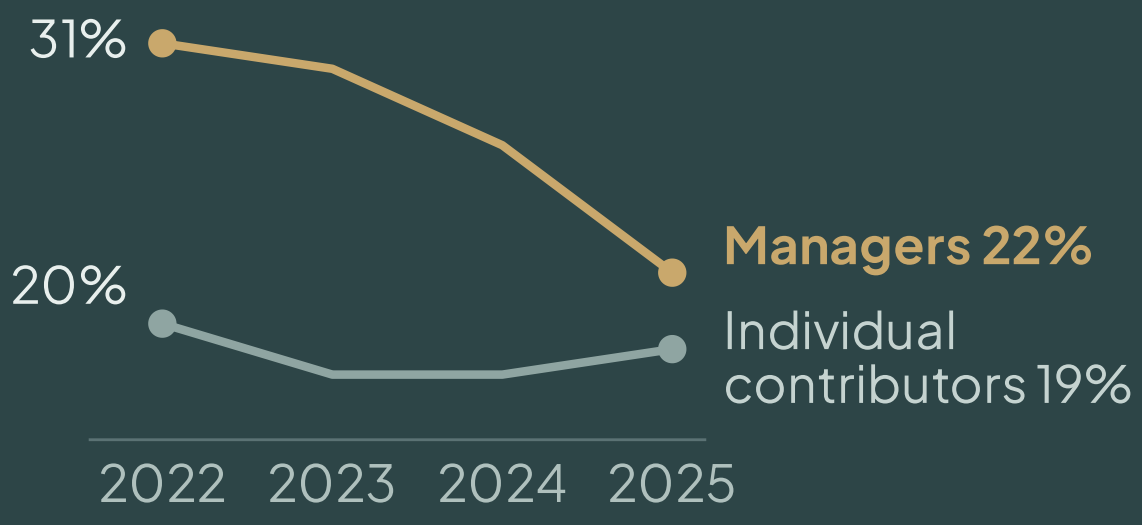
State of Leadership Friction 2026

What the research says about manager overload and slow decisions, with a small 2026 pilot.

By Jimmy Burroughes, founder of JBL High Performance. Written for General Managers and leadership teams. Published and last reviewed 9 October 2026. About a 14 minute read.

Managers' engagement has fallen 9 points since 2022

Share of employees engaged at work



Source: Gallup, April 2026, data for 2025

Abstract

Managers carry much of an organisation's decision traffic, and Gallup's data shows their engagement falling faster than anyone else's.

This paper reviews research on manager engagement, interruption, collaboration load and decision-making. It defines five dimensions along which that delay can be measured, then sets JBL's own client observations and one small pilot beside the published studies.

In plain terms

This is a research review of why decisions slow down inside organisations, written by Jimmy Burroughes of JBL High Performance and published on 9 October 2026. It draws on Gallup, McKinsey, Microsoft, Harvard Business Review and Bain & Company. Manager engagement fell from 31% to 22% between 2022 and 2025, and only 38% of people in organisations with seven or more reporting layers said their decisions were quick, against 61% with one to three layers. The paper defines leadership friction along five dimensions, adds JBL's client observations and a small 2026 pilot, and ends with what leaders can do first. It is free to read and cite.

Key findings

Five findings from the published research. Each figure links to its source.

22%

Manager engagement is falling. Gallup puts it at 22% in 2025, down from 31% in 2022. Individual contributors sit at 19%, so the gap managers once held has almost closed. Gallup, April 2026

61%

Executives rate their own decision time poorly. In a survey of 1,259 people in 91 countries, 61% said most of the time they spend on decisions is used ineffectively. McKinsey, 2019

38%

Speed is the weaker half of decision-making. 57% said their organisation makes high-quality decisions; 48% said it makes them quickly. With seven or more reporting layers, only 38% said decisions were quick, against 61% with one to three layers. See the chart

