

Trend report

Leadership Trends in 2026



greenstep

Three leaders. Three leadership themes.

The world of leadership is changing faster than most organisations can keep up with. In this guide, three Greenstep leaders share their insights from the field, highlighting the key trends, urgent actions and mindset shifts that distinguish adaptable leaders from those who fall behind.



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HR Tech Trends

For CHROs and HR Managers

By Teemu Jäntti,
Business Lead,
People Analytics



Build the foundation before you chase the future

The CHROs who will lead effectively in 2026 are not those who implement the most; rather, they are those who first build the strongest foundation. HR in 2026 is not about doing less. It's about removing the friction that stops good HR and leadership from happening. CHROs should have CIO heart and HR soul. This is simple HR. Redesigned. Focus on these:

Employee experience is technology experience

Employees spend all day working within systems. When those systems malfunction, no cultural programme can fix it. The CHRO must either take ownership of the technology stack or collaborate closely with the CIO to achieve the same outcome.

AI is only as good as what lies beneath

Deploying AI on top of messy data and undocumented processes yields incorrect results and erodes trust. Clean data, clear processes and current policies must come first.

Automate the basics now

By the end of 2026, the following processes should require zero manual effort:

- onboarding and offboarding,
- updating employee data across all systems,
- payroll quality checks and
- any other recurring, definable tasks.

If your team is still entering data manually into multiple systems, investment should go there – not into AI pilots.

Three pillars of modern HR leadership

Operational HRM

Day-to-day processes, payroll, admin, systems



Strategic HR

Talent, culture, and competency development



NEW: Technology & data

Analytics, automation, AI and integration

Your one priority: conduct a foundation audit

Before adding any new technology, get your house in order. Start here:

1

Audit your data and systems

Map every HR process that still involves manual data entry or siloed systems. Identify where data is incomplete, duplicated, or inaccessible. This is your gap list.

2

Align processes and policies

Review your documentation and policies against current legislation — especially pay transparency requirements. Ensure job grades, pay criteria, and reporting structures are defined and defensible.

3

Build your roadmap

Prioritise the gaps by business impact. Close the basics before scaling the ambition. Organisations that complete this in 2026 will move fast in 2027. Those that skip it will spend those years rebuilding.

"2026 should be the foundation year. Companies that rush to implement AI without solid basics will fail — and have to start over."

— Teemu Jäntti



BONUS: AI in HR — Beyond the hype

If you want to leverage AI in your HR work, do it mindfully and gradually. When you have conducted your audit, we suggest:

Phase 1 · Start here

High value, low complexity

HR answers the same questions daily.



AI chatbot handles FAQs around the clock.

Job descriptions written from scratch every time.



AI generates role-ready drafts in seconds.

Interview notes are patchy and hard to compare.



AI captures structured summaries automatically.

Employees can't find policies, HR looks them up.



AI search gives instant answers from a handbook.

Phase 2 · Build on it

Medium complexity

Recruiters manually screen hundreds of CVs.



AI ranks candidates before a human opens a CV.

Onboarding steps vary by manager.



Automated workflows ensure every step is completed.

Phase 3 · Advanced

High complexity, high value

Attrition is only noticed after people resign.



Predictive models flag flight risk early.

Succession planning is informal and undocumented.



AI identifies and develops future leaders at scale.

Pay decisions are inconsistent and hard to defend.



Compensation tools ensure equity and documentation.

L&D Trends

For CEOs and COOs

By Helén Malmberg,
L&D Nordic Business
Developer



The organisations that learn fastest will win

Almost 90% of leaders say reskilling their workforce will be a major priority in the next five years. Most are not moving fast enough. L&D is no longer a support function, it is a co-owner of business transformation.

Critical capability gaps in 2026

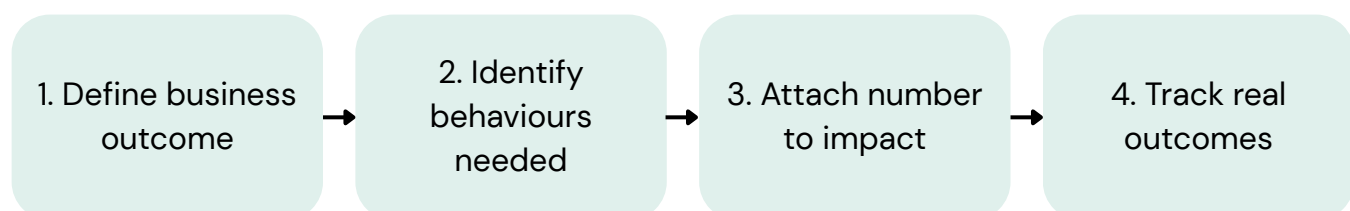
- Strategic AI understanding at executive level
- Leading continuous reskilling across the org
- Staying effective through uncertainty
- Prioritising where to focus AI-related efforts

What's actually working in AI-powered learning

AI-powered learning does have its advantages: faster onboarding, skills built directly within real work, and personalised development by role. The caution: learners who rely entirely on AI retain knowledge less effectively. AI should enhance thinking, not replace it. Critical thinking is now a hard requirement for working with AI, not a soft skill.

