

2026 HR / L&D Trends Survey:

# Turning Uncertainty Into Opportunity

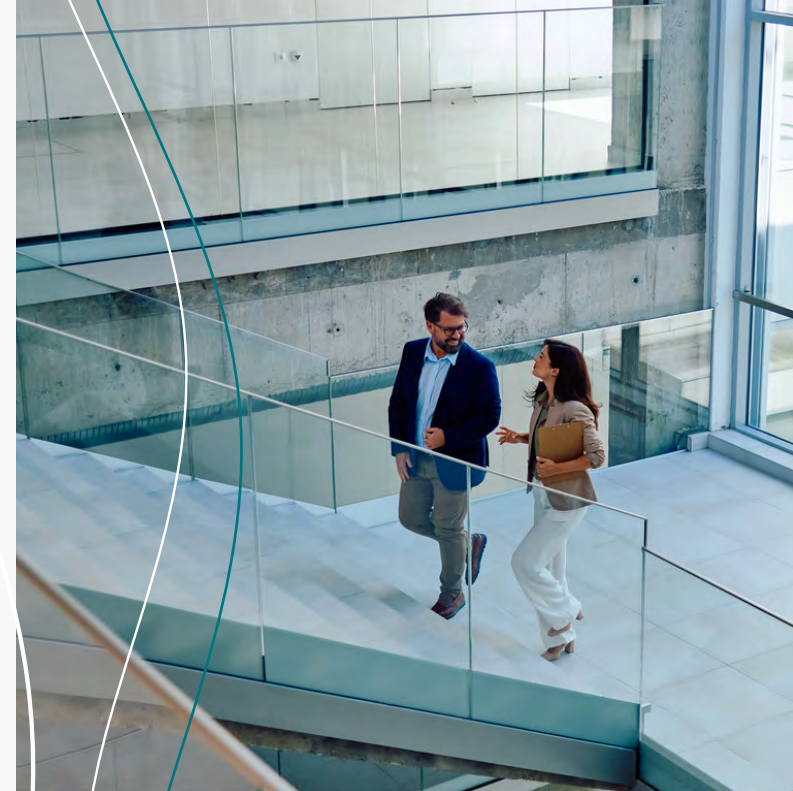


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# 2026 HR / L&D Trends Survey: Turning Uncertainty Into Opportunity

Blanchard's 2026 HR / L&D Trends Survey set out to explore how organizations are responding to the shifting forces redefining work. Almost 500 leaders shared where they are focusing their efforts, what challenges they face, and how they are preparing leaders and teams to thrive in a workplace where leadership capability, learning strategy, and organizational culture come together to drive success.

The data reveals that while companies grapple with constant change, including the disruptive force of AI, they see a connection with the quality of leadership at every level. In challenging economic times and changing business conditions, organizations are depending on highly skilled leaders to create trust, inspire innovation, and sustain well-being. By equipping leaders to model agility, connect purpose to performance, and empower others to grow, organizations look to turn uncertainty into opportunity.



*"Across industries and sectors, organizations are navigating a landscape defined by constant transformation, talent shortages, and technological disruption. When leaders demonstrate adaptability, emotional intelligence, and a coaching mindset, they become the linchpin connecting strategy, culture, and performance."*

—Scott Blanchard  
Chief Executive Officer, Blanchard

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION ONE: 2026 Top Challenges

SECTION TWO: A Closer Look at Hiring, Retention, and Engagement

SECTION THREE: Leadership Competencies: Now and Future

SECTION FOUR: Managing the Spend

SECTION FIVE: Who and How to Train

SECTION SIX: Application, Learning Transfer, and Measurement



# SECTION ONE: *2026 Top Challenges*

*Leadership development is not a support function—it is a business multiplier.*

## 2026 Top Challenges

Data from across the 2026 survey highlights a desire to develop leadership bench strength, enable innovation, and retain high-performing talent. These objectives all point to a strategic imperative: leadership development is not a support function—it is a business multiplier.

The Blanchard survey draws on three complementary data sets to identify the top challenges organizations face from an HR and L&D perspective.