275

Attention is interrupted all day. Microsoft's usage data shows knowledge workers pinged every 1.75 minutes, about 275 times in an eight-hour day. Axios on the Work Trend Index, 2025

3% to 5%

Collaboration load is concentrated. In studies of more than 300 organisations, 20% to 35% of value-added collaboration came from 3% to 5% of employees. Cross, Rebele and Grant, Harvard Business Review, 2016

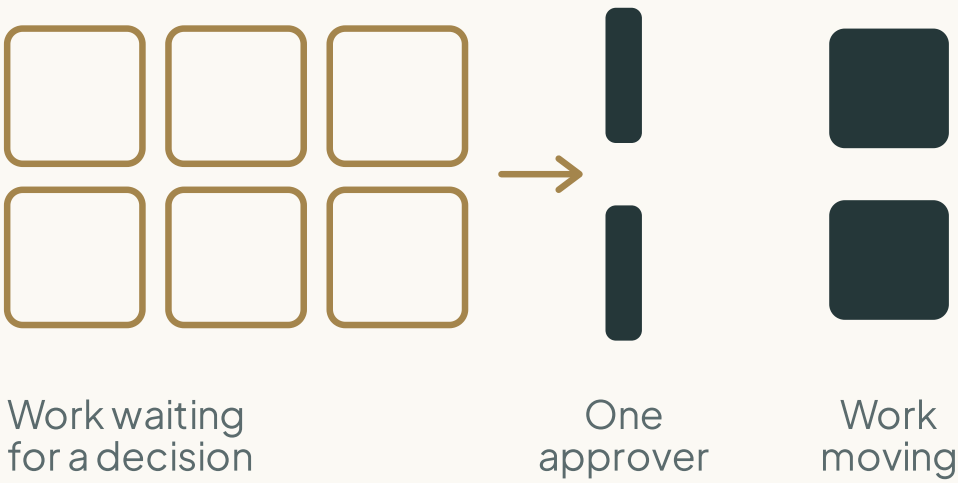
What is leadership friction?

Leadership friction

The delay that builds up when decisions, approvals and information have to pass through a manager before work can move. It appears as waiting, rework, escalation, and meetings held to settle things a lower level could have settled.

The full definition and its causes are set out separately. The term is JBL's; the pieces it joins are studied in the research literature under other names.

This paper treats friction as a property of how work flows through a team. That separates it from burnout, which is an outcome in a person, and from engagement, which is an attitude. A team can have a normal workload, engaged people and no burnout, and still lose days every week to work waiting for a signature.



The five dimensions of leadership friction

Friction breaks into five dimensions. Each maps onto an established line of research, which is how the evidence section below is organised.

Leadership bandwidth

How much of a leader's time and attention is left for work only they can do.

Studied as: collaborative overload, interruption and attention research

Communication clarity

Whether people know what has been decided and what is expected of them.

Studied as: role clarity and engagement research

Strategic alignment

Whether teams at different levels pull toward the same priorities.

Studied as: organisational design, reporting layers

Team autonomy

How far people can decide and act without approval.

Studied as: job demands-control model, self-determination theory

Decision velocity

Time from a decision being needed to it being made at the right level.

Studied as: decision-effectiveness research

One common pattern is the bottleneck manager, the person through whom too much work must pass. The usual structural remedy is effective delegation, which means handing over a whole outcome together with the authority to decide it.

What the research says

The figures below come from published sources JBL opened and read. Each carries its source, year and sample where the source gives one, and the paper says when it does not.

Leadership bandwidth: how much attention do managers have left?

> **The evidence points to shrinking capacity. Manager engagement has fallen faster than engagement among the people they lead, and a small group of people carry much of an organisation's collaboration load.**

Gallup's 2025 data puts managers at 22% engaged, down from 31% in 2022, while individual contributors moved from 20% to 19% over the same period (Gallup, April

2026). Gallup notes that manager engagement can decline with larger spans of control, though the article gives no figure for that link.

