4 Workplace Culture Risks CHROs Must Address in 2026 to Survive in the Age of AI

HR Executive | Leann Pereira | April 22, 2026



Credit: Adobe

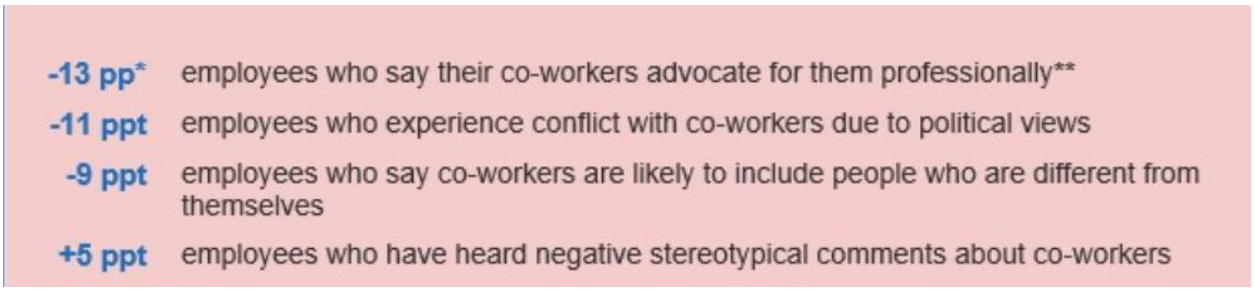
Dr. Leann Pereira is an organizational psychologist and VP of Analytics at Emtrain, where she leads research on workplace culture, leadership effectiveness, and organizational risk. Her work applies psychometric methods and behavioral data drawn from tens of millions of employee sentiment responses to help organizations diagnose culture, develop leaders, and connect human capability to business performance. She has designed leadership assessment frameworks used in cross-cultural engagements spanning multiple countries and industries, and her research focuses on the gap between what managers know and what they can execute under interpersonal pressure.

In 2026, culture has become a measurable business risk. AI transformation is accelerating. Restructuring is ongoing. Political tensions are crossing into team dynamics. Employee confidence in the leadership capability required to manage all of it—conflict resolution, coaching through uncertainty, holding teams together—is declining at exactly the moment demand is rising.

The C-suite sits at the center of this problem because culture is a leadership issue— leadership is responsible for the conditions that allow organizations to perform and innovate. Data from tens of millions of employee sentiment responses points to four patterns every CHRO needs to be actively addressing with their leadership team right now.

1. Political polarization is triggering an empathy recession

The most significant cultural shift inside organizations is not showing up in performance reviews. It is playing out in daily decisions employees make about whether to engage with a colleague, whether a conversation is worth having and whether the person across the table can be trusted. Those moments are accumulating into something measurable.

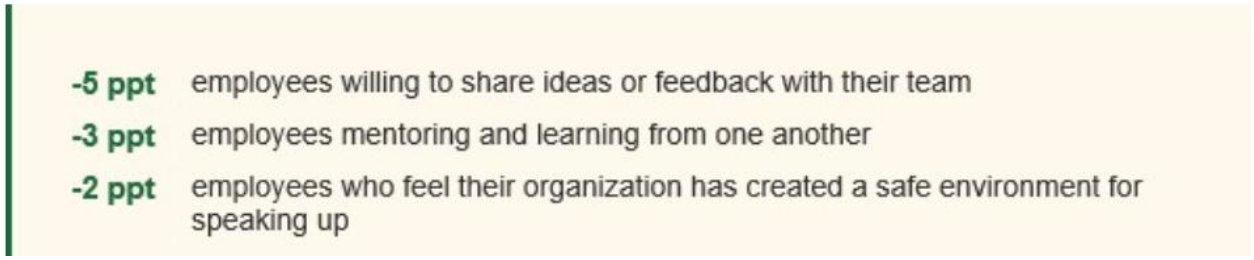


* Data cited draws from Emtrain's 2026 Annual Workplace Culture Report (48 million employee sentiment responses).
** ppt = percentage points

CHROs need to prioritize manager capability over policy updates or values statements. The competencies that move the needle—identifying what is happening in a team, facilitating a difficult conversation without escalating it, restoring working trust after conflict—are teachable skills most managers have simply not been developed to use. Policies address the surface. Leaders address the people. As the line between societal disruption and workplace dynamics continues to blur, a manager's ability to buffer their team from external pressure becomes one of the more durable competitive advantages an organization can build.

2. Psychological safety is declining at the worst possible moment for innovation

Every executive team has AI on its agenda. But faster decisions and more creative output require a workforce willing to share half-formed ideas, push back on assumptions and say out loud when something is not working. That willingness is weakening.



Psychological safety is not a soft benefit—team learning is an innovation strategy. The mechanism that connects AI anxiety to psychological safety erosion is worth tracing carefully: Employees who worry that their roles may be automated are, rationally, less likely to volunteer ideas that could accelerate that process, raise concerns that might be interpreted as resistance to change or take the reputational risk of advocating for an unpopular perspective.

For HR leaders, this means the psychological safety problem often traces back to leadership behavior, because employees make risk-based calculations about whether speaking up is worth it. When leaders emphasize AI primarily in terms of efficiency, automation and cost reduction without equally addressing reskilling, redeployment and future roles, they increase the perceived personal risk of being honest. In a loss-averse environment, the expected value of speaking up becomes negative, and the result is not open resistance but polite agreement, fewer challenging questions and overly optimistic updates.

3. Compliance is improving—and it shows what is possible

Across major areas of business compliance—reporting confidence, ethics awareness, accountability for conduct—employee sentiment improved meaningfully over the past year. Understanding why matters as much as acknowledging that it happened.



These gains came from sustained investment in training, systems and accountability—and from measuring results. The CHRO opportunity is to apply that same logic to culture and leadership behavior. If compliance metrics move with the right combination of training, measurement and accountability, so can conflict management, psychological safety and manager effectiveness. Culture, like compliance, does not improve on its own.

4. Managers are overloaded, under-skilled and asked to do the impossible

The current manager job description includes: performance management, career coaching, holding teams together during restructuring, navigating political tension, maintaining engagement through AI-driven role changes and modeling psychological safety. Most managers were not hired or developed to do any of those things.

-5 ppt	employees who say their manager has skillfully handled uncomfortable situations at work
-5 ppt	employees who believe managers show curiosity and empathy toward direct reports
+3 ppt	employees who have observed bullying on their team

Managers are not underperforming because they do not care. They are underperforming because role demands have outpaced professional development investment. Recent programs focused on self-awareness, but the execution skills that self-awareness is supposed to unlock—conflict resolution, coaching through uncertainty, managing power dynamics—have received far less attention. The human dimension of leadership cannot be built through self-awareness alone; it requires repeated practice in sticky situations with real stakes.

What CHROs should prioritize in 2026

These four risks share a common driver: organizational stress accumulating faster than leadership capability can absorb it. The organizations that perform well ahead will not be distinguished by their AI tools or policy documents. They will be distinguished by managers who can lead people through uncertainty, conflict and change.

Three actions follow. Retool leadership development around team-facing execution skills, not awareness frameworks—and measure behavioral outcomes, not completion rates. Shift culture measurement from annual to continuous so deterioration is visible before it compounds. And make the human case for AI transformation explicit: Employees who understand what change means for their roles are less likely to go quiet, and leaders who can hold that conversation honestly are protecting the conditions innovation requires.

CHROs who treat these as strategic priorities—not HR programs—are the ones positioned to make human capability a genuine competitive advantage in the years ahead.