### Top 5 Overall Organizational Business Challenges

- |                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| • Building leadership capabilities    | 48% |
| • Supporting change and agility       | 36% |
| • Boosting organizational performance | 31% |
| • Improving engagement and retention  | 23% |
| • Managing the workforce impact of AI | 21% |

## Top 5 Most Important Human Resources Objectives

- Developing leadership bench strength 69%
- Enabling innovation and change 60%
- Retaining high performers 60%
- Attracting workers with the skills we need 46%
- Providing a great employee experience 38%

## Top 5 Challenges as an HR / L&D Leader (Open text responses)

1. Leadership and capability development
2. Talent acquisition, retention, and development
3. Organizational change, transformation, and agility
4. Strategic alignment and resource constraints
5. Productivity, engagement, and well-being



Together, these perspectives provide a multi-dimensional view of where organizations are focusing their attention and where HR and L&D leaders see the most pressing needs for building capability.



# Top Challenge Commonalities

Through these different lenses, the data sets reveal five shared priorities—a clear signal of where organizations will be focused in 2026.

## 1. Leadership

## 2. Agility

## 3. Development

## 4. Culture

## 5. Constraints

### Leadership as the Lever that Impacts All Other Outcomes

Across every dataset, leadership capability stands out as the most foundational challenge and the single greatest driver of organizational success. Organizations view leadership as the lever that impacts all other outcomes: change agility, engagement, retention, innovation, and performance. The call is for human-centered, future-ready leaders who coach, inspire, and adapt.

### Adaptability and Change Agility

The second most prominent theme is the need to navigate transformation regarding technology, structure, and culture. Organizations are working to build agility into their systems and leadership practices to stay competitive in an era of constant disruption. The challenge lies in shifting culture and leadership behaviors fast enough to keep pace with external change.

### Talent Acquisition, Retention, and Development

A third major commonality is the competition for talent and the need to retain and grow the workforce currently in place. Skill shortages, succession gaps, and disengagement continue to strain talent pipelines and organizational performance. Organizations recognize that leadership and culture directly influence retention: keeping talent requires strong leaders, clear growth pathways, and purpose-driven environments.

### Employee Experience, Well-Being, and Culture

A fourth theme is the human side of performance—ensuring engagement, inclusion, and well-being amid accelerating demands. As workloads increase and transformation intensifies, employee morale and psychological safety are emerging as strategic imperatives, not secondary concerns. The human side of performance—connection, empathy, and inclusion—is increasingly recognized as a strategic differentiator, not just a wellness initiative.

### Strategic Alignment and Resource Constraints

Finally, there is growing pressure to do more with less and to align limited resources, budgets, and time with strategic business priorities and measurable outcomes. Leaders are balancing ambition with capacity, seeking clear linkage between learning investment (leadership and people development) and measurable business value.



# Leadership Is the Multiplier


## Section One: Action Step

Develop human-centered leaders.

Leadership development, agility, and alignment work best when integrated as part of a single strategy for resilience. As organizations move into 2026, success will hinge on developing human-centered leaders who can navigate change, empower people, and sustain performance in a dynamic world.







# SECTION TWO: *A Closer Look at Hiring, Retention, and Engagement*

# A Closer Look at Hiring, Retention, and Engagement

The Blanchard survey has been tracking hiring and retention issues for several years. While cooling overall, hiring and retention remain a top concern for respondents in the survey with 80% of respondents identifying that hiring will remain difficult in 2026 and 83% identifying that retention will be a continuing challenge in the coming year. When asked about some of the drivers making hiring and retention challenging, respondents identified the following:

## Hiring Challenges

- Finding people who are a good culture fit 45%
- High competition for desirable talent 42%
- Overall talent pool is limited 40%
- Applicants lacking required skills 37%
- Inability to offer competitive comp/benefits 35%

## Retention Challenges

- Limited career growth potential 47%
- Burnout/workload issues 47%
- Dissatisfaction with quality of leadership 40%
- Better offers from outside organizations 39%
- Economic factors such as high cost of living 36%

80% of respondents identified that hiring will remain difficult in 2026.