Cross, Rebele and Grant studied collaboration in more than 300 organisations. Time that managers and employees spend collaborating has grown by 50% or more over two decades, and in most organisations 20% to 35% of the value-added collaboration comes from only 3% to 5% of employees (Harvard Business Review, 2016).

Microsoft's 2025 analysis of anonymised Microsoft 365 usage found that knowledge workers receive a ping from email, calendar or chat every 1.75 minutes, about 275 times in an eight-hour day. Also, 57% of meetings in the data were ad hoc calls with no calendar invite (Axios, reporting the Work Trend Index special report). A ping counts a notification, and the data covers Microsoft's own users only, so the paper reads it as a measure of how much competes for a manager's attention. The cost of switching between tasks is covered in JBL's free ebook on multitasking.

Collaboration is concentrated

100 employees, 4 highlighted

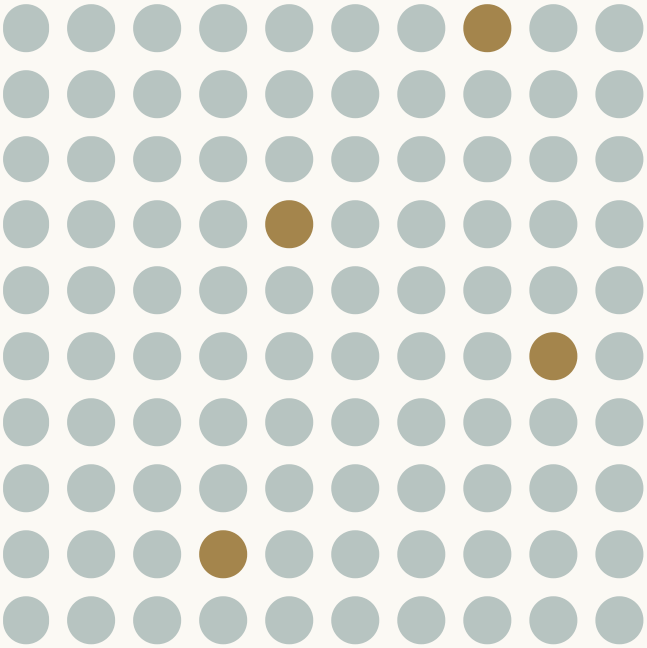


Illustration: 4 of every 100 employees, the middle of the 3% to 5% range, provide 20% to 35% of value-added collaboration.

Communication clarity: do people know what is expected?

> **Clear expectations sit first in Gallup's engagement survey, but JBL found no current public figure that measures clarity directly.**

“I know what is expected of me at work.”

The first statement in Gallup's Q12 engagement survey

Clarity is the dimension with the least directly measurable public evidence. The best-known instrument is Gallup's Q12 engagement survey, and its first statement is the one above. Its place at the top follows a long-standing finding that clear expectations come before the other drivers of engagement. JBL has not tied a specific current figure to this item, so the paper does not give one.