Connect learning to business outcomes from the start

Before any initiative: define the business outcome, identify the behavioural changes needed, attach a number to the expected impact, then track it. Metrics that work: frequency of AI experimentation in teams, shifts in innovation culture, skills applied on real projects.



Your one priority: establish a company-wide skills and AI agenda

Learning without a plan doesn't scale. Here's how to make it real:

1

Identify your critical capabilities

Map the 3–5 skills your organisation will need most in the next 18–24 months. Be specific: not "digital skills" but "AI-assisted decision-making for senior managers" or "data literacy for commercial teams."

2

Build structured learning paths

Create role-specific development tracks for leaders and employees. Connect every initiative to a business outcome before launch. Measure behavioural change, not just completion rates.

3

Commit and govern

Assign ownership. For larger organisations, establish a Generative AI committee to coordinate and approve initiatives. For smaller teams, protect a weekly AI lab hour. Commit to the plan for five years, not one quarter.



"Without an innovative learning culture, organisations will not be able to adapt to AI effectively. L&D belongs in the management discussion, not as an afterthought."

— Helén Malmberg

Sustainability Trends

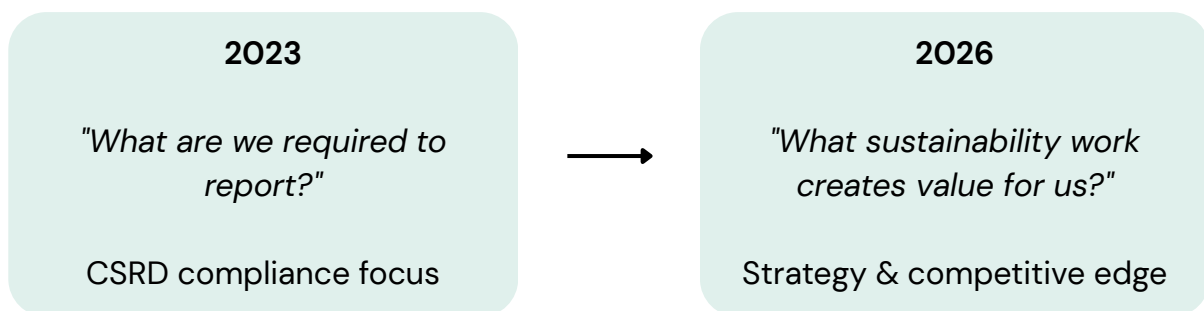
For CSOs and Sustainability Managers

By Susanna Kiviniemi,
Acting Head of
Sustainability Services



From compliance fatigue to competitive edge

Following the revision of CSRD thresholds: €450M turnover and 1,000 employees, both required, most companies in Finland and Scandinavia have dropped out of mandatory CSRD scope. The question has shifted from "What do we need to report?" to "What sustainability work actually creates value for our business?"



Regulations that still demand action

Among others these are examples of regulations that still require action towards sustainability: EUDR (no contribution to deforestation), ESPR (sustainability in product design), CBAM (carbon embedded in EU imports), and the Packaging Waste Regulation. The common thread: data. These regulations require you to know what you hold on your products and supply chains, and provide it on demand.

Supply chain is now a competitive battleground.

Carbon footprint data is already mandatory in many procurement processes. The bar will keep rising. It won't just be about having a number, it will be about having a smaller one than your competitors. Supply chain transparency is also risk management: geopolitical events and human rights translate into sustainability risk faster than most companies expect.

Stakeholder expectations: show your data.

Vague claims invite greenwashing scrutiny. What builds credibility: Science-Based Targets (SBTi) as third-party proof of commitment, consistent KPI reporting, and transparent methodology. On talent: younger employees actively evaluate employers on climate and social practices — companies without credible profiles lose access to the best candidates.

Your one priority: make your sustainability business case solid

Not just to tick the box but as a value and business potential creation. As staged business actions with commercial ownership.

1

Identify where sustainability creates business value

Run a focused analysis of your operations: where do sustainability actions reduce cost, open procurement doors, or reduce supply chain risk? This is where your plan starts. Not with compliance, but with value.

2

Build the transition plan with the business

Develop concrete, staged actions with clear cost-benefit reasoning. Assign ownership inside commercial teams, not just the sustainability function. If it isn't connected to operations, it won't generate real impact.

3

Move before your competitors do

Set measurable targets — for climate ideally Science-Based Targets (SBTi) for third-party credibility. Begin supply chain data collection now. By the time you can see what competitors are doing, you are already behind.



"Sustainability that isn't connected to business operations will never generate real value. Don't stop, and don't work in isolation."

— Susanna Kiviniemi

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Focus on the big picture. **We'll
clarify the details.**

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