# Addressing Morale and Engagement

When asked to share some of the ways they are addressing morale in their organizations, respondents shared descriptive examples and key ideas that could be summarized into five key themes:

## Leadership and Communication

Strong, transparent, empathetic leadership is seen as the single biggest driver of morale. Respondents emphasized the importance of senior leader visibility, open dialogue, and trust-based communication—especially through one-on-ones and engagement sessions. **Key ideas: building trust, feedback loops, listening sessions, consistent leader visibility, transparent messaging.**

## Career Growth and Development

Next was a focus on growth opportunities, skill development, and visible career paths. Investment in L&D, coaching, and internal advancement opportunities was frequently cited as a key to morale and retention. **Key ideas: career pathways, learning opportunities, leadership pipeline, coaching culture.**

## Employee Engagement and Morale

Organizations are working to strengthen connection, recognition, and purpose to keep morale high. Respondents described initiatives that celebrate progress, encourage participation, and connect people to the company mission. **Key ideas: recognition programs, feedback culture, connection, sense of belonging, motivation.**

## Organizational Change and Culture

Change and transformation continue to shape morale. Respondents highlighted communication during restructuring, clarity around mission and vision, and the need to build a culture that supports psychological safety and adaptability. **Key ideas: mission alignment, psychological safety, culture renewal, transparency during change.**

## Work Environment and Well-Being

While less frequent, many respondents mentioned the importance of flexibility, balance, and mental health support to reinforce the connection between well-being and sustained performance. **Key ideas: flexible work, remote/hybrid options, work-life balance, physical and psychological health.**

When leadership transparency, growth opportunities, and psychological safety intersect, morale and engagement rise significantly.



## Section Two: Action Step

Help employees feel recognized and supported.

Develop leadership skills that promote open and empathetic communication. Focus on career growth, engagement, and a sense of belonging. Create a culture that builds alignment, safety, and transparency.



SECTION THREE:  
*Leadership  
Competencies:  
Now and Future*



*Coaching,  
communication,  
adaptability,  
and leading  
change top  
the list of  
present-day  
priorities.*

## Leadership Competencies: Now and Future

As organizations look ahead to 2026, leadership development is being redefined around connection, adaptability, and the human skills that drive performance. Survey respondents identified both current and emerging leadership capabilities needed for navigating the changing work environment.



# Today's Top Competencies

The top-ranked competencies for the immediate future—coaching, mentoring, and communicating effectively—signal that organizations recognize leadership as a relationship-driven practice.

**Effective leaders focus on developing others, fostering trust, and driving performance through meaningful conversations.**

Competencies such as leading change, adapting to new challenges, and developing people's skills highlight the ongoing demand for leaders who can navigate uncertainty while building the capacity of their teams.

## Top Six Leadership Competencies in 2026

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| • Coaching and mentoring people         | 48% |
| • Communicating effectively             | 47% |
| • Leading change initiatives            | 40% |
| • Adapting to new challenges            | 38% |
| • Developing people's skills            | 34% |
| • Leveraging AI / emerging technologies | 33% |



# Tomorrow's Top Competencies

When asked to identify the additional skills leaders of the future will need, five themes emerged.

When summarized, these themes collectively describe a leadership model that balances vision and strategy with empathy, resilience, and the ability to lead through technological and cultural transformation.

## Strategic Thinking and Innovation

Respondents emphasized the need for forward-looking, innovative, and strategic thinking. Tomorrow's leaders must anticipate emerging trends such as artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and sustainability. **Key ideas: innovation, foresight, AI integration, vision setting, and business differentiation.**

## Adaptive Leadership and Agility

Agility and resilience also stood out as defining capabilities for the future. The ability to pivot, make sound decisions under pressure, and maintain composure during uncertainty is central to effective leadership. **Key ideas: resilience, adaptability, agility, decision-making in uncertainty, and emotional stability.**

## Learning and Growth Mindset

A growth mindset continues to define leadership excellence. Respondents emphasized curiosity, reflection, and accountability as vital habits for personal and professional development. Future leaders must commit to continuous learning, unlearning outdated patterns, and fostering the same culture within their teams. **Key ideas: continuous learning, self-driven development, curiosity, and adaptability through learning.**

## Cultural Intelligence and People Skills

Human connection emerged as a central differentiator. Respondents underscored empathy, inclusion, and collaboration as essential to leadership credibility and influence. The ability to build trust, empower others, and create psychologically safe environments is critical when building high-performing teams. **Key ideas: empathy, inclusion, authenticity, empowerment, collaboration, and trust building.**