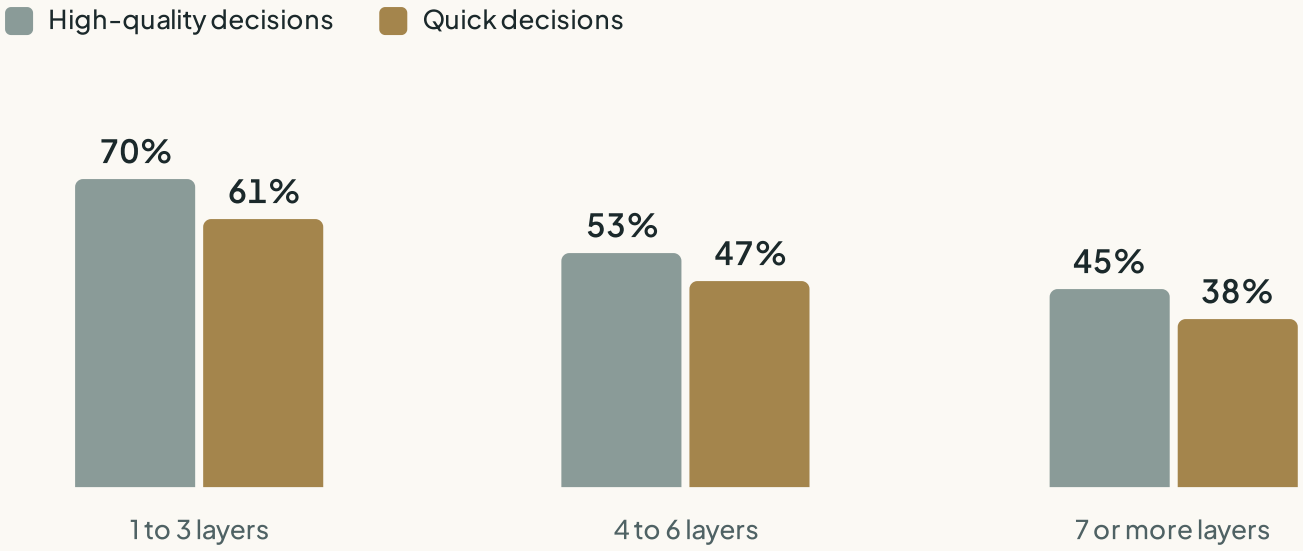
Strategic alignment: do more reporting layers slow decisions?

> **In McKinsey's survey, organisations with more reporting layers reported lower decision quality and slower decisions.**

McKinsey surveyed 1,259 people in 91 countries in February 2018. McKinsey's sidebar estimate puts the cost of ineffective decision time at more than 530,000 days of working time a year for an average Fortune 500 company, roughly $250 million in wasted labour cost (McKinsey, 2019). McKinsey presents it as an estimate, so the paper treats it as an order of magnitude.

Decisions slow as layers are added: 61% quick at 1 to 3 layers, 38% at 7 or more

Share of respondents who agree their organisation makes decisions this way, by number of reporting layers

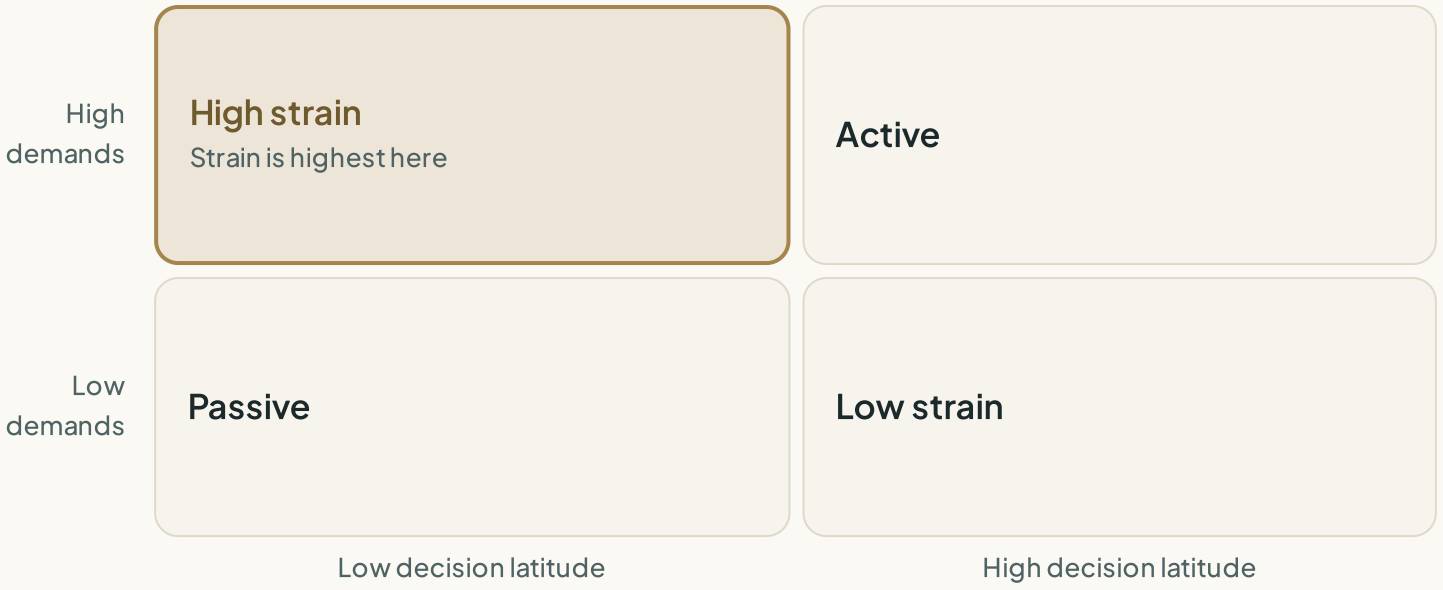


The same data as a table

Reporting layers	High-quality decisions	Quick decisions
1 to 3	70%	61%
4 to 6	53%	47%
7 or more	45%	38%

Source: McKinsey survey, February 2018 (1,259 respondents in 91 countries), published as Decision making in the age of urgency, 2019. Between the flattest and the tallest structures, agreement on decision quality falls 25 points and agreement on speed falls 23 points.

Karasek's job demands–control model



Team autonomy: what happens when people cannot decide?

> **Research since 1979 links low room to decide with higher strain, and treats autonomy as a basic psychological need.**

The oldest evidence here dates from 1979. Karasek's job demands-control model found that mental strain is highest where demands are high and the worker's room to decide is low. Self-determination theory, set out by Ryan and Deci (2000), names autonomy as one of three basic psychological needs. Both are about the person doing the work, and neither measures managers directly. They explain why centralised approval is costly to the people waiting on it as well as to the manager holding it.

Decision velocity: how much decision time is wasted?

> **Most respondents in McKinsey's survey said most of their decision time is used ineffectively, and organisations that decided quickly were twice as likely to decide well.**

61%

37%

of respondents said most of the time they spend on decisions is used ineffectively. The figure was 57% for C-level executives and 68% for middle managers.

said their organisation's decisions were both high in quality and quick.

2x

Organisations that decided quickly were twice as likely to decide well as slow ones. That weakens the common assumption that speed trades off against quality.

For a 2011 article, Bain & Company surveyed almost 800 companies and reported a 95% correlation between excelling at making and executing key decisions and top-tier financial results (Bain). It is a correlation from a consultancy survey, so it cannot show that better decisions caused the results.

JBL's interpretation

Where friction collects: JBL's view

This section is the author's reading of the evidence above.

> **Friction collects in the management layer because it is the one place where the most decisions meet the least authority.**

The studies above come from different fields and different decades, and they point the same way. Engagement is falling fastest among managers (Gallup). The collaboration load sits on a few people (Cross, Rebele and Grant). Decisions slow as they climb layers (McKinsey). Low room to decide raises strain (Karasek). Put together, they describe a layer of the organisation that receives the most decisions and holds the least authority to settle them.

That layer produces escalations, stalled calls and hours nobody can account for, and the managers in it are carrying a load they did not create. Carrying it is what makes capable people look slow. JBL's position follows from that, and it is the one Jimmy Burroughes brings to client work:

1. **The managers are not the problem. They are where the problem is stuck.** A programme that tries to fix the people leaves the cause in place.
2. **Friction sits in decision rights, routines and information flow.** That is where it gets cleared.
3. **The participants' own bosses should judge the result**, after ninety days of watching their teams. A satisfaction score collected in the room tells you how the course went.

Practitioner observation

What JBL sees in practice

Jimmy Burroughes has worked with nearly 3,500 managers in more than 30 organisations across more than 10 countries. What follows comes from that work. It is kept apart from the published evidence because it has not been peer reviewed.