## Communication and Collaboration

Clear, empathetic communication remains a cornerstone of leadership effectiveness. Respondents stressed that transparency, active listening, and storytelling enable alignment, engagement, and trust—especially amid organizational change. **Key ideas: transparency, storytelling, active listening, and clarity in communication.**

# Develop Future Ready Leadership Capabilities

## Section Three: Action Step

Future leaders must combine strategic foresight with adaptive agility and human-centered skills. L&D should prioritize developing leaders who are:

**Strategic Thinkers:** Equip them to anticipate disruption, integrate AI, and lead innovation.

**Adaptive and Agile:** Train them to make sound decisions amid uncertainty while maintaining empathy.

**Continuous Learners:** Foster a growth mindset where reflection, curiosity, and learning agility drive development.

**Culturally Intelligent:** Promote inclusion, empathy, and empowerment to create psychologically safe environments.

**Effective Communicators:** Reinforce storytelling, clarity, and active listening as essential leadership practices.





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## SECTION FOUR:

# *Managing the Spend*





# Managing the Spend

As organizations plan for 2026, learning and development budgets reflect a careful balance between optimism and caution. Survey responses show that while most leaders anticipate an increase in training investment, workforce demands are being weighed against economic conditions and business performance. L&D leaders are managing their spend: prioritizing resources, balancing buy vs. build, and evaluating customized vs. off-the-shelf equations.

For 2026, respondents remain cautiously optimistic about budgeting for learning and development initiatives and are forecasting a 6.5% increase in overall training expenditures. When asked about the factors impacting budgets, respondents identified the following:

## Changes in Training Budgets

- |                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| • Overall economic conditions    | 46% |
| • Company business performance   | 45% |
| • Workforce development needs    | 41% |
| • Inflation/rising costs         | 40% |
| • Changes in strategic direction | 36% |

**Do you anticipate your organization investing more or less in training overall next year?**

## Buy vs. Build

In 2026, what mix of buying versus building leadership development solutions do you anticipate for your organization?

**45%** Buy leadership development solutions

**55%** Build leadership development solutions

### Blanchard Insight

The combination of buy and build signals that organizations want programs deeply aligned with their unique culture, competencies, and business strategy. However, the nearly equal preference to buy indicates continued appreciation for external partners who bring tested frameworks, tools, and experience that preclude reinventing the wheel.

## Off-the-Shelf vs. Customized

What portion of your 2026 instructor-led training will use off-the-shelf training programs versus customized programs tailored for your organization's needs?

**41%** Off-the-shelf training solutions

**59%** Custom training solutions

### Blanchard Insight

The preference for 59% customized programs over 41% off-the-shelf content additionally underscores the desire for learning solutions that align closely with organizational culture, strategy, and skill priorities. Organizations are signaling that effective learning will continue to be personalized, blended, and strategically aligned. This trend reinforces the importance of tailored learning journeys that connect leadership behaviors directly to business outcomes.



# Establish Measurable Goals

## Section Four: Action Step

Align learning investments with strategic goals.

While organizations face budget pressure, cutting learning investments risks long-term performance decline. HR and L&D leaders should focus resources on programs directly linked to business outcomes. Establish measurable goals—retention, engagement, innovation—and ensure leadership development efforts are visibly tied to organizational performance metrics.







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# SECTION FIVE: *Who and How to Train*

# Who and How to Train

The Blanchard survey took a deeper dive into who was being prioritized for training and how it was being delivered. The data shows a clear recognition among organizations that **leadership development must start earlier and extend throughout the leadership journey**, yet there remains a significant quality gap in supporting key audiences.

The highest development priorities are front-line, mid-level, and emerging leaders. This reflects an understanding that leadership impact is greatest where day-to-day engagement, coaching, and execution occur. However, while these groups are prioritized, most respondents rated their current training solutions as medium quality overall, and only about one in five organizations rate their development quality as high. This suggests that investment and execution are not yet matching intent.

*Only about one in five organizations rate their development quality as high.*




# Current Priority and Quality of Leadership Development Resources

Which of the following audiences in your organization have the highest priority for dedicated leadership development? How would you rate your current quality of leadership development resources for each group?