43

Friction points catalogued. JBL's working catalogue has 43. Six to ten turn up in almost every business, and JBL hands a leader 10 to 15 as a working set.

4 hrs

A week back per manager. At a 1,500-person NZ food manufacturing business, clearing the drag handed managers about four hours a week and cut escalations 15 percent inside a quarter.

8.75

Out of 10, scored by bosses. At ninety days, the participants' own bosses scored the work

8.75 out of 10 on funding another cohort.

How to read these figures

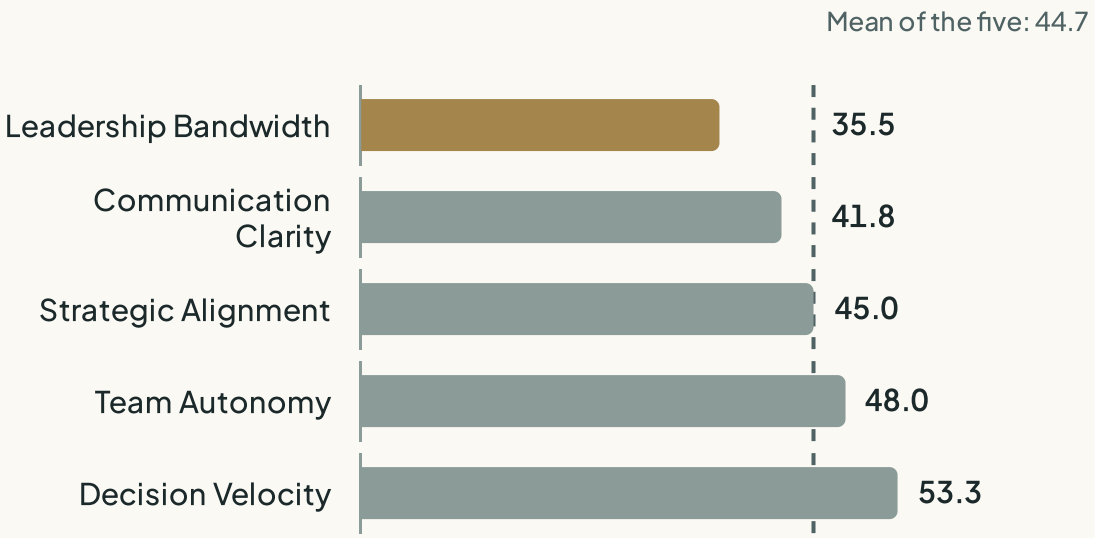
The hours, escalation and boss-score figures come from one engagement, measured by JBL and scored by a small group of bosses. They come from client work with no control group, and a different business could see different numbers. JBL scores every engagement this way, by the line managers of the people on it, and calls it the Outcome Standard.

Exploratory data: the 2026 JBL Friction Finder

In a small pilot, leaders who completed the JBL Friction Finder between May and September 2026 scored lowest on Leadership Bandwidth and highest on Decision Velocity. The sample is too small to report as a benchmark, so this section reports scores only.

Pilot: Leadership Bandwidth scored lowest, Decision Velocity highest

Mean Friction Finder score per dimension, 0 to 100. Lower means more friction.



Source: JBL Friction Finder, May to September 2026. Self-completed, self-selected sample, n = 157.

Pilot sample, n 157

How the data was collected

The Friction Finder is a free online questionnaire. Respondents score themselves on the five dimensions above, each from 0 to 100, where a lower score means more friction. People chose to take it after finding JBL's site, so the sample is self-selected. Internal and test submissions were removed, and no names or company names were recorded. The instrument has not been independently validated. The number of usable responses was 157.

The five scores sit within 18 points of each other, and with a sample this size a gap of that order cannot give a reliable ranking. What the pilot supports is a question for larger studies: whether self-reported friction concentrates in leadership bandwidth, the dimension closest to a manager's own diary. That would fit the Gallup and Cross findings above, which place the pressure on managers' time and attention. Testing it needs far more responses. The Friction Finder stays open, and a larger edition of this paper would draw on those responses.

What leaders can do with this evidence

The research supports six practices, each tied to a finding above.

List the decisions that reach you, then ask who else could make each one.

McKinsey's reporting-layers data suggests decisions get slower and weaker as layers are added. A two-week log of what arrives on your desk is enough to start.

McKinsey, reporting layers

Write down decision rights before delegating.

In the McKinsey survey, delegated decisions had the lowest reported quality, at 46%. Handing a decision down without saying who decides what, and by when, can make things worse. Effective delegation says both.

McKinsey, decision types

Cut the volume of pings you are exposed to.

With about 275 a day in Microsoft's data, turning off non-urgent notifications and protecting meeting-free blocks gives attention back.

Microsoft Work Trend Index

Check whether you are the hub.

Cross, Rebele and Grant found that a few people carry much of the collaboration. If people queue for your input, you are the bottleneck manager in your own team, whatever the intent.

Cross, Rebele and Grant

Give authority with the outcome.

Karasek's model and self-determination theory agree that room to decide protects the person doing the work. Ownership of an outcome carries that room with it. High performance leadership rests on it.

Karasek; Ryan and Deci

Measure again.

Friction is easier to reduce when it is measured before and after. The Friction Finder takes about five minutes, and the leadership assessment gives a wider view of the individual leader.

Pilot instrument

Jimmy Burroughes organises this work with leadership teams in one structure: Simplify to Amplify. It runs in three steps.

See

See where work stalls and which decisions climb too high.

Solve

Solve it by repairing decision rights and routines.

Scale

Scale the change across the management layer so it holds.

A team that wants a shared way to state how each person prefers to work can start with the work preferences assessment.

Fair questions

Short answers, with the sources set out in the sections above.

What is leadership friction?

Leadership friction is the delay that builds up when decisions, approvals and information have to pass through a manager before work can move. It shows up as waiting, rework, escalation and meetings held to settle things a lower level could have settled. JBL High Performance uses the term for how work flows through a team.

How is leadership friction different from burnout or low engagement?

Burnout is an outcome in a person and engagement is an attitude. Leadership friction is a property of how work flows. A team can have a normal workload, engaged people and no burnout, and still lose days each week to work waiting for a signature.

How much has manager engagement fallen?

Gallup's global data shows manager engagement falling from 31% in 2022 to 22% in 2025. Over the same period, individual contributor engagement moved from 20% to 19%, so the gap managers once held has almost closed. The source is Gallup, April 2026.

Do more management layers slow decisions?

In McKinsey's 2018 survey of 1,259 people in 91 countries, 61% of respondents in organisations with one to three layers said decisions were quick, against 38% in organisations with seven or more layers. The survey records perception and cannot show that layers cause the delay.

What is a bottleneck manager?

A bottleneck manager is a person through whom too much work must pass before it can move. Cross, Rebele and Grant found that 20% to 35% of value-added collaboration in the organisations they studied came from 3% to 5% of employees, which shows how concentrated that load can be.

How can a leader measure leadership friction?

JBL's Friction Finder is a free questionnaire of about five minutes. It scores five dimensions from 0 to 100: leadership bandwidth, communication clarity, strategic alignment, team autonomy and decision velocity. A lower score means more friction. It is self-reported and has not been independently validated.

What should a leader do first?

List the decisions that reach you over two weeks, then ask who else could make each one. McKinsey's data suggests decisions get slower and weaker as reporting layers are added. Write down who decides what, and by when, before you delegate anything.

Where do the numbers in this paper come from?

They come from published sources that state their methods: Gallup, McKinsey, Microsoft, Harvard Business Review and Bain & Company. One small JBL pilot is reported separately and flagged as exploratory. Each figure links to its source, and the limitations section sets out what each source can and cannot show.