PRIORITY	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Individual contributors	19%	43%	37%
Emerging leaders early in career	46%	39%	15%
Front-line managers / supervisors	52%	36%	12%
Mid-level managers	48%	42%	10%
Senior leaders	39%	44%	17%
Executives / C-suite	32%	39%	29%
Women leaders	27%	44%	29%

QUALITY	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Individual contributors	14%	52%	34%
Emerging leaders early in career	18%	50%	32%
Front-line managers / supervisors	21%	52%	28%
Mid-level managers	21%	52%	26%
Senior leaders	22%	51%	27%
Executives / C-suite	24%	45%	31%
Women leaders	20%	47%	34%



A scalable leadership development strategy builds foundational skills early.

# In-Person vs. Virtual Instructor vs. Self-Paced Training Modalities

What percentage of your training do you anticipate being delivered via each of the following methods in 2026?

- 41% In-person instructor-led training
- 29% Virtual instructor-led training
- 30% Self-paced eLearning

Organizations anticipate that in 2026, learning delivery will continue to follow a mix similar to recent years. This data reveals a training landscape that has stabilized into a balanced blend of in-person, virtual, and self-paced learning.

*The continued strength of in-person training shows that experiential, relationship-driven learning remains essential. At the same time, the substantial investment in virtual and self-paced modalities reflects continued demand for flexibility, scalability, and accessibility in learning delivery.*

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of Bite-Sized Daily Feed Content

In this section of the survey, Blanchard explored bite-sized learning solutions through three questions meant to measure the perception of how effective these microlearning strategies are. The findings reveal mixed results.

## How effective are your organization's shorter, bite-sized learning solutions?

- Very effective 8%
- Effective 35%
- Somewhat effective 47%
- Not effective 10%

## How valuable would it be for your learners to have a daily feed of bite-sized leadership content such as tips, articles, and videos?

- Very valuable 12%
- Valuable 39%
- Somewhat valuable 40%
- Not valuable 8%

## What type of daily feed content would be most useful for your learners? (Choose top three.)

- Useful tips 60%
- Videos 50%
- Infographics 37%
- Podcasts 29%
- Short assessments/quizzes 28%




# A Closer Look at Current and Future Access Models

Which of the following best describes how your organization typically purchases leadership development solutions?

- **41% Program by program:** We prefer to purchase leadership development solutions individually, as needed
- **39% No standard approach:** Our purchasing varies by situation or stakeholder
- **11% Organization-wide license:** We purchase flat-fee, all-inclusive licenses for teams or departments
- **9% Flexible access:** We buy flat-fee licenses, but only for specific roles or time periods

How desirable would it be for your organization to have full access to a wide range of leadership development programs and content through an annual subscription model?

- Very desirable 13%
- Desirable 29%
- Not sure 39%
- Undesirable 14%
- Very undesirable 4%



**42%** of respondents found annual leadership development subscriptions desirable.

# A Deeper Dive Into Annual Subscription Plans

Follow-up questions taking a deeper dive into the relative desirability of annual subscription plans found that the highest appeal was in cost and efficiency benefits. **Nearly 60% of respondents agreed that subscription models lower the overall cost per course and reduce administrative work tied to multiple purchases.** These practical gains underscore how L&D leaders value scalability and budget predictability.

Equally strong was appreciation for access and flexibility. Sixty-one percent said it's easy to explore different courses and find what's most helpful, while 63% agreed that learners can create personalized learning paths. This suggests that **respondents viewed choice and autonomy as key drivers of value, provided the content is easy to navigate and relevant to diverse learner needs.**

Respondents also highlighted the strategic benefit of continuous, current content. Nearly two-thirds value the ability to gain ongoing access to new programs and trends, seeing subscriptions as a way to keep pace with evolving skills and technologies. Similarly, 62% believe that being able to offer more courses to targeted learners expands learning reach and impact.

But survey respondents also identified three concerns that must be addressed to get full value from the investment.

- Respondents worry that employees won't engage consistently with subscription content, leading to poor utilization and wasted investment.
- Another concern is that all-inclusive subscriptions may lack customization, feel too generic, or be misaligned with goals, roles, or current leadership challenges.
- A final concern is that without clear pathways or strategic direction, learners may struggle to find what's most relevant. An abundance of content could hinder learning rather than enhance it.

# Customize and Guide

## Section Five: Action Steps

Blend internal customization with external expertise.