What does JBL High Performance do?

JBL High Performance works with General Managers and leadership teams to find where performance is stuck and clear it, which in most businesses turns out to sit in the management layer. Founder Jimmy Burroughes has worked with nearly 3,500 managers in more than 30 organisations across more than 10 countries.

Glossary

Leadership friction
The delay that builds up when decisions, approvals and information have to pass through a manager before work can move.

Bottleneck manager
A manager through whom too much work must pass before it can move.

Decision velocity
The time from a decision being needed to it being made at the right level.

Friction Finder
JBL's free questionnaire of about five minutes that scores five dimensions of friction from 0 to 100. A lower score means more friction.

Simplify to Amplify
JBL's three-step method for clearing friction: See where work stalls, Solve it by repairing decision rights and routines, Scale the change across the management layer.

Leadership bandwidth
How much of a leader's time and attention is left for work only they can do.

Decision rights
Who decides what, and by when. Writing them down before delegating is the step people skip.

Effective delegation
Handing over a whole outcome together with the authority to decide it.

Outcome Standard
JBL's rule that every engagement is scored by the line managers of the people on it, after ninety days.

Limitations and method

Six limits apply to the evidence in this paper. The table shows what each source is.

Sources used in this paper

Source	Period	Method	Sample
Gallup	Data for 2025, published April 2026	Employee engagement survey	Not stated in the article
McKinsey	13 to 23 February 2018	Online survey of executives and managers	1,259 respondents, 91 countries
Microsoft	12 months to February 2025	Anonymised Microsoft 365 usage data	Millions of users, no exact count
Cross, Rebele and Grant	Published 2016	Organisational research	More than 300 organisations
Bain & Company	Reported 2011	Company survey	Almost 800 companies
JBL Friction Finder	May to September 2026	Self-completed questionnaire	n = 157
JBL client work	Practitioner observation	Experience across engagements, one scored case reported	No sample

Perception data. Most figures come from surveys in which people rate their own organisations. They record how leaders see friction, and none measures it directly.

Mixed ages and populations. The McKinsey survey is from 2018, the Bain survey was reported in 2011, and the Gallup and Microsoft data cover 2025. Microsoft's figures describe Microsoft 365 users only.

Correlation. The Bain result links decision effectiveness to financial results and says nothing about which causes which.

No direct measure. JBL found no public study that measures leadership friction as defined

here. The five dimensions are the author's grouping of established lines of research.

A small pilot and one case. The Friction Finder data is a self-selected, unvalidated sample. The client figures come from a single engagement. Both are reported as observations only.

Interest. The author advises organisations on this topic. The external sources were chosen because they are public, state their methods, and could be checked against the originals. Figures were last checked in October 2026.

How to cite this paper

Burroughes, J. (2026). *State of Leadership Friction 2026: A Research Review.* JBL High Performance. https://jblhighperformance.com/research/state-of-leadership-friction-2026

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Related reading from JBL

What is leadership friction?
The full definition and its causes.

The bottleneck manager
The person through whom too much work must pass.

Effective delegation
Handing over an outcome with the authority to decide it.

High performance leadership
What it rests on and how it is built.

Multitasking ebook
The cost of switching between tasks.

Leadership Friction Finder
Five minutes, five dimensions, scored 0 to 100.

Leadership assessment
A wider view of the individual leader.

Work preferences assessment
A shared way to state how each person prefers to work.

Simplify to Amplify
The See, Solve, Scale method.

Leadership library
Related articles.

Jimmy Burroughes

Founder, JBL High Performance

Jimmy Burroughes is the founder of JBL High Performance. He is a former British Army officer, commissioned from Sandhurst, and a General Manager of an eight-figure business. He has worked with nearly 3,500 managers in more than 30 organisations across more than 10 countries, and he speaks and writes on leadership friction. More on his approach is on the Simplify to Amplify page, and the leadership library has the related articles.