With nearly equal preferences for building and buying leadership content, organizations should adopt hybrid ecosystems that integrate internal relevance with research-backed frameworks. **Customize programs to reflect culture and business strategy while leveraging external partners to accelerate scalability and ensure quality.**

Create integrated, personalized learning experiences.

Learners value practical, bite-sized, and engaging content—but impact depends on integration. Curate learning journeys that combine microlearning with coaching, reflection, and real-world application. **Guide learners through structured, relevant pathways that connect content to performance.**





## SECTION SIX:

# *Application, Learning Transfer, and Measurement*



# Application, Learning Transfer, and Measurement

Final questions in the 2026 Blanchard survey asked respondents to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning initiatives through two dimensions: application and measurement.

## Application of New Learning

To what extent do you believe your learners are applying the new skills taught in your L&D solutions after training?

- To a very large extent 3%
- To a large extent 21%
- To a moderate extent 55%
- To a small extent 20%
- To no extent 1%

*When training exists in isolation without clear follow-up or connection to business goals, its impact quickly fades.*

*The data suggests that most organizations are still struggling with measuring true behavior change and business outcomes.*

## Impact Measurement

Just 29% of respondents believe their current approaches clearly demonstrate value. Around half of respondents (48%) view their measurement practices as only somewhat effective, and nearly a quarter (23%) see their methods as not effective.

**How effective are your organization's current measurement practices in demonstrating impact?**

- |                      |     |
|----------------------|-----|
| • Very effective     | 4%  |
| • Effective          | 25% |
| • Somewhat effective | 48% |
| • Not effective      | 23% |



# Focus on Behavior Change and Business Outcomes

## Section Six: Action Steps

Reinforce application and measurement.

Learning transfer happens only when leaders model, coach, and reinforce new behaviors. Build accountability into post-training processes and measure not just participation, but also behavioral change and business outcomes. Create feedback systems that connect learning directly to engagement, productivity, and retention.





## Final Thoughts

As organizations face rapid change and increasing complexity, HR and L&D leaders must treat leadership development as a strategic system that fuels adaptability, engagement, and innovation. Blanchard's 2026 findings reinforce that growth will come from leaders who connect purpose to performance, communicate with empathy, and model agility. Investing in human-centered, measurable development will enable organizations to thrive through disruption while building a resilient, future-ready workforce.

## About the 2026 Data

For Blanchard's 2026 survey, 808 respondents started the survey with a 58% completion rate, resulting in 466 completions.

### Geography

Americas	34.0%
Asia-Pacific	29.4%
EMEA	36.6%

### Functional Area

Human Resources	32.43%
Learning and Development	41.21%
Administration	2.85%
General Management	7.05%
Finance	1.24%
Marketing	2.10%
Operations	4.58%
Sales	2.85%
Other (Please specify):	5.69%

### Level

Administrative	5.94%
Specialist	16.96%
Manager	32.55%
Director	22.03%
Vice President	3.71%
C-level	8.66%
Other (Please specify):	10.15%

### Organization Size

1-499	36.99%
500-999	10.75%
1000-2499	15.70%
2500-9999	15.27%
10000+	21.29%

### Industry

Accommodation & Food Services	1.81%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management	0.23%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	1.35%
Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation	0.45%
Construction	2.26%
Educational Services	10.61%
Finance and Insurance	7.22%
Government and Public Sector	4.97%
Health Care and Social Assistance	9.03%
Information	5.87%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	2.03%
Manufacturing	20.77%
Mining	0.68%
Non-profit	2.26%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	7.90%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	10.61%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1.35%
Retail Trade	4.51%
Transportation and Warehousing	2.71%
Utilities	1.58%
Wholesale Trade	1.81%

Blanchard® is a global leader in leadership development, consulting, and coaching. For more than 45 years, Blanchard has partnered with organizations to maximize individual achievement and organizational performance, bringing measurable progress and true transformation. Blanchard's SLII® is the global leadership model of choice, powering inspired leaders for more than 10,000 organizations worldwide. Blanchard also offers a suite of award-winning solutions through flexible delivery modalities to meet the specific needs of clients and learners.

To learn more about how Blanchard can help you design a strategy for creating inspired leaders through dynamic, human-powered learning experiences, visit [www.blanchard.com](http://www.blanchard.com)



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